

Dance Theatre of Harlem

Flynn Student Matinee Study Guide



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About the Company

Dance Theatre of Harlem is a leading dance institution of unparalleled global acclaim. They have a professional touring company, a studio school, and a national and international education and community outreach program. The New York Times has called the company “one of ballet’s most exciting undertakings.”

Founded in 1969, Dance Theatre of Harlem tours their original performances nationally and internationally, presenting a powerful vision for ballet in the 21st century. The 18-member, multi-ethnic company performs a forward-thinking repertoire that includes ballet classics, neoclassical works by George Balanchine* and resident choreographer Robert Garland, as well as innovative contemporary works that use the language of ballet to celebrate company founder Arthur Mitchell’s belief that ballet belongs to everyone.



Dancers in the company

Now in its sixth decade, Dance Theatre of Harlem has grown into a multi-cultural dance institution with an extraordinary legacy of providing opportunities for creative expression and artistic excellence that continues to set standards in the performing arts. Dance Theatre of Harlem has achieved unprecedented success, bringing innovative and bold new forms of artistic expression to audiences in New York City, across the country, and around the world.

**What does “neoclassical” mean? And who is George Balanchine? You’ll learn about both in the “Brief History of Ballet” section!*

The Mission: More than Entertainment

“We were Asian, Mexican, Black... I think the first white dancer didn’t come until 1970. But it was not about making a ‘Black ballet company... It was to make people aware of the fact that this beautiful art form actually belongs to and can be done by anyone. Arthur Mitchell created this space for a lot of people who had been told, ‘You can’t do this,’ to give them a chance to do what they dreamed of doing.”

–Virginia Johnson, Artistic Director & Founding Member

Each component of Dance Theatre of Harlem carries a solid commitment towards enriching the lives of young people and adults around the world through the arts. The company was founded by Arthur Mitchell, a dancer and choreographer who, in 1955 became the first Black soloist in the New York City Ballet, and Karel Shook, a choreographer, writer, and ballet master (that means someone who teaches ballet and helps the dancers rehearse). Shortly after the 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Arthur Mitchell was inspired to start a school that would offer children — especially those in Harlem, the community in which he was born — the opportunity to learn about dance and the allied arts. Harlem is a predominately Black neighborhood in New York City that has historically been economically disadvantaged, compared with many other wealthier neighborhoods in NYC.



Arthur Mitchell, the first Black soloist in the New York City Ballet

Through performances, community engagement and arts education, the Company carries forward Dance Theatre of Harlem's message of empowerment through the arts for all, as you can see in this brief video made by the company about their [Dancing Through Barriers program](#).

This mission is not only present in their educational programming but in the performances they create. One example is their 1984 ballet piece, *Creole Giselle*. This piece took a famous French ballet from the mid-1800s, *Giselle*, and changed the setting from medieval Europe to an Afro-Creole community in 1840s Louisiana. The ballet featured an all-Black cast and was the first full-length ballet created by the company. It premiered at the Coliseum Theater in London and



Image from the company's award-winning 1984 production of Creole Giselle

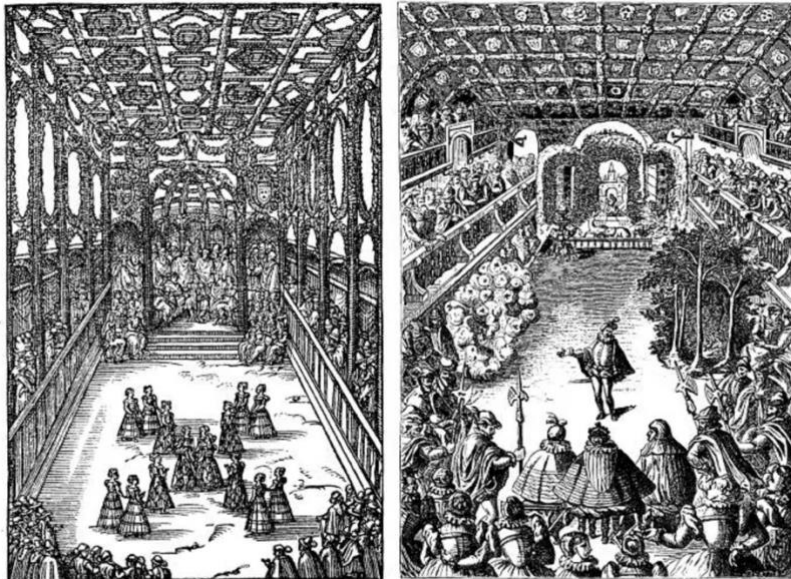
was widely regarded as a groundbreaking achievement, winning the 1984 Sir Laurence Olivier Award (the British equivalent of a Tony Award).

A more contemporary example is the company's dance piece, [Sounds of Hazel](#). This piece is new, and might be one of the pieces they perform on the Flynn stage! *Sounds of Hazel* uses dance and music to tell the story of Hazel Scott, a jazz and classical pianist and singer. In 1950 she became the first Black American to host her own TV show, "The Hazel Scott Show," in which she would perform showtunes and other musical numbers live on TV. She was an outspoken activist fighting against segregation and racial discrimination, and performed in five Hollywood films, using the platform of her fame to demand better representation of Black Americans in film.

When speaking about [making Sounds of Hazel](#), current Dance Theatre of Harlem artistic director Virginia Johnson says, "this is what Dance Theatre of Harlem is about: bringing to the stage stories that haven't been told, told by people who haven't been able to tell them before."

A Brief History of Ballet

"The arts ignite the mind, they give you the possibility to dream and to hope."
– Arthur Mitchell, Dance Theatre of Harlem Founder



Engravings depicting two of the earliest ballets, staged in Paris in the late 1500's

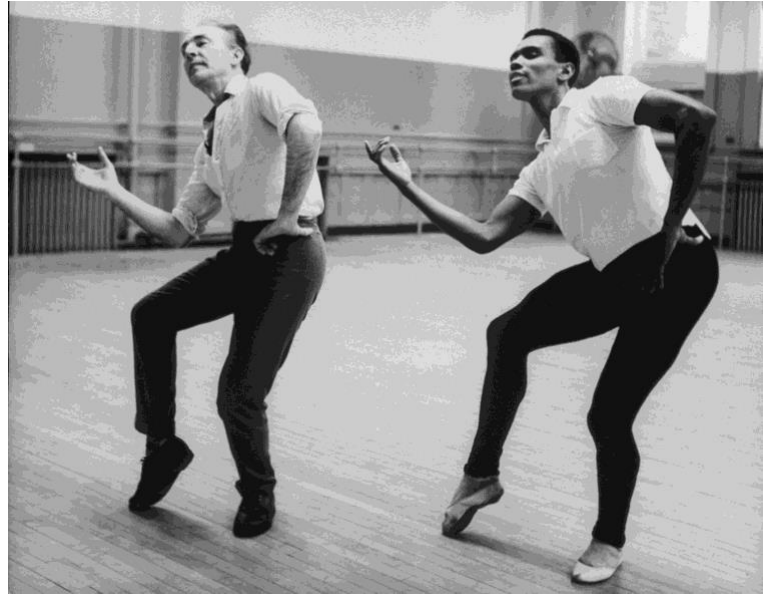
Ballet began in the 15th and 16th centuries in Italy, as a formalized dance originally created to entertain aristocrats and royals. The form did not originally include tutus or ballet slippers, and adapted choreography from different court dances.

The form spread to France and continued to grow as an art form, incorporating poetry, dance, music, and scenic design to convey storylines through the dance. The Paris Opera Ballet was the first professional theatrical ballet company, founded by the

French king Louis XIV in 1673 (this is also why there is so much French in the vocabulary of ballet, even today!). Louis XIV used ballet to establish political power, formalizing the dance into a strict discipline with particular positions that enforced his rules of social etiquette.

Ballet quickly spread around the world, as other royal courts brought the form to their own countries. Beginning in the late 1800s, ballet flourished in Russia, where some of the most famous ballets such as *The Nutcracker* and *Swan Lake* were created. In the early 1900s, the company Ballets Russes was formed, made of Russian dancers who were in exile in Paris after

the Russian Revolution. When we think of ballet today, we usually think of it as very formal and polite, but one of the ballets that came out of the Ballets Russes, *The Rite of Spring*, was so shocking to audiences that they actually rioted! It used modern music, instead of floating gracefully the principal dancer stomped across the stage, and it involved a theme of human sacrifice!



George Balanchine (left) and Arthur Mitchell (right) in rehearsal, 1946

Ballet soon moved to the United States, where one of the most influential 20th-century choreographers, **George Balanchine**, opened the New York City Ballet. He created the “**neoclassical style**” of ballet, which stripped away much of the detailed narratives and theatrical settings that ballet had become known for, creating ballets that had less of a focus on plot, removed complex set pieces, and were driven more by music, making the dancers’ movements the main focus.

Reflection Questions

Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:

Before the Show:

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about ballet, what comes to mind?
- What do you think dance is capable of doing? Can it tell a story? Can it make you feel? Can it be a tool for activism or social change? How do you think it can or can’t do those things?

After the Show:

- How did the show meet or break your expectations of ballet?
- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- Now that you’ve seen the show, what do you think dance is capable of doing? Have your answers changed since before you saw the show?
- In theatre, symbolism is the use of one or more objects to represent something else. The object may represent an idea, a feeling, or a physical entity. Symbols allow theater makers to convey messages to audiences that would be difficult to communicate through dialogue or action alone. Did you see any symbolism in the show?

- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?

Resources:

- Full Performance of DTH's award-winning 1984 ballet "Creole Giselle" (90 minutes)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LreKPkVoUnk>
- "Creole Giselle" context: Antebellum Louisiana:
<https://lib.lsu.edu/sites/all/files/sc/fpoc/history.html>
- Dancing Through Barriers program
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HsUSnYBh2C4&t=93s>
- The Making of "Sounds of Hazel"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0H9Oaq56Ouo>
- Full dance piece, "Sounds of Hazel" (20 minutes)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Owj2V2Msji8&t=1s>