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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



MOBBallet: Website Showcases Black Ballet History

by Ellen Chenoweth

If you were a casual observer, only connected to dance through mainstream media, you might think that ABT dancer [Misty Copeland](#) is the first black ballerina of all time. You would be wrong, but Theresa Ruth Howard believes that “even in the dance community itself, we have a kind of collective amnesia.”

Philadelphia native Howard is on a mission to shake us out of this collective amnesia with her project, [Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet](#) (MOBBallet). MOBBallet collects oral histories and archival material from black ballet dancers and gives them a digital home. Howard explains why the moment seemed ripe for her website: “With the groundswell of the conversation, the narrative of the black ballerina was very skewed. And it just seemed like the right time to say, ‘You know, there is a huge history out there.’ The idea that no one was ever evoking this history was hurtful.”

The MOBBallet website features a timeline, starting in 1919 and continuing to the present-day, that contextualizes ballet history with concurrent world events, highlighting the contributions of black dancers, choreographers, and teachers. There is a “roll call” section of the website, currently with more than 300 dancers named, many including bios and additional information. Howard's engaging and honest voice is most present in the [E-Zine](#) portion of the website, which includes letters from the editor, panel discussions, and additional writings. It's a project still in development, but clearly a vitally important resource for the field.

Howard began her career with the Philadelphia Civic Ballet Company, before going on to perform with Dance Theatre of Harlem and Karole Armitage. She has gathered oral histories from a number of important and powerful African American dance icons, including Joan Myers Brown and [Judith Jamison](#), as well as the less well-known [Delores Browne](#).

In addition to highlighting dance history that often gets overlooked, Howard is also interested in adding more depth and nuance to the existing narratives. In conversation with Delores Browne, Howard asked what inspired her to pursue ballet when there was no space for her professionally. Brown stated, “I didn't realize that; I had no idea that I wasn't supposed to be doing this, that there was no space.

Later it became clear that it was an issue." Howard remembers her own surprise: "But in my idea of what her time or her experience must have been, I thought, clearly, she must have known that there was no space, but they didn't feel that way. So I'm discovering all the nuance to the story that gets lost. It gets flattened out into this one-dimensional never-saw-opportunity story."

Many of her subjects had a relationship with Philadelphia, making her project of particular interest for dance followers in this city. She muses, "There is something about folks from Philly, about these women. As Brenda [Dixon Gottschild] said, they are '[audacious](#).' They are all elegance, eloquence, and unapologetically black." For her, the connection is personal: "I'm a black Philly girl, and people would say, 'Oh, you're from Philly, that's why.' I was very interested to see if I could crack that code for myself through these women."

Howard points out that at one point, Philadelphia was the home of the largest population of free black men in the United States, and wonders about the connection between dance pioneers like Brown and Jamison and their home city. "There was some organic integration [in Philadelphia], that made them less fearful of white people—less than in places that are more segregated, which might translate as 'entitlement,' as much as a black person could feel 'entitled' in certain spaces. I'm still trying to figure it out."

Howard sees larger implications for this conversation and historical reclamation, going well beyond the world of ballet. Alluding to the current political climate, Howard exclaims, "Especially now, you can either talk about stuff being messed up or you can actually do something. A lot of things are in jeopardy right now, and if we don't start to stand up for what we say we believe in, they can be gone. Restoring the history of blacks in ballet has the potential to change the conversation around the way we discuss the canon at large." She advocates a holistic way of teaching dance history, an integrated approach, which celebrates that dance doesn't happen in isolation, and that artists of all races have been influenced by each other throughout our country's history. MOBBallet gives an example of this approach with its timeline feature. "Changing the way we have conversations about diversity in ballet is hard, but it can be transformative. If we can figure this out in the dance world, then we can use it as a model in other aspects of life."

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