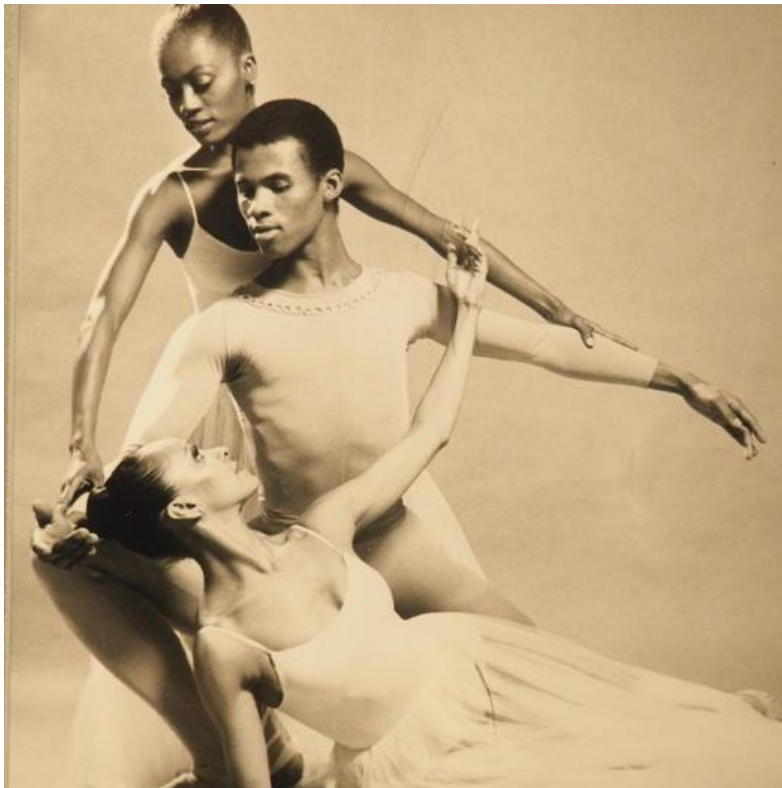


## Reginald F. Lewis Museum exhibit demonstrates the influence of the Dance Theatre of Harlem



A photo from the Reginald F. Lewis Museum's exhibition, "Dance Theatre of Harlem: Forty Years of Firsts," on view through Aug. 30. (Courtesy of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum)

by Maura Callahan City Paper

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Three pairs of ballet slippers and stockings, each dyed different shades of brown, sit in a glass case in a corner of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum's special exhibitions gallery. The slippers belong to the world-renowned Dance Theatre of Harlem, and were dyed under the direction of co-founder Arthur Mitchell, who recognized the injustice of the uniformly pale color in ballet costuming.

“He was very sensitive to how a skin of color would look in a pink ballet slipper or white ballet slipper—he didn’t want to break the [visual] line,” says Dr. Skipp Sanders, the museum’s executive director. “So he went so far to have three different tones of slippers for different complexions, even using makeup.”

Sanders continues to marvel at the company’s contributions to the arts as he walks through the exhibition, titled “Dance Theatre of Harlem: Forty Years of Firsts,” on view through Aug. 30. The gallery is filled with bold, exquisite costumes, set pieces, posters, and photographs from the company’s international performances, as well as an interactive area with a dance-studio mirror, barre, and ballet pose guidelines. The exhibition runs in conjunction with special programming, including a flash mob at Artscape, a talk with American Ballet Theatre soloist Misty Copeland on Aug. 1, and a Dance Theatre of Harlem performance at Murphy Fine Arts Center at Morgan State University this Saturday, June 20.

Sanders notes the ways in which Mitchell introduced multicultural elements into the European art of ballet, juxtaposing traditional choreography with rhythm and blues and Afro-Caribbean music and using African- and African-American-inspired costume design.

“There was an idea that African-Americans weren’t physically built to look good for ballet,” he says. Mitchell’s direction and founding of the Dance Theatre altered the public’s perception of ballet as an exclusively white, European art.

Mitchell, who became the first African-American male to perform as a permanent member of a major ballet company in 1955 when he joined the New York City Ballet, founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem with his mentor Karel Shook in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Inspired to provide children with opportunities for self-expression, Mitchell started teaching dance classes in a church basement, and soon after moved the school and company to a renovated garage. The school grew to include a variety of courses in the performing arts and art theory and featured many renowned figures in the arts as teachers and collaborators, such as actor Gregory Hines and choreographer Glen Tetley. The legendary choreographer George Balanchine, who served as Mitchell’s mentor at the New York City Ballet, allowed several of his ballets to enter the Dance Theatre of Harlem repertoire and served on the company’s founding board of directors.

The exhibition highlights four major ballets from the company’s repertoire: “A Streetcar Named Desire,” “Creole Giselle,” “Firebird,” and “Dougla,” with costumes, photographs, and set pieces from each, as well as a video monitor looping archived footage from major performances. The four ballets represent the Dance Theatre of Harlem as it is known internationally and historically: a racially and ethnically diverse company with a multicultural repertoire, infusing classical ballet with the arts of African diaspora—a monumentally important player in the expanding inclusivity of the arts. But according to one of the company’s earliest members and current ballet master, Keith Saunders, there is still significant work to be done in the global ballet world.

“I don’t want to discount the progress that has been made,” Saunders says over the phone while packing for a two-week overseas tour immediately preceding the Dance Theatre of Harlem’s performance in Baltimore. “But honestly, if you look at ballet companies around the country, the progress is limited. You’ll still see the same thing you saw maybe 10, 20, 30 years ago. If you look at ballet companies across this country, there’s maybe one dancer of color, maybe two dancers of color on any company’s roster.”

Saunders indicates that one of the greatest barriers for performers of color exists between the training level and professional companies.

“The training grounds [for ballet] have become more diverse, but they have to continue to proactively embrace that diversity and find ways to support that diversity and that ongoing idea of carrying it through to the highest professional level,” says Saunders. “They need to continue to make improvements and continue to make ballet companies all across the country look like what American really is.”

Saunders, who performed as a principal dancer for the Dance Theatre of Harlem for more than 17 years before becoming ballet master in 1996, grew up in Baltimore near Liberty Heights and Hilton without any formal introduction to dance until he began taking classes as a student at Harvard. He soon left school to pursue a career in dance, taking as many classes as possible while working as a clerk in Boston, and apprenticed with the dance company at the National Center for Afro-American Artists at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in Roxbury. In 1975, he saw the then-6-year-old Dance Theatre of Harlem perform at Connecticut College, and took a trip to New York later in the year to give an impromptu audition at the company’s base. He was hired as an apprentice, and thereafter continued to perform in many of the company’s major ballets.

In 2004, the company suffered severe financial difficulties and was forced to cease performances until returning to the stage in 2012.

“The Dance Theatre of Harlem of the 21st century is markedly different than the company that our artistic director Virginia Johnson and I and many others danced in all those many years under Arthur Mitchell’s directorship,” says Saunders. “It’s a much leaner company.”

At the Dance Theatre’s peak, around the mid-’80s, the company featured more than 50 dancers. By the time the company was forced to close in 2004, the roster had shrunk to 44 dancers. The company returned with only 18 dancers in 2012.

“Our company used to tour with two or three trucks as we traveled around the country, carrying the scenery and equipment for huge ballets like ‘Giselle,’ and one of our signature ballets ‘Firebird.’ Our present company just doesn’t have the numbers to do those works.”

On June 20, the company will perform three smaller ballets from the company’s repertoire: “Vessels,” choreographed by Darrell Grand Moultrie for the company’s dancers last fall to a score by Ezio Bosso; “Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven (Odes to Love and Loss),” originally choreographed for the Royal Swedish Ballet in 1993 by Ulysses Dove to music by Arvo Pärt; and resident choreographer Robert Garland’s signature work “Return,” performed to songs by James Brown and Aretha Franklin. Together, the ballets represent a new generation of the company, marked not merely by a smaller scale, but also a renewed sense of perseverance and opportunity.

“It’s still, very frankly, quite a struggle for the arts in this country to deliver the services and products that we do,” says Saunders. “It’s a battle that we continue to fight.”