DANCE THEATRE OF HARLEM

40 YEARS OF FIRSTS
“Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts captures the majesty of the choreography, the beauty of the costuming, the dancers who defied gravity and stereotyping, and Arthur Mitchell’s own wide-ranging accomplishments.”


**DANCE THEATRE OF HARLEM: 40 YEARS OF FIRSTS** celebrates the history and art of dance with 22 costumes, set pieces, historical video excerpts, documentary photographs, fashion sketches and tour posters; and includes four dramatically-staged ballets that are iconic to the company: *A Streetcar Named Desire, Creole Giselle, Dougla and Firebird*. Dispelling the belief that ballet could not be performed by those of African descent, Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969. It has since grown into a multi-cultural dance institution with a legacy of providing opportunities for creative expression and artistic excellence that continues to set standards in the performing arts.

The exhibition is thoughtfully divided into sections that allow the viewer to walk through a history of Dance Theatre—from photographs and stories about co-founders Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook, to the forming of the school and progression to a professional company, and a repertoire that includes contributions from a myriad of choreographers over the years, including George Balanchine.
“As a kid, I was up against the widespread attitude that if you’re not white, blond or blue eyed, you’re not a part of things.”

—Arthur Mitchell

Arthur Mitchell (b. March 27, 1934)

A natural talent from an early age, Arthur Mitchell began his dance training by learning tap at the Police Athletic League, and attended the High School of Performing Arts in New York City. He was only a teenager when he was awarded a scholarship to the Katherine Dunham School of Dance, where he first met his mentor and future Dance Theatre collaborator, Karel Shook.

After graduating, Mitchell was offered a scholarship to the New York City Ballet’s School of American Ballet. He performed in a variety of Broadway shows, including *Kiss Me Kate*, *House of Flowers*, *Carmen Jones*, and *Four Saints in Three Acts*.

Arthur Mitchell became the first African American male to be a permanent member of a major ballet company when, in 1955, he was selected by Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine to join the New York City Ballet. He performed for 15 years with the Company, quickly rising to the rank of premier danseur. The first African American to achieve this status, he danced in virtually all of the ballets in the company’s repertoire. His two standout performances include the pas de deux in *Agon*, and his portrayal of “Puck” in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*—both roles created for him by Balanchine.

This great accomplishment—occurring in pre-civil rights America—is one of many reached by Mitchell, and significantly contributed to the face and future of dance forever.

Karel Shook (1920-1985)

Karel Shook is recognized internationally as one of the most influential and productive ballet teachers of our time. He danced for several seasons with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and for one year with New York City Ballet. After teaching for several years at the Katherine Dunham School—where he met Arthur Mitchell—he started his own school, the Studio of Dance Arts. It was here that he taught many of the leading black dancers and choreographers of today.

Just prior to joining Arthur Mitchell to found Dance Theatre of Harlem, Karel Shook had been working in Europe for nine years, and, according to him, “was beginning to be
restless and discontent in many ways [...feeling that his work] however successful artistically, was lacking in deeper meanings." Whether drawn together by fate or a mutual desire for positive social impact, it was mere days later that Arthur Mitchell placed a call to Shook to present him with the idea of a new school and potential partnership. Karel Shook immediately accepted and returned to the United States to help launch what would become one of the most respected and culturally-diverse dance schools of all time.

First School to Professional Company

The School of Dance Theatre of Harlem opened in 1969, holding classes in the basement of Church of the Master in the heart of Harlem. Propelled by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook founded the multicultural school, providing the youth of Harlem an opportunity to learn classical ballet and grow proficient in dance.

Moving into new and larger facilities in the early 1970s, the number and types of classes offered at Dance Theatre of Harlem increased to encompass the allied arts, including classes in modern, ethnic, jazz, tap, acting, music appreciation and theory, percussion, sewing and tailoring.

“Diversity is part of the mission ... Ballet arguably has the strongest technique and is the base and foundation for all the disciplines, although each offers something to the other. Modern offers a roundness that often escapes ballet dancers; African offers the rhythm and syncopation important for dancers when performing neoclassical and contemporary ballet styles.”

—Endalyn Taylor, former principal dancer and director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem School

Led by Dance Theatre of Harlem music director and conductor Tania Leon and celebrated designer, Zelda Wynn, apprenticeships were offered in costume design, set design and construction, stage lighting and stage managing.

Making its official New York City debut at the Guggenheim Museum on January 8, 1971, Dance Theatre of Harlem enjoyed a successful opening season with three ballets by Mitchell, and others supplemented by George Balanchine.
and Jerome Robbins. In the last 39 years, the Company has performed in 41 states, 202 cities in North America, and in 40 countries on 6 continents.

Today, Dance Theatre of Harlem is a leading dance institution of unparalleled global acclaim, encompassing a performing touring company, a school ensemble, a leading arts education center and Dancing Through Barriers®, a national and international education and community outreach program. Each component of Dance Theatre of Harlem carries a solid commitment towards enriching the lives of young people and adults around the world through the arts.

**Exhibition Highlights**

In the early years of Dance Theatre of Harlem, Arthur Mitchell had to create the choreography for the company. Beginning with *Ode to Otis* (set to the R&B music of Otis Redding) and *Biosfera*, the company in time incorporated into its repertoire ballets by George Balanchine and Louis Johnson. Mitchell did, however, continue to create choreography, focusing on extending the neoclassical vocabulary to suit the bodies of his dancers. One ballet demonstrating this is *Manifestations*, based on the story of Adam and Eve. In time, the repertoire included works from close to 60 choreographers, including ballets created by company members.

To showcase the strong talents of its dancers, Dance Theatre of Harlem revived many “Bravura” works, or ballets known in the dance world to be demanding. These performances represent the French, Danish and Russian traditions in the 19th and early 20th century ballet. Also included in its repertoire are classics of the 18th and 20th centuries, including Agnes de Mille’s *Fall River Legend* and Valarie Bettis’ *Streetcar Named Desire*, which became an international hit.

The four iconic Dance Theatre of Harlem ballets featured in the exhibition include *A Streetcar Named Desire, Creole Giselle, Doula*, and *Firebird*. 

Dougla dancers. Photo 2010 courtesy of Gene Ogami, California African American Museum

dance theatre of harlem 40 Years of Firsts

A Streetcar Named Desire
Showcasing the company’s dramatic talents, Streetcar tells the tragic story of a young woman tormented by her brother-in-law as she struggles with reality and attempts to hide from her past.

Choreography by Valerie Bettis
Set design by Peter Larkin
Costume design by Saul Bolasni
Costumes executed by Grace Costumes, Inc.
Creole Giselle
The French story of a peasant in love with a nobleman, the Dance Theatre of Harlem version transplants the story to Louisiana, in a free black society during America’s antebellum period.

Staged and directed by Frederic Franklin
Designs by Carl Michel
Choreography by Jean Coralli and Jules Perrot
Music by Adolphe Adam
Dougla

Representing the ritual and ceremony of a wedding between Dougla people, this production—choreographed by the Renaissance dancer choreographer, Geoffrey Holder—became a Dance Theatre of Harlem signature work and has been a part of Dance Theatre of Harlem’s active repertoire since it was premiered in 1974.

Dance Theatre of Harlem premiere 1974
Choreography, music and designs by Geoffrey Holder
Costumes executed by Zelda Wynn
Firebird

Originally based on Russian folktales, choreographer John Taras and designer Geoffrey Holder broadened the appeal by shifting the setting to a mythic tropical island.

Dance Theatre of Harlem premiere 1982
Choreography by John Taras
Scenery and costumes designed by Geoffrey Holder
Costumes executed by Grace Costumes, Inc.
Choreographers, Designers and Composers: Key Players in Dance Theatre of Harlem

Arthur Mitchell and George Balanchine began their relationship early on, when Balanchine was master choreographer with the New York City Ballet, crafting roles specifically for Mitchell. Productions choreographed by this highly-acclaimed artist and included in Dance Theatre of Harlem's repertoire include Agon, Concerto Barocco, Four Temperaments and Serenade. Balanchine's talents were praised in 2010 in the Los Angeles Times when author Debra Levine stated that, of all “eminent dance artists associated with Dance Theatre of Harlem [...] the greatest was George Balanchine.”

Jerome Robbins—renowned for his work as a choreographer of ballets and as a director and choreographer in theater, movies and television—created more than 60 ballets, including two in Dance Theatre of Harlem’s repertoire: Fancy Free and Afternoon of a Faun. Other well-known contributors include award-winning African American choreographer for Broadway and theatre, Billy Wilson; choreographer for the movie version of The Wiz, Louis Johnson; and the highly respected Talley Beatty, who has created over 50 ballets and is recognized as one of the greatest African American choreographers in history.

Zelda Wynn owned her own shop on 57th and Broadway in New York, and taught sewing upon retirement. A teacher to Mitchell’s niece, she was hired as Dance Theatre of Harlem’s first costume mistress, with the responsibility of tending to wardrobe maintenance, and designing and constructing costumes. A well-known designer, she created looks for notable black female celebrities including Ella Fitzgerald and Gladys Knight. Another memorable creation by Ms. Wynn are the first Playboy Bunny costumes commissioned by Hugh Hefner. She spent 18 years with Dance Theatre of Harlem before retiring at the age of 83.

The multi-talented Geoffrey Holder is an accomplished dancer, choreographer, painter, costume designer and

“A copy of Balanchine’s New York City Ballet is exactly what the Dance Theatre of Harlem has never been. Yet it was the Balanchine esthetic—a special way of dancing—that freed the company to become itself. No other company has this kind of extraordinary relationship with Balanchine.”

director who won a Tony Award for best director and best costume design for the Broadway production of The Wiz. The first African American man to be nominated in either category, he provided choreography and costumes for Dance Theatre of Harlem’s Dougla, and costume design for Firebird.

Renowned Cuban-American composer, Tania Leon, started at Dance Theatre of Harlem as an accompanist for ballet classes taught by Karel Shook and Arthur Mitchell. In 1969, she became the first music director of Dance Theatre of Harlem, establishing the music department, music school and orchestra. She conducted all of the compositions she wrote for the company.

“In a remarkably short time Arthur Mitchell’s Dance Theatre of Harlem has established itself as a force in the dance world”
dance theatre of harlem | 40 Years of Firsts

### Specifications

#### Number of Works
More than 165 objects including 25 costumes with set pieces, approximately 130 documentary photographs in more than 50 frames, 20 tour posters, 3 cloth banners, a quilt and 4 historical video excerpts for four staged ballets.

#### Exhibition Components
Mannequin forms, form stands, set pieces, cloth backdrops for the staged ballets and large cloth banners with dance images. Venues will need to print additional graphics, provided as PDF files.

#### Organized by

#### Curators
Judy Tyrus, Exhibition Curator for Dance Theatre of Harlem along with Barbara Cohen Stratytner, Curator of Exhibitions at The New York Public Library.

#### Exhibition Components created by
Woodburn T. Schofield, Jr., Deputy Director of Operations and Special Programs and Edward Garcia, Exhibit Supervisor, California African American Museum.

#### Requirements
Moderate security; 4,000 square feet.

#### Participation Fee
$15,000 plus outgoing shipping and travel expenses for one courier.

#### Shipping
I&A makes all arrangements; exhibitors pay outgoing shipping costs within the contiguous United States.

#### Booking Time
12 weeks.

#### Tour

#### Availability

#### Contact
Beth Pacentrilli, Exhibitions Manager
bethp@artsandartists.org.

---

### Highlights:

- Includes costume forms and backdrops for four staged ballets.
- Banners are long and can be mounted to a wall, or hang in open-air space.
- Ballet video excerpts from television productions of Firebird, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Creolle Giselle.