



Baltimore native Keith Saunders performed with the Dance Theatre of Harlem for more than 17 years, and now serves as the ballet master for the company. An exhibit about the pioneering dance company is on display through August at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in downtown Baltimore.

Photo courtesy of the Dance Theatre of Harlem

An exhibit about the Dance Theatre of Harlem is currently drawing attention at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum. It highlights the many accomplishments of African Americans and other minorities who have defied stereotypes to pursue their passion for dance and pave the way for future generations of artists.

When black dancers were told that African American bodies were not built for classical ballet, for example, they mastered classical repertoire like *Giselle*, then set it in Creole society in Louisiana, to give it a distinctly American twist.

Central to the themes of the exhibition is the story of founder Arthur Mitchell, who was selected by legendary choreographer George Balanchine to join the New York City Ballet. As the only African American dancer of a major ballet company at the time, Mitchell's rise was a historic achievement in pre-civil rights America.

He became a principal dancer within the company, and then went on to found Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969 in a church basement in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. It was Mitchell's way of giving back to his community in honor of the civil rights leader.

Ballet memorabilia

The inspirational story of the ballet company, as well as its social and artistic impact, is brought to life in this exhibition of costumes, historical photographs, set pieces and video excerpts.

The objects represent two productions that are iconic to the company: *Firebird* and *Creole Giselle*. In addition to the costumes and performances, the exhibition includes artifacts such as original tour programs, letters from choreographers and dignitaries, magazine articles, design bibles, and original tour posters.

The present-day company has a local connection, as Baltimore native Keith Saunders serves as Ballet Master. Saunders began dancing in 1971, while a student at Harvard University. His original career goal

was to become a lawyer. But then “I took a dance class...and my whole path changed,” he said in an interview with Helen Yuen of the museum.

He then decided to leave his studies to pursue dance. Saunders began his ballet training in 1973 at the National Center for Afro-American Artists in Dorchester, Mass. In 1975, he was selected to join the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

He has performed a wide range of roles throughout the company’s repertoire for more than 17 years. He was appointed Dance Theatre of Harlem’s assistant ballet master in 1994 and ballet master in 1996.

Breaking barriers

The Dance Theatre of Harlem has paved the way for African Americans to be more visible and more accepted in the world of classical dance. A recent full-length production of *Swan Lake* by the Washington Ballet, for example, featured two African Americans in the lead roles — the first time that has happened in the United States. The event was called “overdue” by the *New York Times*, which said it resulted in “broken barriers.”

Despite the progress, however, African Americans still remain a minority in classical ballet troupes. The New York City Ballet, for example, has just five African American dancers in its company of 94; American Ballet Theatre, which has 92 members, has even fewer.

According to Saunders, Dance Theatre of Harlem continues to define and solidify its role in the dance world. In light of the recent events in Baltimore, the company’s message is particularly poignant.

“Dance Theatre was founded in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination. The message of Dance Theatre is still relevant in terms of showing a palpable sense that any child, given the opportunity, can succeed at whatever that child wants to succeed at,” Saunders said.

“But that opportunity must be present. Once it’s present, one must undertake the education and training to compete on an international level. It’s also about inclusion, understanding, dialogue, and the ability of the arts to advance that understanding.”

The exhibit and events

“Dance Theatre of Harlem: Forty Years of Firsts” can be seen Wednesdays through Saturdays through Aug. 30, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Dance Theatre of Harlem will perform on Saturday, June 20, at 8 p.m. at the Murphy Fine Arts Center at Morgan State University. For tickets, contact the box office at (443) 885-4440.

In addition, the museum will hold a program about Broadway Dance on Sunday, May 31, from 3 to 4 p.m., with theatrical dances performed by local dancer CJay Philip. A class on line dancing will take place on Sunday, June 28, from 3 to 4 p.m. with local dancer Maurice Perry.

The Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture is located at 830 E. Pratt St. General admission is \$8. Admission for those age 65+, youth (age 7-17), and students (with ID) is \$6. Museum members, children under the age of 6, and Maryland Public School teachers may enter free of charge.

Tickets may be purchased at www.rflewismuseum.org, by calling (443) 263-1875, or in person. For

more

information about the exhibit, visit www.rflewis-museum.org/special-exhibition.

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