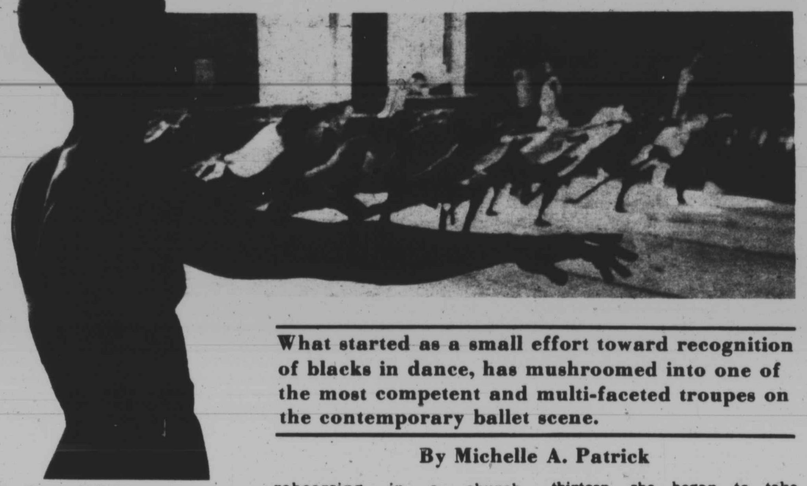
Dance Theatre of Harlem



Joe Wyatt, ballet master, puts a class through its paces.

What started as a small effort toward recognition of blacks in dance, has mushroomed into one of the most competent and multi-faceted troupes on the contemporary ballet scene.

By Michelle A. Patrick

Virginia has the daring elegance of a calla lily; Elena the crisp clarity of a rose, and Joe the taut and colorful rhythm of a bird of paradise. They are the blossoms of one of America's hottest artistic greenhouses. They are flowers of the world - acclaimed Dance Theatre of Harlem.

The first permanently established black company of classical ballet dancers, Dance Theater was born in 1969, in an atmosphere rich with the fervor and commitment that surround ground - breaking endeavors. Its founder, dancer Arthur Mitchell, forged DTH with the same zeal and ardor with which he had already harvested a career of firsts. In 1955, Mitchell had been the first black dancer in this country to become a part of a major ballet company.

During the course of his fifteen year tenure with George Balanchine's revered New York City Ballet, he had been the first black man to perform leading roles as a permanent member of a principal troupe.

By 1969, when Mitchell accepted money from friends and a grant from the Ford Foundation to nurture his dream, he was well accustomed to cultivating virgin territory.

Virginia Johnson was one of the first seedlings to take root within Dance Theater. She joined the company six months after it began, one of four dancers rehearsing in a church basement. Joe Wyatt came three years later and in 1974, Elena Carter, the young ballerina who would ultimately marry Joe, became a member of DTH.

Although, during the middle 1970's, Joe and Elena danced a two and a half year stint with Mexico's National Company of Dance, all three prerformers credit Arthur Mitchell and DTH's co - founder Karel Shook, with having shaped them and determined the course of their careers.

Virginia started studying ballet at the age of three in her native Washington, DC. At thirteen, she began to take classes at the Washington School of Ballet and received a scholarship to study modern dance with Pola Nirenska. As a teenager, she danced with the Washington Ballet in yearly productions of "The Nutcracker." When she joined Arthur Mitchell's dance troupe, Virginia was a dance major at New York University's School of the Arts.

Despite all this, the ballerina insists that, had it not been for DTH, she might never have become a ballet dancer at all. Of course, a major company might have accepted her as an - apprentice, but Virginia says she was "far from the professional level" when she became a founding member of Dance Theater.

Ballerina Virginia Johnson pauses reflectively during rehearsal.

While no one doubted their vitality and authenticity as modern dancers, tap dancers, jazz dancers, flamenco dancers and the like, blacks were the **personae non gratae** of ballet.

Perhaps because of classical dance's association with things upper crust, perhaps because of the great mythical stereotype of the black body, or perhaps because ballet is the child of European musical tradition, black classical dancers were thought of as curiosities, as flukes.

A legendary misconception was the idea that perppering a **corp de ballet** with performers of color would fracture the all - important sameness of a troupe, destroying its cohesive look.

Arthur Mitchell shattered that kind of thinking forever, sometimes with gestures eloquent in their simplicity, like dressing brown ballerinas in blue tutus, not pink ones.

Statuesque Joe Wyatt is another who gives Dance Theater sole credit for his career in dance. Unlike Virginia, Joe had relatively little training before he went to Arthur Mitchell as an apprentice.

As a boy in Trinidad, Joe was, more than anything else, an athlete. A lover of physical activity, he was a member of the junior national swimming team of the West Indies by the time he was thirteen. On academic scholarship to North Dakota's Dickinson State College, he began to expand his range, studying the arts as well as gymnastics.

It was not really until he transferred to Brockport State College that he began to focus on dance. In 1971, Joe was awarded a scholarship to Jacob's Pillow, Connecticut's famous summer workshop for young dancers. That experience and a sense of adventure spurred him to send his photographs to Arthur Mitchell, who promptly summoned him.

"I remember I was standing at the bar," Joe muses, "and Mr. Mitchell came in. He stood across the room and looked at me with an expression on his face that said "Oh, my God, what is that!"

Joe, was immediately accepted into Dance Theater. Shortly thereafter, he became one of the 10 to 25 percent of the troupe's apprentices who go on to join the performing company.

The dancers of Dance Theater "work as a team", observes Shook, "like the old Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, in the forties and fifties." "It's a rare quality," says the seasoned Ballet Russe veteran, "a quality rare enough to be non - existent." He chuckles to himself.

Shook notes other attributes which single Dance Theater out among its peers: "The tensile strength, the stamina, the rhythm, plus that indefinable thing," he reaches for a word, (soul). "The Russians use the term in exactly the same way that we do. They call it **Dusha**. If you don't have **Dusha**, you're not a very good dancer."

Perhaps **Dusha** is the root of another DTH phenomenon. "In most companies," Shook instructs, "dancers of a certain age, usually thirty, start to fall apart." Not so among the Mitchell troupe, where dancers may be buoyed by an extra dollop of **Dusha** past that crisis - ridden juncture.

Uncommon too is the fact that, as Joe puts it, "We move so fast." He is referring, not only to the pulse of Dance Theater's phycical motion, but to the rate of the company's artistic development.

Twelve seasons ago, DTH was a fledgling company, one which many perceived as a social service project, something nice for blacks, a statement about color. Today, many European and American critics see the company as one of the most exciting performing troupes on the contemporary dance scene.

As one columnist posed it last season: "Let's stop thinking of the fabulous Dance Theatre of Harlem as if it were something unique and special, like the Harlem Globetrotters. It has "arrived" and is ready to take its place as simply one of the major ballet companies of our time.

When it began, Dance Theater of Harlem stressed two dance traditions: the precise, patterned, story - free musical abstractions of Balanchine and the colorful, percussive, ethnically influenced dances of choreographers like Goeffrey Holder.

Several seasons ago, Mitchell and Shook began to train their dancers in the great romantic tradition, performing legendary works like **Swan Lake** and **Paquita**. Although some critics balked at the idea, others expressed glee at seeing the 19th century Russian classics danced with a decided combination of pure technique and pure joy.

One balletomane wrote: "(DTH) descends and departs from the tradition of American ballet in the same way that American ballet forty - five years ago descended and departed from Russo - European ballet . . . There is such a thing as black classicism, and it is a phenomenon, not an invention."

Of "black classicism", Karel Shook says: "All I can say is that there is classicism, and no matter what color you are, an arabesque is an arabesque. However, that's going to look different on different bodies.

"About fifty percent of the dance company comes up through the school," Shook explains, referring to the three levels of classical training which preceed Dance Theater's apprentice program.

"Another 25 percent have been routed directly through the apprentice program." Generally, no matter how much training a dancer has had before becoming a part of the school or company, "most of it has been so bad," opines the former ballet master of the Dutch National Ballet, that some degree of re - training must take place.

"What we look for is professional potential," says Shook. "If a beginner has professional potential, we take him. They have to be bright, pick up quickly, and be motivated." Given that, the school takes over. "We develop elegance, presence and self - esteem," Shook asserts. "We convince the students that they are what they are, and if they're going to go out there on stage, they can't go out and apologize."

—Reggae

(Continued from page 16)

vocals drew a fantastic reception, especially considering the fact that she was one of the few non-reggae artists on the show. She ended her set with a reggae melody that earned her further acclaim.

It took the high energy of dub poet Mutabaruka, with his jarring proclamation "It's Not Good To Stay In The White Man's Country Too Long," to bring us all to consciousness (literally and philosophically).

Judy Mowatt gave a sterling performance, and proved once and for all to be the rock of the I-Threes, Bob Marley's former back-up group, also composed of Marcia Griffiths and Rita Marley.

Lloyd Parkes and We The People were right on time, and 24- year-old Dean Fraser's eloquent sax introduced a refreshing new dimension to the music.

Especially poignant, was his rendition of Bob's "Redemption Songs." Taj Mahal showed us what mastery of the blues guitar was all about. D. J.s (the closet thing to our rappers) Michigan and Smiley, Louis Lepke, and Brigadier Jerry, lived up to their reputations and closed the Splash that morning in grand Rub-A-Dub style.

By the final night everyone looked dragged out, but determined to hang in as there were more "Rockers" in the wings. The evening got off to a fair start with dub master Augustus Pablo, but it took the likes of the Twinkle Brothers and Marcia Griffiths to "lively up" the set.

Steel Pulse, from England was the group everyone was waiting for, and they appeared after an interminable set-up time that left everyone restless.

By then it was after 3 a.m., and they played a short, tight set that left the audience chanting for an encore that never materialized.

The surprise of the evening was The Blue Riddim Band from Kansas—all white and pumping hard! Color was forgotten as people instinctively responded to the "roots" music. The Jack Miller Band and Ras Carbie were also crowd favorites.

However, the Mighty Diamonds had the audience "skanking" along with them, and begging for their hit "Pass The Couthie" (herb). The song had been performed by several groups during the past few nights, but this was the version for which we were all waiting.

Reggae Sunsplash was an unqualified success, bringing to world attention acts which would otherwise not be heard outside of Jamaica, as well as those groups known the world-over. Hopefully,? recording contracts will be signed that will make it possible for Americans to enjoy Jamaica's "black gold" more than once a year.

Reggae Sunsplash is the brainchild of Synergy Productions, a group of four young Jamaicans determined to bring quality entertainment to the people, and boost the economy with some tourist dollars as well. They lost money for the first three years, and in 1980, the government stepped in and lent it's financial backing to the concert, retaining Synergy as the show's producers.

This was a touchy situation, since reggae music often decries the ocrruption of the system, and Rastas still encounter discrimination. However, the financial benefits outweighed all these considerations. Reggae music has become Jamaica's most valuable commodity, and largest export, as its popularity increases throughout the world.

(Continued from Page 15)

Augustus Pablo

ORIGINAL ROCKERS: Rockers Dub, Up Warrika Hill, Cassave Piece, Tubby's Dub Song, Jah Dread, Brace A Boy, Thunder Clap, Park Lane Special, New Style, A and P Special.
Shanachie: L004
Rating —★
The general consensus of the panel on this one what that it did not make it at all. At one point, it seemed to be jamming, but all of a sudden, it fell down on it's knees. It is a mixture of hard rock and reggae, but somehow, it doen't come across on this one. The one star rating was a kind interpretation.
D - 9282

Midnight Star

Victory, Strike a Match, Move Me, Make Time, Hot Spot, You Can't Stop Me, Be With You Is Alive.
Solar: 9-60145-1 ★ ★
Rating — Some how, this just didn't get into the groove, neither the music nor lyrics. Every cut sounds b asically the same, although the variance is strictly with the beginning. It would be a strictly danceable pair of sides, but nothing to raise it out of the ordinary.

The McCrarys

ALL NIGHT LONG: Its Still You, Night Room, Lookin' Through the Eyes of Love, Love On a Summer Night, All Night Music, For You, Only with Music, Torn in Two, Miles Away, Feel Your Fire.
Capitol 12198
Rating —★ ★ ★ ★
This is class material from a veteran group which has been around, and are now starting to move out under their own name. They have travelled as opening acts with a great many well - known stars, so they have paid their dues, and should now start to reap some of the rewards. You can tell by the rating that the Dawn panel thinks they will make it.