

Forty-year retrospective highlights the accomplishments of Dance Theatre of Harlem



Le Combat male and female tunics, 1975, designed by Marie Laure. Installation at the California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA, 2010. Photo by Gene Ogami, California African American Museum.

FORT WAYNE, IN.- [Fort Wayne Museum of Art](#) in Fort Wayne announces Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts, an exhibition that highlights the many accomplishments of African Americans and other minorities who dared to overcome social norms and prejudices to pursue their passion and pave the way for future generations of world class dancers. Organized by Dance Theatre of Harlem, California African American Museum, and The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and toured by International Arts & Artists, Washington D.C., Dance Theatre of Harlem is on view at Fort Wayne Museum of Art from December 20, 2014 through March 15, 2015

The colorful history and powerful social and artistic impact of the renowned ballet company and school is brought to life in the exhibition's more than 250 objects, including costumes, historical photographs, set pieces, and documentary video excerpts from four dramatically-staged ballets that are iconic to the company: A Streetcar Named Desire, Creole Giselle, Dougla and Firebird.

In addition to the costumes and staged ballets, exhibition highlights include numerous artifacts

including original tour programs, letters from choreographers and dignitaries, magazine articles, design bibles, more than 20 original tour posters from the company's New York City and worldwide touring seasons over the decades—including Dance Theatre of Harlem's (DTH) first performance in New York City at the Guggenheim Museum and their first international tour—and an overview of Arthur Mitchell's career and accomplishments. The exhibition also contains a large one-of-a-kind quilt with embroidered images of signature DTH ballets, and patrons can view a BBC documentary on Arthur Mitchell and Dance Theatre of Harlem.

In writing about the vibrancy and impressive talent of Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969, *The New York Times*' former chief dance critic, Clive Barnes, began his article with the following rhetorical question, "Black is beautiful, classic ballet is beautiful, so why are the two so rarely found together?"

Later that year such rarity ceased to exist when the Dance Theatre of Harlem was founded in New York City. Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Arthur Mitchell—a Harlem native and principal dancer with the New York City Ballet—was moved to give back to his Harlem neighborhood by offering local youth access to success in life through the focus and discipline of classical ballet. He enlisted his mentor and renowned ballet teacher, Karel Shook, to join him in developing a dance school. Soon after, Dance Theatre of Harlem was born. DTH's eclectic teachings include classical, ethnic, modern and contemporary styles; and the enormously-talented dancers who defied gravity and stereotyping quickly set them apart from other ballet companies. Dance Theatre of Harlem became one of the most sought-after dance companies by the leading impresarios, opera houses and performance venues around the world.

In 2009, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center, in collaboration with Dance Theatre of Harlem, presented a smaller yet comprehensive exhibition that brought to the Vincent Astor Gallery at Lincoln Center, 40 years of art and accomplishment in the form of rare costumes, photos and other memorabilia. Following this showing in New York City, the exhibition was redesigned by the California African American Museum (CAAM) for its West Coast premiere, which ran at CAAM from February 4, 2010 through June 6, 2010, before traveling to the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History (June 16, 2011 to January 16, 2012), and the University Museum at Texas Southern University (February 1, 2013 to April 30, 2013).

Judy Tyrus and Barbara Cohen-Stratyner co-curated the exhibition in 2009 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Dance Theatre of Harlem is about using the art form of classical ballet to change people's lives. Through performances by the internationally acclaimed company, training in their world-class school, and participation in their multi-faceted arts education program, Dance Theatre of Harlem has made a difference in the world for 43 years.

Inspired to bring new opportunity to the lives of the young people in the Harlem neighborhood in which he grew up, Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem in the basement of a church in 1969. Mitchell, who had found success as a principal dancer with the renowned New York City Ballet, understood the power of training in a classical art form to bring discipline and focus to a challenged community. Dance Theatre of Harlem's unprecedented success, as a racially diverse company, school and source of arts education, was built on creating innovative

and bold new forms of artistic expression. Through these varied artistic interactions, DTH ambassadors have helped to build character and have provided valuable life skills to countless people in New York City, across the country and around the world.

As Dance Theatre of Harlem traverses its fifth decade, they remain committed to excellence and are dedicated to reaching new audiences with a message of self-reliance, self-expression and individual responsibility through the re-launch of the Dance Theatre of Harlem Company.

Now under the leadership of a second generation of artists inspired by Arthur Mitchell's vision, founding member and former prima ballerina, Virginia Johnson, acts as artistic director for DTH; and the former school director and choreographer, Laveen Naidu, is acting executive director.