



Where Are All the Black Swans?

Apr 27, 2010

The New York Times

May 6, 2007

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IN 1933 Lincoln Kirstein wrote a passionate 16-page letter to his friend A. Everett Austin Jr., the director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, introducing a man named George Balanchine and a dream: to remake ballet for America. The plan, as Kirstein wrote, was to have "four white girls and four white boys, about 16 years old, and eight of the same, negros."

What resulted from that letter -- the School of American Ballet and New York City Ballet, both founded by Kirstein and Balanchine -- have endured as major cultural institutions. But Kirstein's plan for student diversity was never realized, and while other minorities have made inroads in classical ballet, the complicated reality of racial inequality persists, especially for black women.

Because male dancers have always been in short supply, black men have attained some success, the most famous being Arthur Mitchell, who was a principal dancer at New York City Ballet before founding Dance Theater of Harlem in 1969 with Karel Shook. But there has never been a black female principal in the ranks of American Ballet Theater or City Ballet.

Currently Ballet Theater has one black female dancer, Misty Copeland, a member of the corps de ballet. Since the departure of Aesha Ash in 2003, City Ballet has had none. Last week Ms. Ash, a member of Alonzo King's San

Francisco company Lines Ballet, returned to New York to perform at the Joyce Theater in an engagement that ends on Sunday.

The first -- and until recently, only -- black woman promoted to the rank of principal at a major American company was Lauren Anderson of Houston Ballet, then directed by Ben Stevenson. "It seems like what matters is if you have a director or a choreographer who has the guts to do it," Ms. Anderson, who retired in 2006, said by phone from Houston, where she is now an outreach associate in the company's education department. "But why should it take guts? It's art, it's ballet, it's dance and it's for everyone."

It was devastating when Mr. Mitchell's Dance Theater of Harlem went on hiatus in 2004 because of financial problems, but at least it looked as if some of his female dancers would be given an opportunity to join major classical companies. That seemed particularly true of Alicia J. Graf, but she was hired by Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in late 2005 after being turned down by City Ballet and Ballet Theater.

Tai Jimenez was the only Dance Theater member to make a successful transition to a prominent ballet company. After freelancing and being turned down by both major New York companies, she joined Boston Ballet, led by Mikko Nissinen, as a principal, though chronic injuries have forced her to step down.

"I got only about a year and a half out of her, but she went out in an amazing way, dancing the lead in Balanchine's 'Midsummer Night's Dream,' " Mr. Nissinen said. "As an artistic director you seldom bring somebody in who is 35, but my reasoning was that she represented what a mature ballerina is with a really ideal work ethic. I have an up-and-coming generation of very talented ladies, and I wanted them to have an example of what it means to be professional."

Ms. Jimenez credits Mr. Nissinen with being a director who aspires to have a diverse company. But while many company leaders express that desire, few have acted on it, partly because there is a shallow pool from which to choose. In response to interview requests American Ballet Theater, led by Kevin McKenzie, said in a statement: "Overall, more than 40 percent of A.B.T.'s roster has been trained outside the U.S. We think these numbers speak to the larger issue of access to quality ballet training in the U.S., regardless of racial background."

Certainly it is impossible to speak of the makeup of companies without looking at the schools that feed them. A Ballet Theater spokeswoman, Kelly Ryan, said there were "long-range plans in development for training students at all levels" at the company's new Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School, but she declined to elaborate. There are two

black students at the school, one male and one female.

At the School of American Ballet, where this year the age of potential students has been lowered to 6 from 8 in an effort to attract a broader applicant pool, Annette Burgess, director of projects, said there had been an increase in minority students since the school started holding community auditions in 1998. The next round will take place on May 17 (in Chinatown), May 19 (in Brooklyn and Queens) and May 20 (in the Bronx and Harlem). Unlike auditions at the school, to be held during the next three weeks for children 6 to 10 who pay a \$25 fee, community auditions are free.

Since the 1998-99 season minority enrollment in the children's division of the school has risen to 22 percent, from 13 percent. (The school's figures don't differentiate among minority groups.) But in the advanced division there is just one black female student. Marjorie Van Dercook, the school's executive director, said: "That gets to the City Ballet issue. We're their academy, so what you see on the stage is reflected by what you see in the school."

Nearly 70 percent of the dancers who join City Ballet come from the school's highly competitive summer program for 12-to-18-year-olds, which mainly attracts dancers from outside New York. Here the number of minority candidates drops considerably from that 22 percent in the children's division. Ms. Burgess said there weren't many minority applicants at School of American Ballet auditions around the country, even in Chicago and Detroit.

The reason there are few black students to choose from is complex. For Virginia Johnson, a former star of Dance Theater of Harlem and the editor of *Pointe* magazine, the disparity stems from three issues: artistic vision, economics -- ballet is expensive and competitive among women no matter their skin color -- and culture.

"It's hard to be the only black dancer," she said. "You feel separate, and you feel negated in a certain sense, and it's not that people are trying to make you feel bad, but it's just obviously around you. Everyone else can bond by similarity, and you have to make an effort, and making an effort makes you wonder, 'Am I not being true to myself?' It's hard to be strong enough to be in that environment and to not feel wrong."

That sense of alienation contributed to Ms. Ash's decision to leave City Ballet after seven years. "It was very difficult," she said. "I fought my way through the school, and I felt like I continued fighting through the company -- fighting with the image that I had of myself."

Ms. Ash, an enormously gifted dancer who performed many prominent parts, never progressed past the corps de

ballet. After her father died, she said, she asked Peter Martins, the company's ballet master in chief, for a short leave of absence. "He actually encouraged me to leave the company, because, in so many words, he told me that he didn't see me really doing any more than what I was doing at City Ballet, period," she said. "Had I not been dealing with all the personal things in my life, I would have just been like: 'Oh yeah? Watch.' But at that time I was so dead."

Ken Tabachnick, City Ballet's general manager, speaking for Mr. Martins, responded in an e-mail message, "In terms of Aesha Ash, Peter feels that his discussions with dancers are confidential, and he would prefer to not betray that confidence by commenting." He added, "Ms. Ash's career was a typical one for an N.Y.C.B. dancer, the majority of whom spend most of their careers here in the corps de ballet."

But Ms. Ash made more of an impact than most. During her final season she ran into a young, black female student on the plaza of Lincoln Center. The student said, "I admire you so much, and I'm so happy you're out there," Ms. Ash recalled, "and I said, 'I'm actually leaving the company.' She started crying. But then she said: 'It's O.K. You can be satisfied with what you've done. And you can leave.' That was huge."

Ms. Graf, in her quest for a job, took an open class at Ballet Theater (she said she was told that at 5 feet 10 inches she was too tall) and sent a package of photographs and reviews to City Ballet. "I got a response saying that there weren't any open positions," she said of City Ballet. Then she auditioned for Ailey. "It wasn't all that devastating," she said. "I wanted to work with one of the top companies, and Ailey worked out. That was the best thing that could have ever happened to me."

To Ms. Johnson of *Pointe* magazine Ms. Graf's inability to secure a job with either New York City Ballet or American Ballet Theater was disappointing. "Alicia would be amazing at either one of those companies."

Ms. Johnson said the reluctance of ballet companies to recruit black ballerinas of Ms. Graf's caliber had more to do with vision than with talent. "On one side of the marketing issue it's tremendously fantastic what they could do with having Alicia as a ballerina," she said. "But on another side, the side that they're much more afraid of, is their whole subscriber base and their whole history of being a ballet company the way you thought ballet was. It means that you have to create a kind of trust, and they've never challenged their audiences to move forward."

In Ms. Graf's case, "the timing wasn't right for them to say, 'Here's our chance,' " she continued. "Of course I regret that they didn't. She's fabulous at Ailey, but she's also wasted at Ailey. She's bigger than Ailey."

Without principal dancers at major American companies, Ms. Johnson and others maintain, young black students have no role models. Dancers of an older generation, like Delores Browne, who trained with Marion Cuyjet in Philadelphia and performed with the New York Negro Ballet in the 1950s, see a lack of patience among young dancers.

"We thought that our struggle would encourage the next generation coming along, but what it did was discourage them," Ms. Browne said. "The people who admired us and thought we were gifted looked at themselves and said: 'I can go to Broadway. I can go to a modern-dance company. I can go to Europe. I'm not going to bother.' I actually had a young woman say that to me, and I was heartbroken."

On a deeper level many black dancers suggest that a primary obstacle is stereotyping. Black women are perceived as being forceful, which doesn't square with the ethereal image of a ballerina. Raven Wilkinson, who joined the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in the mid-1950s, encountered devastating racism while on tour with the company in the Deep South, including incidents with the Ku Klux Klan.

"I have wondered if women have a harder time because ballet, as Balanchine said, is woman," Ms. Wilkinson said. "That purity, that sense of leaving the earth and the romantic sense of being on point is the idea of the woman on the pedestal. Whereas the black woman is seen as more earthy and as dancing solidly."

This seems to be of little consequence in Europe, where black ballet dancers have found more success, including Ms. Wilkinson. When she couldn't find work in America, she joined the Dutch National Ballet in the Netherlands.

In an article, "Glorifying the American Woman: Josephine Baker and George Balanchine," Beth Genné, an associate professor of dance studies at the University of Michigan, makes a strong case that Ms. Baker was Balanchine's first American muse. Ms. Genné writes, "It could very well be that Baker's long legs and lithe body not only fit Balanchine's ideal but also helped to create it."

What's confusing about the rejection of Ms. Graf by City Ballet is that she is a Balanchine archetype: long legs, with a silky, harmonious line and plasticity. Ms. Graf views the question "Why don't companies hire black dancers?" as outdated. "We have to change the paradigm now," she said, "and I think that in order to do that we have to challenge companies to make it a priority to diversify their roster, and not just to do an outreach or bus in some kids and expose them to dance. The companies, as a business tool, have to go into communities where dance is not present to expose and train dancers."

That's what Mr. Mitchell set out to do when he formed Dance Theater of Harlem. While the company remains on hiatus (performances continue through the organization's Dancing Through Barriers Ensemble), the school still functions, directed by Endalyn Taylor, a former Dance Theater member. But without a company to aspire to, Ms. Taylor said, the situation "is really challenging and really sad."

"My mind always goes back to the days when there was a company," she added. "I remember the students looking in the doorway, watching us. Being the role models for them made it a lot easier."

In the end Ms. Taylor is hopeful that aspiring black ballerinas will realize that the fight is worth it. "I think our job as instructors and motivators and role models is to let dancers know that it's still possible," she said. "It may not be the easiest road, but if you love to do it, you have to go for it."

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Photograph: Aesha Ash from Aesha Ash's blog - Vox.