

Great Events from History: The 20th Century

1968: Mitchell and Shook Found the Dance Theatre of Harlem

The Dance Theatre of Harlem, founded by ballet dancer Arthur Mitchell and ballet teacher Karel Shook, became the first world-renowned African American ballet company. The company's success continues into the twenty-first century.

Also Known As: School of Dance Theatre of Harlem

Locale: New York, New York

Categories: Dance; organizations and institutions; education

Key Figures

Arthur Mitchell (b. 1934), principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, who became cofounder of the Dance Theatre of Harlem

Karel Shook (1920-1985), ballet teacher, choreographer, and former director of the Netherlands Ballet, who became cofounder of the Dance Theatre of Harlem

Summary of Event

Arthur Mitchell, a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, was at a New York airport en route to Brazil on April 4, 1968, the day Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. The idea to develop a black ballet company germinated that same day. Mitchell noted, "I sat there the whole time, thinking to myself, here I am running around the world doing all these things, why not do them at home?"

Mitchell was commuting to Brazil, where he was establishing that country's first national ballet company under the auspices of the United States. He was asked to head the Brazilian group as permanent artistic director; the event of April 4, though, lingered in his thoughts. Mitchell declined the offer and returned to New York. He felt that he should go to Harlem, the community of his youth, to open a school and pass on his knowledge to other African Americans. Mitchell thus aimed both to open a school and to found a company in which the school's graduates could perform; he believed that, with talent and given proper instruction, African Americans could achieve success in ballet.

Mitchell approached Karel Shook, ballet master of the Netherlands Ballet and Mitchell's former teacher at the Katherine Dunham School of Dance, to assist in the undertaking. The two established the Dance Theatre of Harlem as a school of allied arts and as a professional dance company. Their goal for the Dance Theatre was "to promote public interest in and support for the aims of the organization, while providing role models and professional goals for aspiring students." With the financial assistance of the Ford Foundation, the school opened in a garage and a church basement belonging to the Harlem School of Arts. The original student body of thirty increased to four hundred within two months. Many of the students had at first been curious onlookers, since the garage doors were left open for ventilation and light.

The primary purpose of the school was "to promote interest in and teach young black

people the art of classical ballet, modern and ethnic dance, thereby creating a much-needed self-awareness and better self-image of the students themselves." The instructors at the school included Mary Hinkson, a renowned Martha Graham dancer who taught modern dance, and Pearl Reynolds, who instructed the ethnic dance classes. Classical ballet classes were conducted by Mitchell and Shook.

Strained relations with the Harlem School of Arts and the advice of George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein led to Mitchell's opening the school as an independent endeavor. The school and company moved to new premises.

The long-range goal of the Dance Theatre was the production of dancers soundly trained in the classical tradition. Mitchell noted, "We have to prove that a black ballet school and a black ballet company are the equal of the best of their kind, anywhere in the world." The performing company was inaugurated in February of 1969, with Balanchine and Kirstein as members of the company's first board of directors.

Since funding from the Ford Foundation was provided via a matching grant, the Dance Theatre of Harlem began performances as a means of raising money. The programs also provided the dancers with an opportunity for development as artists. In addition, frequent lecture-demonstrations were performed for a range of audiences, from neighborhood children to corporate executives. The school also expanded to include classes in related aspects of Theatre production. Lighting, sound, music, costuming, stage management, and accounting became part of the curriculum.

During this period, Mitchell was still performing with the New York City Ballet. As he became increasingly involved with the operation of his organization, however, Mitchell's performances became fewer. In 1970, Mitchell resigned from the New York City Ballet, informing Balanchine of his need to stop dancing to devote his full attention to the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

The first extended performance of the Dance Theatre of Harlem took place in August of 1970 at Jacob's Pillow, Lee, Massachusetts. The official debut of the company occurred in 1971 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 1974, the Dance Theatre of Harlem presented its first Broadway season at the Anta Theatre.

Significance

Following the official debut of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the company built its international reputation. In 1971, the company participated in the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy, and played other Italian engagements. Cities in Switzerland and the Netherlands were also included on the performance schedule. The Dance Theatre gained recognition within the United States as well through its touring. The repertoire of the Dance Theatre diversified under the artistic direction of Mitchell, and Balanchine ballets were added to the repertoire.

The Dance Theatre is acknowledged as one of the world's finest ballet companies. Initially predominantly composed of black dancers, the company has come to include several white dancers, underscoring its initial concept and attesting to the universality of classical ballet. In this regard, Mitchell has commented, "Blackness is now irrelevant in ballet."

Further Reading

Clarke, Mary, and David Vaughan, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Dance and Ballet*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977. Contains brief descriptions of Arthur Mitchell and the Dance Theatre of Harlem under separate headings. Includes a picture of the company.

Coe, Robert. *Dance in America*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1985. Gives a brief account of Mitchell and the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

DeFrantz, Thomas F., ed. *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002. Explores the "complex history" of African American dance in the twentieth century.

Doeser, Linda. *Ballet and Dance*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977. Presents an overview of Mitchell's career and establishment of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Discusses the repertoire of the time. Presents listings of company members, the company's repertoire, and its tours. Includes pictures.

Emery, Lynne Fauley. *Black Dance from 1619 to Today*. 2d rev. ed. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Book Company, 1988. Provides an interesting account of Mitchell's career and the emergence and rise of the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Haskins, James. *Black Dance in America*. New York: Harper Trophy, 1990. Takes an in-depth look at Mitchell's career and the Dance Theatre of Harlem's growth.

Hodgson, Moira. *Quintet: Five American Dance Companies*. New York: William Morrow, 1976. An insightful look at the early beginnings of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Discusses company members and repertoire. Replete with pictures of the company in rehearsal and performance.

Kraus, Richard, Sarah Chapman Hilsendager, and Brenda Dixon. *History of the Dance in Art and Education*. 3d ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997. Provides a brief description of the development of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. References to the company are made in various sections of the book.

Long, Richard A. *The Black Tradition in American Dance*. London: Prion, 1995. Contains a concise overview of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Includes pictures of Mitchell, Shook, and the company.

Thorpe, Edward. *Black Dance*. Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1989. Gives a generalized account of Mitchell's career and the development of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Provides a picture of Mitchell as a dancer with the New York City Ballet and one from his performance in *Creole Giselle*.

See Also

Oct. 16, 1942: Agnes de Mille Choreographs *Rodeo*; Apr. 18, 1944: Robbins's *Fancy Free* Premieres; Oct. 30, 1944: Graham Debuts *Appalachian Spring* with Copland Score; Nov. 20, 1946: First Performance by Balanchine and Kirstein's Ballet Society; May 30, 1954: Taylor Establishes His Own Dance Company; Oct., 1956: Joffrey Founds His Ballet Company; Mar. 30, 1958: Ailey Founds His Dance Company; June 24, 1964: Cunningham Stages His First Dance "Event."