

Black ballet dancers are focus of Kennedy Center's 'Reframing the Narrative'

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Creating a space for ballet dancers 'where Blackness is not an issue'

'Reframing the Narrative,' at the Kennedy Center June 14-19, pulls together an all-star team of Black dancers and choreographers from around the world for performances and other public events

Corey Bourbonniere and Ashley Murphy-Wilson rehearse a new work by choreographer Donald Byrd at Reach at the Kennedy Center on June 6. Portia Adams watches at right. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

When the Kennedy Center brought in [Theresa Ruth Howard](#) as a guest curator for a program celebrating Black ballet dancers, she had more in mind than a showcase of majority-Black companies.

Howard, a former dancer and founder of the website [Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet](#), envisioned gathering an international lineup of dancers for something that's rare in the traditional ballet world: to work in a space where being Black is the norm rather than the exception.

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Working with Seattle choreographer [Donald Byrd](#), Howard pulled together an all-star team of Black dancers from primarily White ballet companies across the country and Europe. They'll perform a new work by Byrd, commissioned by the arts center and featuring music by resident composer [Carlos Simon](#). This piece, still untitled, will be part of the Kennedy Center series "[Reframing the Narrative](#)," June 14-19 in the Opera House.

The series, curated by Howard and Denise Saunders Thompson, president and chief executive of the [International Association of Blacks in Dance](#), also features three predominantly Black companies — [Dance Theatre of Harlem](#), Atlanta's [Ballethnic](#) and the Memphis-based [Collage Dance Collective](#) — in two programs of short ballets and excerpts.

"It's a continuation of [Ballet Across America](#)," said Jane Raleigh, the Kennedy Center's director of dance programming, referring to the center's occasional series that presents troupes from across the country in shared programs. "It's similar to that model, but with a specific focus."

'Ballet Across America': Sporadic gems with a new twist

Howard, speaking by phone before a rehearsal, said her aim was to alleviate the self-consciousness some Black dancers may feel among their White colleagues.

“Am I being too loud? Am I being too Black? Am I code-switching all the time? ... As a Black ballet dancer in traditional ballet spaces, you’re always negotiating your Blackness,” she said. “So what if we put you in a space where your Blackness is not an issue? A space where Blackness is centered? I was interested in what sort of conversations and sharing they would bring together.”

Susan Jaffe might blow up the entire way we think about ballet

That sharing is evident on a recent weekday as sunlight fills a dance studio in the Kennedy Center’s Reach complex, where Byrd and Howard watch a run-through by the cast of 11. Everyone is masked, including the dancers, among them Precious Adams, a junior soloist with the English National Ballet; her sister Portia from Les Ballets de Monte Carlo; longtime Washington Ballet members Ashley Murphy-Wilson and Gian Carlo Perez; and members of Atlanta Ballet, Joffrey Ballet and others.

Warming up before rehearsal began, Katlyn Addison, the first Black principal in Salt Lake City’s Ballet West, spoke of the pressure she feels at home. “There is an expectation as a woman of color — yes, I do push myself harder.” Yet her drive is a bit different in this studio: “There’s a positive nervous energy,” she said. “I hope I live up to that expectation that the other dancers of color have of me.”

You get a glimpse of that drive as the rehearsal begins. The music starts out with soft, dreamy violins as Addison stretches her limbs in all directions. She’s held aloft by four men in succession; they rotate her body as if she’s a gem catching the light. In a swift series of spins, she whirls from one partner to another, circling the room in a chain of tight turns and bright, shifting footwork.

Suddenly she veers off balance. She stops, chest heaving.

“Could I try it again without the music?” the ballerina asks, panting behind her mask.

They practice this opening again — the spins, the timing, Addison’s shift in focus from one man to the next, how close they need to stand. When Byrd starts to work on the next section, with other dancers, Addison continues quietly practicing in the background, going over the turns, rhythm and hand positions with each of her partners.

On the next run-through, she whizzes from point to point smoothly, without stop. There’s a chorus of “Nice, nice, nice!” from the other dancers and cheers of “Yesss!” at the end.

During a break, Corey Bourbonniere, a member of Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, echoed Addison's sense of a subtle difference in this environment.

"In my home space," he said, "if you mess up a bit, you might have someone else who's like, 'Oh, I know [the steps],' and maybe they mean, 'Put me in.' Whereas here, it's more like, 'Oh, let me help you.' If there's a little partnering stumble, everyone goes over to help figure it out.

"That's not to say that never happens at home," Bourbonniere continued. "But I feel there's less competition here. This feels so supportive."

When war hit Ukraine, dancers mobilized like never before

Byrd's ballet is abstract but guided by a vision "of Black people migrating from this planet and going to places where there are other suns," the choreographer said one recent morning before a rehearsal. The idea arose from the music, which composer Simon told him was inspired by Isabel Wilkerson's book about the Great Migration, "The Warmth of Other Suns."

"I'm attempting to present the dancers as celestial bodies," Byrd said. "There's a beauty about them that's otherworldly."

A sense of that beauty, enduring and unconditional, is what Howard hopes the dancers will absorb from this process and take back with them to their workplaces. As the ballet world shifts to embrace diversity, dancers of color entering companies that are mainly White need the support of others who share their reality, she said. "Reframing the Narrative" offers that, along with opportunities for the artists' personal development and the experience to connect and share with one another through discussions and other public events that are part of the series.

It's also a chance for audiences to shift their perspective — to see Black ballet dancers from all over as well as an assortment of works by choreographers of color. The programs include Dance Theatre of Harlem in Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's "Balamouk," accompanied by North African music; Collage Dance Collective in a South African-inspired "Firebird"; and Ballethnic Dance Company in excerpts from "The Leopard Tale," a fusion of ballet and African dance.

"Dancers from around the world, in this space, and African American music and choreography," Howard said. "What does it all mean when you look at the Kennedy Center in the context of who you think should be presented here?"

"Hopefully, if we change this lens," she added, "we will be able to see the possibilities in the Black dancers who are coming up now."

Reframing the Narrative June 14-19 at the Kennedy Center. [kennedy-center.org](https://www.kennedy-center.org).