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Discrimination in Ballet

Discrimination and segregation have been two huge issues in American History. Going back to Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, this case brought up the idea of “separate but equal”. Leading into the idea of the Jim Crow laws was around the time that segregation played a role. Children went to different schools, and people had different facilities based on the color of their skin. Later, the civil rights movement was initiated by Southern Blacks in 1950 to break the existence of segregation. However, this has proceeded to be an obstacle in many aspects of society. It ranged from positions on sporting teams and segregated neighborhoods, to public education and facilities. Discrimination has also made its way into the performing arts profession. Growing up in my generation, I have been fortunate enough to not witness the extreme which some people took this issue. I have been a dancer since the age of 3, and a competitive dancer since the age of 8. This art has been a huge part of my life and throughout all my years, I have not seen major discrimination against those who are of different color than I am. I have danced with others of different color skin than me, competed against them, and even took master classes with them. I found those men and women to be equally as beautiful in performing their passion for all in the audience. Unfortunately, the world of dance was not always this accepting of those of different color. African American dancers have faced many hardships in trying to make it into the profession and be accepted. This has taken a huge mental and emotional toll on these men and women. Although this issue is not as extreme today, how many African Americans do you really see in big places such as the Radio City Rockettes, The Nutcracker, and other famous Ballet’s? The act of discrimination has evolved the performing arts scene to making the dance world better and what it is today.

“Central to this domination are the well-institutionalized practices of ‘whites’ that have for centuries routinely denied ‘black’ Americans the dignity, opportunities, positions, and privileges generally available to most ‘whites’ of all backgrounds” (Atencio, 31). For the longest time this has been a white world and if you weren’t, you were looked down upon. African Americans were never given equal rights and opportunities. Instead, they faced harsh realities, embarrassment, punishment, and torture from those who felt they were of higher power.

A high school decided to step up and take initiative to ‘reproduce’ what the assumptions of ‘black’ dancers are by hitting the racial aspects they face. By doing this they compare and show how similar all these dancers are. It is thought of that whites have this domination and are more inferior than blacks, although it is just looked at as racism. These students are trying to push how normal it should be for institutional practices to be integrated. It is very important to explore the differences there are between the races to be able to see that there aren’t many after all. All should be able to be equal without any one being more ‘inferior’ than another or being looked at differently. Especially in the ballet world, it is important that everyone feels comfortable and safe to be able to give it their all and work well with everyone else.

Today, there is still a divide in the ballet world. Although there has been a slight increase in the number of African American ballerinas, there is still that slight separation in them. There is a term ‘black dance’ that has been used to distinguish this difference. “As a result, performers of ‘black’ dance forms such as African and even hip hop are seen as embodying power and energy, whilst lacking in the technical and disciplinary aspects required of high-level dance performers” (Atencio, 32). Black dance is widely known as a dance performed by people of African origin and puts a label on them which in reality is segregating them from everyone else. However, the term ‘Black Dance’ has had so many other meanings in the past century.

According to Howard, “Black dance is a term that sets the doers apart as separate and unequal in artistic validity” and “the work created by African Americans is too diverse to be compartmentalized and uniformly labeled” (Amin, 8).

Black Dance was created mainly for African American communities to be able to have the freedom to express themselves through an art, which everyone should be able to enjoy. Although this is directed towards forming a separate community of dancers of different skin, it is part of the process to start allowing everyone to see the impact of how the dance world can change. This is the start to gradually allowing integration in bigger productions.

Desmond Richardson is an African American ballet dancer who is the co-founder and co-artistic director of Complexions Contemporary Ballet. He has danced in companies such as Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Ballet Frankfurt, American Ballet Theater, and Hollywood musicals. Throughout his dancing career, he has been able to see so many different places and go through different experiences at each. He stresses the idea about virtuosity when it comes to ballet. Virtuosity is having great skill in music or other artistic passions. “This concept meets the point of gender, religion, capitalism, and individualism. As well as accounting for how “queer of color” critique concentrates its meaning for contemporary performance” (Osterweis, 55).

Ballet is one form of dance. Aside from this, there are so many other styles. There is beauty and passion in all forms and each one of them should be cherished. From whites to people of color, male or female, and straight and gay, they should be able to feel proud and not out of place. Richardson tried his best to make it a point that he could be who he was and pursue what he wanted.

Arthur Mitchell was the first African American dancer with the New York City Ballet. He had faced tough family problems in the early years of his life which helped lead him to where

he is now. He started off with learning how to tap dance. He decided to take this further and audition to land a role in a performance with the New York High School of Performing Arts. After this performance, he was recognized and received a scholarship by the School of American Ballet. Due to their affiliation with the New York City Ballet, they saw Mitchell's potential and wanted to take a chance on him, which then landed his first debut with the company. This was huge because it was unheard of in the Fifties.

People felt that there was no place for a male African American in the ballet world. His choreographer, George Balanchine, did not agree with this. He took a huge stance on allowing Arthur to become a part of the performance and believed in giving him a chance in something he is so passionate about. If it wasn't for him, Arthur may not have gotten the opportunities he was allotted. He faced a great amount of racism and hardships through trying to pursue his passion. At this point in society, many people were against the thought of integrating blacks and whites in the ballet world. When Arthur entered, people were not accepting of the idea of a black ballerina partnering with a white one. Balanchine made it a point to incorporate Mitchell in different aspects of the ballet where he felt worked the best.

After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Mitchell was hurt and wanted to give back. He was so determined to be able to help the black community that he had grown up in with allowing their voices to be heard. Mitchell felt it was critical to hold a stance with making it acceptable for blacks to be able to dance if that was what they had a passion for. He did not want this death to take that away from him and his community. A soprano, Dorothy Mayer, had reached out and asked if Mitchell wanted to help her make a dance program for her Harlem School of Dance. Mitchell was ecstatic at the opportunity and jumped all over it. It was important for him to continue to spread the ballet world with those he had grown up with. He

wanted to give back and make sure the African American community had somewhere to practice this beautiful art (“Dancer who ran circles”).

With the help of Karel Shook, Arthur Mitchell was able to create his own dance school, the Dance Theatre of Harlem. The Dance Theatre of Harlem is a classical dance company founded on August 15, 1969. It is the first predominantly black ballet troupe that is still being used today (“Dancer who ran circles”). Arthur took his passion and turned it into a great opportunity for all to be able to share. In this school, the members were exposed to the works of Balanchine as well as introduced to different new pieces which explored African American Culture. Keeping Balanchine’s pieces was important to Mitchell since he was the one who gave him a chance and got him to the place where he is now. Without this choreographer, these amazing opportunities would not have opened up.

In 1984, this company took a chance and wanted to do something out of the ordinary. Mitchell has decided to put on a performance of “Giselle”, which was commonly known to purely consist of Caucasian dancers. Théophile Gautier, a French novelist and critic, had described the main role in the show “as bathed in a “white mist,” dancing in the “pale starlight,” her face an “oval of alabaster” set with two beautiful blue eyes” (Gaiser, 272). These ballerinas were all white and “fit” the body image and roles. Society viewed them as having the classical look and being more visually appealing. The Director of American Theatre Ballet, Oliver Smith, stated, “The carriage of the black dancer is not classic. It’s the position of the spine” (Gaiser, 272). He had made this statement in regard to why major American ballet companies did not include African American dancers. In other words, it was believed that due to different body types, blacks did not belong in the classic dance area. Mitchell did not believe this and wanted to stress hybridity.

By incorporating blacks, the company is allowing those who don't get equal opportunity to be able to fully be a part of the ballet world. Mitchell wanted to take society and create a more hybrid ballet environment. In putting on this production, there was a hope to show that the African American body was just as beautiful, and it did not matter the color of your skin. Mitchell had faced harsh comments and critics through the process of putting on this production.

Lauren Anderson began her dancing career in 1983 with The Houston Ballet. She was the only African American prima ballerina for many years. She was then promoted to principal dancer, a dancer at the highest rank within a professional company, in 1990. Anderson danced alongside another beautiful African American, Katlyn Addison. Katlyn was a corps member in The Houston Ballet and never made it as far up as Anderson had. As of 2009, there has not been another African American female dancer in the role as principal since Anderson landed the role (McCarthy-Brown).

Mark Hill, author of racial research, mentioned "Whiteness became identified with all that is civilized, virtuous, and beautiful; blackness in opposition, with all that is lowly, sinful, and ugly" (McCarthy-Brown, 389). This quote has a huge impact on the lives of African Americans and shows just how others view them in society. This was how slavery was portrayed back when it was more common in society. Today, people still share those same views and try their best with having a voice and making it heard. We need more men and women to take a stance and fight for what is right and what should be.

A huge role model in the ballet world, as well as in society in general is Misty Copeland. She was the first African American ballerina to dance with a major touring troupe. Aside from the ballet world, she is currently the face of Under Armour, having her own line of athletic clothing. She also has represented Coca Cola, Seiko, and is the new face of Modern Muse

fragrance. By landing all these roles, she has hoped to prove that African Americans have a voice and the power to be role models and as important as whites. Her main goal has been to set a different beauty standard for both dancers and campaign models, as well as to have an impact on the lives of others.

Misty's mentor, Raven Wilkinson, has played a huge role in Misty's mission and has aided in getting her to where she is. Wilkinson was born in Manhattan and is a former ballerina from the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. When she was younger, her mother used to take her to different concerts and ballets, especially hosted by Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. On her ninth birthday, her mother got her first ballet lesson for a gift. This made her ecstatic and boosted her desire to start dancing. Wilkinson had wanted to be accepted into the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo but was told by her own friend not to bother going to auditions since she was not what they were looking for (00:13:37-00:13:47). After hearing this she said, "Well, you certainly aren't going to get anywhere if you sit down and feel sorry about the situation... you have to keep going" (00:14:00-00:14:09). After feeling so strongly about this, she decided to go out and audition for the part anyway. She had landed the role and then became a member of the school she had always admired.

During the duration of her career, she had faced many instances potentially ending in arrests or death by touring with her company. However, this to her was worth every risk. It was illegal for blacks and whites to share the stage at this time in her life. She did not believe that this was fair and knew that uniting different groups of people can only benefit and improve the overall quality of the art. She never gave up on her goals and knew that things would get better one day.

Wilkinson remembers one instance where she was surrounded by the KKK. This was a scary and intimidating time for her. Her hotel manager said to her, “You can’t dance tonight. Go to your room, stay in your room, lock the door, and don’t come out and don’t let anybody in” (Waxman). She had to stay in so that she wasn’t put in harm's way. Due to this, she missed out on the performance with her company and knew in her heart that none of this was fair. Looking out her hotel window, she saw the KKK burning the cross. Wilkinson had mentioned that this will be a sight that she will never forget. The experience was a very scary situation and made her step away for a while. Years later, she decided to go to an audition with the Metropolitan. At this point it was extremely difficult for her to land a role.

Wilkinson had met a man, Sylvester Campbell. He told her that he would like to dance with her in Holland. Wilkinson jumped all over this opportunity and left for a little while. She later decided she wanted to go back home to America and ended up leaving Holland. At this point in her life she knew that America did not grant the same opportunities as she had. She then met Misty and saw huge potential in her determination and abilities. Although times are different from when Raven was younger, Misty has faced similar hardships and knows there is still so much that needs work.

Misty Copeland believes there is still many things that are the same as prior generations. Although things are not taken to the same extreme, there are still cases where blacks are trying to be changed or limited in the ballet world. She has stated, “The one difference is that the world outside ballet has changed. We won’t be told to leave the company because our safety is at risk, but I had a similar experience being told to pancake my skin a lighter color to fit in with the rest of the company. I’ve talked to so many dancers who have had it even worse than [what] I’ve experienced. Raven and I both have a light complexion, but darker dancers have experienced

much worse” (Waxman). Having Wilkinson has helped Misty feel empowered and keep pushing to not let racism step in the way of her career and passion.

The documentary, *Black Ballerina*, explored different experiences of African American ballerinas. We were able to get an inside look at their thoughts, discourage, hurt, and confusion about why there is not equal opportunity for blacks. Having the experience of being able to watch a documentary is different from just reading an article. Through the video, you are able to see and hear what the dancers had to say and what they have faced. This had a huge impact and will hopefully be an inspiration to other black ballerinas.

The film began with a class of black dancers watching a video of a ballet. Their instructor had mentioned that the movement and quality of the dancers were beautiful and so intricate. However, there was something missing from the stage. Still today, there is not equal opportunity for blacks in the ballet world. There is starting to be an increase in seeing them on stage, but their focus is keeping the tradition of the “white body” on the stage. Going through constant rejection and let downs, it is making it harder and harder to encourage African American dancers to keep chasing their dreams.

Ashley Murphy was one of the first girls highlighted in the film. She lives and grew up in Louisiana and always admired ballet as a little girl. Her mother used to take her to see performances by the Dance Ballet of Harlem which had later influenced her to want to “be like the ballerina on the stage.” In 2002 Ashley was in her senior year of high school. During this time, she decided to take a company class with the theatre and later was asked to return to their summer intensive in NYC. This had opened doors for her, and she was beyond excited. Mitchell, founder of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, had then asked Ashley to be in company about a year later. It took much convincing to her parents to allow her to move to NYC and take part in this

opportunity. Joan Myers Brown, founder of Philadanco, made a comment that “parents don’t see ballet as an opportunity for youngsters... but if they saw more blacks on stage and more opportunity it would be more encouraging” (00:05:10-00:05:24). This was true when it came to Ashley’s parents, though they eventually gave her the chance she wanted. She had mentioned in the film how African Americans are discouraged to try ballet since it isn’t the norm (00:04:30-00:04:39), but she wanted to prove that wrong and make an impact. Through this opportunity she had landed, Ashley is able to pursue her passion in ballet and feel included in the world that was once known to be only for whites. She believes that “our society today is moving at a slow pace when it comes to diversity and has to grow to other companies” (00:43:42-00:44:00). She makes a strong case here and hopefully society will continue to work towards this.

The next young woman we got to hear from was Bianca Fabre. When she was younger, she went to see the Atlanta Festival Ballet perform the nutcracker. What was different about this performance was that the company had a black ballerina in the role of Dewdrop, Keila Harvey. After seeing this, Bianca was encouraged to want to do ballet and knew if this girl had a chance, there is hope. Her first look into reality was when she landed a role as Clara in the Nutcracker with her company. She had shared this role with another young girl, who was Caucasian. What was different about this was that she refused to share the same costume as Bianca. This made her extremely upset and it was even worse that the company did not stand up for her (00:07:00-00:07:42). Bianca had gotten to a point where she was unable to excel in the ballet program anymore. Others had recommended to her to move over to modern dancing, but she had refused. With fighting and fighting for equal opportunity, Bianca had finally left the dance world because she was sick of not being able to move up and land more roles. She had made sacrifice after sacrifice and found that it was never enough due to the color of her skin. Watching her get

emotional during this point of the documentary was extremely eye opening and powerful. Bianca hopes to one day be able to return to her passion and be able to have more equal opportunity as those around her.

Delores Browne is a former ballerina from Ballet Americano. At age 10, she had been watching different ballet movies and was inspired by what she had saw. This is when she decided to join a ballet school. Unfortunately, at this point of her life she did not realize the lack of opportunity and that she was not able to join many companies because of the color of her skin. In high school, Delores was in the ballet club and enjoyed every minute of it. She embraced her opportunity and decided she wanted to pursue a higher level in the art. After graduation, she was determined to go to NYC and dance. She took initiative to go out for an audition, and luckily, she landed the role. During her time here, no one in the school was nice to her and she tried her best to brush it off and focus on herself. She was told by many that “going to auditions did not matter because you aren’t going to be given the opportunity due to the color of your skin” (00:11:40-00:12:01). This spoke loudly to Delores, but she never gave up.

Her program did a bunch of modern styles and tried to be ‘exotic’. One thing they did do was perform *Bluebird*. When they danced on stage, she felt the wonderful warm applause of acceptance (00:10:30-00:10:52). This was huge in this time for people of other color to get a round of applause after putting on a performance. They all felt proud and it made a huge impact on their lives. Later in her life she decided to run a scholarship program for younger dancers to teach advanced ballet to those who want equal opportunity.

Virginia Johnson, artistic director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, discussed in more detail the acceptable ballerina body. She mentioned many people believe, “It does not look like ballet if there aren’t twelve of the same body types, skin color, and complexion on the stage”

(00:21:12-00:21:20). She further explained how the perfect body entails a small head, small trunk, and long legs. “Ballerinas don’t have large legs and glutes” (00:25:06-00:25:10). After hearing and knowing about the realities of what people believe, she felt it was important to break this and explain black ballerinas are just as beautiful. Virginia stressed that all women and men have embodied the same intentions, spirit, idea, and movement. “The desire to be excellent, to inspire, doesn’t belong to one group of people. The ability to be the shining example of beauty is not restricted to skin tone” (00:51:28-00:51:44). Due to having the same intentions and values, all should be given equal opportunities to show their feelings on the stage in front of hundreds.

This paper explores a wide variety of experiences through the eyes of multiple African Americans. Over the course of hundreds of years, racism has been addressed and talked about all over the world. Times have significantly changed since then, but it is evident that there still aren’t as equal opportunities for all ethnicities. In most athletics, advertisements, and performing arts there is a vast majority of whites, even today. There has been more African Americans involved, but not as many which should be. The integration of races in ballet is slowly on a rise and hopefully one day will not be looked at as anything other than ‘normal’.

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