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DANCE
THEATRE 
HARLEM

40 YEARS OF FIRSTS

DANCE THEATRE ♀ HARLEM

40 YEARS OF FIRSTS

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EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts celebrates the history and art of dance with more than 165 objects including costumes with set pieces, historical photographs, tour posters, documentary video excerpts, and design sketches; and includes four dramatically-staged ballets that are iconic to the company: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Creole Giselle*, *Douglas* and *Firebird*.

The exhibition was initially presented by Dance Theatre of Harlem and The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, exhibiting the company's rare costumes, photos, and other memorabilia. The California African American Museum supplemented the exhibition with the staging of costumes and the addition of documentary video excerpts, and added life-sized banners and other imagery to illuminate the forty years of history during which Dance Theatre of Harlem and Arthur Mitchell received over 300 official citations for excellence.



Firebird *flag bearers*, designed by Geoffrey Holder.

Right: Rhythmetron *headpiece and neckpiece*, designed by Bernard Johnson.

In the last 44 years, the professional touring company of Dance Theatre of Harlem has performed in 41 states, 250 cities in North America, and in 40 countries on 6 continents.

Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts is 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, DC.



HISTORY OF DANCE THEATRE OF HARLEM

Dance Theatre of Harlem began as a multicultural school holding classes in the basement of a church in Harlem. In reaction to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook founded the school in 1969 with intention to ignite positive social change by offering classes in classical ballet.

The school moved to larger facilities in the 1970s and expanded the number and types of classes offered to encompass the allied arts. Led by music director Tania Leon, these included classes in modern, ethnic, jazz and tap dance, acting, music appreciation and theory, percussion, sewing and tailoring. Apprenticeships in costume and set design were conducted by celebrated designer, Zelda Wynn.

The Dance Theatre of Harlem company officially debuted in New York City at the Guggenheim Museum in January 1971. In the early years, Arthur Mitchell choreographed ballets such as *Ode to Otis* and *Holberg Suite*. Soon after, works by George Balanchine and Louis Johnson were incorporated into the company's repertoire. Mitchell continued to create choreography for the company, extending the neoclassical vocabulary with ballets such as *Manifestations*, based on the story of Adam and Eve. Since the company's inception, the repertoire grew to include works from close to 60 choreographers.

Dance Theatre of Harlem is a leading dance institution of unparalleled global acclaim, encompassing a performing Ensemble, a leading arts education center and Dancing Through Barriers®, a national and international education and community outreach program. Each component of Dance Theatre of Harlem carries a solid commitment towards enriching the lives of young people and adults around the world through the arts.

ARTHUR MITCHELL (b. 1934)

Arthur Mitchell displayed an innate talent for dance from an early age. Beginning his dance education with tap lessons at the Police Athletic League, he went on to attend the High School of Performing Arts in New York City. There, Mitchell won a scholarship to the Katherine Dunham School of Dance, where he was introduced to his mentor, Karel Shook. After graduating, he was offered a scholarship to the New York City Ballet's School of American Ballet and starred in a variety of Broadway shows including *Kiss Me Kate*, *House of Flowers*, *Carmen Jones*, and *Four Saints in Three Acts*.

Success continued for Mitchell when, in 1955, he was selected by Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine to join the New York City Ballet, becoming the first African American male to be a permanent member of a major ballet company. Performing with the Company for 15 years, he starred in roles created specifically for him by Balanchine, including the *pas de deux* (dance for two) in *Agon*, and his portrayal of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Mitchell was also the first African American to reach the status of *premier danseur*, or the male lead in a company.

“As a kid, I was up against the widespread attitude that if you’re not white, blond or blue eyed, you’re not a part of things.”

- Arthur Mitchell



TIMELINE

1969 - Dance Theatre of Harlem is co-founded by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook in response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

1971 - The Dance Theatre of Harlem company debuts at the Guggenheim Museum.

1984 - Dance Theater of Harlem's *Creole Giselle* premieres at the London Coliseum, winning the Laurence Olivier Award for best new dance production of the year—a first for an American ballet company.



Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook

1988 - Dance Theatre of Harlem is the last American dance troupe to perform in the former Soviet Union (USSR) as part of a cultural initiative mutually sponsored by the United States and USSR.

1991 - Arthur Mitchell and Royal Ballet director, Anthony Dowell, sign an agreement to help diversify the London company. This results in the creation of the Chance to Dance program, which is modeled after Dance Theatre of Harlem's outreach program, Arts Exposure.



Arthur Mitchell and Nelson Mandela, 1992

1992 - Following the lifting of the thirty-year U.S. cultural ban of South Africa, Nelson Mandela personally invites Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) to re-open the previous apartheid venue—the Johannesburg Civic Theatre—to all audiences and conduct extensive community outreach in the townships surrounding Johannesburg and Durban. With the country focused on the performances and residencies, DTH is able to achieve full cooperation and approval of all political groups.

1992 - Dance Theatre of Harlem's historic tour to South Africa formally institutionalizes the Dancing Through Barriers® program—a comprehensive educational and community outreach program which brings a variety of activities to schools and community centers around New York City, with residency programs in Washington, D.C., Miami and Detroit.

1997 - As part of the Walter Annenberg Arts and Education Initiative, Dance Theatre of Harlem is one of the cultural institutions selected to help restore arts education in New York City schools after two decades of cutbacks for classroom arts programs.

2000 - With the signing of the of the new trade agreement with China, the U.S. State Department sponsors Dance Theatre of Harlem's first tour to China, resulting in sold-out performances in Beijing and Shanghai. The Chinese audiences see their first performances of *Firebird*, and the company conducts extensive classes in China's major ballet schools.



Visitors (dancers and others) from Peking with Zelda Wynn, 1978

2001 - For months, the company prepares for its New York City season at City Center, opening two weeks after 9/11/01. Families of first responders from the New York police and fire departments are provided personal invitations to attend as guests of Dance Theatre of Harlem.

2002 – The company returns to England after 14 years. By permission of Her Majesty, The Queen Elizabeth II, Dance Theatre of Harlem’s London season is dedicated to the memory of Her Royal Highness Princess Margaret, Countess of Snowdon.



2003 - Inaugural engagement at the Lincoln Center Festival with the premiere of *St. Louis Woman: A Blues Ballet*, choreographed by Michael Smuin.

2004 - In February, Dance Theatre of Harlem celebrates its 35th anniversary, beginning with an extensive U.S. tour, followed by a seven-week historic tour of the United Kingdom.

2004 - Dance Theatre of Harlem suspends operations of the touring company and places its professional company on an indefinite hiatus.

Within six weeks of the suspension taking effect, substantial fundraising efforts yield over \$1.6 million—\$433,000 through government funding, and \$1,118,000 through foundations, corporations and private donors—paving the way for Dance Theatre of Harlem to reopen its doors in 2012.

2006 - At the invitation of First Lady Laura Bush, Dance Theatre of Harlem participates in President Bush’s Global Literacy Conference at The New York Public Library. More than 60 leaders and education ministers attend the conference for panel discussions on how to improve educational opportunities around the world.

President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush showcase an evening at the White House in honor of Arthur Mitchell and Dance Theatre of Harlem.

2008 -The Kennedy Center Dance Theatre of Harlem Pre-Professional Residency celebrates its 15th season at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. The 20-week class series is led by Robert Garland, resident choreographer and a member of the Dance Theatre of Harlem faculty.

GLOSSARY OF DANCE TERMS

ADAGIO [uh-dah-zhee-oh]: slow, graceful movements. Part of the pas de deux, or “dance for two,” in which the female dancer displays slow, fluid movements. It is also a series of exercises in center practice in a ballet class.

ALLEGRO [uh-ley-groh]: brisk and lively movements

ARABESQUE [ar-uh-besk]: a position of the body supported on one leg, which can be straight or bent, with the other leg extended behind. The positions of arabesques may vary.

ATTITUDE: a position on one leg with the other lifted in back, the knee bent at an angle of 90 degrees and well turned out so that the knee is higher than the foot.

BALANCÉ [bal-uhn-sey]: Rocking step. Shifting the weight from one foot to the other.

BALLERINA: the main female dancer in a company. Often mistakenly used to refer to any female dancer. A large company may have a Prima ballerina, the leading ballerina when there is more than one.

BALLON: “bounce.” The lightness or spring of a dancer’s leap or jump.

BARRE: the wooden handrail in a ballet studio. All ballet lessons begin at the barre.

BATTEMENT: a beating action of the extended or bent leg. Grande battements refer to higher kicks, while petits battements are lower.

CHOREOGRAPHER: one who composes the patterns or movements of ballets or dances.

CLASSICAL BALLET:

1) the traditional style of ballet following the academic technique developed throughout the history of ballet.

2) A ballet in which the style adheres to the nineteenth century’s codified framework. Examples of classical ballets include Giselle and Sleeping Beauty.

CORPS DE BALLET: the dancers in a ballet who do not appear as soloists.

DANSEUR NOBLE: noble dancer. A premier dancer excelling in the classical style.

DEMI-PLIÉ [dem-ee-plee-ey]: half bend of the knees. All steps of elevation begin and end with a demi-plié.

DIVERTISSEMENT: diversion, enjoyment. Short dances included in classical ballet to display the talents of individuals or groups of dancers.

ÉCARTÉ [ey-kahr-tey]: separated, thrown wide apart. In this position the dancer faces either one of the two front corners of the room.

FIVE POSITIONS: the basic positions of the feet in classical ballet. Each step of ballet begins and ends with one of these positions.

GLISSADE [gli-sahd]: glide. A gliding step, linking other steps together that always begins with a demi-plié.

JETÉ [zhuh-tey]: a jump forward, backward, or to the side, from one foot to the other.

PAS [pah]: step; also used to refer to types of dances. For example a dance for two is pas de deux.

PIROUETTE [pir-oo-et]: a turn or spin on one leg.

PLIÉ [plee-eh]: the action of bending the knee or knees while keeping the back straight.

PREMIER DANSEUR [pre-myadanscer]: lead male dancer in a dancing company.

PRIMA BALLERINA: lead female dancer in a dancing company.

TUTU: a short or long classical ballet skirt made with tulle or net.



EDUCATIONAL REFERENCE MATERIALS

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Tobais, Tobi. *Arthur Mitchell*. HarperCollins, 1975.

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Dance Theatre of Harlem – Fall River Legend (1990). Performer: Virginia Johnson. Image Entertainment, 2002.

ONLINE RESOURCES

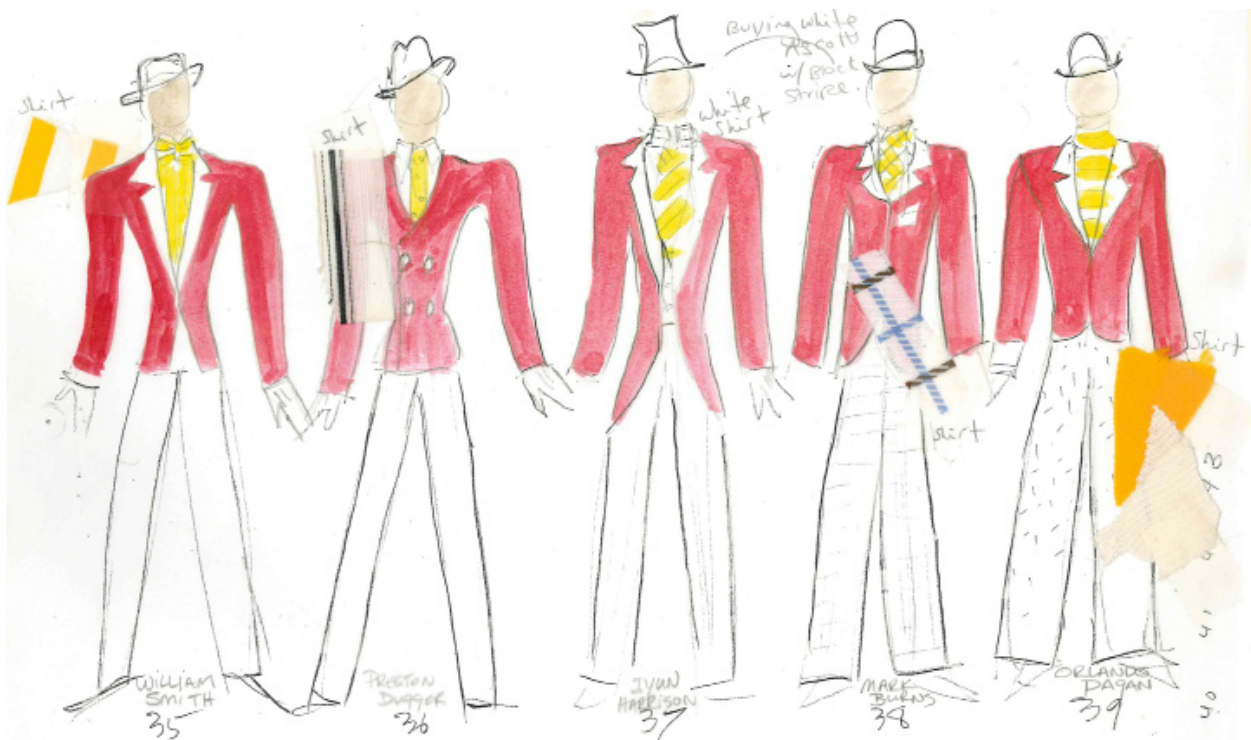
BoysDoBallet.com. 2010.
<http://boysdoballet.blogspot.com/>

Dance Theatre of Harlem
<http://www.dancetheatreofharlem.org/>

PBS. "Profile: Dance Theatre of Harlem." 13 June 2013. Online video. PBS Video.
<http://watch.thirteen.org/video/2362268164/>

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. In the 20th century, new forms of dance flourished with the evolving social environment in America. In what ways did periods of social change such as the Civil Rights Movement affect the world of dance?
2. Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) represents the power of art to foster equality and provide education and inspiration to those who were not given such opportunities before. In what ways is DTH more than just a dance company? Which values do you believe define its foundation?
3. What do you think about DTH's reinvention of classic ballets such as *Giselle*? What does such evolution of a traditional dance have in common with the development of other prominent styles of the 20th century such as modern, jazz, tap, or ethnic dance?
4. If you had the opportunity to establish your own dance company or school for the arts, what social or cultural cause would you support, change, or explore?



St. Louis Woman, sketches by Willa Kim

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SPEAKERS LIST

Judy Tyrus

jtyrus@dancetheatreofharlem.org

Guided Exhibition Tour: A Walk through the Years at Dance Theatre of Harlem

Former Prima Ballerina and current Alumni Liaison and Archives Curator at Dance Theatre of Harlem, Judy Tyrus is the exhibition curator for *Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts*.

Travel and accommodation required.
Honorarium negotiable

Woodburn Schofield

wschofield@caamuseum.org

Lecture/Discussion: Touring Internationally with Dance Theatre of Harlem: The Challenges and Triumphs

Woodburn Schofield is the deputy director of operations and special programs at California African American Museum, and former director of touring for Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Travel and accommodation required.
Honorarium negotiable

Virginia Johnson

vjohnson@dancetheatreofharlem.org

Virginia Johnson, Artistic Director and Former Prima Ballerina of Dance Theatre of Harlem, may be available for a lecture.

Travel and accommodation required.
Honorarium negotiable

Alumni of Dance Theatre of Harlem

Available for lectures, demonstrations and/or Question & Answer sessions.

Please contact Judy Tyrus of Dance Theatre of Harlem for details and contact information of local alumni.

Honorarium plus expenses to be negotiated.