
Dance Theatre of Harlem coming to Charlotte for the first time

By Glenn Burkins – June 21, 2015



In January 2016, the acclaimed Dance Theatre of Harlem will stage five performances at Charlotte's Knight Theater, and the Harvey B. Gantt Center will open a five-month exhibition dedicated to the dance company. (Photo by Sharen Bradford)

In a city that prides itself on having a vibrant arts sector, Charlotte's cultural leaders have known for years of a glaring omission: The Dance Theatre of Harlem has never performed here – not once in the company's 40-plus years of existence.

That omission will soon be rectified.

In January 2016 -- just in time for the city's Martin Luther King Jr. celebrations – the acclaimed Harlem dance company will stage five performances at Knight Theater, a guest of Blumenthal Performing Arts.

Around that same time, the Harvey B. Gantt Center will open a five-month exhibition that explores the Harlem dance company's storied mission and existence, which began in 1969 in the wake of King's assassination.

Both the Knight Theater performances and the Gantt Center exhibition will be underwritten by Wells Fargo and will include aggressive outreach efforts to low-income students who otherwise might be excluded.

Of the five performances scheduled for Jan. 22-24, one will be reserved – with 1,200 free tickets -- for students and youth-oriented groups.

Blumenthal President Tom Gabbard said making the performances accessible was central to the success of the program. (Each free ticket will include a pass to also see the Gantt Center exhibition.)

“If we bring this great dance company here and only those who can afford a relatively high ticket price are there, we will have failed ultimately in doing for our community what this can do,” he said.

Years in the making

Gabbard said he and the Harlem dance company had been talking on and off for years about a Charlotte visit. Then earlier this year, just as the Gantt Center was working separately to secure the exhibition, Wells Fargo stepped in to encourage them both to think collaboratively.

Jay Everette, Wells Fargo's community affairs manager, declined to say precisely how much money the bank had committed to securing the dance performances and exhibitions, but he said the total amount would be in the low six figures.

“It will be one of our leading arts sponsorships for 2016 that we will be doing in the community,” he said. “That's a very significant thing for this community.”

The visit by the Harlem dance company and the corresponding exhibition will be the second major cultural event announced this spring that will have an outreach component. In May, the Blumenthal announced the upcoming arrival of a British-based hip-hop dance festival – [Breaking Convention](#) -- which also will feature free events and local workshops.

A major win for the Gantt Center

David Taylor, the Gantt Center's president and CEO, said the exhibition would include about 250 artifacts, including 22 costumes, set pieces, videos, photographs and tour posters from four staged ballets. He predicted the exhibition would rank among the center's top five in attracting visitors.

The exhibition will travel to Charlotte after leaving the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History & Culture in Baltimore.

"I think it puts Charlotte in a unique place," Taylor said. "Charlotte strives to be a world-class city of its size, and I think it validates that, to a great degree."

Born of pain

Dance Theatre of Harlem was founded by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook in the emotional aftermath of King's death in 1968. According to its [website](#), "Mitchell was inspired to start a school that would offer children -- especially those in Harlem, the community in which he was born -- the opportunity to learn about dance and the allied arts," dispelling the belief that ballet could not be performed by those of African descent.

Now in its fourth decade, Dance Theatre of Harlem has grown into a multi-cultural hub for creative expression, and its dancers have performed in venues worldwide.

Gabbard, the Blumenthal president, said that given the dance company's history, it was only fitting that the Charlotte visit focus on access, equity and inclusion, issues important to King and his struggle for human and civil rights.

Gabbard said he hoped the performance would provide an "aspirational moment" for a young person who, for the first time, might see classical dance performers who look like him or her.

"That's how we transform our community," he said. "That's how we have a big impact."