

Carolyn Copeland, *Prism*, September 17, 2020:



Ballet companies confront increasingly urgent calls for racial justice

Amid nationwide uprisings, the arts have been forced to reckon with their own institutionalized racism.



Since the performance season came to an abrupt halt in March due to the pandemic, dance companies of all sizes have attempted to endure irrecoverable revenue loss, socially distanced rehearsals,

and in some cases, massive layoffs. At the same time, with protesters flooding the streets in the name of racial justice, people in the arts have been forced to reckon with longstanding cultural problems and their involvement in institutionalized racism. Ballet companies in particular have been criticized and called out on social media for their underwhelming—and in some cases, nonexistent—responses.

Though efforts to create more diversity in ballet are not new, recent world events have brought a new wave of calls for inclusion. Now, as COVID-19 cases rise across the country and the next performance dates to take place in front of an audience remain unclear, ballet companies and organizations are being called on to reassess their values, adequately address the inequities that exist within their walls, and implement lasting change.

Public condemnation

In June, *The Harvard Crimson* [published an open letter](#) to the broader ballet community, calling out the industry for its participation in upholding the status quo and remaining deafeningly silent during the peak of the racial justice uprisings.

“Time and time again, the ballet world has consistently failed to turn the magnifying glass upon itself and address the many deeply ingrained instances of racism within it, much less take concrete action to combat these issues,” wrote Sara Kamatsu, an Asian American staff writer for the *The Harvard Crimson* and a ballet dancer. “This is a predominantly white, wealthy, elitist, and exclusive world, one that this industry has historically sought to

maintain—leaving the ballet world very little removed from the French and Italian royal courts in which it originated.”

Kamatsu goes on to claim that ballet companies tend to march dancers of color in front of cameras for optics, but rarely cast them in principal roles for classical ballets. Dancers on social media have echoed Kamatsu’s claims, including a former dancer for Ballet Memphis who posted a [video on Instagram](#) accusing the company of having an all-white staff while priding itself on being diverse and remaining silent about social injustice. Shortly after that post on the same day, Ballet Memphis put up a [social media post](#), vowing to give a voice to the voiceless and declaring their support for Black dancers and staff.

“The time is now to demand more of ourselves as an organization and a community,” the statement read.

Theresa Ruth Howard, the founder and curator of [MoBBallet](#), an organization that aims to diversify the field and illuminate the history of Black ballet artists, has been an outspoken critic of discriminatory dance culture. In June, she [wrote a scathing op-ed](#) for *Dance Magazine* laying out the ways dance companies and organizations are failing Black dancers, calling on them to publicly acknowledge the issue of systemic racism.

“It’s not just one thing that needs to change,” Howard said in an interview with Prism. “People like to pick out one thing and be like, ‘Yeah, that’s the thing we need to shift and change.’ Well, no. That is *one* thing that you have to change, but there’s a whole lot of other things. That means a real cultural shift that will allow for sustainable change and diversity [and] integration. So yes, it’s a pipeline issue. Yes, representation is an issue. Yes, hiring and

casting is an issue. Yes, the board of directors—that’s an issue. There are all these parts that go into how we shift the field.”

While Howard believes there needs to be a serious cultural shift to diversify ballet, she also understands that companies have been scrambling to deal with a “perfect storm” amid the pandemic, staff layoffs, and readjusting to their new normal—all while facing increasing calls for more inclusion. A number of those companies have been doing work to create a more inclusive space in ballet, but Howard says they could be doing more to be transparent about their efforts and inform their dancers about the work they’re doing to diversify.

“Those were the two things most of the companies weren’t doing when the world went up in flames,” Howard said. “The dancers were like, ‘You haven’t been doing anything,’ and it’s like, no no no. They have been. You just don’t *know*.”

American Ballet Theatre (ABT) is just one company that has made attempts to address institutionalized racism and create more diversity. In 2013, they introduced an initiative called [Project Plié](#) aiming to diversify ballet schools and dance companies around the country. ABT [issued a statement](#) of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement on their website in June, saying “we must devote ourselves to doing better.”

“[W]e have much more work to do to address systemic racism—individually, interpersonally, and institutionally—and we are actively engaged in this process,” said ABT Executive Director Kara Medoff Barnett in a statement to Prism. “We believe that authentic representation and inclusion—on stage and off—are the keys to sustaining excellence as America’s National Ballet Company.”

Other notable ballet companies issued statements to express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, but stopped short of saying what specific plan of action they intended to take—or were already taking—to address the issue within their own companies.

“The Look”

Since demonstrations began taking place, there has been a surge in the number of dancers speaking out about their firsthand experiences with prejudice, especially as it relates to appearance or build. Standards and expectations for a “ballet body” can cast out dancers, regardless of race or skill level. Some critics, however, believe these standards can also disproportionately marginalize dancers of color. In an [August web panel](#) hosted by Ballet West, panelists discussed the idea of “the look” in ballet and the “racialized element” associated with having requirements for hair, tights, pointe shoes, and body type.

“There are times where, yes, ‘the look’ can make an African American feel some sort of way about themselves and what they were born with,” said Joshua Whitehead, a dancer with Ballet West, during the panel. Panelists went on to explain some of the differences between Black, brown, and white body types.

“I do feel like in these classical ballet schools there need to be more teachers that have a lens [and] can work with all different body types to create that unique, classical ballerina look,” said Katlyn Addison, a dancer at Ballet West, during the panel.

But not everyone believes having the “wrong” body is a major disqualifier for Black and brown dancers. Howard disagrees with

the argument that Black bodies aren't deemed "right." The key is bringing more Black and brown dancers into the audition process.

"It's a numbers game," she said. "[If] you see 100 white girls, maybe 25 of them will have the ideal body for ballet. But if you're only seeing 25 Black girls, there's a good chance that nobody in that 25 is going to have the right body for ballet."

Hair discrimination can also be an issue. During the August panel, Addison put the responsibility on directors to create more inclusion around hairstyles and allow exceptions to the traditional "slicked-back bun" by permitting dancers to have short hair, braids, or tight curls.

"As long as your hair is out of your face and it looks elegant, then you can achieve that look ... of a classical ballerina," she said.

Christina Johnson, a faculty member at Marin Ballet and a former dancer with Dance Theatre of Harlem and Boston Ballet, shared her personal experiences with wigs and hair during the panel.

"At the Royal Ballet, they have wigs for everything—they have a whole wig department," she said. "We went to get our wigs fitted and they were blonde. They made us new wigs, but we also had to speak [out]. We had to say something."

Johnson also discussed her past dilemmas about whether to wear brown tights that matched her skin tone, or stick to the traditional pink tights—a common conundrum for some dancers of color.

Colorism

Trailblazers like [Janet Collins](#), [Virginia Johnson](#), and [Alvin Ailey](#) made names for themselves in the ballet world despite the roadblocks that can prevent Black and brown dancers from receiving quality training or professional careers. In many ways, however, the field has been resistant to evolving from its original white, 17th century European roots. Even now, some Black and brown dancers say colorism can be a factor that prevents them from obtaining sought-after roles.

“I have experienced racism in the dance world and it’s in the audition process,” said Eduardo Vilaro, artistic director and CEO of Ballet Hispánico, a contemporary dance company with ballet roots in New York. “I would never be [cast as] a prince, but I could always be a thief.”

Colorism during the audition process only scratches the surface of the racism in ballet and dance in general, Vilaro said. Racism can also be ingrained in harassment, since people often view dark-skinned dancers as “exotic.”

“Being a young male dancer dealing with an audience or donors who see you as an object [can lead to] instances of inappropriate behavior,” he said.

Similar to other art forms, there is an ongoing discussion in ballet about whether certain traditions are racist, and whether directors should be more open to the possibility of a different, more inclusive aesthetic. One tradition still being practiced in some ballet companies around the world is Blackface. In 2019, Misty Copeland, the first Black woman to be promoted to the highest rank in ABT’s 75-year history, posted a photo of two dancers in Blackface from the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, Russia.

“I’m tired of giving the oppressors the benefit of the doubt,” Copeland [wrote on Instagram](#). “They need to be exposed, called out, educated and more. I have lived in the ballet world for 25 years. I have silenced myself around ‘them,’ and made them feel comfortable and suffered in silence.”

The Russian dance company responded to Copeland’s criticism, calling the use of Blackface “completely normal” and that they planned to continue it. Other Russian theater experts also [defended the use of Blackface](#), citing the lack of diversity in the country.

Copeland later went on [Twitter](#) to say, “I get that this is a VERY sensitive subject in the ballet world but until we can call people out and make people uncomfortable, change can’t happen ... It is painful to think about the fact that many prominent ballet companies refuse to hire dancers of color and instead opt to use blackface.”

Copeland [has also shared her experience with racism and colorism](#), saying she was once told to [lighten her skin](#) for a role.

“The ballet world doesn’t really have or celebrate women of color,” she [said in 2018](#). “There’s not a day that goes by that I feel like this is normal—or that this should’ve happened for me.”

Copeland’s ascendancy doesn’t mean the ballet world has reached an acceptable level of diversity. Young dancers of color hoping to one day dance professionally—even those outside of highly competitive ballet schools—have received similar pushback.

Microaggressions

Briana Bell, an 18-year-old ballet dancer and dance major at Alabama State University, grew up as a young dancer in a predominantly white town in Texas. She said she was one of the only—and sometimes *the* only—Black dancers in her classes. Though she said she never experienced any overt racism, she regularly dealt with microaggressions.

“They would always try to make us ‘tame’ our hair,” she said. “They were really just being passive aggressive and wanted us to straighten our hair because our natural hair wasn’t acceptable. I would definitely say that I felt underappreciated and overlooked. [One of my ballet teachers] would always talk to the other girls and correct them and make sure they were doing it right, but she never gave me any corrections.”

Bell also dealt with the high cost of being a ballerina, which can be wildly expensive after adding together the cost of shoes, clothing, and auditions. Pointe shoes alone can cost [around \\$75](#), not including the additional costs to add ribbon and elastic. Depending on how often they’re used, they can wear out in a matter of months. [It wasn’t until relatively recently](#) that brands began making pointe shoes for Black and brown dancers that match their skin tone. Before, many dancers would paint over their shoes with makeup.

For top-tiered dancers who attend elite ballet schools, the cost is even higher. A 2015 [study by FiveThirtyEight](#) found that raising a top-tiered ballerina can cost up to \$100,000 by the time they turn 18-years-old—a big barrier for families that aren’t wealthy, regardless of race. Even for dancers like Bell who don’t attend ballet schools, the rising costs can be overwhelming.

“You have to pay to be seen,” she said. “There’s been a few times where me and my family just couldn’t get [the money] together for me to audition or even go to an event where I could potentially be seen or be scouted.”

As a student at a historically Black college, Bell no longer has to deal with Eurocentric pressures and expectations in class. Unlike her previous ballet classes taught by white teachers, she’s also learning more about the Black pioneers of dance.

“It’s already tough to be a dancer in the first place because you’re always competing with someone to get a spot somewhere, but it’s even harder when you’re Black,” Bell said. “They teach us how to get our foot in the door.”

Where to start

Making deep, cultural changes doesn’t happen overnight, but some people in ballet have taken the recent demonstrations around the country to heart and are finding ways to fold the messaging into their work. Choreographer Helen Pickett says she has been working toward equity for more than two decades, but [in her recent projects](#), she aimed to highlight more women and people of color. Though she said the heightened racial tensions haven’t changed the way she choreographs, it has forced her to uphold her beliefs in creating more racial equity and respect.

“It is of tantamount importance to get ALL the faces of America onto the stage. To get everyone represented,” Pickett said in an emailed statement to Prism. “This is what NEEDS to happen. For young ones to dream, they need to see the example presented. It is what needs to happen for art. Equal seats at the table. Equity and

working together makes everything work better. Inclusion makes ART BETTER. It is time NOW for these changes and we have a chance.”

Vilaro, who has been in diversity talks with other ballet companies in New York, said the first step to creating more inclusion is to awaken ballet companies to their involvement in institutionalized racism.

“An awakening and a realization that ‘we’re not as diverse as we thought’ is a start,” Vilaro said. “For years, ballet companies have had some kind of nod to diversity by having somebody [of color] on stage and that was checking off a box. There should be no more checking off boxes. Now is the moment for [ballet companies] to ask themselves how they’re changing the narrative.”

In order to implement lasting change, Howard believes dance companies must individually decide what diversity means to them, based on their own goals and demographics. That decision, she said, should be made by the board of the company or whoever is responsible for its brand or image.

“You can be in a very white area, but you have to decide: Do you want to represent your city or state, or do you want to represent America at large?” she said. “I don’t think that I’m necessarily the person to judge those things. I think those are questions that companies need to be asking and they have to be able to stand by whatever their answer is.”

Carolyn Copeland is the News Editor at Prism. Her written work can be found in the Washington Post, HuffPost, San Francisco Chronicle, San

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