



ANDREW GOLDBERG

# THE BLACK BODY IN QUESTION



MICHAEL HAINBARD

IS BLACK DANCE LESS ACCESSIBLE THAN THE 300-YEAR-OLD BALLET IDIOM? JAWOLE WELLA JO ZOLLAR, TOP! "WE'VE NEVER REALLY LOOKED AT HOW SEPARATE OUR CULTURES ARE." ABOVE: ADAGIO CLASS AT THE SCHOOL OF AMERICAN BALLET, WHERE BLACKS ARE RARE.

by  
**THOMAS  
DEFRANTZ**

SCARCE ON  
BALLET STAGES,  
AFRICAN  
AMERICANS  
NEVERTHELESS  
PACE AMERICAN  
DANCE

C all me an affirmative action baby, but I imagine an American ballet that looks like my friends and family: black, white, Puerto Rican, Asian, Filipino, Indian, European, African—many-hued, diverse, interested in art. Right now, I have a hard time dragging them to the ballet. Though many of them love dance nearly as much as I do, ballet in New York is, well, just too *white*.

Currently, the New York City Ballet (NYCB) has three African American dancers (out of a company of 83); American Ballet Theatre (ABT) has none (out of 85, though there are Asians on the roster). As representatives of New York, these two organizations limp along, out of step with the times. Feld Ballets/NY does better with three men of African descent (out of 20), while the precariously perched Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH), responding to its latest financial crisis

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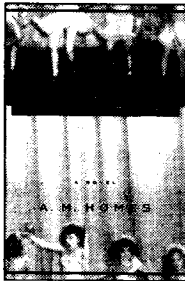
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30 VILLAGE VOICE April 23, 1996

with yet another downsizing, now counts 26 African Americans among its 36 dancers.

Affirmative action at the School of American Ballet (SAB), the teaching wing at NYCB, got squashed way back in 1933. SAB cofounder Lincoln Kirstein wrote then of training an equal number of black and white children, but it wasn't until 1950, when Louis Johnson became the first dark-skinned black at the school, that integration came in the flesh. Johnson wasn't the first African American dancer on regular salary at NYCB, though; that honor went to Arthur Mitchell in 1955.

Forty years later, there are only two advanced black students at SAB. I asked SAB administrator Tom Schoff how they recruit. "Every-one auditions. For the little kids, that means an audition in New York. We advertise in the *Amsterdam News*, *El Diario*, and that Russian newspaper. In our ads we show a racially mixed group." What happens next? "Everything thins out. In a beginning class we start with 20 boys and 40 girls. Of the 60, only three or four are ever going to go through the school and become professionals. To say that 14 per cent of those first 60 were minorities, and only two or three become professional dancers, well, you can't have a half person."

Using this logic, you also can't have many black ballet dancers. As SAB and ABT cling to segregation-era theories of self-selection in training and hiring ("It's a matter of who comes to us," an insider at ABT told me), we suffer the racial consequences. It hurts my heart to see ABT at the Met, sailing through Twyla Tharp's jazz-inspired *How Near Heaven*, while next door the overwhelmingly white NYCB rips into Balanchine's jazzy neoclassicism. All this in a theater owned by New York City, the two companies funded in part by government grants.

To be fair, the three dancers at NYCB represent the largest permanent black presence there ever. And ABT has hired African American choreographers and guest artists, including Judith Jamison in her first New York appearance as a member of the corps in Agnes de Mille's *The Four Marys* (back in the day, before her stardom with the Ailey company). Black choreographers Alvin Ailey, Ulysses Dove, and Keith Lee all made works for ABT; Twyla Tharp associate Shelley Washington served briefly as ballet mistress there. But how do these two companies, standard-bearers for American ballet, remain so rigidly Eurocentric and closemouthed about race in a city boastfully proud of its racial diversity?

The incredible whiteness of ballet spills into audiences at Lincoln Center, where all too often I've counted myself as one of four or five African Americans in the house. According to senior marketing director Christopher Ramsey, NYCB has recently "embarked

on a wide array of initiatives aimed at increasing understanding of ballet as an art throughout New York City," including reduced-price admissions for high-school- and college-aged audiences. But these programs all seem oblivious to the racial standoff between ballet and New York City's expanding populace of color. If NYCB and ABT don't aggressively pursue integration onstage, they'll continue to be perceived as collaborators in maintaining an in-

creasingly segregated status quo. Unfortunately for us all, the conservative economics of the '90s predict that until these white dance institutions need an audience of color, and that audience insists on its stage reflection, ballet will remain pale.

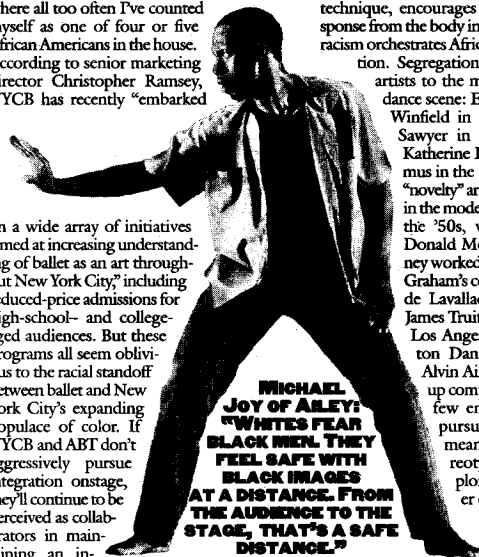
Luckily, some world-class ballet options, admittedly smaller-scaled, are committed to a multiracial vision of America. DITH wasn't able to give a New York season this year; last year's critically acclaimed season underwhelmed at the BAM box office. The classically oriented Feld Ballets/NY works modestly at the Joyce Theater, often to audiotape. (Even amidst fierce budget restraints, NYCB and ABT both work with live orchestras.) I love both of these companies, but don't wonder that they're relegated to the margins of the New York ballet scene.

Percentage-wise, you'll find more classical dancers of color in the regional ballet companies: San Francisco (17 out of 63), Pennsylvania Ballet (2 out of 35), Boston (2 out of 44). The schools associated with these companies have aggressive outreach programs offering ballet training to minority populations. Stephanie and Bojan Spassoff, directors of the Rock School of the Pennsylvania Ballet, administer a City Dance program which serves Philadelphia students based on financial need. Since City Dance was conceived in 1993, the Spassoffs say, "the complexion of the school has changed. The majority of students [still] tend to be Caucasians from the suburbs. But now we have a very healthy minority representation. There's a higher comfort level for African Americans and Latinos. The school is aggressive in wanting to get talent that reflects the community."

The regional schools predict more fully integrated companies as their students progress to advanced levels of technique. But don't expect change overnight. Ballet training is time- and money-intensive, requiring thousands of dollars for classes and shoes, and eight to 10 years of a child's focused attention. If you make it into a company, the financial rewards remain slight: a new corps member at NYCB currently makes a base salary of \$750 per week, for 38 weeks annually. Add to that the social pressures of representing the race—since there are so few black dancers in ballet today—and you begin to wonder how current NYCB corps member Andrea Long manages. "Being the only black woman in a company this size," she says, "means there are always personal issues to deal with."

No wonder most dancers of color move into modern dance, which allows a later-in-life start, and, unlike the strict formality of ballet technique, encourages a deeply personal response from the body in motion. But here, too, racism orchestrates African American participation. Segregation forced pioneer black artists to the margins of the modern dance scene: Edna Guy and Hemsley Winfield in the 1920s, Randolph Sawyer in the 1930s, and even Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus in the 1940s were considered "novely" artists. Integration arrived in the modern dance mainstream in the '50s, when Mary Hinkson, Donald McKayle, and Matt Turney worked as members of Martha Graham's company, while Carmen de Lavallade, Don Martin, and James Truitt performed with the Los Angeles-based Lester Horton Dance Theater. But until Alvin Ailey assembled his pick-up company in 1958, painfully few ensembles aggressively pursued integration as a means to subvert racial stereotyping and publicly explore the beauty and power of brown bodies.

By now, dance in America has boomed and bombed, its



MICHAEL JOY OF AILEY:  
"WHITES FEAR BLACK MEN. THEY FEEL SAFE WITH BLACK IMAGES AT A DISTANCE. FROM THE AUDIENCE TO THE STAGE, THAT'S A SAFE DISTANCE."

TOP: BARNES & NOBLE

NEA funding cut dramatically by the current congress. I asked dancers, choreographers, school administrators, critics, and company directors to talk about racism in the dance world. No surprise that black artists have more to say about the current race-baiting climate than their white counterparts. Everyday racism assures dancers their fair share of atrocities, from the Ailey soloist called "nigger boy" by a white woman brandishing a checkout separator in a Florida supermarket, to the black ballet student blithely informed that "tap dancing is not an art" by an anonymous white man in an elevator at the San Francisco Ballet school. New Jersey police hassled Bill T. Jones in 1994; he escaped arrest by producing a *Time* magazine cover bearing his image. These stories probably sound familiar to anyone born colored. But for dancers, racism arouses a uniquely crippling distraction from the aesthetic business of the body.

David Rousseuf spoke backstage before a performance of his BAM-sponsored *The Whispers of Angels*: "People pigeonhole you as a black artist; what comes with that is a very subtle form of racism—that your work is less than human. Like, 'It's artwork, okay, but it's for black people? Whereas in fact we're really making work from an African American perspective that's about the human condition. I find that quite frustrating. And I find it a lot from the critics. I think they're very, very confused when writing about black work. It's difficult—even just getting reviewed by people who aren't used to seeing African work, and can't really see it as anything but."

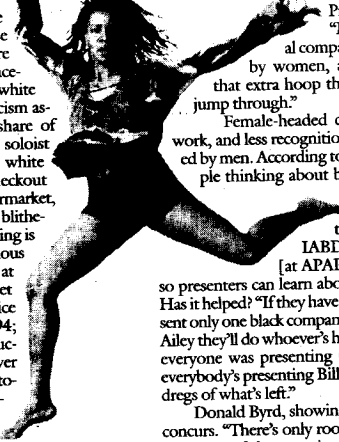
In journalism, seeing more than race demands moving beyond stereotyping. "When are white people going to stop putting black and white culture in opposition to each other?" wonders Robert Henry Johnson, a fast-rising, 28-year-old San Francisco choreographer. "Whenever journalists represent me, they play off Robert Henry Johnson grew up in the ghetto, three blocks away from the San Francisco Ballet. He had to walk through hell to get to the lily-white art scene, where we taught him everything he knows. He broke through the ghetto? I ain't broke through *shit*."

Ann Murphy, a white Bay Area critic, recognizes the racial impasse: "Unless the critic works very hard to write against biases, they appear. A patronizing tone creeps into the criticism. White critics are afraid of their own racism coming out in ways they can't control. Part of the nature of [white] privilege is the absence of insecurity. There's a tendency to want to exempt dance from politics, or to assert that political dance is not real. And to talk about race is to be political."

Bill T. Jones waited six months to speak out after Arlene Croce's 1994 "victim art" tirade; last December he publicly called her attack racist. Croce's implication, that political reality need never intrude upon art, peremptorily excludes African American materials from the dance-maker's palette. Where in our history can we find movement without political, social, or ecstatic meaning? And what are our family histories, if not carefully choreographed dances of survival? Ironically, many of the dancers I interviewed for this article approach concert dance as a *refuge* from racism, as a path to expression denied in the larger society.

"Not only is there racism, there's sexism," says Joan Myers Brown, founder and artistic director of Philadanco and chair of the International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD).

**CHOREOGRAPHER BEBE MILLER, WHOSE COMPANY IS MULTIRACIAL: "THERE'S BEEN A WIDENING OF ARMS AND EYES."**



She laid it out for me at the annual Manhattan conference of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP).

"Most of the regional companies are headed up by women, and there's always that extra hoop that women have to jump through."

Female-headed companies get less work, and less recognition, than those headed by men. According to Brown, most people thinking about black dancers begin and end with Alvin Ailey and Arthur Mitchell. "The IABD has a booth here [at APAP] for the first time, so presenters can learn about our companies." Has it helped? "If they have a season, they'll present only one black company. If they can't afford Ailey they'll do whoever's hot. One while there, everyone was presenting Garth Fagan. Now everybody's presenting Bill T. Jones. We get the dregs of what's left."

Donald Byrd, showing his wares at APAP, concurs. "There's only room for one or two of us. Some of the most interesting work being done is by African American artists, but [presenters and critics] will never admit that many of the most interesting choreographers alive—Bill T. Jones, David Rousseuf, Alonzo King, Bebe Miller, Ulysses Dove, Ralph Lemon, myself—are black. They want the one or two best of the black ones. Most people—funders and presenters—are not even conscious that they're acting out that way. Everyone seems to be dying for some white man to save the dance world?"

In other words, unequivocal acts of racism remain as elusive in the arts as in other professions. Still, we all know that race matters, even when it shouldn't. Multicultural funding quotas can work *against* dancers and presenters, forcing fierce competition over a tiny slice of "black money." When racist practices can't be attributed to a single person, the mainstream routinely calls them figments of colored people's imagination. But blacks create transcendent concert dance in a volume disproportionate to our presence in the population. In New York, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is the only modern troupe of *any* hue still able to sustain a month's run. The Ailey company's peerless mastery of several forms echoes traditional modes of black survival in the Americas: dancing ballet, jazz, modern, and everything else. Ailey dancers strive to escape dismissive critical stereotyping.

Stereotypes linger from minstrel-era conceptions of blacks as traditional entertainers to whites; this legacy hovers nervously over today's musical shows. GhettoOriginal Productions's *Jam on the Groove*, and George Wolfe and Savion Glover's *Bring in Da Noise*, both latter-day attempts to bumrush the mainstream with hip hop glamour, share an opening number: The house lights dim, a disembodied voice announces "In the Beginning was the Beat," a spotlight reveals a young brother breaking down rhythms barely contained by amplified offstage drumming, and gradually the entire company joins into an absurdly hyperkinetic dancefest. The striking architectural similarities of the two shows are more than a notion of 1999 synergy. Black people's social dances—both tap and break-dancing developed as social dance forms—fizzle on the proscenium stage. If these shows need all their noise, mirrors, smoke, and lighting effects to dazzle, maybe it's because we don't respect the dance at their center.

Despite their flaws, both of these musical edutainmenters kindle our desire for African-inspired dance modes based in improvisation and competition. They're also fabulously deep dance documents of youthful faith. "Tap sorta like

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saved me" testifies one of the divas in a *Noise* voiceover sequence. "I dance to stand by my man and remind him that we are protectors of one another," proclaims the poplocking sister in a *Jazz* voiceover sequence. For dancers of color, the very act of dancing answers existential conundrums born of everyday racism.

Says Michael Joy, soloist with Ailey: "You get on stage and perform, and people love you; they have a respect for you. The same people see you on the street and they don't care. White people have a fear of black men. They feel safe seeing black male dancers or dealing with black images from a distance. From the audience to the stage, that's a safe distance."

Black choreographers aggressively use dance to replay African diaspora history in the face of its continuing neglect. Detailed historical narratives shape a lot of recent work, from Savion Glover's hypnotic tap dance through the middle passage in *Bring in Da Noise*, to Christine King's staggeringly heroic escape from slavery in the Urban Bush Women's *Bones and Ash*, to Marlies Yearby's surreal explication of African and Native American segregation in Movin' Spirit's *Feathers at the Flame*, to Donald Byrd's quixotic survey of economic disenfranchisement and cultural revival in his *Harlem Nutcracker*.

These artists' rush to chronicle a century of African American experience makes for curiously uniform manipulation of photographic props: strange fruit swaying from Southern trees appeared in each and every piece's historical slide show. David Rousseve's sun-drenched cotton pickers, Ronald K. Brown's loosely danced survival/folk adages in *Life Lessons*, and Judith Jamison's staged adaptation of Gullah rituals in *Riverside* broached the long muscle mem-

ory of African ties that bind.

Is the cultural information which inspired these dances closed to whites? No more than ballet's political and gestural foundations have been clouded by 300 years of aesthetic refinement. But black choreographers hear a litany of complaints that their work is obscure.

Jawole Wilia Jo Zollar, founder and artistic director of Urban Bush Women, observes: "A lot of the people confused by cultural information I assume is clear have been white. I'm still trying to figure out how much of that we need to address, and how much is just a certain portion of the population not used to looking. Black people are always having to deal with culturally specific information. One white person told [choreographer] Reggie Wilson, 'You're making your work and leaving me out.' He said, 'I wasn't consciously trying to leave you out.' But that seems to be the perception. White people think they should 'get it' anyway. The assumption wouldn't be there if we were an Asian company from Japan, or an African company from the continent. We've not really looked at how separate our cultures are. African Americans have historically kept a lot inside them."

The Black Arts movement of the 1960s, like the Harlem Renaissance before it, advocated making art of, by, and for colored communities; that utopian fantasy died at the hands of American economic realism. Truth be told, concert dance remains a middle-class pursuit, slowly gaining in appeal to middle-class blacks and Latinos. Milton Simpson, president of Atlanta-based marketing specialists Forward Communications Inc., worked with Dance Theater of Harlem last year: "We couldn't market DTH exclusively to a black audience because the num-

ber of people able to part with \$35 couldn't sustain the company's profitability. Black audiences virtually disappear above \$25 or \$30 a ticket. Still, DTH generated the single largest opening-night crowd for dance ever in the city of Atlanta."

Every artist I interviewed hoped for enlarged audiences of color. When mostly white audiences won't do, they turn to recently formed service organizations, like the Manhattan-based Network of Cultural Centers of Color (NCCC), to stack the house with family. Sidestepping racial boundaries means enlarging audiences conversant with several cultural histories. Merián Soto and Pepón Osorio's sumptuous *Familian* project, premiered last year at the Hostos Center for Arts and Culture in the Bronx, after 15 months of workshops with families who ultimately appeared in the performance. For NCCC member Soto and her collaborators, fostering Latino access to the concert stage required imagining outreach as the *impetus* for the work.

Empowering audiences and neutralizing racism also drive Donald Byrd, who engineered a series of workshops and discussion groups to create his recent work: "For me, outreach is not a frivolous thing at all. It's how I can make a difference. My first experience to the performing arts—via an outreach program—was remarkable. Suddenly the world got bigger in a good way. I saw the possibilities. With black children it's really important, because there are a lot of forces out there saying, 'Your world is teeny-tiny and it's gonna stay like that.'"

Opening an honest racial dialogue among artists isn't easy, but it's happening. Bebe Miller's luscious dance, *Tiny Sisters in the Enormous Land*, probes maturation, womanhood, and

racial difference: Miller's current company—four white women, an Asian woman, and her brown-skinned self—interacted with a film of their racial opposites, earth-toned women from the Dayton Contemporary Dance Theater. Miller says: "I've accepted the fact that my perceptions are always going to be more racially conscious than those of whites. And while the racial conversation has been hammered, there's also been a widening of arms and eyes, which I think is positive. Last spring, at a retreat for midcareer choreographers organized by Dance Theater Workshop, white choreographer Tere O'Connor said, 'Until the question of race is talked about in the dance community by whites as well as people of color, we haven't gotten anywhere.'"

The current wave of dances challenging sexual, gender, and religious identity cuts deep into the impossibly amorphous "black dance" label. Recently, Dwight Rhoden deconstructed recordings of Mahalia Jackson; David Rousseve aligned homosexuality with traditional black church practice; and Ronald K. Brown tendered emotionally explicit same-sex partnering. When the younger breed push buttons, simple racism falls off the remote. Ronald K. Brown: "The beautiful thing now is that you have young brothers fine with their sexuality making dances about it at a young age. It's all about creating your own history—because that's what people do."

People also allow racism, like dance, to begin with the body: it's our common disgrace that art still imitates so much of life.

Bebe Miller's company runs through April 21 at the Joyce. Donald Byrd's *The Beast* plays April 19 and 20 at the BAM Majestic Theater.

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