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# Blackface at the Ballet Highlights a Global Divide on Race

A photograph from the Bolshoi stirred a debate on social media that exposes differing attitudes in the United States and Europe.



By [Alex Marshall](#)

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Earlier this month, Misty Copeland posted a [photo](#) to her 1.8 million followers on Instagram. “This is the reality of the ballet world,” wrote Ms. Copeland, the first African-American female principal at American Ballet Theater.

The image was from a rehearsal at the Bolshoi in Moscow, one of the world’s leading ballet companies. It showed two women, smiling wide, in full dress for “La Bayadère,” a 19th-century ballet set in India.

The dancers were in [blackface](#).

Ms. Copeland’s post, and her later comments on Twitter (“Until we can call people out and make people uncomfortable, change can’t happen,” she [wrote](#)), have led to weeks of

debate among ballet fans, highlighting a growing geographic divide on questions of race and representation.

In the United States the use of dark makeup evokes the painful legacy of racism and minstrel shows, in which performers darkened their skin with burnt cork to play characters that perpetuated racist stereotypes about African-Americans. But while the practice is increasingly rare in North America — notwithstanding several recent instances in which politicians in the [United States](#) and [Canada](#) apologized for wearing blackface or dark makeup long after it was widely seen as offensive — it persists in parts of Europe and Russia.

“I’ve smeared my face and body with a stain a thousand times,” wrote Anna Okuneva, a dancer at the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko company in Moscow, [on Instagram](#). “This is my creative work, and this is not racism.”

Some African-American dancers disagree. Calvin Royal III, a soloist at the American Ballet Theater, said in a telephone interview that his immediate reaction on seeing the image was to cringe and ask, “How is it we’re heading into 2020 and this is a reality in some places?”

Dana Nichols, a dancer with the Philadanco company in Philadelphia, said that, as a child, she had been made to wear dark makeup by another leading Russian ballet company, the Mariinsky, despite being black. “It’s easy to be trapped into doing things like this in the name of an art form you love,” she said of the Bolshoi photo. “But you also have to be a citizen of the world and know this is stereotyping and degrading.”

In June, Anna Netrebko, the Russian opera singer, caused a stir by posting a [picture](#) on Instagram with her skin darkened for a performance of Verdi’s “Aida,” in which she was singing the title role, an Ethiopian princess. “Beautiful singing! But is the blackface really necessary?” [one commenter wrote](#).

Maxim Matusевич, a professor at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, who studies cultural exchange between Russia and Africa, said in a telephone interview that blackface was not widespread in Russia, but neither was it taboo. “There is no symbolic baggage with it,” he said, and that allows Russians to consider the makeup as simply part of a theatrical tradition. There are also few people of color there to complain of its use, he added.

In Soviet times, racism was seen as an American problem, said Nikolay Zakharov, the author of a book on racism in Russia, in a telephone interview: “They said that it’s America who has the racism, segregation and lynching. We don’t have this, so we’re anti-racist.”

Over the last five years, there has been a conservative turn in Russia’s arts world that means people defend politically incorrect actions like blackface more firmly, Mr. Zakharov added. And there remains a dislike of being told what to do by the West, he said. “People say it’s just scapegoating of Russia, and it’s absurd.”



Misty Copeland's Instagram post triggered a discussion of tradition in dance. Credit...Jordan Strauss/Invision, via Associated Press

These points echoed some comments on Ms. Copeland's Instagram post, and in Russian news media. "Russian ballet should not be guided by what an artist wrote on the other side of the world," said Nikolai Tsiskaridze, who danced at the Bolshoi for over 20 years, in an interview with [Izvestia](#), a Russian newspaper. "This is our culture," he added.

Bolshoi "will not comment on the absurd allegation" of racism. A spokeswoman for the company declined an interview request.

Benjamin Millepied, the artistic director of the Los Angeles Dance Project, said in a telephone interview that, when he was the director of dance at the Paris Opera Ballet, he heard similar arguments that blackface in ballet was a tradition and shouldn't be considered offensive.

In 2015, he faced strong opposition when he announced he would change a scene in the company's production of "La Bayadère," that included children in blackface, so they did not wear makeup. He also wanted to change the playbill so the children were listed as "enfants" rather than "négrillons," or "little negroes."

"You don't understand, this is tradition," Mr. Millepied recalled being told by the head of the ballet's union. Mr. Millepied, who danced for years at New York City Ballet, had

the “bewildering” experience of having to call a meeting of the entire company to explain why the blackface was wrong, he said.

“I told them to think of a black family walking into the opera, and seeing themselves shown onstage in this grotesque fashion,” Mr. Millepied said.

His arguments won out and the changes were made, but Mr. Millepied [resigned](#) from the Paris Opera Ballet in 2016, citing the struggle over “La Bayadère” as one reason for leaving. The Opera, where staff are currently on strike, did not respond to an interview request.



Benjamin Millepied said that when he was director of dance for Paris Opera Ballet he fought the use of blackface. Credit...Alec Lesser for The New York Times

Awareness of racist stereotypes in ballet productions has been [growing](#) among companies in the United States, too. In 2017, the New York City Ballet altered the choreography, costumes and makeup in “The Nutcracker” to remove racial stereotypes about Chinese people. The male dancer in one segment traditionally wore a Fu Manchu-style mustache.

Despite these efforts, the ballet world has been insular, Mr. Millepied said, and “not open to looking at some of these issues staring them in the eye.”

He referred to [an article](#) in The Guardian in November, in which Jean-Christophe Maillot, the director of Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo, discussed the idea that an ensemble of dancers, or corps de ballet, should look identical onstage. “If you ask me if a traditional ‘Swan Lake’ at the Mariinsky can have a black girl in the corps de ballet, I can tell you, honestly, that I don’t have the answer,” Mr. Maillot said. “But I feel like telling you no.”

Such comments were upsetting, Mr. Millepied said, and showed a lack of empathy and understanding about what dance should be, which is a celebration of human diversity and movement.

In the debate about the Bolshoi’s production of “La Bayadère,” not all dancers of color have criticized the Russian company. Rasta Thomas, a former member of the Dance Theater of Harlem who described himself as multiracial, said in a telephone interview that we should judge historical and contemporary productions by different criteria.

“It is up to the new artists to make the changes they so desire, not to complain about past traditions, and art being preserved in their original forms,” he said.

The complaints about the Bolshoi were “a bit ridiculous,” he wrote later in a text message. “No one would be talking about the art form had the Russians not given us these great ballets,” he said, adding that anyone “who is not European, performing classic ballets, is guilty of cultural appropriation.”

And not all Russians have taken the Bolshoi’s side. Alexei Ratmansky, a former director of the company, now an artist in residence at American Ballet Theater, wrote [on Facebook](#) that it was time to drop blackface.

“What is the artistic value in black makeup, under which you can’t even recognize an artist?” he wrote. “Why provoke?”

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