



DANCE THEATRE OF HARLEM AT 50: Reaching Back and Leaping Forward

by Djassi DaCosta Johnson

In a year of milestones, including New York City Center's 75th Anniversary Season and 100 years since the start of the Harlem Renaissance, iconic American ballet company, Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH), celebrates its 50th anniversary.

DTH celebrates this landmark anniversary just months after Arthur Mitchell, its founding father, passed away at the age of 84. While Mitchell's passing is a great loss for the entire dance community, it offers an opportunity to reflect on the strides made, as well as the progress still needed, for the clas-



Bethania Gomes in *Firebird*; Photo by Eduardo Patino

lenge.” The groundbreaking ballet company has indeed expanded that awareness over the past five decades. From its highly acclaimed version of *Firebird* in 1982, to being the first American dance company to perform in South Africa after the fall of apartheid in 1992, DTH has been a pioneer in the proliferation of classical ballet—artistically and socially advancing what ballet can mean to a public.

DTH staked a claim to New York City Center early on—it is the theater where Mitchell first danced with the New York City Ballet. DTH had its first season at City Center from February 20, 1979 to March 4, 1979. To celebrate 50 years, this year’s program pays tribute to Mitchell’s legacy while leaning forward and gazing into the future of the ballet, highlighting the ingenuity of the company and depth of its dancers.

With *Tones II*, Arthur Mitchell reimaged the work he created in 1971 while in the studio with the dancers this past summer. This work, along with Geoffrey Holder’s classic *Douglas* (which Johnson calls “a big, wonderful, spectacle”), are two works that were integral to building the DTH repertoire in the early years. Also featured

sical ballet world to truly reflect the contemporary society in which we live.

History has shown that, in moments of extreme injustice and frustration, the most impactful art is born. At the height of the civil rights movement, on April 4th, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated spurring Arthur Mitchell, the first black ballet dancer and principal at New York City Ballet, to co-found The Dance Theatre of Harlem with Karel Shook and create a classical ballet company that would change the face of American ballet and the international dance scene through the decades.

From its beginning, DTH was a pioneering institution integrating the traditionally whites-only ballet world by training and featuring black and brown ballet dancers who have gone on to leave their mark on the classical ballet and modern dance landscape. Virginia Johnson, former prima ballerina, founding dancer, and Artistic Director since 2010, notes that “Mitchell wasn’t set on founding a black ballet company, he was more interested in making people aware of the fact that this beautiful art form doesn’t reside on the surface of the skin, but can be done by anyone who has the access, talent, and tenacity to rise to its chal-

are two vibrant new ballets. DTH's resident choreographer, Robert Garland, who Johnson calls "one of the great choreographers in America right now" will be presenting, *Nyman String Quartet #2*. Garland's work taps the neo-classicism that George Balanchine invented—taking it further by incorporating the black vernacular dance that inspired Balanchine. The second, *Balamouk*, is a work by Belgian choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, originally commissioned by City Center for the 15th Fall for Dance Festival. Johnson celebrated Ochoa's "astonishing creativity" as she worked fluidly with the dancers, evolving the choreography based on the personalities in the room, resulting in a "playful, fun, and mysterious" work showcasing their strengths and individuality.

Johnson has been integral in bringing in noted choreographers over the years and expanding the space for contemporary and classical voices. She has provided a platform for female classical ballet choreographers through *Women Who Move Us*, the DTH program with a mission to cultivate the female choreographic voice in classical ballet. "There is much headway to be made," says Johnson. "The ballet world is so hierarchical and still so traditionally male dominant."

She emphasizes that Dance Theatre of Harlem's evolution is about making "ballet valid in the 21st century." She elaborates; "These are living, breathing, human beings—individuals, well-rounded people—who can do amazing things. That's something that I would love to see embraced more, even in the most classical works, to see that there is a person within the impeccable technique."

50 years from its inception in a garage in Harlem, DTH presents a vibrant season that highlights classical ballet as an art form that has the power to speak to the global human experience. This is key at a time when the arts are needed more than ever to inspire, uplift, and sustain our collective inclination towards beauty. Moving forward, DTH is poised to continue to redefine classical ballet as a vital, relevant artform for the next 50 years and beyond.

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