

Dance Theatre of Harlem: loving the classics, but with eyes on the future

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By [Robert Johnson](#)
For The Star-Ledger

Da'von Doane and Ashley Murphy in Dance Theatre of Harlem's "Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven" Rachel Neville
Virginia Johnson speaks passionately about classical ballet.

The artistic director of the **Dance Theatre of Harlem** clearly has a soft spot in her heart for "Pas de Dix," the ethereal distillation of dances from "Raymonda" among the company's offerings this season.

DTH, which returns to Jazz at Lincoln Center on Wednesday, will also treat balletomanes to a matinee performance of the Black Swan Pas de Deux. Yet the classics are only part of what Johnson has planned. "We don't want to get stuck in grooves," she says. "The power of Dance Theatre of Harlem is that it affords a different perspective on the art form."

To that end, DTH has acquired Ulysses Dove's "Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven," a legendary work that the late choreographer—best known for searing, contemporary pieces like "Episodes" and "Bad Blood"—created for the Royal Swedish Ballet. Another provocative mix of ballet and modern dance is Donald Byrd's "Contested Space." And Johnson has commissioned two DTH alumni to stage a premiere. Thaddeus Davis and Tanya Wideman-Davis have created "past-carry-forward," a dramatic piece that recalls the Great Migration.

"Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven," to music by Arvo Pärt, is an elegy for friends and family members lost to death. "Love is at the center of it," Johnson says. Yet these danced conversations and soliloquies have a sharp-edged clarity. Dove wanted "to push the dancers to the very edge of their capability in order to find out what that next step is," says Johnson. The piece demands total commitment. "It's not just physical. You need your whole self to do it," she adds. The ballet is in four sections: Love, Friendship, Loss and Letting Go.

Dance Theatre of Harlem
Where: Frederick P. Rose Hall, Jazz at Lincoln Center, 60th Street and Columbus Circle, New York
When: Wednesday at 7:30 p.m., and Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m., with matinees on Saturday at 2 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m., through April 27
How Much: \$25-\$110; call (212) 721-6500 or visit jalc.org

Choreographer Donald Byrd, who directs Seattle's Spectrum Dance Theater, has maintained a dodgy, questioning relationship with classical ballet over the years, glorifying the beauty of the arabesque in a piece like "Shards," yet stripping ballet of its prettiness in his "Life Situations: Daydreams on Giselle." "He asks you to see classical tradition through a different lens," Johnson says describing "Contested Space," which Byrd created for the DTH Ensemble. "Sometimes the lens is sardonic, without a doubt. Sometimes it's playful and witty. Sometimes it is dangerous.

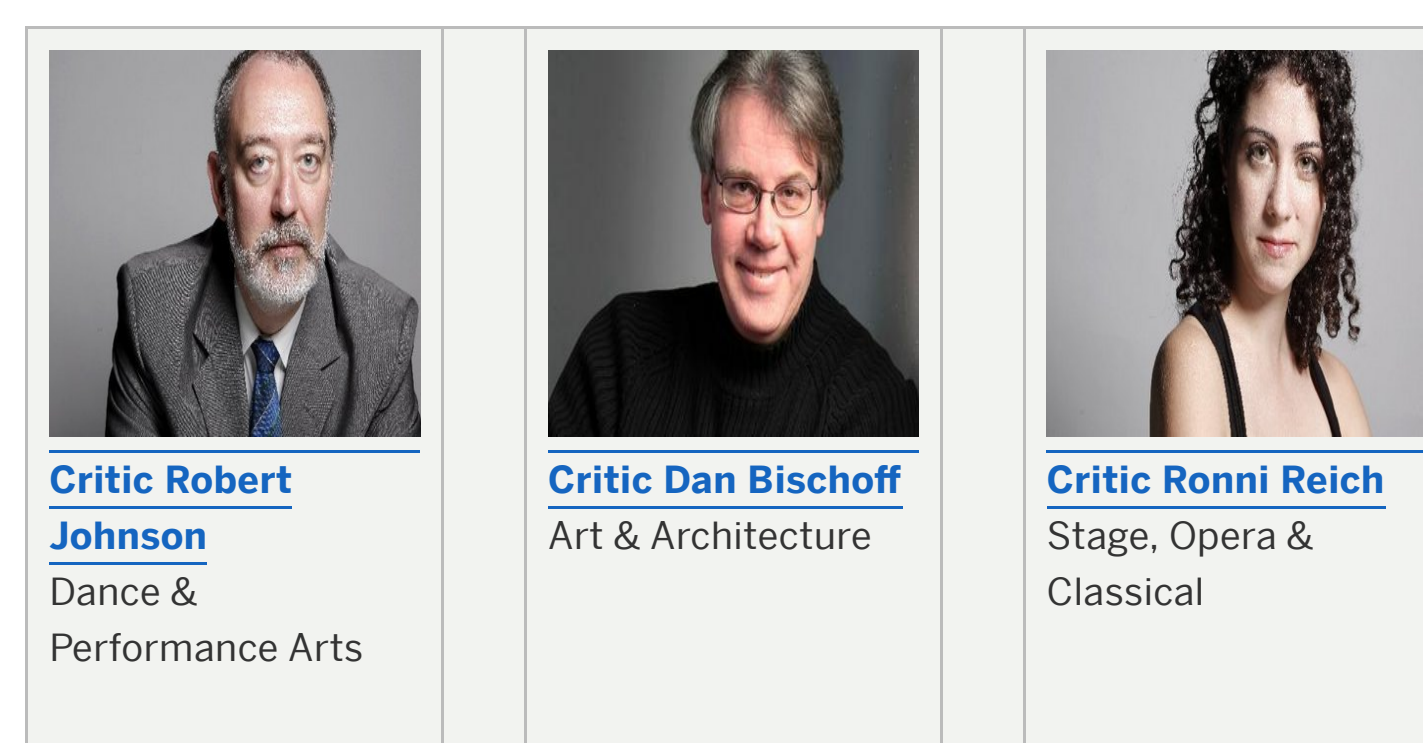
"He's in your face," she says, noting that Byrd's work demands an opinionated response.

The season premiere, "past-carry-forward," was inspired by Isabel Wilkerson's book "The Warmth of Other Suns." Realistic characters like a train porter, a showgirl and a soldier are drawn from life, as the ballet portrays African-American migrants seeking jobs and dignity in the North. The ballet doesn't end there, however. Davis and Wideman, the husband-and-wife choreographers, go on to imagine a second Harlem Renaissance, in which social mores continue to evolve leading to ever-greater freedom. As their characters prepare to enter a new world, the porter pulls aside a curtain recalling the moment in years gone by when northward bound trains crossed into unsegregated territory allowing black and white passengers to mingle.

"It's an attempt to look at what is possible now, and in the future," Davis says.

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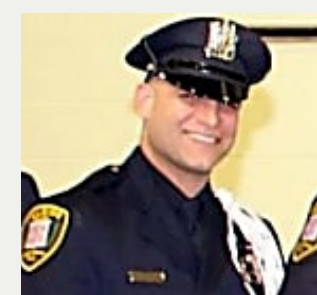
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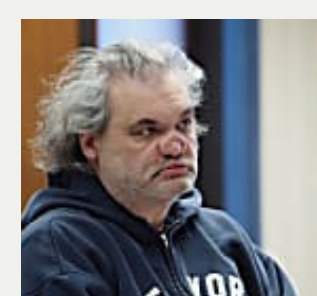
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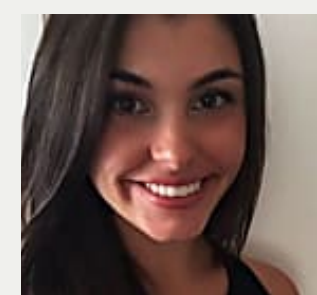
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