



**CLASSICISM HAS NO COLOR: EXAMINING THE CAREERS OF OFTEN-  
OVERLOOKED AFRICAN-AMERICAN BALLET DANCERS**

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“[T]here have been beautiful dancers of color all along, I mean, throughout history there have been numerous ones... Yeah, I think that we have always had a large [impact]... as large as we were allowed to, in certain parts of history. Sometimes we were relegated to... a place on the periphery. Now we are able to be front and center...” (Dwight Rhoden)

This research paper examines the impact of certain black ballet dancers on the landscape of American theatrical dance. While “diversity” is a buzzword today, I call attention to the significant presence of black dancers throughout American ballet history, as well as the reasons why their experiences have been overlooked by critics, historians, and those who construct the ballet canon. The five unsung heroes I focus on are Raven Wilkinson, Arthur Mitchell, Debra Austin, Lauren Anderson, and Katlyn Addison, with Dwight Rhoden featured in the conclusion. Each chapter begins with the dancer’s biographical information, as to give context to their story, and then features pivotal roles and experiences, interactions with mentors, encounters with discrimination, and through-lines from the individual to today.

In the preface to his book *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, Dr. Thomas F. DeFrantz writes, “It is hardly an understatement that the history of African American dance performance has been documented insufficiently.” Because of this insufficient documentation, my research process was heavily influenced by interviews with Debra Austin, Lauren Anderson, Katlyn Addison, and Dwight Rhoden. Meeting with them in person, over the phone, or through video chat enriched my understanding of their legacies because they were able to share their own stories; stories that have been left out of the history books. I also conducted archival research into articles, reviews, films, and videos that related to each dancer; I relied exclusively on archives to research Raven Wilkinson and Arthur Mitchell, who are deceased.

I have chosen to use the term “black” in this paper in lieu of “African-American” or “of African descent” because “black” is the racial identifier that these dancers have used when referring to themselves. Because it is my goal to honor their careers and legacies, I am committed to using the vocabulary that they feel best represents their identity.

Each dancer in this paper has been categorized as the “first black ballet dancer in American history”—or some derivation of the moniker—which shows that those who have constructed the canon forget dancers of color as soon as they step out of the spotlight. Meanwhile, we remember dancers like Anna Pavlova or Fanny Elssler for centuries, showing that only the white version of history is preserved and perpetuated. This is also evident in “traditional” ballet history courses, which focus on the European origins of the art form and trace its development from one white dancer to the next. By foregrounding the importance of Wilkinson’s, Mitchell’s, Austin’s, Anderson’s, Addison’s, and Rhoden’s careers, I argue that dancers of color are more deeply engrained in American ballet history than typically acknowledged, and that their presence significantly enriches the form.