

# Black and Brown Ballet Dancers Finally Get Their Due

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Producing a ballet extravaganza at the Kennedy Center was enthusiastically supported by diverse, multicultural audiences of all ages.

“Reframing the Narrative” took the history of Black ballet and compressed it into a week of workshops and performances. An on-screen scroll of 460 names called “Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet (MOB)” preceded staged performances. That list honored excellence from Black and brown ballet dancers, past and present.

“Reframing the Narrative” was designed to stimulate conversations about ballet, where darker hue dancers have been and are going. Curators for “Narrative” were Denise Saunders Thompson, president and CEO of the International Association of Blacks in Dance, and Theresa Ruth Howard, founder of Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet.

“This is a view of our mission and an invitation for you to explore your narrative,” Thompson said to the audience.



Dance Theatre of Harlem company artists Amanda Smith, Ingrid Silva and Alexandra Hutchinson perform “Odalisques Variations” during “Reframing the Narrative,” a celebration of Black dancers in ballet held recently at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in D.C. (Courtesy of Theik Smith)

Opening the evening were two dances from the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

“Balamouck,” performed by five ballerinas and five males, was a colorful contemporary ballet. With rapid, syncopated choreography, this dance was a great way to start the evening.

Next was “Odalisques Variations from Le Corsaire,” a ballet with three ballerinas in bronze jeweled tutus who danced as a trio and individually. Their focused moves, range and strength were a delight to see.

Through these two performances from the Dance Theatre of Harlem, I realized the audience was shown how ballet is a versatile dance form. That was the vision of the late Arthur Mitchell, co-founder of the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Atlanta-based Ballethnic Dance Company performed “Sanctity,” a dance about how a community can come together. A music trio consisting of a drummer, acoustic bassist and cellist accompanied dancers against a giant backdrop of on-screen images and clusters of candles on stage.

That performance was followed by the Collage Dance Collective from Memphis, Tenn. Blues recordings from some of the greats drove the storytelling dances in “Bluff City Blues.” From B.B. King’s “Let the Good Times Roll” concluding with Muddy Waters’ “Mannish Boy,” the

interaction among the dancers was a delight to the audience.



The world premiere of Donald Byrd's "From Other Suns" featured Claudia Monja and Gian Carlo Perez was a part of "Reframing the Narrative," a celebration of Black dancers in ballet held recently at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in D.C. (Courtesy of Shoccara Marcus at shocphoto)

The final performance was a Kennedy Center commissioned ballet by renowned choreographer Donald Byrd, using the music of Kennedy Center Composer-in-Residence Carlos Simon.

The orchestra began playing very softly, but the interplay between the dancers could be heard from the patter of the dancer's feet as they moved around each other on the stage. A slow build-up from the music was almost meditative.

For me, one thrilling takeaway from "Reframing the Narrative" was seeing ballet dancers in leotards and toe shoes that matched the color of their skin. Experiencing ballet beyond strictly European concepts was captivating. Event curators praised the outcome of this collaboration with the Kennedy Center.

"We asked to think outside of the box and they allowed us to do that," Thompson said. "All of these beautiful brown and Black dancers have a special connection to Arthur Mitchell."

"Reframing the Narrative" was not just about the performances. The week also included advanced master classes and talks with choreographer Donald Byrd and event curators. The message was apparent in the "Narrative" opening video.

*"In order to understand and ensure our history, we are pulling the shadow history into the light."*