

## **Whiteness in Dance**

How the art form is shifting, but the lens we see it through stays the same.

By Rachel Swansburg

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From the time she was 12 years old, watching dancers twirl and leap across the gold-framed stage of Chicago's Civic Opera House, Tanya Wideman-Davis knew that she wanted to be a part of the world of ballet.

Throughout the course of her career, Wideman-Davis has seen a level of success in the industry that many young dancers can only dream of. From the Dance Theater of Harlem, to Joffrey Ballet, Alonzo King Lines Ballet, and Complexions Contemporary Ballet, she's traveled across the country in search of a place where she could perform with a true sense authenticity and self-expression – a strong part of which, she says, comes from her African American heritage.

Though dancers of color are increasingly finding prominence in the slowly diversifying, but historically white-dominated world of dance, the art form itself is still viewed through the lens of whiteness. From the dancers, to the choreographers, to dance performances themselves, many conform to a standard that does not leave room for the perspectives and realities of people of color – nor do they often attempt to do so.

The most sought-after body types in ballet are historically long, thin, and pale. In Russia's Vaganova school - one of the most renowned in the world - students are hand-selected for their thin arms, long legs, flat torsos, and smooth hair. The most renowned music comes from composers like Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, and Prokofiev.

Many of the stories told in ballet center around European cultures, and those that don't, like *La Bayadere*, are still told by traditionally white actors. The classical style of movement is soft, quiet, and gentle. And while some of those standards may be shifting over time, they still don't accommodate racialized stereotypes that people of color continue to face in the twenty first century.

Ballet in particular has been viewed as the style of dance slowest to open its doors to people of color. Masters of the art form like Arthur Mitchell and Alvin Ailey were some of the first to challenge the standard of whiteness in dance by founding companies such as Dance Theater of Harlem and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater specifically for dancers of color.

These companies opened doors for hundreds of dancers, and provided a space for people of color to explore movement in an environment that was encouraging and responsive. Many more of these companies exist today, and ballet has become far more accessible than it was even 30 years ago.

The problem that remains, however, is that many 'traditional' ballets and performance choreography are still composed by white choreographers, for white audiences, no matter who actually performs them.

"I come from fighting women. I come from women who transcend," said Wideman-Davis. She described how she initially sought out a place in historically black ballet companies, but didn't necessarily find what she was seeking there. "It was then that I realized that what I was looking for was not necessarily in the racial coding of these companies – black or white, they're all doing the same repertoire."

She explained that many of the companies she danced with were seeking a kind of "social validity" - a validity found through the lens of whiteness. "I was looking for something that has a different kind of connectivity to soul," she said.

In order to truly explore her own life experiences in movement, Wideman-Davis created her own company, Wideman-Davis Dance, with her husband Thaddeus Davis. "We were not interested in replicating this authoritarian environment that dance has flourished in."

She explained that dance to her is more than executing steps and positions to perfection. "I come from a culture where dance has an essence that's rooted in family, in our rich African American history," she said. "I didn't feel this down-to-earth quality coming into the forms of ballet we were doing."

Wideman-Davis recognized in her own career that though her status as an African American ballet dancer did not stop her from attaining principal roles, those roles did not represent her own realities.

Some companies have acknowledged this issue, and have attempted to address it by creating choreography specifically for dancers of color. Angela Harris, a professional ballerina and founder of Dance Canvas, a development program for budding choreographers, says that this is not the key to creating a more diverse landscape on stage.

“Separating based on racial lines takes us backward,” Harris said. “We should be diversifying based on the fact that people are good dancers and can contribute to the art form, not because we’re doing a black ballet.”

Creating ballets that are specifically for people of color may seem like a way to be more inclusive, but in reality, it does nothing to break or subvert the mold of whiteness that ballet adheres to. Actually giving people of color to the space to create pieces that reflect their own identities, Harris says, is much more effective.

When it comes to seeing representation in dance, Harris explained that one of the best solutions is to have more people of color in the roles of artistic directors and choreographers. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and until the person who’s selecting dancers and pieces of choreography has the desire to put African American dancers on stage, you’re not going to see a change.”

With other styles of dance that don’t typically stem from European traditions, it might be assumed that dancers of color have a better shot at not only getting a foot in the door, but truly expressing themselves through the art form. However, many styles like tap and jazz that have African American roots are actively ‘translated’ for white audiences.

Roxane “Butterfly” Semadeni is a world-renowned tap dancer who trained under the instruction of legends like Jimmy Slyde and who founded the Euro-tap coalition. She described how tap has been taken from its original form and made palatable for mass audiences - by and large erasing its complex and tangled history.

“Tap has its roots in the American slave trade,” Semadeni said. “This dance came from that specific moment in time, but it’s a style that many claim ownership of all over the world.” Indeed, tap dance has its roots in the complex rhythms tapped out by African American slaves in colonial America as a form of communication. It’s a history far removed from today’s flashy Broadway performances, or the notably ‘uniform’ Rockettes’ Radio City shows.

Thomas Vacanti is a professor of dance and the head of the UMass Amherst Dance Department. He says that his years in the industry have made him witness to this same type of translation in jazz dance. “Jazz has very multicultural roots,” Vacanti said. “But it’s become this trained system that dancers go through, and there’s been a shift in what people actually see as jazz. It’s turned into what you’d see on So You Think You can Dance - more contemporary than traditional jazz, and more catered to bodies that have trained in styles like ballet.”

To recognize the roots of jazz and tap also means embracing the roots of the music that it stems from and the artists that created it. It means recognizing that those dancing on Broadway are performing styles that did not begin with Frank Sinatra and Fred Astaire, and do not end with the Rockettes.

Recognizing the ways in which whiteness affects dance styles does not mean placing guilt on white dancers - it means opening the art form to include those whose perspectives and experiences have been written over by an overwhelmingly white popular culture.