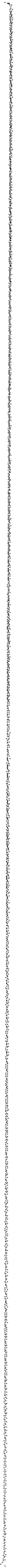


ballet in black:

louis johnson and african american vernacular humour in ballet

thomas f. defrantz

> African-American humour . . . emanates from the social and political predicament of the group; for African Americans, their predicament has been based on their status as outsiders.[1]

During the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, African American dancers interested in ballet approached the form "sideways," supplementing their mastery of other forms of dance rather than becoming accomplished classical performers. Strict segregation precluded sustained ballet study by black children before the 1960s, causing the few African American classical dancers of that era to begin their ballet training as adults. While the African American presence in classical ballet crystallized with the founding of the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969, wider African American interest in the form grew more slowly alongside waxing American interest in theatrical stage dancing.

This essay explores the history of African American participation in classical ballet before the abatement of segregation and focuses on the work of Louis Johnson, a master choreographer whose ballets employ sparkling fragments of African American vernacular humour. Although an African American presence in ballet has been circumscribed by ambiguous race relations in the United States, Africanist compositional strategies have had a dynamic impact on contemporary ballet choreography.

overview

Ballet captured the interest of a broad American public only after tours by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes provided entertaining "high art" in the early part of the twentieth century.[2] Diaghilev's repertory included a fantastical coordination of settings, costumes, music, and choreography that

propelled modern ballet into American cultural landscapes. But assumptions that the European outlook, history, and technical theory fundamental to ballet were alien to the black dancer's culture, temperament, and anatomy discouraged African American interest in the form for generations. Dance aesthetes wrote about the unsuitability of the Negro dancer's "tight joints, a natural turn-in rather than the desired ballet turn-out, and hyper-extension of the knee [and] weak feet."[3] Most black dancers, barred from all-white ballet schools, turned to performing careers in modern and jazz dance. Ballet training, however, remained the basis of many theatrical dance techniques, ensuring that African American dancers studied ballet when and wherever they could.

Although general American interest in ballet broadened, few performing opportunities were available to classically trained African American dancers.[4] From the 1930s to the 1960s, racial division led to the formation of several short-lived "all-black" ballet companies. While these companies provided much-needed artistic outlets for dancers and, in fewer cases, choreographers, they also promoted a voyeuristic exoticism of black bodies that placed the dancers outside the emergent mainstream of American classicism. These early companies withstood a dual-pronged challenge to prove that black bodies could master classical technique while simultaneously entertaining their mostly white audiences and critics within familiar, stereotyped performance contexts. Not surprisingly, the repertory of each all-black company employed and expanded upon prevailing stereotypes.

Eugene Von Grona's American Negro Ballet debuted at Harlem's Lafayette Theater on 21 November 1937.[5] Von Grona had been a modern dancer and was trained by the German choreographer Mary Wigman before moving to the United States in 1925. He formed his own company of African American dancers to address what he termed "the deeper and more intellectual resources of the Negro race."[6] Although the company's original program included a version of Stravinsky's *Firebird* choreographed by Von Grona, its more popular works were set to jazz music by Duke Ellington and W. C. Handy. In an apparent attempt to attract a larger audience, Von Grona reformed the company as Von Grona's American Swing Ballet in 1939, when it appeared in producer Lew Leslie's musical spectacular *Blackbirds* and at the Apollo Theater.

Other lesser-known companies mimicked the racially inspired use of African American musical forms to accompany ballets made for African American dancers. Joseph Rickhard, a German émigré and former dancer with the Ballets Russes, founded the First Negro Classic Ballet in 1948. Rickhard taught ballet to African American students in Los Angeles, where his company first performed in 1949. Its concert material included *Variations Classiques,* a suite of dances set to Bach, as well as a reworking of *Cinderella* with African American materials. Although the company achieved critical success and toured the West Coast for seven seasons, almost no documentation of its repertory has survived.[7] In 1956, Rickhard and several of his dancers moved to New York, and the company merged with the New York Negro Ballet.

The most important company before the Dance Theatre of Harlem was Edward Flemyng's New York Negro Ballet, founded as Les Ballets Négres in 1955. This group began as a loose collection of dancers who took daily technique classes with Maria Nevelska, a former member of the Bolshoi Ballet. Flemyng, a charismatic African American dancer born in Detroit, Michigan, organized private sponsorship of the company, which led to the landmark 1957 tour of Great Britain, with stops in England, Scotland, and Wales.[8] The company's tour repertory included a purely

New York Negro Ballet. Edward Flemyng, Cleo Quitman, Theodore Duncan, and Barbara Wright in Ernest Parham's Mardi Gras, *1957.*

classical pas de deux from *Sleeping Beauty* danced by Delores Brown and Bernard Johnson, as well as *Waltze*, an abstract classical work for twelve dancers by Louis Johnson. Other pieces in the repertory mined more recognizably "Negro" themes. Ernest Parham's carnival ballet *Mardi Gras*, set to music by Les Baxter, ended with a group possessed by a mysterious primitive ritual.

Raisin' Cane, by Graham Johnson, with music by Claudius Wilson, told a comic story of a country boy who becomes lost in the big city and is seduced by a barroom siren. Joseph Rickhard's *Harlot's House*, also with music by Wilson, depicted a young girl's strange attraction to a brothel she passes while strolling with her boyfriend.

Even with repertory that traded on the time-worn stereotype of black bodies as sexually available primitives bewitched by "low" jazz music, none of these companies survived their contemporary marketplaces. Over time, singular efforts by African Americans to use classical technique resulted in similarly abbreviated programming with blatantly sensationalist overtones.[9] Even as African Americans were recognized for their achievements in modern dance and jazz dance, there was widespread ambivalence toward the idea that black dancers could master classical technique or that African-derived performance practice could influence American ballet.

The beginnings of an integrated classical dance in the United States began after World War II, when individual dancers became briefly associated with larger organizations. At New York's Ballet Society, Talley Beatty appeared in Lew Christiansen's 1947 *Blackface* and Arthur Bell danced in Frederick Ashton's 1950 production of *Illuminations*. Janet Collins, the most famous African American classical dancer from this era, achieved the stature of prima ballerina at the Metropolitan Opera from 1951 to 1954, where she danced in *Aida, La Giocanda*, and *Samson and Delilah*. In 1952, Louis Johnson, a student of the School of American Ballet, created a role in Jerome Robbins' *Ballade* for the New York City Ballet.[10]

The affiliation of African American dancers with mostly white companies accelerated throughout the 1960s. The Harkness Ballet of New York ran an aggressive recruitment program in consultation with Thelma Hill, an alumna of the New York Negro Ballet, which by 1968 had successfully placed five black members in that company. Choreographer Alvin

Ailey, who created *Feast of Ashes* for the Joffrey Ballet in 1962, also made *Ariadne* (1965), *El Amor Brujo* (1966), and *Macumba* (1966) for the Harkness Ballet. Ultimately, the founding of the Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) in 1969 conclusively ended speculation about the appropriateness of African American interest in ballet. Arthur Mitchell's company and its affiliated school provided performing opportunities and training for black dancers and choreographers from all parts of the world.

As DTH performances set a standard for black classicism, African American influences on ballet began to be recognized and documented. Choreographer George Balanchine, who served on the original DTH board of directors, successfully articulated a neo-classical style of ballet that emphasized thrust hips and rhythmic syncopations commonly found in African American social dance styles. Prominent in his works *The Four Temperaments* (1946) and the "Rubies" section of *Jewels* (1967) are references to the Charleston, the cakewalk, the lindy-hop, and tap dancing.[11]

The critical success of DTH hinged on its dancers' abilities to embody these social movement styles within classical technique. The company excelled in resilient performances of the Balanchine repertory and also in works that explored affinities between ballet and ritual dance, including Geoffrey Holder's *Dougla* (1974), a stylized wedding ceremony combining African and Hindu motifs, and Billy Wilson's *Ginastera* (1991), a combination of Spanish postures and pointe dancing.

black classicism

The consummate versatility achieved by DTH is, of course, directly related to the articulation of "black classicism." Because African American dancers were denied access to sustained study of dance technique, they excelled in choreography that embraced a continuum of idioms as a compositional strategy, in work that explored the spaces between modern dance, social dance, and ballet technique. I want to suggest that dancing well "in between" idioms became a hallmark of African American achievement in ballet and a recognizable standard of black classicism.

The artistic achievement of DTH, the presence of innumerable individual African American artists in companies around the world, and George Balanchine's neo-classic fusion of classical technique and African American dance styles have led to a contemporary ballet repertory that is indisputably bound up with Africanist aesthetic principles. These principles have been vividly realized in works by the European American choreographers Gerald Arpino, William Forsythe, Jerome Robbins, and Twyla Tharp. Ironically, vernacular African American dance styles, which value subversive invention, participatory interaction, and an overwhelming sense of bodily presence, diverge from ballet's conception of strictly codified body line, a silenced and motionless audience, and movement as metaphoric abstraction.

But what are the principles of African diaspora performance? In 1966, art historian Robert Farris Thompson proposed a series of aesthetic commonalities in dance and music-making based on his extensive travels through sub-Saharan Africa. This "aesthetic of the cool" described four shared traits of West African music and dance: the dominance of a percussive concept of performance, multiple meter, apart playing and dancing, and call-and-response. In addition, he chronicled a large category of performance that he termed "the songs and dances of derision."[12] Thompson's work held profound implications for the study of expressive culture in the African diaspora including concert dance.

Thirty years later, dance theorist Brenda Dixon Gottschild elaborated on Thompson's principles by naming five intertextual traits that work together to produce aesthetic balance in an Africanist aesthetic. These traits are a precept of contrariety, in which "difference, discord and irregularity are encompassed, rather than erased or necessarily resolved"; polycentrism and polyrhythm, in which "movement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centres may operate simultaneously"; high-affect juxtaposition, in which "breaks that omit the transitions and connective links valued in the European academic aesthetic" are explored; ephebism, the principle that "encompasses attributes such as power, vitality, flexibility, drive, and attack"; and the aesthetic of the cool, the attitude that "combines composure with vitality."[13]

These theoretical hallmarks of Africanist dance are typically discussed in relationship to social dance and modern dance performance.

I'm interested in how they emerged in ballet choreography, especially as African American artists began creating works for classically trained dancers. A close look at two ballets created by Louis Johnson will shed light on how these principles are realized as compositional strategies. I acknowledge that a single choreographer cannot produce a narrative of cultural coherency. But Johnson's work does embody an obvious engagement with Africanist dance practice, especially in his unexpected use of humour to produce a recognizable "ballet in black."

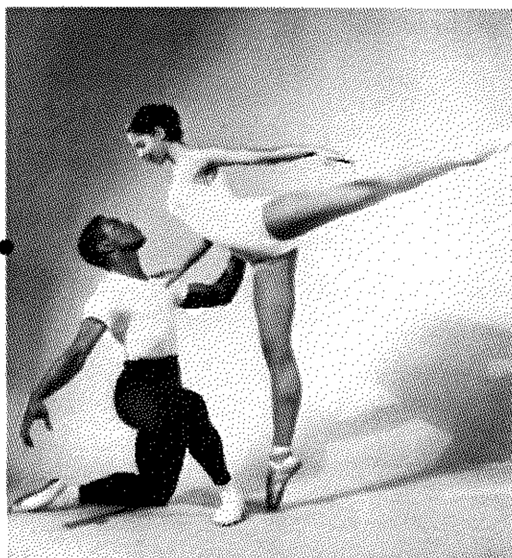
louis johnson

Although Johnson was among the first African American choreographers to work consistently in the ballet idiom, his life and career have been poorly documented. A brief biographical note outlining his early career is in order.

Born in 1932 in Statesville, North Carolina, Johnson developed an interest in dance after his family moved to Washington, DC. Acrobatic play at the local YMCA led to dance study as a teen at the Doris Jones-Clara Haywood School of Dance, an important studio that trained many accomplished African American and Latino dancers. Johnson's potential in ballet was confirmed during a single year of study there and, with classmate Chita Rivera, he auditioned and was accepted as a student at the School of American Ballet in 1949. After high school, he moved to New York in 1950 to study at the School of American Ballet, as well as the Metropolitan Ballet and the Katherine Dunham Dance School. After only two more years of study, Johnson created a role in Jerome Robbins' ballet *Ballade,* alongside dancers Nora Kaye, Janet Reed, Tanaquil Le Clercq, Todd Bollinger, and Robert Barnett. His participation at New York City Ballet was short-lived, however, and he was not offered a permanent position with the company.

Johnson danced on Broadway in several productions during the early 1950s, including *Four Saints in Three Acts, My Darlin' Aida, House of Flowers,* and both the stage and screen versions of Bob Fosse's *Damn Yankees.* He began his significant choreographic career in 1953 with *Lament,* a lyrical ballet set to music by Villa-Lobos and first presented

with an integrated cast at the Third New York Ballet Club Annual Choreographers' Night. After this successful showing he continued making small-group dances, including the character studies *Kindergarten* and *Harlequin,* as well as early explorations of African American experience titled *Spiritual Suite* and *How Many Miles?* He also made abstract dance suites during this period, including a decidedly neo-classical trio titled *Variations.*[14]



Louis Johnson and Barbara Wright in Variations. *Choreography by Louis Johnson.*

For the New York Negro Ballet's tour to Great Britain in 1957, he created two works: the classically styled *Waltze* and *Folk Impressions,* a suite of dances set to Morton Gould's orchestral arrangements of folk songs and spirituals. But after the New York Negro Ballet company folded in 1959, Johnson found few outlets for his classical choreography.

In other spheres, however, Johnson's reputation grew and he settled into a career making dances for television, film, the Broadway stage, and nightclub appearances.[15] His experience in show business deeply influenced his choreographic method. When he resumed making ballets for classically trained dancers, his choreography began to freely mix movement idioms, setting social dance next to classical ballet technique, Dunham-inspired modern dance forms, spiritual dancing, and acrobatics. His mature

work is consistently concerned with style juxtaposition, as was evident in his large group ballets, especially *Forces of Rhythm,* created for the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1972, and *Fontessa and Friends,* premiered by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1981.

Forces of Rhythm, subtitled "A Fusion of Classic Ballet, Ethnic, and Modern Dance Styles," is ostensibly an abstract suite of dance variations, and it offers fine examples of Johnson's choreographic method. The dance is structured as an agon between four groups of dancers all costumed in black and white: a quartet of ballerinas on pointe, a quartet of male ballet danseurs, a quartet of female "Katherine Dunham" dancers clad in white ceremonial dresses, and a quartet of social-dancing men who wear very little. The dance exploits the tension between these four groups and their "appropriate" movement ideas, then mixes up any notion of choreographic propriety as the groups perform in one another's idioms.

The ballet begins with three of the identifiable groups of dancers on stage. The ballerinas, danseurs, and Dunham dancers approach the audience performing movements that satisfy the charges of their costumes. They demonstrate a working vocabulary for the piece as the ballerinas scoot through petite allegro passages, the danseurs execute expansive jumping phrases, and the Dunham dancers charge passionately through a series of turns and contractions. Without warning, the four "social dance" men leap onto the stage and cavort through the space with patently invented "neo-African" steps. Their gestures are at definite odds with those of the other groups, their very presence undermining the propriety established in the opening sequence of the dance.

Throughout *Forces of Rhythm,* these "social dance" male dancers interrupt the flow of other dance episodes. Their appearance often prompts an abrupt shift in the pre-recorded musical score, from a classical orchestral selection to a rhythm-and-blues song.[16] The juxtaposition of musical selections mirrors the flagrantly contrary quality of their actions in relationship to that of the other dancers. In one variation, four ballerinas "trap" one of the clowning social dance men within a series of precise geometric formations. In the dance's central pas de deux, a ballerina and danseur are joined by a comic figure who teases his way into the dance, counterposing his fluid, low-to-the-ground neo-African movements with their formal, lengthened

classical partnering. The members of this trio interact with a poignant curiosity, the social dance man partnering the ballerina in a series of lifts, while the danseur tests his way through sinuous motions with a released torso and articulated hip and shoulder isolations. It is as if the dancers are "learning" one another's appropriate modes of expression.

In the final section of the ballet, set to Rufus Wright's song "Do the Breakdown," all the dancers achieve the neo-African movements proposed by the social dance quartet.[17] First, each of the four groups offers a brief summation of its basic dance idiom. Here, the four comic men strut, tap dance, and perform the cakewalk, an African American social dance of derision that was popular at the turn of the twentieth century. As the vocals in the musical score call the dancers to "do the breakdown, children!" the dancers carefully promenade toward the audience in unison, then pulse in a neo-African gesture of supplication, their torsos pushing toward the ground as their feet stamp from side to side. The dancers find a common language in this gesture and seem to dance with and for one another, rather than simply at the same time. Each group exits the stage in character, the last being the four social dance men. They leave dancing the breakdown, an African American social dance popular in the early 1970s.

Obviously, *Forces of Rhythm* comments on the variety of dance impulses available to African American dancers — in this case, the classically trained dancers of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. While the choreography draws lines between four "types" of dancers, the audience is challenged to remember that all sixteen dancers on stage are members of a classical ballet company. The choreographer clearly takes delight in feeding non-balletic movement to some of these dancers, as he simultaneously tests his audience's ability to comprehend connections between several dance idioms. In some sections of the piece, individual dancers test and master movements borrowed from other idioms until the differences between these groups of dancers are ultimately laid bare.

Most interesting to me are the social dance men. Their idiom in the dance as a whole is never clearly defined. They are, of course, trickster figures. In several passages they perform neo-African movements borrowed from the Dunham technique and a host of African American social dances, while humorously mimicking the classical ballet postures of the danseurs.

Overall, they are the outrageous comic glue that ties the piece together. The choreographer invests them with the ability to inhabit other idioms represented in the dance. They are agents of vernacular inversion, equalizers who target the pride and pretension of other dance idioms with a wink and a smile.

DTH "Tricksters": William Scott, Homer Bryant, Samuel Smalls, and Roman Brooks in Louis Johnson's Forces of Rhythm.

The social dance men embody the ability of the African American vernacular to absorb influences from Europe and the Caribbean and derisively expand on the implications of those influences. This ability is one of Thompson's aesthetic commonalities. Throughout *Forces of Rhythm,* aspects of Africanist composition emerge in the phrasing of percussive movement, complex metrical subdivisions, passages of physicalized call-and-response dancing, and sections that require the dancers to work apart from one another as pieces of a larger, unified whole. Also apparent in the choreography are vestiges of Gottschild's intertextual traits of Africanist performance. These are evident in the blatantly contrary structure of the work and the juxtaposition of dance idioms and musical selections within a classical ballet setting.

Clowns: Members of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in Fontessa and Friends *by Louis Johnson.*

In his later work, *Fontessa and Friends,* Johnson revisited the depiction of tricksters who derisively tease the conventions of ballet. In this dance, the tricksters appear as clowns and are led by a tattered character recognizably drawn from minstrel shows. His name is Ragtime. The ballet tells the story of an evening in the life of Fontessa, described by the choreographer as "a crazy lady."[18] Fontessa is a lonely countess who hosts an imaginary party. Ragtime and his clowns number among her guests, along with a young couple of balletic lovers and a golden slave character borrowed from *Scheherazade.*

The ballet follows a complicated scenario full of outrageous juxtapositions and abrupt shifts in mood. At its opening, Fontessa commands the stage with a searing portrayal of melancholy as she carefully prepares for the imaginary party. Her "guests" first arrive only in pantomime, and then in the flesh when Ragtime, his clowns, and the young lovers suddenly emerge from the wings. Ragtime repeatedly invades the mood of the other party-goers by breaking in on the young lovers' idylls. He presents Fontessa with a wardrobe trunk that contains her very own golden slave. The

broadly drawn humour in this piece ranges from the male clowns' mimicking of traditionally female corps de ballet movements, to Fontessa's pratfalls as she chases after the preening golden slave. The flirtation is consummated when the couple disappears inside the wardrobe trunk.

Fontessa and Friends includes a phantasmagoric sequence in which Fontessa, wearing a sequinned G-string, struts across the stage to the strains of a disco version of "If They Could See Me Now." During this sequence, the clowns accompany her post-coital outburst with singing-group backup movements. The dance draws toward its close as the young lovers flit across the stage to lead a series of humorously stereotypical ballet endings full of multiple turns, impossibly fast leaps, and unattainable lifts and balances that involve all of the cast members. In a short coda, Fontessa finds herself alone again, bejewelled but singular as she recalls the imaginary party to the plaintive strains of the tune "Fontessa," played by the Modern Jazz Quartet.[19]

What I find most striking about this dance is the flamboyant indulgence that Johnson employs to tell Fontessa's story. Huge juxtapositions of musical style force seemingly contrary idioms into a compressed expressive space, as the assembled score careens from modern jazz to disco music to symphonic selections. The ballet is permeated with a feeling of queer excess, not only in the mannered, mincing gestures of the male clowns, or the even more obvious use of disco music and Las Vegas showgirl kick-line routines, but in its abundance of technical demands. Johnson's choreography here is laced with difficult feats, all to be performed with a patent theatricality and sense of coolness. *Fontessa and Friends* is a rare achievement; a ballet that frames classical technique within vernacular comedy.

Forces of Rhythm and *Fontessa and Friends* each questions the "suitability" of classical ballet for African American dancers, placing ballet in direct dialogue with movement styles and strategies of humour traditionally practised by African Americans. Through their strategic uses of humour, these dances tease fundamental assumptions surrounding the black body in ballet. Ultimately, Johnson's choreography proposes a belief in the power of classical ballet technique to provide an effective metaphorical rendering of human conditions — so long as that technique is slyly framed within recognizable black vernacular humour.

Johnson came of age in the 1950s, when the mood of the New York dance world was remarkably optimistic, well before the variety of impulses we now call Africanist had been documented. His tenure at the School of American Ballet (SAB) was marked by his status as a pioneer. In a 1976 interview for *The New York Times,* dance critic Jennifer Dunning described Johnson as the first "black black" at the school, dancing at a time when "blacks were rarely hired."[20] In that interview, the choreographer expresses an affinity for classical ballet borne of his training at SAB: "'It's so funny,' Johnson sighed, 'When I was into classical ballet all those years, I couldn't get hired or fired. There were just no outlets for blacks. And now, all of a sudden, here I am doing *Dance of the Hours.*'"[21]

By the time of the 1976 interview, Johnson was staging *La Gioconda* as resident choreographer for the Metropolitan Opera. It is a striking irony that the *Dance of the Hours* had been performed at the Met in the early 1950s by light-complexioned African American ballerina Janet Collins — during the same period that Johnson was at SAB.

Johnson's training in acrobatics combined with his dance studies at the Dunham school and at SAB surely contributed to his vision of aggressive style juxtaposition in his ballet choreography. To be performed well, his dances require consummate mastery of several movement idioms. As if to draw on the experiences of his African American predecessors who were interested in ballet, but denied opportunities for sustained study and performance, Johnson makes work that investigates the space *between* movement idioms. His dances suggest classicism with a difference — a powerful, hybrid black classicism that draws on African diaspora aesthetic principles within ballet technique. For Johnson, vernacular humour serves as a salve to the longstanding predicament of African Americans as outsiders to ballet.

Portions of this essay appeared in the subject entry "Ballet," Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History *(MacMillan Press, 1995).*

notes

1 Eugene Nesmith, "Langston Hughes' *Simply Heavenly* and African American Humour," in Pamela Faith Jackson and Karimah (eds.), *Black Comedy: Nine Plays* (New York: Applause Books, 1997), 458.

2 Lynn Garafola discusses this issue in depth in *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). See also Lynn Garagola (ed.), *Diaghilev and His World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

3 Don McDonagh, "Negroes in Ballet," *New Republic*, 2 November 1968, 44.

4 The "Classic Black" panel, developed by Dawn Lille Horwitz and Jonnie Green at the New York Public Library, 12 February 1996, explored issues of African American dancers seeking training and performing opportunities in segregated ballet schools and companies of the 1940s and 1950s. Participants included Delores Browne, Louis Johnson, Betty Nichols, Walter Nicks, Cleo Quitman, Carmencita Romero, and Marion Spencer.

5 Joan Ross Acocella, "Van Grona and His First American Negro Ballet," *Dance Magazine*, March 1982, 22–4, 30–2.

6 Ibid., 24.

7 Zita Allen, "Blacks and Ballet," *Dance Magazine*, July 1976, 65–70.

8 For more information about the tour and repertory, see Dawn Lille Horwitz, "The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain," in Thomas DeFrantz (ed.), *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

9 For example, Helena Justa-De Arms performed toe dances in vaudeville in the 1910s, Mary Richards danced on toe in the 1923 Broadway production of *Struttin' Along*, and Josephine Baker performed on toe for at least one number in her appearances at the Paris Opera.

10 Collins began her career in vaudeville and was a member of the original Katherine Dunham troupe. John Martin, the influential dance critic for *The New York Times*, wrote a column praising Collins' debut in 1949. See John Martin, "The Dance: Newcomer," *The New York Times*, 27 February 1949, II, 9.

11 Several scholars have documented African American influences on Balanchine's neo-classical style, most notably Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Sally Banes. Balanchine was fond of telling his dancers to "dance jazz" in certain neo-classical works.

12 Robert Farris Thompson, "Dance and Culture: An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance," *African Forum* 2, 2; Fall 1966: 88. The concept of apart playing and dancing refers to the tendency in African forms to allow each artist a unique contribution to the whole. Strict unison is seldom desired; rather, dancers and musicians "unite music and dance, but play apart" (Ibid., 93).

13 Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 13–6.

14 Although the actual premiere dates for these ballets are not clear, they were all created between 1953 and 1957.

15 In 1970, Johnson received an Antoinette Perry (Tony) nomination for his choreography of the Broadway musical *Purlie!* Since then he has continued to alternate musical staging with

concert choreography, film, and opera choreography. He is also a noted teacher, and in 2000 continues to serve as the coordinator of the Dance Program at the Henry Street Settlement in New York City.

16 The score for *Forces of Rhythm* juxtaposes classical music by Tchaikovsky to pop music by Rufus Thomas ("Do the Breakdown"), Donny Hathaway ("He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother"), and others.

17 Two sections of *Forces of Rhythm* are included on the videotape *Dance Theatre of Harlem,* telecast on *Dance in America* by WNET Channel 13, New York, 23 March 1977.

18 Johnson describes Fontessa briefly before the screening of the ballet on the videotape *Dance Black America,* produced by the State University of New York and Pennebaker Associates, Telecast on Great Performances, PBS Channel 13, New York, 27 January 1985.

19 The score for *Fontessa and Friends* includes music by John Lewis and the Modern Jazz Quartet, James P. Johnson, Scott Joplin, Aram Khachaturian, Dorothy Fields, Cy Coleman, Giuseppe Verdi, and Linda Clifford. Louis Johnson designed the costumes for the ballet.

20 Jennifer Dunning, "Louis Johnson: 'I Love Dance — Any Kind of Dance,'" *The New York Times,* 28 September 1975, II, 6.

21 Ibid.

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