

## **Saving the Black Swan: Responses to the Racial Disparity in Classical Ballet**

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*In Memory of Tiffany Glenn, whose enduring grace and courage  
continues to inspire Collage Dance Collective and the growth of ballet for all.*

The ballerina dances at the end of a tunnel of light,  
She spins on her impossible toes- the rest is shadow,  
The head on the pillow sees nothing else,  
Though it feels the sun warming its cheeks.  
There is no China; no cross,  
Just the papery kiss of a kleenex above the stink of camphor,  
The walls exploding with shabby tutus.

- *The Oriental Ballerina* by Rita Dove

In this poem, African American poet Rita Dove describes her dying grandmother observing a ballerina dancing in a jewelry box. Her grandmother associates classical ballet with China, not knowing of its French origin. The ballerina represents a foreign fantasy—an escape from her sorrowful reality. It is not accessible to her; it is only a dream. Although Dove's words describe a specific narrative, they speak to a greater issue of social inequality within the arts. Even the noblest expression of creativity can reflect the broken state of a community.

African Americans have been historically alienated from classical art forms in the United States. This tragic disparity is particularly manifest in the world of classical ballet. The ballet's aristocratic origins, intense scrutiny of the body, and emphasis on aesthetic uniformity have left the African American in the wings. In responding to this social and cultural alienation, blacks have chosen a variety of paths—struggling to find national acceptance while also maintaining their cultural identity. Founded in 2004, Collage Dance Collective is responding to this disparity

in Memphis, Tennessee by working to increase the number of professional black classical ballet dancers through first-rate training—fundamentally unifying a divided community.

## I. Understanding the Past: The Negotiation of Race and Classical Ballet

### *“A White Man’s Art”: Blacks and the Ballet Aesthetic*

From its very beginnings, ballet, in all of its beauty, has catered to the social elite. Throughout the history of ballet, undertones of nobility and elitism, which are central to the art form as a whole, have profoundly alienated of the black dancer. Some of the first swift, elegant steps of ballet were danced in conflict-ridden sixteenth century France. In the late 15th century, the Italians performed dances that consisted of “graceful, rhythmic steps” at special occasions. The French called these social spectacles *ballets*. After the French king Henri II married the Florentine Catherine de Medici in 1533, Italian and French culture became deeply connected.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next century, particularly under the reign of French king Louis XIV, ballet would transform from a social activity into a codified art form. Throughout this development, the desire for a certain noble splendor only deepened. The ballet became a centerpiece of French society. One’s ability to dance gracefully at a court function defined his or her nobility. Posture was paramount. The ballet dancer was caught between physical captivity and transcendent freedom. The body must appear to move freely, while actually bound to a very detailed set of rhythmic steps. The ideal ballet dancer exuded the majesty and glory of a Greek god or goddess. In fact, according to dance historian Jennifer Homans, there was a common notion that God himself was “the great Ballet-master.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Homans, *Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010), 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 6-12.

This hunger for the divine evolved into an expression of all things mysterious and beautiful. The narratives in ballets reflected aristocratic society and European folklore. The body was a vehicle to tell stories from another world—the heartache of a princess, the fleeting touch of a fairy. In describing the idea of a ballerina that developed in the Romantic era, Homans states:

She is a wispy, winged creature, a confection of white tulle and rose perched delicately on toe, torso tilted slightly forward as if she were listening to a faint song. She is birdlike, quaint, and almost cloyingly sweet and if there is a thought in her head, it is lost in the mists of her vaporous ethereality.<sup>3</sup>

In order to create this ephemeral movement, the unique, complex articulation of the body required a very specific physique. Flexibility of the feet and limbs, turn out or rotation in the hips, and long, slender lines made up the perfect ballerina. This “classical line” is still central to the form of a ballet dancer. The desire for a transcendent aesthetic resulted in the intense scrutiny of the body. As an artist, the dancer’s primary tool is her body, and she constantly strives to refine her tool. Each individual body must act as part of the greater body of dancers. As a result, uniformity became central to any performance. The goal of the *corp de ballet*, meaning “group” or “ensemble,” is to move as one organism—one “body of dance.” This sameness became paramount to a visually effective ballet performance. The audience should not notice individual differences so that the group as whole can overwhelm the spectator with a majestic unity.

The African American could not be farther removed from these deeply-held principles of the ballet. While a ballerina was supposed to portray something greater than human, the African American was considered to be less than human. Nobility and aristocracy have never been part of the typical African American experience. Because of pervasive stereotypes about the black

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 135.

body, the physical scrutiny involved in ballet only further rejects the African American. The need for uniformity excludes blacks as they might disrupt the line.

John Martin, the first major dance critic in the United States, was a prominent voice in the ongoing conversation about blacks in ballet throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He once wrote that “the European outlook, history and technical theory of ballet” are “culturally, temperamentally and anatomically” unfamiliar and thus unsuited to the black dancer.<sup>4</sup> Although Martin’s opinions would evolve over time, he voiced a widely-held belief that there was no place for an African American in the ballet. Because African Americans were culturally removed from the European elitist experience, many choreographers doubted their ability to portray that experience on stage. George Balanchine, one of the most prominent American ballet choreographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, would eventually hire a black male dancer. However, at times he struggled with the idea of tainting the European art form with dancers of another race. He stated:

I don’t want to see two Japanese girls in my *Swan Lake*. It’s just not right. It’s not done for them. It’s like making an American blonde into a geisha. It’s a question of certain arts being things unto themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Balanchine’s words reveal the racial and cultural limitations of art—particularly art of European origin. In addition to this cultural alienation, understandings of the black body severely limited the black dancer. For years, the prevailing thought held that, according to Frantz Fanon, “the Negro represents the sexual instinct in its raw state. The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions.”<sup>6</sup> In the classical dance world, this “genital potency” could not reconcile with noble ethereality. Not only was the black body considered too

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<sup>4</sup> Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today* (Hightstown: Princeton Book Company, Publishers, 1988), 318.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Long, *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1989), 119.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35.

sexual, it was also seen as inherently unfit for the “classical line” that defined the ballet form. In 1963, *John Martin’s Book of Dance* was published. In distinguishing the black body from the white, Martin states:

Nevertheless, in practice there is a racial constant, so to speak, in the proportions of the limbs and torso and the conformation of the feet, all of which affect body placement: in addition, the deliberately maintained erectness of the European dancer’s spine is in marked contrast to the fluidity of the Negro dancer’s, and the latter’s natural concentration of movement in the pelvic region is similarly at odds with European usage. When the Negro takes on the style of the European, he succeeds only in being affected, just as the European dancer who attempts to dance like the Negro seems only gauche.<sup>7</sup>

Martin’s observation left no possibility for an effective black ballet dancer—male or female. Alvin Ailey, who thrived as a major modern dancer and choreographer throughout the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, encountered this painful rejection early in his career. In his autobiography, he writes:

The American dance world practiced a pervasive racism. For a variety of reasons: Our feet weren’t shaped right, our butts were too big, our legs wouldn’t turn out correctly; blacks simply weren’t wanted.<sup>8</sup>

This was not constructive criticism that a black dancer could work on—it was absolute rejection. Blacks did not meet a standard rooted in years of tradition. Many black dancers who encountered this painful rejection, from ballet choreographers and from American society as a whole, never quite lost that crippling insecurity. Ailey goes on to say:

[It] all left an enormous strain and sense of inferiority that lasted for many years. I felt that no matter what I did, what ballet I made, how beautifully I danced, it was not good enough. Even now I doubt whether the new ballet is going to be what it really should be—even though I’ve made 150 ballets. That’s one of the worst things about racism, what it does to young people. It tears down your insides so that no matter what you

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<sup>7</sup> John Martin, *John Martin’s Book of Dance* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1963), 179.

<sup>8</sup> Alvin Ailey, *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), 51.

achieve, no matter what you write or choreograph, you feel it's not quite enough. You're not quite up to snuff.<sup>9</sup>

In summary, black dancers in American ballet simply were not “up to snuff” for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They lacked the specific physicality, the cultural connection, and the “white style” of the Euro-classical art form. But their passion for the ballet was still alive, their dedication for a noble expression still fervent, and their perseverance against the odds still strong. From the early 1930s to today, blacks have chosen a variety of paths in American dance. They have struggled with questions of heritage and identity, while also working to gain respect from the best of the best.

*“What Shall the Negroes Dance About?”: Varying Responses to the Exclusivity of Ballet*

In the realm of American dance, critics like John Martin limited the black dancer to two possible responses: to copy “the white man’s art” or to give “the white man what he chooses to believe is Negro art.”<sup>10</sup> The black dancer was not allowed to simply participate in ballet as a universal art, but was limited to the art of imitation. According to Martin, if he turned down the option of imitation, he was left with the responsibility of creating new “Negro art.” The complex struggle that the black ballet dancer faced in the early to mid-twentieth century is one that many black artists experienced at the time. At the height of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s, Langston Hughes wrote in *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, that the “true Negro artist in America” struggles against “the urge...toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”<sup>11</sup> As blacks struggled to construct an identity within American dance and the arts as whole, many felt that the struggle towards acceptance in ballet was not the best path to

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<sup>9</sup> Alvin Ailey, *Revelations: The Autobiography of Alvin Ailey* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Long, *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1989), 24.

<sup>11</sup> David Lewis, ed, *Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York: Penguin Group, 1995), 91.

take. With such limited options for classical training and performance, some instead sought to create innovative and accessible art that reflected black culture with pride. Modern dance provided the perfect outlet for that expression.

In the years after World War II, modern dance companies began to recruit blacks more heavily for training. By the 1950s, there were two black women in the Martha Graham company, a major modern dance troupe. Although the modern dance world was not free of racism, the movement could give voice to the black experience in a way that ballet could not. In response to the rigidity of ballet, the rhythm and style of modern dance was much more grounded and unpolished. Choreographers were not looking for a specific physique. If a black woman was not capable of portraying a fairy or a sylph, perhaps she could dance as a loving mother or a role that resonated with her own rich experience. In general, the modern dance world was much more hospitable to blacks, expanding professional opportunities profoundly.<sup>12</sup>

Although many black dancers such as Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham thrived in modern dance, it was Ailey who created works that captivated audience members around the world. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater is perhaps the most well-known American dance company in the world—black or white. It has come to signify the black presence in the American dance world today. Although Ailey encountered the devastating effects of racism in his early career, he went on to create a hugely successful integrated company in the 1950s. Raised in rural Texas, Ailey's works drew from his own personal memories of living in a socially repressive environment laced with songs of black spirituality and strife. In one sense, much of Ailey's work revolved around the experience of one specific group of people. However, Ailey's art spoke universal truths about humankind. He was intent on communicating the all-

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Long, *The Black Tradition in American Dance* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1989), 113.

encompassing universality of art. And even though his work was very “black” in its creation and execution, he refused to see himself or other artists of color as simply “black artists.”<sup>13</sup>

No one quite anticipated the response that audiences would give to this revolutionary group of dancers. Most reviews raved of the powerful contribution to concert dance<sup>14</sup> coming from an African American company. Ailey’s work reminded audiences of the value of the black experience. His interpretations of black cultural history yielded his greatest success as “each of the dances presumes a tension surrounding the construction of the black identity.”<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, Ailey’s interpretation of black history, pride in the black body, and understanding of universal human truths profoundly impacted the American dance world and society as a whole. Ailey stated:

I am celebrating the trembling beauty of the black American. I am not just a black choreographer. Black American culture is a part of the whole country’s heritage. The dances are created to celebrate the human experience—to communicate to everyone—and through the concept, our dance is for art regardless of color.<sup>16</sup>

Modern dance pioneers like Ailey liberated black dancers to embrace their bodies, their heritage, and their newfound ability. However, Ailey’s impact on American dance is one of many meaningful responses. And while many valued modern dance expression, some still yearned for the tutu and pointe shoes—seeking full acceptance and respect in the classical ballet world.

*The Power of the Black Swan: The African American in Classical Ballet*

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004),

<sup>14</sup> “Concert dance” refers to any dance performed before a theatre audience.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

While modern dance did empower black dancers in a revolutionary way, the racial disparity in classical ballet remained. In responding to this disparity, some dancers felt that classical ballet was still worth the pain and struggle, as it provided an invaluable amount of core strength and versatility. Unfortunately, training continued to be expensive and racially exclusive. Early efforts in the 1930s and 40s to create an integrated or black ballet company were unavailing. However, there are a few brave, talented individuals who laid a foundation for black ballet dancers today. Influenced by the bravery and dedication of dancers like Janet Collins, Arthur Mitchell in particular has made profound contributions to the dance world, empowering many black dancers with the possibilities of ballet. With hard work and the creation of the world-renowned Dance Theater of Harlem, Mitchell defied several myths about blacks in ballet.

Before Arthur Mitchell rose to success as a male ballet dancer, Janet Collins had already broken the color barrier at the Metropolitan Opera Company. Collins is considered by many to be the first black prima ballerina. John Martin considered her the exception to his rule about blacks in classical ballet.<sup>17</sup> She first auditioned for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, but was told that she could not dance certain parts unless she painted her face white. However, in 1951, artistic director Zachary Solov made Collins the first black ballerina at the Metropolitan Opera. Collins had a very successful and dynamic career, dancing in other genres besides ballet. Both Mitchell and Collins worked at the School of American Ballet at the same time, giving Mitchell time to observe the ballerina's style of movement. Mitchell appreciated that Collins truly valued classical ballet as a technical base for every dance genre. He observed that Collins was able to participate in modern dance without forsaking the appreciation for classical ballet—a delicate

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<sup>17</sup> John Martin, *John Martin's Book of Dance* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1963), 179.

balance that Mitchell would strive for throughout his career.<sup>18</sup> In an interview with dance scholar Yaël Lewin, he states:

But you've got to start with the basic technique and a basic structure, and then you're strong enough to free yourself to have your own voice. I think that is what set Janet apart from everyone. She was very aware of the technical attributes that classical ballet would give her... and that, I think, is really the strength of what she did. To understand that you don't throw away your foundation because you want to try a new thing.<sup>19</sup>

It was this “foundation” that would set the efforts of Mitchell apart from other blacks in concert dance. Like Collins, Mitchell knew that the ballet was not just about ethereal fantasies, but provided an essential strength that could significantly benefit a dancer. According to him, no true freedom in movement could come until one had properly conditioned his or her body with ballet. And no matter how difficult the path towards success would be, Mitchell was up for the challenge. He knew the road ahead of him in ballet would be difficult, as he grew up in the same repressive environment that Ailey did. In speaking of his childhood, he said: “I was up against what every Negro kid is up against, the widespread attitude that if you're not white, blond, or blue-eyed, you're not part of things.”<sup>20</sup>

In 1952, after graduating from New York's High School of the Performing Art, Mitchell would have his chance to become “part of things.” He received a scholarship to the School of American Ballet. There, he studied ballet and also performed in modern dance performances with Donald McKayle's company. He was then invited to join the prestigious New York City Ballet in 1955. George Balanchine, the director of the company, began to choreograph specific roles for Mitchell. Mitchell's color did affect the roles he was chosen for, but oftentimes it was of no consequence. However, Mitchell still felt limited, even at the height of his success. He is

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<sup>18</sup> Yaël Lewin, *Night's Dancer: The Life of Janet Collins* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 200.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today* (Hightstown: Princeton Book Company, Publishers, 1988), 280.

well known for his pas de deux, or partnering piece, with white ballerina Allegra Kent. Although the pair could perform the piece around the world, the performance could not be legally shown on national television because of segregation laws in the American South. After experiencing these limitations, Mitchell knew that there was much work to be done to produce black classical dancers. He felt that in addition to explicit racism, there were many other reasons for the lack of black ballet dancers, namely a lack of exposure and investment in the African American community. He felt that if more blacks were exposed to the classic art form at a young age, the disparity would improve greatly.<sup>21</sup>

After the tragic assassination of Dr. King in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968, Mitchell felt strongly compelled to provide that needed exposure to an urban community. He felt that his art could continue the dream that King and others had for equality in the United States. In 1970, he founded a training school, calling it the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Initially, the goal for DTH was to train young students in classical ballet and modern dance. Mitchell quickly realized that he must also have a highly professional company to provide a place for students to perform after their training. Mitchell noted: “We have to prove that a black ballet school and a black ballet company are the equal of the best of their kind, anywhere in the world.”<sup>22</sup> Mitchell was criticized for creating an all-black company. Some said that this was only more discrimination, making no progress in the greater cause. However, Mitchell felt passionately that blacks needed to be particularly invested in for training in classical ballet. He sought to prove that the classic nobility of ballet is a quality that every individual, black or white, is capable of portraying, saying: “Is nobility a virtue of the white dancer alone, and not of the black? Ballet is the classical theatre

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 279-281.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 282.

dance, but have you seen African dances—what could be more classic than a Watusi dancer?” Mitchell wanted dancers proudly dancing *Swan Lake*.<sup>23</sup>

However, due to a lack of financial resources and dancers, it would be years before the company would take on the classical ballet *Swan Lake*. In the earlier stages, the company’s repertoire was a combination of classical pieces, as well as modern and ethnic works. Mitchell worked to find that delicate balance between recognizing black identity while also maintaining a classical image. For example, when the company added the classic tale of *Giselle* to the company’s repertoire, Mitchell altered the story to reflect themes more relevant to his audience. The story is originally set in medieval Germany. Mitchell set the story in a nineteenth-century Louisiana plantation. Mitchell’s artistic decision epitomized the complex cultural intersections involved in black ballet. He brought relevance to the stage, maintaining black identity in a noble, Euro-classic context.<sup>24</sup>

This meaningful relevance would resonate with people of all races and walks of life. The company toured around the world, receiving the most praise from audiences in European capitals. Part of this acclaim, according to Mitchell, came from the very word *Harlem*, saying, “[the word] *Harlem* fascinates everyone all over the world.” Mitchell was proud of his community and the talent it possessed; it was that pride and dedication that captivated audience members around the globe.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding its wide acclaim, as late as 1990, DTH “still [did] not have a regular New York concert season at a major midtown theater.”<sup>26</sup> And unfortunately, in 2004, the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 319.

<sup>24</sup> James Haskins, *Black Dance in America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Junior Books, 1990), 147.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 151.

company went on hiatus for financial reasons. This left many black dancers discouraged, once again questioning the art form as a possibility. According to the *New York Times*, the renewed company could potentially debut again in 2013.<sup>27</sup> The school and company empowered black dancers to be beautiful and proud, giving them hope for a professional career in ballet. Arthur Mitchell's vision for the stage fundamentally challenged centuries of the status quo. His efforts brought a revitalizing cultural pride, artistic exposure, and unity to Harlem itself.

From an impossible aesthetic to questions of racial identity, the struggles faced by the black dancer have been complex and overwhelming. Ultimately, black dancers have struggled against tradition. Despite the invaluable contributions of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the severe obstacles that face the black ballet dancer still remain. The number of blacks in classical ballet has grown very little since the 1950s and 60s, and the need for community investment in black ballet training across the nation is greater than ever.

## II. The Harlem of the South: Collage Dance Collective's Impact on Memphis, Tennessee

The varying responses to this disparity continue today. While the Dance Theatre of Harlem was instrumental in producing many professional black ballet dancers, its closing in 2004 resulted in even fewer opportunities for black dancers. Inspired to continue the dream of DTH, Kevin Thomas partnered with Marcellus Harper to found Collage Dance Collective just months after the company closed. The company re-located to Memphis, Tennessee in 2007 to participate in the city's "artistic renaissance." Modeled after the Dance Theatre of Harlem as a primarily classical company and school, Collage seeks to "inspire the growth of ballet," particularly investing in African Americans. Collage Dance Collective employs a network of 25

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<sup>27</sup> Gia Kourlas, "Where Are All the Black Swans?" *New York Times*, 6 May 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com> (accessed 25 June 2012).

dancers, who come from diverse, dynamic professional backgrounds. With a rich understanding of the black ballet dancer's experience, these professionals, along with the leadership of Harper and Thomas, are training in, performing, and teaching classical ballet here in Memphis—unifying a divided community in a unique and relevant way.

*“The Myth Stayed Around”: From DTH to Collage Dance Collective*

Many of the leaders of Collage Dance Collective were significantly influenced by the Dance Theater of Harlem. Those positive experiences were instrumental in developing a company with a similar mission in Memphis. When Kevin Thomas joined DTH in 1995, he developed a confidence in himself and in his race that he had never experienced before. Raised in Montreal, Canada, Thomas began his professional career under the shadow of racism. He does not recall understanding the limitations of his color until his first audition for the National Ballet of Canada. At the audition, he was told that his “crooked legs” would suffice for jazz, but not for the ballet. Years of this kind of rejection left Thomas feeling discouraged and insecure. Confronting the “racial mountain” that Langston Hughes spoke of decades prior, Thomas struggled with his own identity. He states: “It made me feel like I needed to my white. It made me not like myself—my body or anything about my body.”<sup>28</sup>

Although Thomas went on to join the all-white Le Grande Ballet of Canada, his experience as the only black member of the company brought on its own damaging effects.

I felt like I had to work twice as hard as everyone else to get the same kind of role. I felt that if I made a mistake, it was seen quickly. There were comments like: “you need to put on more powder on your face so you don’t shine too much.” It definitely played on my

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<sup>28</sup> Kevin Thomas, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

psyche a bit. Boys were coming in with less technique than me and yet they were getting the roles—it was easier for them to be the prince.<sup>29</sup>

Once Thomas joined DTH, like so many others, he began to accept himself as a dancer and as a person, realizing just how capable he actually was.

[When] I went to the Dance Theatre of Harlem, my life changed a lot...I started seeing ballets differently. I started really loving my own self and loving my own body. For some reason, those people had dissuaded me into thinking that I did not have a ballet body. Only when I was of the age of 31 or 32 did I realize that I [had] the most ballet body ever.<sup>30</sup>

Brandye Lee, a current member of the Collage professional company, had a somewhat similar experience. Lee did not understand her own limitations in the dance world until she was in her teenage years. She trained at the Jones-Haywood School in Washington D.C., established in 1941 to “provide high-quality dance training to students of all races and socio-economic backgrounds.” Growing up in such an encouraging environment, Lee was unaware of what the outside dance world might be like, particularly the ballet world—she “was never told that it wasn’t a possibility.”<sup>31</sup>

Lee became very aware of her limitations as a black ballerina when she and her fellow students traveled to France to study ballet. In the ballet class, Lee’s group stood together at the barre (need explanation footnote). Lee recalls that the teacher of the class, “a white woman with blonde hair and blue eyes,” would pass by Lee’s group of students and would not offer them corrections. She states: “Her eyes were so piercing when she did look, but she never really

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Brandye Lee, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

looked. I just remember thinking: why won't she give us any corrections? That really bothered me.”<sup>32</sup>

When Lee received a summer scholarship to the Dance Theatre of Harlem, she realized that there was a place for her outside of her home school in D.C. DTH impacted her life in significant way.

It felt very much like all of these people were my family. [They] were very near and present role models, examples of what I could do. I'm watching *Firebird*; I'm watching *Giselle*, all of these ballets that have been around forever—*Swan Lake*. And everybody on the stage is exquisite, and everybody on the stage is brown.<sup>33</sup>

Both Lee's and Thomas' experience with DTH demonstrate the power of a ballet school and company that invests in African Americans. The confidence that was given to them at DTH is something they hope to now give to their students in Memphis. Some might wonder if our society still needs such efforts. Thomas believes that we do, saying that “[the myth] about black bodies has stayed around for a long time...and it's still here.”<sup>34</sup> Marcellus Harper, co-founder and managing director of Collage, also knew that there was still great value in establishing this kind of program. He states:

Stemming from the civil rights movement and from when DTH was created, there was a large push post-assassination of Dr. King to really address disparities between African Americans and whites. Somewhere in the 90s, it appeared that changes had already been made and that we did not need to focus on this anymore. People thought that the playing ground had been leveled and organizations specifically targeting African Americans are no longer needed. Our progress was not where it needed to be and those programs are still very much needed. Those ideas are ridiculous. There are no more black ballerinas today than there were in the 1960s.<sup>35</sup>

*Responding in Memphis: The Development of Collage Dance Collective*

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Kevin Thomas, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Marcellus Harper, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

Much of what defines an organization is not the organization itself, but the community that surrounds it. An urban community with a predominantly African American population, Memphis, Tennessee has provided a unique setting for Collage Dance Collective. Both Harper and Thomas realized that in addition to forming a high-quality professional company, they must also focus on the training to really make a significant impact. The pair needed a new, permanent location to establish their company and training school. One year after Collage Dance Collective's debut in Kansas City, they re-located to Memphis. Both Harper and Thomas had never lived in Memphis but felt drawn to its history and long-standing commitment to the arts. Harper and Thomas also recognized the untapped talent in Memphis. Harper often tells people when asked about his decision to move to Memphis: "Where do you build a diamond mine? Where the diamonds are."<sup>36</sup>

Before attempting to "build the mine," Harper and Thomas worked diligently to understand the climate of the Memphis arts scene. From the beginning, they have stressed that building relationships within the greater arts community is an essential step in affecting change. Harper claims that "[they] do not operate in a creative silo."<sup>37</sup> As a Collage company member, Lee also appreciates the ongoing efforts of Collage to connect to the arts community. She states:

I really enjoy how involved Collage is in the arts community, because we can't do it in a vacuum. We can't make change happen on our own. We definitely have to find the strength in numbers...Especially when you are talking about something as sensitive as race, we need each other.<sup>38</sup>

However, while some important connections have been made, Harper recalls that the early efforts were met with some resistance. Entering an arts community that is already defined

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Brandy Lee, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

by certain music organizations and traditions can present some challenges. As funding is always a difficulty for arts non-profits, Harper notes that the transition to Memphis was not simple:

The arts community and particularly the dance community [are] very territorial and fragmented. There is this irrational fear that because the pie of funding is so small, people are worried about their piece of pie becoming smaller. In Memphis, there is not much of a willingness to do things differently. [However], people like to jump on a train that is moving.<sup>39</sup>

The pair was determined to “get the train moving” in the first year so that the Memphis community would support the organization. In order to build that creative momentum, Harper and Thomas reached out to several dancers across the nation to join the professional company. Collage did not have the financial resources to enable dancers to live and work in Memphis, so they have decided to work with 10 non-residential dancers per show. Performing up to three major concerts per year, the 25 company members each work for about 10-12 weeks a year. Many of those involved with Collage agree that the professional aspect of the organization is central to its mission and impact on Memphis as a whole. Harper states:

It increases the number of professional artists living here in Memphis. It will be easier to attract dancers from around the country. We all want to move to communities that we feel are strong and will support our spirits particularly as artists. We want to put Memphis on the map.<sup>40</sup>

Harper and Thomas believe that this professional investment can bring economic and cultural growth to the community—making the city more appealing as a whole. They are very aware of the socio-economic realities of the city that stretch beyond racism. They recognize that many people in low-income neighborhoods do not have access to quality arts education, much less ballet education. Ballet is particularly expensive to participate in. This is something that Collage Dance Collective seeks to change. Scholarships and community outreach have become

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<sup>39</sup> Marcellus Harper, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, June 25, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

central to the organization. Poverty is a part of the identity of Memphis, and therefore it is part of the identity of Collage. Harper states:

For us, Memphis is a very specific place. We are talking about the needs of this city. We have a very large African American community. We have a lot of underserved communities in Memphis. We have a lot of students who are in poverty in Memphis. We have a school system that as a whole, is failing students. So, we really have to look at the basics and figure out how to solve some immediate issues.<sup>41</sup>

In forming an identity as a non-profit organization in Memphis, Collage Dance Collective has become aware of the city's amazing potential and complex struggles. In response, Collage Dance Collective uses ballet training to empower and uplift the city as a whole. Harper and Thomas believe that ballet can strengthen and empower students not only as dancers but as people.

*Why Ballet? The Impact of Collage in an Urban Community*

The alienation of blacks from classical ballet happens in a variety of ways. Some blacks like Mitchell and Ailey were provided training and then experienced explicit rejection as a well-trained dancer. However, in urban communities like Memphis, the rejection is not always coming in the ballet studio. Instead, many black students are lacking the exposure and intense training they need to make it to the studio. Arthur Mitchell did not consider himself an exception to the rule about blacks in ballet, but instead someone who was fortunately exposed to the art form.<sup>42</sup>

Collage seeks to provide that same exposure in Memphis. Not only does Collage expose many children to ballet, it also works to find those who have professional potential and focus

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance from 1619 to Today* (Hightstown: Princeton Book Company, Publishers, 1988), 280.

intensively on those students. This balance can be difficult to reach. Ultimately, Harper and Thomas believe that there are particular aspects of ballet training that are important in an urban setting. In addition to producing more black professional ballet dancers, exposure to ballet in an urban setting provides a healthy amount of discipline and structure, dispels fear of the unknown, and unifies a socially segregated community with the powerful universality of dance.

In bringing this needed exposure to Memphis, Collage Dance Collective has struggled to find a balance between community outreach and intensive training, as both are important to its mission. Collage has never turned away a student for financial reasons. Harper states that “if you really want to be here and you are dedicated, then we need to figure out how to pay for it.”<sup>43</sup> One of Collage’s primary outreach efforts is after-school dance program at KIPP Memphis Elementary School. Cameron Peterson, a rising seventh grader, first learned about Collage at his school. He states, “When they first brought ballet to my school, I didn’t know what to do. So instead of doing something old, I decided to do something new.”<sup>44</sup> Cameron has since become very involved with Collage and hopes to dance professionally one day. In this form of outreach, Collage has become even more aware of talented students like Cameron who would be deserving of intensive training. Thomas states: “I see a lot of kids [at KIPP Memphis]. And I see a lot of ballet bodies. I’m seeing kids who have great feet, flexibility, turned out hips, straight backs. There is a lot.”<sup>45</sup> Brandye Lee understands the importance of wide community exposure as well as focused training. She states:

The way that Collage is exposing kids at KIPP Memphis to ballet and what it could be for them—that is so important. You have to show kids early on what is possible. You can’t wait. The time is now. That can be tricky though because you don’t want to spend all

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<sup>43</sup> Marcellus Harper, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, June 25, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Cameron Peterson, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 13, 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Kevin Thomas, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

your resources on just exposing kids, you really want to take time to find the ones who are super talented and groom them. You don't want to just do outreach, you also want to focus on training.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to outreach efforts, Collage works to also intensively train students. If African American students are well-trained, they will have a higher chance of acceptance into prominent professional companies. This type of intensive training involves a very disciplined and structured classroom. The discipline and concentration of ballet is central to the technique. It is also essential to the development of a dancer at Collage Dance Collective. In responding to the racial disparity in ballet, Collage does not dilute the intensity of the art form. Ballet involves several rigorous exercises and a mental concentration. Harper and Thomas believe that this rigorous structure not only results in a proficient dancer, but develops one's personal character as a whole. They believe that ballet can provide important personal development that may not happen in the home of the student. Harper states:

Ballet is over 400 years old. It's very structured. There is a curriculum. It teaches discipline and etiquette. A lot of the students that we work with don't even know how to talk to each other. There are basic things that they are not learning. They are not learning how to conduct themselves like appropriate young men and young women. I think those are some things that you learn in the studio with ballet. That is why we focus on the ballet.<sup>47</sup>

Harper acknowledges that there are aspects of this 400 year old tradition that must evolve to include African Americans. However, he does not believe that the overall technique and classroom standard needs to change. The discipline and structure of ballet training creates a very serious class environment. Thomas, who teaches most of the ballet classes, instructs with authority. This authority ensures that students take the art seriously and become all that they can be as dancers. Students of every age are expected to put their best effort into each exercise and combination. Mistakes are not overlooked, and students are expected to take corrections

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<sup>46</sup> Brandye Lee, interview by Jenna Sullivan, July 9, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> Marcellus Harper, interview by Jenna Sullivan, June 25, 2012.

seriously. Thomas acknowledges the rigor of the class, saying: “It’s a challenge for them—and you can see the difference in their bodies when they take [that challenge].”<sup>48</sup> Thomas knows the challenge himself. With each correction, he hopes to strengthen the dancers, giving them a fair chance to have a successful career. Collage ballet classes are not after-school care. Thomas states:

There are schools here who are not teaching ballet properly. We take it seriously. This is our life. I started dancing at nine and I made a living at the age of 18. So, this is what I know. I know what it takes to get there. I’m not going to go into a studio and babysit your child.<sup>49</sup>

The students agree that the classroom can be a challenging place. While they do feel challenged by the class, most understand the purpose behind the intensity. Nathan Payson, a rising fifth grader, appreciates the discipline saying: “We have to certain things over and over again. But in the end it always makes us look better.”<sup>50</sup> Some students are frustrated at times with the serious nature of training. Reccardo Townsend, a rising seventh grader, admires Thomas as a role model but does not wish to be as firm as Thomas. He states: “I want to be like Mr. Kevin. I’m not going to mean though. I want to be a professional dancer just like Mr. Kevin... I really want to pointe my feet very good and be very flexible.”<sup>51</sup> Even though Thomas has very high expectations for the children, he is always proud of them during a performance. He states:

The greatest accomplishment is seeing them onstage. I yell at them all year long, and then when it comes to the end of a performance, I’m always close to tears. I’m always thinking, ‘you better not cry.’<sup>52</sup>

Collage has also struggled to help parents in the community understand the commitment ballet training requires. Thomas notes that oftentimes parents are surprised by the number of

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<sup>48</sup> Kevin Thomas, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Nathan Payson, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 13, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Reccardo Townsend, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 13, 2012.

<sup>52</sup> Kevin Thomas, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

rehearsals that are needed to produce a great show. Thomas and Harper work to communicate to parents that “becoming a dancer is like getting your doctorate. It is not playtime.”<sup>53</sup> Parents begin to understand and accept the commitment when they see the Collage professional dancers take the stage in a performance. Thomas states that “[parents] are seeing black women like Paunika and Jenelle look ephemeral and they think, ‘I want my daughter to look like that’ or ‘I want my son to be that strong.’”<sup>54</sup> This demonstrates the importance of having a professional company alongside the school. The intensity of the training makes Collage a credible organization.

Ultimately, this training is an essential part of changing the racial disparity in classical ballet. If African American students are not exposed to intensive, structured training, they will not succeed in the professional dance world. Harper notes that pushing the students to do their best proves to the community that they are capable of success. Harper does not want to simply criticize companies for not hiring black dancers without recognizing the lack of dancers with proper training. He states:

We really want to make sure that the training we provide is first-rate and phenomenal and that is the focus. So that we really can say that there is nothing about their technique that the community can say is not right. That will not be the reason that companies are not accepting our dancers. If the technique isn’t strong, it can be really hard to figure out whether it is racism or simply poor training. The technique has to be really strong.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to achieving advanced technique through rigorous training, exposure to ballet offers new cultural knowledge and appreciation that many students may not have experienced before. This cultural exposure gives students the ability to confront the unknown with confidence. Thomas, fluent in French, not only teaches the French terms that constitute the ballet curriculum, but also speaks to the students in French when giving corrections or instructions.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Marcellus Harper, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, June 25, 2012.

Anna Anthony, a rising fifth grader, describes Thomas's use of the language, saying: "He uses the French phrase *écoute-moi*<sup>56</sup> and we have to put our hands behind our backs and shut our mouths."<sup>57</sup> Not only does this strengthen the dancer's vocabulary, but it empowers the dancer to learn something unfamiliar. Whereas Martin stated decades ago that blacks are culturally removed from ballet, Collage strengthens that cultural connection with exposure to the French language. Ballet all together is an unfamiliar art form in many urban Memphis neighborhoods. Harper recognizes that the African American students at Collage are not usually very familiar with ballet, but also knows that "everyone wants to be a part of something great."<sup>58</sup> Once the children try this new skill, they are less afraid of the unknown. Harper states:

If I can get young black boys to be interested in ballet, they can learn to not be afraid of something that is different. Young people are afraid to do something that they don't see in their neighborhoods. And that inhibits them from growth. What people think about ballet, you know, they think about tutus and running around on your tippy toes, and this fanciful stuff. But that's not really what it's about. It's about developing muscles and structure. If you are a young man that can do ballet, you learn that you don't have to be afraid of doing something different. Which is a very important lesson in an urban setting.<sup>59</sup>

Not only are students exposed to the French language and classical ballet, but they are exposed to an affection and appreciation for the arts as a whole. Karen Spacek, Chief Operating Officer of ArtsMemphis, one of the funders of Collage Dance Collective, notes this exposure can make a significant impact in the lives of the children. She states: "By getting young people and their families involved in the arts, even if those kids don't become dancers, they are teaching some really important life skills and showing how transformative the arts can be."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> French phrase meaning "listen to me."

<sup>57</sup> Anna Anthony, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 13, 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Marcellus Harper, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis TN, June 25, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Karen Spacek, interview by Jenna Sullivan, July 10, 2012.

In addition to training and cultural exposure, Collage works to unify the community with ballets that explore universal, relevant themes. In the words of Harper, “art must have social relevance.”<sup>61</sup> Ballet presented in a relevant way can unite Memphis as an audience and a community. Just as Ailey and Mitchell struggled to form the identity of a predominantly black company, Collage Dance Collective faces those same decisions and struggles. The reality is that many people, white and black, do not resonate with the Euro-classic narratives that have dominated most ballet repertoires. Collage recognizes that love for traditional ballet must be cultivated—especially in an urban community like Memphis. However, Collage also strives to remain relevant in society. Harper continues:

We do a lot of contemporary work as a company because we want to engage our audience members who don’t know anything about ballet, who are intimidated by ballet. We show dancers who look like them on stage. We create ballets with themes and stories that are relevant and accessible. Ballet becomes the backdrop. You are presented the ballet in a way that is familiar. We want someone who knows a lot about dance and a truck driver to be able to come to a Collage performance and leave thinking, I really like this and will come back. As our audience grows, I think we will be able to present a large variety of stuff because we have been able to break down those fears and cultivate that appreciation of ballet.<sup>62</sup>

However, in seeking relevance, Collage will not leave its ballet foundation. The organization offers only ballet classes at the training school in hopes of cultivating that unifying appreciation and accessibility that Harper speaks about. Oftentimes, members of the Memphis community expect that a predominantly black dance company will perform hip hop routines. Historically, African Americans have been more successful in the commercial dance realm. However, Collage is interested in opening doors that are not currently open. The mission of the organization is “not to make the most money, but to create black ballerinas.”<sup>63</sup> They are not

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<sup>61</sup> Marcellus Harper, interview by Jenna Sullivan, June 25, 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

interested in teaching or performing hip hop or genres that do nothing to challenge the status quo. Harper believes that this type of “diversity” does not unify the city or work towards equality. He states:

I don't want diversity to be bringing black kids who do hip hop and mixing them with white girls from East Memphis who do ballet and blend that and think that it is diverse and edgy and cool. That's not cool to me. It's not edgy, it's annoying. We want to create diversity with ballet. We want to increase the number of black ballet dancers.<sup>64</sup>

If black and white people can come together to enjoy a performance, fundamental racial barriers are broken down. Ultimately, the vision that Collage hopes to implement is a racially diverse audience watching a diverse group of dancers perform a diverse series of pieces. Harper recognizes that this vision will require a great amount of dedication. He states:

We have to work to create the world we want to see. It's not a build it and they will come approach. Things won't just happen. We have to work to get boys. We have to work to get black students. We have to work to get white audience members. We work to create the company and the audience and the city that we want.<sup>65</sup>

This vision that Harper wishes to create does not include labeling the company and school as a “black” organization. While Collage Dance Collective invests particularly in African Americans, its efforts are not limited to blacks only. It would be easy for Collage to identify that way, and only accept black students. However, that would be too easy. Instead, Collage is working to build a whole picture of humanity on stage. In building that whole picture, Collage ensures that students, black and white, dress in a way that allows for individual skin tones to be shown. Whereas most ballet studios require pink tights, Collage requires students to wear flesh colored tights. Arthur Mitchell required that his students in the Dance Theater of Harlem dye their tights to reflect individual colors. Harper notes that “nobody is pink” and therefore the color

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid..

should not be the default requirement.<sup>66</sup> In creating a world that is not pink, Collage works to include every individual regardless of color. Harper sees no need for any more racial barriers in Memphis. He continues:

I don't think we should have to claim that label if Ballet Memphis is not a white ballet company or if NYCB is not a white ballet company. We are a contemporary ballet company whose artistic vision is one where we see African Americans as a part of the picture.<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, the efforts of Collage seek to expose ballet to students of all races and form an audience that can appreciate different cultural expressions together in harmony. Instead of building walls of separation, Collage Dance Collective performances invoke a unifying participation in dance for all people. Even the most Euro-classic dance expression like ballet can speak to universal themes. Dance is innate to who we are as human beings. Every human being, regardless of race, experiences movement. The ambiguity of dance expression can challenge our society in ways that explicit communication cannot. Scholar Judith Lynne Hanna writes about the powerful universality of dance:

Dance is a nearly universal behavior with a history probably as old as humanity itself. Dance is embedded in our being. Even when not physically manifest, the concept and vision of dance emerge in our thinking. The dynamics of dance, culture, and society are inseparable.<sup>68</sup>

*The Future of Collage Dance Collective and the Black Ballerina*

As such a young organization, Collage Dance Collective has made profound steps toward changing the social inequalities found in the ballet world. In just three years of training, many students have grown tremendously as dancers, finding confidence in themselves and in their ability to succeed professionally. Lauren Boyer, Manager of Marketing and New Media at

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Judith Hanna, *The Performer-Audience Connection* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 3.

ArtsMemphis, has observed the rapid progression of Collage from the beginning, saying: “[Harper and Thomas] have risen very quickly because they have a great product.”<sup>69</sup> Harper and Thomas hope that students who complete their training will feed into the professional company, creating a sustainable movement of professional black ballet dancers in Memphis. Harper’s short term goal is to have 8 professional dancers living and working in Memphis, as well as more administrative assistance. The organization will also become more solidified with a new permanent location on Broad Avenue. For the past few years, Collage has operated out of Grace-St. Luke’s Episcopal Church and Overton High School. The new building will provide a greater sense of identity and place within Memphis. Lee notes that the new location will benefit the students and the organization as a whole. She states:

I think the new building [on Broad] is going to catapult everything. These kids who have been around since the beginning—they can say “we earned this.” It’s like going from being homeless to having a home.<sup>70</sup>

In the coming years, Harper and Thomas plan to work diligently towards their mission. They will continue to show citizens of Memphis and individuals around the nation that not only are blacks capable of excellence in ballet, but should be supported by their communities. Spacek believes that the organization will stay around if they continue to remain true to their original goals. She states:

I think they should keep doing the things they are doing like working well with other organizations. It’s important for them as they look to grow that they grow smartly. That’s where we see the biggest obstacle for groups is when they take on big things and they get in over their heads. And they don’t stick to their mission.<sup>71</sup>

Harper and Thomas have ambitious hopes for Collage to be a national example of diverse training and first-rate work in general. In the next 10-20 years, Thomas envisions Collage as a

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<sup>69</sup> Lauren Boyer, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 10, 2012.

<sup>70</sup> Brandye Lee, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

<sup>71</sup> Karen Spacek, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 10, 2012.

major institution in Memphis and the United States. He states that eventually “you will have New York City Ballet in New York and you’ll have Pacific Northwest Ballet on the west coast, and you will have Collage Dance Collective in Memphis.”<sup>72</sup>

However, until that day, the leaders of Collage are very aware of the challenges their students will face once they leave their doors. The professional opportunities for black ballet dancers are still very limited. While Misty Copeland, an African American ballet dancer, was promoted to be a soloist in the American Ballet Theater in 2007, there is still much progress to be made. Copeland was the first African American soloist at ABT in nearly two decades. While leaders of Collage celebrate Copeland’s success, they are still pushing for more men and women of color to dance on stage. Lee states:

If you blink, you will miss [Misty Copeland]. And that’s not to say she is any less black. I’m not taking anything away from her as a black woman. But I do think it’s important that we are not just looking for the person that completely blends in and doesn’t mess up our picture... our perfect lily white tableaux. I think it’s important that we embrace all skin tones and complexions.<sup>73</sup>

Collage does not want to keep the students from understanding what the outside world might contain. No matter how accepting and understanding the leaders at Collage are there are still many choreographers who might reject a black ballet dancer. Collage hopes to make students aware of the reality of their limitations but also aware of their ability to overcome them. A rising second grader, young Collage student Amor Williams “wants to be a ballerina when [she] grows up.”<sup>74</sup> Thomas knows that there may be restrictions in her way, but with solid training and encouragement, he knows that there will one day be a path for her. Thomas states:

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<sup>72</sup> Kevin Thomas, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Brandye Lee, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

<sup>74</sup> Amor Williams, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 13, 2012. (Homans, 2010)

We will make [the students] aware of what's out there. That is the truth out there—and here's what you need to do to overcome it. It is possible. You can get into that company, but here are the things you need to do, you will have to work twice as hard. You will have to have skin made out of stone. But you *can* get there.<sup>75</sup>

### III. Conclusion

In its very essence, the ballet is meant to bring the audience to a state of poetic fantasy and dreaming, leaving reality behind, no matter the cost. Theophile Gautier writes:

The very essence of ballet is poetic, deriving from dreams rather than from reality. About the only reason for its existence is to enable us to remain in the world of fantasy and escape from the people we rub shoulders with on the street.<sup>76</sup>

In escaping the street for a more beautiful life, this European fantasy has forsaken the reality of the human condition. It has built and preserved a world in which minorities like African Americans do not exist. And no matter how fantastical the ballet world may be, it is not

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<sup>75</sup> Kevin Thomas, interview by Jenna Sullivan, Memphis, TN, July 9, 2012.

<sup>76</sup> Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010), 135.

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worth dreaming about until every human being is a part of it. The ideal ballerina has graced the pages of story books, danced in the dreams of little girls, and captivated the world's imagination. But as beloved as she is, she is only one portrait of beauty. The many efforts of black concert dancers over the last century have shown us that the traditional ideal of beauty is just that—an *ideal*. While the responses of black dancers have varied greatly, individuals like Arthur Mitchell, Marcellus Harper, and Kevin Thomas have shown that nobility and beauty are universal attributes that any dancer of any color can embody. They have shown that blacks are capable of ballet and that investment in their training can significantly benefit a community.

The racial disparity found in classical ballet reveals one of many limitations of the African American. Whether on the stage or on the golf course, humankind often limits certain races to certain abilities. Culture can still separate individuals from one another. Along with many, Lee dreams of a day when American culture will reflect and celebrate the ever-growing diversity of life. She states:

You can't just paint this picture that life is one color. Because it's not. It's not realistic. Not in this country. We have to get comfortable with the idea that when we go to the ballet, or when we go to the orchestra, or when we go to the grocery store—when we go to Sax Fifth Avenue, there won't just be white people there. We can't just cater to them.<sup>77</sup>

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