

On the "A" w/Souleo: Dance Exhibition Celebrates 'Firsts' While Looking to the Future

By Peter 'Souleo' Wright Posted: 04/23/2015 5:15 am EDT

The founding of the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969 by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook occurred in the aftermath of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1968 assassination. There was the body of a civil rights leader shot down, and rising from that tragedy would be the bodies of young and motivated African-American dancers ready to lead the charge of challenging racism head-on in the world of dance. The exhibition *Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts*, on view at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in Baltimore, Maryland presents this groundbreaking dance company's story.



Green Lady from Dougla (1974). Green dress, headdress, and white skirt. Courtesy of Dance Theatre of Harlem

"This is a culture interested in bodily expression and when Arthur Mitchell began there were foolish stereotypes that blacks couldn't do classical dancing with our bodies. It was about shattering that barrier," said the museum's executive director, A. Skipp Sanders. "That type of perseverance is happening now too as we look at what's going on in today's movements with our younger generation. Every chance to point that out is a chance to tell truth to power."



Dancers from Firebird/Courtesy of California African American Museum

The exhibition presents this journey through costumes, archival photos and tour programs, design bibles and interactive elements including an installation where youth can compare the athleticism in the jump of a football player to that of a dancer. And while the exhibition offers a chance to see the strides made since Mitchell was the only African-American dancer of a major ballet company (New York City Ballet) in 1955 -- for Dance Theatre of Harlem ballet master, Keith Saunders it's also a stark reminder of what more is left to achieve. To understand how Saunders feels it is worth considering the fact that celebrated dancer, Misty Copeland is only the third black female soloist at the American Ballet Theatre in its 75-year history.

"Through the existence of Dance Theatre of Harlem there has undoubtedly been progress in the field," said Saunders, a Baltimore native. "But we are having the same conversations today that occurred since the 1970s. The question is still being asked, where are the black ballet dancers? It highlights how far we still have yet to come."