

When Pink Ballet Slippers Won't Do

As a woman of color who has for years mixed foundation to match my skin tone as an act of self-love, I view tinting ballet shoes as an act of love for my daughter.



Credit...Giselle Potter

By Jenine Holmes

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As an African-American mother of a brown-skinned 7-year-old girl, I seek empowering examples for my daughter.

After seven years of infertility and one horrendous miscarriage, I adopted my daughter, Julia, from Ethiopia at 8 months old and made motherhood my mission. She plays with

dolls that look like her, reads books that feature brown children and had the “Sesame Street” video of a muppet proclaiming that she loves her kinky-curly hair in steady rotation. Yet our most powerful experience of racial identity came through a pair of ballet tights.

Julia longed to attend classes at the Dance Theater of Harlem with her older pal, Jade. Her audition this winter, held behind closed doors, ran an hour. Two weeks later, the results arrived. Julia, thanks to her preschool ballet lessons, had made the cut.

We headed to the school store to purchase her gear. A saleswoman pulled a pair of tan tights from a basket and held them against Julia’s forearm.

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“Umm, too bright.”

She returned to the basket. My curiosity followed. Inside, I spied an assortment of legwear — from nutmeg to milk chocolate to espresso — in neat packaging. She tried a cognac-colored pair.

“Now that’s a match.”

“*Match?*”

“To her skin tone.”

My eyes widened. I’d given ballet, and its uniform, little thought since I studied the form as an 8-year-old in a Detroit studio, decades ago. I wore an inky black leotard paired with snowy white tights. The pairing made a bold graphic statement, much like a Franz Kline painting, or a penguin, or a grand piano. Back then no one considered my skin tone. Ballet tights were typically white, just as the ballet dancers typically were. Now, 40 years later, my daughter’s ballet school protocol peeled back my brain.

Next the saleswoman held up a pair of cotton-candy colored slippers and explained that I would need to dye them to match the tights, so the line of Julia’s leg “would be continuous to the eye. That’s the look we want to create.”

I nodded, studying my assignment.

Arthur Mitchell, a professional African-American dancer with the New York City Ballet, founded the Dance Theater of Harlem, along with Karel Shook, in 1969. Mr. Mitchell wanted to create opportunities in the Harlem community where he grew up. With funding from Alva Gimbel, wife of the board chairman of Gimbel Brothers, the Ford Foundation, and his own savings, Mr. Mitchell opened his school. Next he set out to open minds.

“Initially, Dance Theater of Harlem dancers wore pink tights and toe shoes,” Anna Glass, the executive director of the school, is quoted as saying in a 40-year retrospective.

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“But Arthur Mitchell changed course as he believed pink tights visually interrupted his dancer’s lines. The wardrobe staff worked with each dancer to combine the correct amount of Rit dyes to match their individual skin tone, then applied pressed powder to their ribbons and shoes to seamlessly blend the color. Now, matching tights and toe shoes to skin tone became a trademark of Dance Theater of Harlem.”

And with that, Mr. Mitchell broke a 300-year-old tradition.

In 1971, the neoclassical company debuted at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, wearing custom, skin-toned shoes and tights, which, nearly 50 years later, remains the company’s signature.

To have a beloved art form reflected back in body shapes and hues that mirror yours is powerful. That was part of the magic behind the success of the blockbuster “Black Panther” when it opened in February. For African-Americans to see actors of color reflected as the protagonist, antagonist, scientist, even the queen, created a revelry of humanity that resulted in over \$1 billion in ticket sales.

But that familiarity wasn’t waiting in the wings when [Debra Austin first slipped on her slippers](#). She would become the first black principal dancer with a major American company, the Pennsylvania Ballet, in 1982, decades before Misty Copeland.

How is such a drive born without a basket of brown-hued tights? Perhaps, Freud found the key. “Beauty has no obvious use; nor is there any clear cultural necessity for it. Yet civilization could not do without it.”

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Ms. Austin couldn’t, either.

I wish we lived in a world where brown-hued ballet tights didn’t matter so much. Perhaps, one day we’ll achieve it. But for now, it matters, deeply. It matters in Kenya, at the Kibera Ballet School where teachers bring that beauty and resilience to students who live in the slums, helping create the next generation of dancers for the national company. It mattered to [Michaela DePrince](#), a soloist in the Dutch National Ballet who discovered her connection to dance at a young age. She wrote in her memoir, “Hope in a Ballet Shoe,” about being a child in an orphanage in Sierra Leone when she spotted a magazine with the image of a ballerina on the cover blowing against the gate.

She dreamed of becoming a ballerina and carried that dream to stardom. Not every brown girl who loves classical dance will be a star, of course, but many can find

inspiration through their tights, their bodies, their being. I want that opportunity for my daughter, that unique confidence code.

[Some professional dancers have taken to social media](#) to protest the lack of toe shoes mass-produced beyond the range of pink and black. But as a woman of color who has for years mixed foundation to match my skin tone as an act of self-love, I view tinting ballet shoes as an act of love for my daughter.

On the first day of classes, I helped Julia get dressed and line up with the other students. The girls admired their forms. There's an inherent sweetness to tiny ballerinas. As I studied the tableau of dark chocolate, cinnamon and café au lait legs, the sense of racial pride, self-identity and belonging set me glowing.

But not everyone seemed to fall under the same spell: Beside me, a mom with long, thin braids perused her Facebook feed on her iPhone.

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"Time to go!" the teacher announced.

Moms and dads stood. We checked the girls' upswept buns once more. We planted kisses on their smooth foreheads. We watched our daughters troop down the hall, toward the studio, in a conga line of cuteness. My eyes glossed over.

"Really beautiful, right?" I heard from behind.

I turned. The Facebook addict.

"Sure is."

She sighed. "Those brown tights get me every single time. I had to look at Facebook, so I wouldn't start crying."

Jenine Holmes is an essayist who writes about single parenthood on her blog, [The Single Baby Mama](#).

***A correction was made on
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: An earlier version of this article misidentified the ballet company with which Arthur Mitchell danced. It was the New York City Ballet, not American Ballet Theater.

***A correction was made on
July 18, 2018***

: An earlier version of this article incorrectly described the origins of a 40-year retrospective on the Dance Theater of Harlem. It was curated by the dance company, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and the California African American Museum, not International Arts and Artists.