

MITCHELL, ARTHUR

Members of the MFDP went to Atlantic City believing that their planned contest of the seats assigned to the state party had a reasonable chance of success. In reality, the MFDP leadership received an education on how politics at the national level operated. While a number of MFDP delegates sincerely believed that moral persuasion would lead the DNC to refuse the regular state party the state's allotment of seats, President Johnson had his own agenda. Johnson, running without opposition for the nomination for president, wanted a smooth convention. He feared a southern walkout if the DNC seated the MFDP. Johnson ordered the FBI to wiretap the MFDP office, as well as the hotel rooms of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bayard Rustin. Johnson knew the positions of civil rights groups and key leaders throughout the convention. He also threatened the patronage of those who might have been inclined to support the MFDP. In addition, he coerced Walter Reuther, the head of the United Auto Workers union, to threaten to cut off financial support to SNCC and the MFDP in Mississippi if the challenge was not withdrawn.

This threat did not alter the determination of the protestors. Before a televised hearing of the Credentials Committee, the deeply affecting testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer led Johnson to stage a news conference in an effort to stop public opinion from mounting to the point that he had to give seats to the MFDP. Johnson forced Hubert Humphrey to try to convince the challengers not to go forward. This was a test of Humphrey's personal loyalty, and Johnson told him the vice presidential position on the ticket depended on how he handled the controversy. Humphrey offered the MFDP two seats representing the state of Mississippi, and the rest of the MFDP delegation were to be "honored guests" at the convention. The MFDP refused this offer, demanding at least the seats proportionate to the state's blacks of voting age. Unwilling to compromise, the challengers got no seats, but they did manage to obtain the credentials of sympathetic delegates from states that disapproved of the regular Mississippi delegation. Several members of the MFDP staged a sit-in demonstration on the convention floor, but security guards quickly removed the protestors.

MFDP members left the convention embittered by their experience. Feeling betrayed by the actions of northern liberals and civil rights moderates such as King and Rustin who had supported the compromise option proposed by Humphrey, the MFDP and SNCC became more militant after the convention. The DNC did unseat the regular Mississippi Democrats in 1968 (as promised at the 1964 convention) when the state party persisted in denying access to blacks. As a consequence of this action, the

Mississippi Democratic Party ended the discriminatory practices and customs it had used to exclude blacks from meaningful participation in party affairs.

See also Freedom Summer; Hamer, Fannie Lou (Townsend, Fannie Lou); Moses, Robert Parris; Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

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MICHAEL A. COOKE (1996)
Updated bibliography

MITCHELL, ARTHUR

MARCH 27, 1934

Born in New York City, the oldest son of five children, dancer and choreographer Arthur Adams Mitchell Jr. began tap-dance lessons at the age of ten, sang in the Police Athletic League Glee Club, and attended the High School of Performing Arts, where he progressed quickly through a modern dance major. He began his professional career while still a senior in high school when he appeared in the 1952 Paris revival of Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Upon graduation from high school he was the first male to receive the school's prestigious Dance Award.

Mitchell was accepted as a scholarship student at the School of American Ballet in 1952. Determined to overcome a late start in classical ballet technique, he also studied with ballet master Karel Shook at the Studio of Dance Arts in New York. His vibrant, agile performance style made him highly sought by contemporary modern dance choreographers; and during this period he performed with the Donald McKayle Company, Sophie Maslow and the New Dance Group, Louis Johnson, and Anna Sokolow. In 1955, after only three years of concentrated ballet study,

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Mitchell joined the John Butler Company for a brief European tour. He returned to New York to join the New York City Ballet (NYCB) in November 1955.

Within his first week with NYCB, Mitchell danced a featured role in George Balanchine's *Western Symphony*. He became the first African-American principal dancer permanently associated with that company but asked that there be no publicity about breaking a color barrier. In 1957 Balanchine created the centerpiece pas de deux of *Agon* for Mitchell and ballerina Diana Adams. Performances of this technically demanding, modernist work gained Mitchell international recognition as a principal dancer imbued with supple control and precise partnering skills. Mitchell stayed with the NYCB for fifteen years, dancing a range of leading roles that included spare, sensual works (Jerome Robbins's *Afternoon of a Faun*), neoclassic works (Balanchine's *Four Temperaments*), and pure classical ballets (Balanchine's *Allegro Brillante*). In 1962 Mitchell created the role of Puck in Balanchine's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, winning critical and audience praise for his dramatic abilities and charismatic warmth.

Mitchell also performed in the Broadway productions of *House of Flowers* (1954), *Shinbone Alley* (1957), and Noel Coward's *Sweet Potato* (1968). He choreographed for Eartha Kitt at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1957 and appeared at the 1960 and 1961 Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy. He danced as a guest artist with the Metropolitan Opera (1962), the Munich Ballet Festival (1963), the Stuttgart Opera Ballet (1963), and the National Ballet of Canada (1964). In 1967, at the invitation of the U.S. government, he helped organize the National Ballet Company of Brazil.

Well aware of his role as a trailblazer, Mitchell encouraged others to follow his example of excellence in classical ballet. He taught at the Katherine Dunham School, the Karel Shook Studio, and the Harlem School of the Arts, as well as the Jones-Hayward School in Washington, D.C. In 1968 Mitchell and Shook reacted to the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., by forming the school that became the Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH), although Mitchell "never actually started out to have a company. I wanted to start a school to get kids off the streets. But I couldn't tell the young people in the school to be the best they could when they had no place to go." DTH was cofounded in February 1969 by Mitchell and Shook to "prove that there is no difference, except color, between a black ballet dancer and a white ballet dancer."

Mitchell has received numerous honors and awards, including the 1975 Capezio Dance Award, the New York

Public Library "Lion of the Performing Arts" Award for outstanding contributions to the performing arts, the NAACP's Image Award of Fame, and numerous honorary doctorates, including ones from Harvard, Princeton, and Williams College. In 1993 he was honored by David Dinkins, mayor of New York City, with a Handel Medallion Award and by President Bill Clinton at the Kennedy Center Honors for lifetime contribution to American culture. In June 1994 he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. In 1998 Mitchell choreographed *South African Suite* in collaboration with two South African dancers. In 1999 he was inducted into the Hall of Fame at the National Museum of Dance in Saratoga Springs, New York.

See also Ballet; Dance Theater of Harlem; Dinkins, David; Kitt, Eartha Mae

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Updated by author 2005

MITCHELL, ARTHUR WERGS

DECEMBER 22, 1883
MAY 9, 1968

The politician Arthur Wergs Mitchell was born in Chambers County, Alabama. He left home at age fourteen and walked to Tuskegee Institute, where he obtained work as an office assistant for Booker T. Washington (1856–1915). He eventually entered Tuskegee as a student.

Mitchell taught in rural schools in Georgia and Alabama, and he founded the Armstrong Agricultural School