

SEE

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Why are there so few black ballet teachers? And could they change the face of international ballet? **Hannah Azieb Pool** investigates.

TO BE IT

‘This is for the little brown girls,’ writes Misty Copeland, principal dancer at the American Ballet Theatre, on page two of her recent bestselling memoir *A Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*. Copeland describes herself about to take to the stage at the Metropolitan Opera House in Stravinsky’s iconic *Firebird*, in 2012, the first black woman to star in the role at ABT, one of the world’s legendary classical ballet companies. ‘This is for the little brown girls,’ she writes again, a couple of pages later, and again, and again, four times within the first seven pages, making sure the reader is under no illusion of the importance of this moment: although she has become the first African American woman to be a principal in ABT’s 75-year history, classical ballet still has a huge way to go when it comes to race.

Meanwhile, in London, Eric Underwood is wowing audiences at the Royal Ballet, where he has danced for over 10 years (after being spotted during a tour with ABT, where he danced with Copeland). ‘Ballet can be incredibly elitist,’ Washington DC-born Underwood recently told the *Guardian* newspaper. Because despite the success of Copeland, Underwood and a handful of others, there is no doubt that when it comes to race, ballet still has a problem.

Too often, the industry hides behind the ‘supply and demand’ excuse, claiming if only there were more black ballet students, there’d be more black ballet professionals. But given that most of the leading classical companies and schools have their bases in some of the world’s most ethnically diverse cities, the fact that as an art form ballet remains so resolutely white, while contemporary dance has a much healthier hue, hints at deeper issues.

Trinidadian-born Céline Gittens, who won a gold medal in the RAD’s Genée International Ballet Competition in 2005 and is now a principal dancer at Birmingham Royal Ballet, is one of the few black primas in the UK. Gittens started dancing at the age of three. ‘I grew up with ballet all my life, it was not really a choice,’ she says. ‘My mum had her own ballet school in Trinidad. One day I was in my stroller, playing with toys and watching my mum teach and she gave an instruction to the class to point their toes, and apparently I just did it.’

The relationship between a ballet student and their teacher is the stuff of legends. Dancers remember their favourite teachers the way top athletes remember



Seeing the talent... Denzil Bailey and (right) Céline Gittens with Brandon Lawrence Photos: Juliana Kasumu for *Dance Gazette*; Bill Cooper

coaches: with a heady mix of fondness, love and fear. ‘The relationship between student and teacher is very important,’ Gittens says. ‘They need to understand each other and know the teacher is there for them, not against them. The teacher needs to see the strengths and weaknesses of the students so they know how much to push, and to assess their limitations so they can work together to deliver a successful performance.’ So how does that work if your teacher is also your mother? ‘We had a happy medium: she was my mum on the outside, but in the studio she was the ballet teacher, training me to be better, seeing my talent and doing everything she could to make me progress,’ says Gittens.

But most black ballet dancers go through their entire career without ever being taught by anyone who looks remotely like them, much less shares their DNA.



Theresa Ruth Howard, founder of the website *Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet*, has been teaching ballet for over 20 years. Former member of the Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Pennsylvania Ballet, she has taught and choreographed internationally, and has been on the ballet faculty of New York's prestigious Alvin Ailey Dance School for over 17 years. 'Imagine you are a black child walking into a ballet school,' she says. 'All the other pupils are white, all the parents are white, all the portraits on the wall are white, the receptionist is white, the teacher is white. What message will that give you? Does that black child feel they should be there?'

It's all very well celebrating the handful of black ballet dancers who make it, but if we really want ballet to better reflect the world it sits within, it's crucial to look at the start of the pipeline – ballet teachers. Given that the majority of teachers were once dancers, it stands to reason we won't see an increase in one without an increase in the other, says Howard. It's about more than representation, or the empowerment of black children; it's about keeping the art form relevant, building new audiences and not missing out on potential talent, says Sandie Bourne, whose recent PhD thesis *Black British Ballet: Race, Representation & Aesthetics* (Roehampton University) looks at why ballet remains so steadfastly white in such a changing world. 'It's so much harder for black dancers to succeed, so they give up,' she says. 'Even if they do progress they so often never get beyond the corps.'

Teacher Denzil Bailey danced and toured the world for 10 years with English National Ballet. 'White Lodge [the Royal Ballet's lower school] always had some black guys and girls, but by the time you get to the upper school there were hardly any,' he says. 'There might be one black face in a line of swans but that would be it.' Bailey was founding ballet master of Ballet Black, a company for dancers of black and Asian descent. 'A good teacher is a good teacher, regardless of race, but when a black child sees a black teacher, it changes their view, it inspires them,' he says. 'If black kids don't ever see black teachers, they think there's no point trying so really good dancers go into the West End.'

A dancer's life is full of disappointments, particularly for women. Companies are always looking for boys, so a half decent boy will often progress quicker and further than a much more talented girl, says Bailey: 'A semi-decent

‘WHEN A BLACK CHILD SEES A BLACK TEACHER, IT CHANGES THEIR VIEW. IT INSPIRES THEM’ – Denzil Bailey



For the little brown girls... Misty Copeland and (opposite) Eric Underwood Photos: Gregg Delman; Johan Persson/Royal Ballet

boy will be offered a contract, but girls have to be really, *really* good to get a contract.’ Black students face all of this, plus added pressures. They speak not just of casual racism from teachers and other students, but also overtly being told their face, bodies and hair don’t fit, says Bourne. Too often they’ll be pushed towards jazz, hip hop or street dance, regardless of ballet potential. ‘Local dance classes aren’t being monitored and they are getting away with murder,’ Bourne explains. ‘There are some very eurocentric ideas being taught. Black students are being stopped by their schools from progressing, so they either stop dancing or go towards contemporary dance.’

‘It’s important to understand that there is something very isolating about being a brown ballet student, even in a modern school,’ adds Howard. ‘The technique is made to feel distant from you, even your body type, the idea you’re wearing pink tights, your hair, there’s a whole bunch of stuff – and then a teacher that doesn’t look like you, looking at you in a way that makes you feel you shouldn’t be doing this.’

Despite the fact that pretty much all major companies have outreach or engagement programmes to encourage young dancers from non-traditional backgrounds (class is another big issue), the fact there are still so few black ballet dancers and teachers means the ‘pipeline’ is still broken.

‘There’s all of that stuff that ballet organisations that might have black students but no black teachers don’t understand,’ says Howard. ‘They just think it’s about having someone who looks like you. It’s much more than that. My dance teacher was a white woman, I love her dearly, but there are certain things I might not share with her.’ Things like what? ‘I’ve had black students who feel white teachers teach towards their “ideal bodies” in the room, that they are being “othered” by their teachers,’ says Howard. ‘Othering,’ or when one person treats another as if they are somehow alien, pointing out how they ‘don’t belong’ and are therefore inferior, often has racial overtones. It takes many forms, but in the confines of a ballet class it might be a (white) teacher constantly telling a (black) student they don’t have the right ‘look’ or ‘aesthetic’ for ballet, or the curious notion that when a group of women are pretending to be swans it will somehow break the fantasy if not all of those pretend swans have the exact same skin tone. Defending ballet’s ‘aesthetic’ on this basis is really code for ‘keep ballet white’.



What kind of ballet do we want – one which reflects the rest of the world, or one which remains cold, distant and open only to a tiny minority? ‘You can say it doesn’t matter, but I truly think unless you are of colour you won’t understand that feeling of someone who looks like you doing something seen as predominantly white,’ says RAD teacher and former dancer Marsha George. She has been teaching since 2005, set up her own school in Surrey and now teaches in Denver, USA. ‘I still remember when I saw my first black ballet teacher, on a TV documentary when I was about nine years old,’ says George.

Of course no one is saying white teachers can’t teach black students properly, or that black students can only learn from black teachers. But when the demographics of the rest of society are changing so rapidly, why hasn’t ballet caught up? As long as black ballet teachers are so rare, the art form has little hope of solving its identity crisis, says Mark Elie, Artistic Director of Portobello Dance School, London. ‘We haven’t invested in this country. You can probably count the classically trained black women teaching in the UK on one hand. Young black girls and boys need to be able to look at a teacher, a role model they can relate to. A lot of the white ballet world labels young black children negatively.’ After dancing with companies in Lisbon and New York (including the Dance Theatre of Harlem), Elie set up his own school, to counteract some of the negative messages the art form sends out to students who don’t fit the ‘traditional’ ballet model. ‘Too many black ballet students, especially the girls, still get told they “haven’t got the right aesthetic” to do classical ballet. My school is all about inclusivity,’ he says.

The classical ballet ‘black talent drain’ which sees many black British ballet dancers either move to the USA in the hope of better roles, or hang up their pointe shoes for contemporary dance, is a direct result of the lack of teachers, says Marsha George. ‘I had a fabulous time at the RAD and they have really nurtured me, but I was the only black person in the room during my graduation.’ Does she feel the weight of that responsibility now she’s at the front of class teaching? ‘What I hope is I’m there to guide and encourage the next generation of dancers. To be a listening ear, to show them they can do it, it’s an art form that should be accessible to everyone.’ Or, in the words of Misty Copeland: ‘This is for the little brown girls’.