Being Black at the Barre : Dancers of Color Fight for Equal Representation

by

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Misty Copeland made history by becoming the first African-American female principal dancer with the American Ballet Theater. This achievement is all the more monumental because there is a clear lack of diversity in dance.

Kai Richardson performing at Fiorello H.Laguardia High School of Music and Art
Photo credits: Laguardia High School

Misty Copeland has been the only black ballerina most people can name, but she is certainly not the first. In April of last year,Misty Copeland served as a guest editor for The New York Times special dance photography section. In the article she points out a particular black and white photograph of young black ballerinas. Copeland describes them in the article as looking uncomfortable: “In ballet, we’ve never been told there was a place for us to fit in. You can see that within this image.”

Many dancers of color feel as if they don’t fit in with ballet’s Eurocentric ideals. Faith Mondesire, a senior in the Purchase College Dance Conservatory, says being the only black dancer in a class or audition is not a foreign occurrence.“When I walk into the room ,I realize that I am the only person of color, but this feeling has strayed further away from being a surprise. It’s become almost normal.”

Mondesire is not the only dancer of color to feel this way. Kai Richardson, also a Purchase senior dancer with a concentration in ballet, has had a similar experience. Richardson said sometimes she “would be lucky to see one” black dancer with her at an audition.

The Purchase College motto is “Think Wide Open,”but Mondesire experienced a not -so inclusive environment with an instructor last semester. This teacher made a comment about her choice of skin-tone colored tights instead of the typical pink tights.

“I prefer to wear these tights because it represents me as an individual and shows that my differences that make me beautiful and unique,” Mondesire said. “I do not think anyone should be made to feel like they can’t wear their tights because it doesn't fit a certain aesthetic, which is that of European, pearl-white skin.”

Mondesire is not alone in her feelings about wearing brown tights. Precious Adams, a principal dancer at English National Ballet, spoke about the debate of pink vs.brown tights in a 2019 New York Times article.

“In ballet, people have very strong ideas about tradition. They think me wearing brown tights in a tutu is somehow ‘incorrect,’” she said. “But I want to look my best onstage. I’m not colorblind, and I think it ruins the line of my body.”

‘I Didn’t Feel Welcome’

Richardson recalled being one of only three black girls out of 150 campers at a performing arts camp in Lenox, Mass.

“They made me feel alienated, they wanted to make sure I didn’t feel welcome,” she said. “They were pretentious, rich, and thought they were better than me, just because I didn’t look like them.”

Her bunk mates went so far as to threaten to her if she didn’t do as they say.

“Your hair looks like pubes,” was just one of the nasty comments she would hear on a daily basis.

There are a number of reasons behind the lack of diversity in dance.

James O’Loughlin a senior dancer of color at Purchase College, trains at Dance Theater of Harlem. According to the company website, their mission is to present a ballet company of

African-American and other racially diverse artists who perform the most demanding repertory at the highest level of quality

O'Loughlin received a scholarship to train with them over a decade ago. Had he not received the financial assistance, he would have been unable to afford his training. This is a reality for many young dancers of color: Dance is simply too expensive for many of their families.

Dance Theatre of Harlem is one of the most recognizable black ballet companies. In 2019 they celebrated their 50th anniversary. A gap in the dance world was filled by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook, in the midst of the civil rights movement in 1969, when they decided to form this legendary company. According to their website, “In moments of extreme injustice and frustration the most impactful art is born.”

O’Loughlin points out that there aren't many people of color in his classes at SUNY Purchase: about eight or nine out of 41.

“Children of color are not exposed to these art forms,” he said, “and it’s saddened me that this hasn't changed.” Had it not been for Dance Theater of Harlem he would not have been nearly as exposed to dance. It is still a great expense for him. “Tuition doesn't cover my costumes and shoes,” he said. “It comes out of my own pocket.”

“Art isn’t affordable,” says Richardson, who struggled to pay for several dance camps and programs like The American Ballet Theater program she attended in the summer of 2015. “It isn't made available to people of all socioeconomic backgrounds.”

Even once exposed to dance and after coming up with the money to pay for it, dancers of color describe a constant battle to be seen as equal.

“As a person of color in the world of dance I already know that I will have to work 10 times harder to get to where I want to be,” said Mondesire.

Richardson describes overcompensating for her skin color by controlling her weight.

“God gave me one struggle, and that was being a person of color,” she said. “That is a struggle enough. I can’t have weight on top of that or I would never be cast in anything.”

Despite all the struggles, O’Loughlin urges all people of color to dance if it is their passion.

“You should never feel that you don’t belong,” he said. “Dance is for everyone. It’s deeper than your skin tone. You are baring your soul.”

In a 2019 The New York Times article headlined “Brown Point Shoes Arrive 200 Years after White Ones,” dancers of color discussed the issue of “pancaking.” This is the practice of painting makeup or paint on point shoes to match the skin tone of the dancer. One dancer, Cira Robinson, who started her career at age 15 with Dance Theatre of Harlem, said, “I’d go to the cheapest stores and get foundation. You’d never put on your face as it’d break you out. Like, $2.95 cheap.” This practice is not only messy and annoying but also very expensive. In the article Robinson explains that she goes through about 12 to 15 tubes of foundation a week.

Robinson is currently a senior artist at Ballet Black, a British ballet company. According to their website, Ballet Black aims to bring the dance form to a more culturally diverse audience by celebrating black and Asian dancers in ballet.

“Our ultimate goal is to see a fundamental change in the number of black and Asian dancers in mainstream ballet companies.”

Freed of London, a shoe company that supplies shoes to Ballet Black, started selling pointe shoes for dancers of color. They now have brown and bronze colors available for pointe shoes. Freed, however, is not the only company to do this. Gaynor Minden, an American company, has also been making point shoes for dancers of color for over a year.

Shanice(aka Ashley)Johnson, a 25-year-old black dancer from Queens, N.Y., started ballet at only 3-years-old. She trained at Adele's Dance Studio in Queens, which is now known as Ultimate Dance Academy. After bouncing to a few other dance schools over the years, Johnson started dancing on Broadway and for Alvin Ailey in her early teens. Her first touring dance company was Kerri Edge Dance and Ensemble. She toured with them from the ages of 10 to 13.

"We went to Denmark, Mexico, and some other places that are all a blur," Johnson chuckled.

The touring was during her summer breaks from school but the schedule was still grueling. "We would have back-to-back performances, twice a day, every day, it was crazy."

"I went to Frank Sinatra High School in Queens,so I would dance for about three hours a day, and then go straight to rehearsal with the dance company," Johnson recalled. At the age of 12 she remembers attending nationals and being stared at by other teams since they were the only black company in attendance.

"At that age I didn't know how to comprehend it," she said. "But as you get older you need to rest on your talent and not let those stares get to you."

"I got a perm because I had to bend to the rules of ballet," Johnson said. She remembers she and her fellow black dancers being told to have perms by the age of 10. She sighs heavily as

she speaks of the struggle to paint her pointe shoes with foundation, and get her kinky curly hair into a neat bun.

“Casting in ballet pieces are solely based off looks,” she said. “The light-skin or white girls are almost always cast while the dark-skin girls are pushed to the side.”

Johnson also mentioned that social media has helped dancers of color showcase their talent but also hurt them.

“Social media is great because girls who are usually overlooked can show their talent,” she said, “but it’s also hard to get noticed because the internet is flooded with people trying to get noticed.” This influx of diverse dancers should presumably put pressure on companies to start paying attention, but Johnson explained that all attention isn’t good attention.“They don’t take you seriously on social media. A lot of companies will ask you to do shows for free instead of paying you.”

Most black dancers have the experience of being “the only one in the room.” This happened for Johnson when she was 16 and danced for the Rockette Experience.“By then I was old enough to understand why I was the only black girl there. I just tried not to think about it.”

“We are accepted the most in hip-hop, that’s what they want us to do,”Johnson said. “In high school my teacher told us we would never be ballerinas because we don’t have the right look.” Many black dancers abandon ballet for hip-hop, not because of a lack of talent but because of long standing Eurocentric ideals.

Misty Copeland has broken barriers for dancers of color, but Johnson makes sure to mention that Copeland does have advantages over darker skinned dancers. “She’s Latina and she's

very fair skinned," she said. "I'd like to see someone my shade or darker reach that level of success."

In 2015, Johnson danced Brooklyn based rapper Lil Mama's music video. Johnson stresses that Lil Mama wasn't in charge of the hair and makeup process, so when Johnson showed up with her natural hair in an afro, chaos ensued.

"They gave me a wig to put on because they said they wanted my hair straight," she said. "They put the light-skinned girls in the center and me and the other dark-skinned girl on the side." At the end of the video shoot, Lil Mama asked Johnson why she didn't wear her afro and asked her to showcase her natural hair for the end of the video. This small act shows the importance of people of color in roles of authority to help break traditional dance stereotypes.

"I think things are getting a lot better and more inclusive, like just look at the hair bill that passed," Johnson said, referring to the anti-discrimination law signed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in July of 2019 that "prohibits race discrimination based on natural hair or hairstyles. The law prohibits workplaces to ban locs, cornrows, bantu knots and other hairstyles. New York is the second state in the country after California to pass such legislation.

"But to be honest that's not for us, they didn't pass it until white girls started wearing cornrows," she added.

Johnson recalls a time where her dance students wanted to wear box braids and other natural styles for a competition but unfortunately those styles would result in point deductions.

"But I encouraged them to put their natural hair in a bun," she said. "They don't need to perm their hair and break it off."

Johnson now teaches dance at Ultimate Dance Academy, her former school, under the leadership of Anthony Borello, a white dance instructor.

“Since it is a predominately black neighborhood, a lot of dance teachers in the area wonder why he is teaching here,” she said.

Borello, who grew up in Harlem and began training in Queens dance schools as a child, responded, “I was raised by black dancers.” As a child in the competition circuit, he was recognized by black judges, such as Sheila Barker a choreographer and performer, and became a protege.

His first dancing job was at Radio City Music Hall performing for Muhammad Ali. Borello was 17 at the time and the only white person in the cast.“Muhammad Ali came up to me after the show and told me I was the token white guy,” he said. “At the time I had no idea what that meant.”

Borello recalled how this was transformative for his relationship with his father. “My dad was a business man from Harlem, he didn't want his son to dance,” he said. “But when he found out I was dancing for Muhammad Ali he flipped!”

His father was such an Ali fan that he didn’t want Borello to accept his check out of respect. “But I took my check,” he said with a laugh.

After dancing around the world for some time, in his 30’s, Borello noticed a change in the industry. “There became a shift,” he said. "There was less focus on ballet and more on hip hop.” So began his career as a dance instructor.

He was approached by Adele Weinstein of Adele’s Dance Studio in Rosedale,Queens and after some convincing, he bought the studio from her and the studio has been thriving for the last

five years. He now has students currently dancing in “Hamilton,” and another, Genessy Castillo, earned the second runner-up spot on the TV show “So You Think You Can Dance.”

Ultimate Dance Academy is predominately a black dance school, located in Rosedale, Queens, which according to the most recent census was 57% African American. “Most of the girls are black, but we’ve had a few Latinos and Asians but never like a full-on white girl,”Borello said. Even though Borello’s studio serves mainly black dancers, that does not reflect in the staff. Up until about a year ago, the entire staff was white, but they now have one full-time black instructor.

“Hair is a huge challenge,” Borello said. He remembered a student challenging him by saying, “You need to know where you’re at,” referring to the neighborhood.

“I know damn well where I’m at,” Borello fired back. “I knew that when I purchased this building.”

He knows hair is a sensitive topic so he now asks the black instructors to discuss hair with the students and remind them that at competitions, hair needs to be uniform, slicked back and in a bun.

“But I love natural hair,” Borello insisted, mentioning Genessy Castillo, who is Latina and has loose long curls. “She’s a girl who knows how to work and move her hair. I had her take her hair out and she won.”

Borello was used to working at predominately white schools where black girls would wear ashy pink tights that didn’t match their skin tone. “And I’ll admit it does look funny,” he said. “It’s distracting.” When he moved to his current school, he was told by a neighboring dance school to get tights and dye them to match his students’ skin tone.

While most people know Misty Copeland, a younger black ballerina is emerging on the scene. Charlotte Nebres was profiled in The New York Times in November of 2019. Her role as Marie in the New York City Ballet's "Nutcracker" is sparking a bigger conversation about young girls of color in ballet. At age 6, Charlotte remembers seeing Misty Copeland perform. "When I saw someone who looked like me onstage, I thought, that's amazing. She was representing me and all the people like me."

Charlotte is also breaking new ground as a student at the School of American Ballet, and playing Marie. The Nutcracker has been a staple of New York City Ballet since 1954 and not yet has a black Marie graced the stage until this winter. Nebres, now 11, understands the gravity of this opportunity and the sacrifices that were made for her to get there. "(I) got to grow up in a time when it wasn't just like, oh yeah I can do this, but not do this, there was nothing holding you back."

In a 2019 article of the New York Times, Sara Lewis, a Harvard professor explained how bias works in all areas of art, not just dance but also in photography. Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study hosted a conference called Vision & Justice. The conference was centered on the role of the arts in relation to citizenship, race and justice. Lewis organized this conference and had guests such as Ava DuVernay, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Wynton Marsalis and Carrie Mae Weems.

The article poses the question, "Can a photographic lens condition racial behavior?" Lewis' article shows the subtle but sinister nature to deem people of a darker skin tone unworthy of being onstage and fully encompasses the battle black ballerinas endure over time as they try to step onstage. "Well, everything is lighter than my face. I'm black. What had happened in this ex-

change? It can be hard to technically light brown skin against light colors. Yet, instead of seeking a solution, the technician had decided that my body was somehow unsuitable for the stage."

Mondesire agrees with Lewis. "Lighting black dancers isn't difficult as much as it is different," she said. "Black skin absorbs the light while light skin reflects it. But if lit correctly our skin will look rich and beautiful onstage and I'm learning that now while lighting my senior project. Proper lighting makes sure we are seen just like anyone else."

Mondesire looked elegant as she tied her brown pointe shoes in a sea of "nude" ones as she stood in the SUNY Purchase dance studio. She dons a gray turtleneck with a black shirt on top and black sweats. As they stretched, I counted, 23 white dancers, two biracial dancers, and three black dancers. The professor is white. I watched Mondesire's brown shoes pliè to the beat of the piano, one two three, one two three, one two three. Mondesire and her fellow black dancers stayed towards the back of the studio, with only one black dancer in the front. They all have their hair pulled slick black except for Mondesire whose long, curly hair is in two braids on either side of her head.

"Hair is always an issue as a dancer, it just is," she said. "I used to want to have long flowing hair that pulled slick back in a bun like the other dancers I saw in class, but I learned to love the hair I have."

The teacher naively asks her students to take out their hair for a part of class, to see how it would move on the day of the performance.

"I felt very uncomfortable, I can't just take out my hair like the other students," Mondesire said. "Natural hair is work. I would need to wash and condition my hair on the weekend, put

in my products, braid all my hair up and let it dry for two or three days before carefully taking it all down to actually achieve the style I wanted."

We shared a chuckle as a cloud of familiarity came over us. Natural hair is more about breaking the mental chains and stigma society has placed on black girls and how they are deemed as beautiful or accepted. While Mondesire never had a perm, Johnson felt pressure to get one.

Johnson thought it was simply, "how things go in ballet."

Perms originated in 1909, when a black inventor Garret Morgan was looking for a way to reduce the friction on fabric caused by sewing machines. He later realized that the chemical solution he made caused the cloth hairs to become straighter. He tested his invention on a neighbor's dog's fur and lastly on himself, deeming the product to be a straightening success. This invention revolutionized how black people maintained their hair for well over a century according to biography.com.

Madam CJ Walker became the first female millionaire in the U.S. by capturing the black hair-care market and black women's need to assimilate and fit in at the workplace.

"This product made your hair suddenly, 'professional' giving you room to move up the corporate latter and provide for your families. This invention also allowed many light-skinned black people to 'pass' with more ease whether that be at work or on stage," said Johnson.

Passing is playing up Eurocentric features, such as light skin or blue eyes, in order to sit in the front of the bus, or drink at a fountain designated for whites. An excerpt from a 2019 article in the New Yorker, "Notes on a Lifetime of Passing," explains it beautifully: William Pickens, the brown-skinned field secretary of the N.A.A.C.P. in 1927, also understood the allure of race

denial: “If passing for white will get a fellow better accommodations on the train, better seats in the theater, immunity from insults in public places, and may even save his life from a mob, only idiots would fail to seize the advantage of passing, at least occasionally, if not permanently.”

Passing is what gave many black women the opportunity to even dream of dancing ballet in the first place. Raven Wilkinson is a prime example. She was one of the first black ballerinas permitted to join a ballet company. In the 1950s she danced with Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, who let her dance on one condition: that she pose or pass as a white woman by painting her face with a light foundation. After dancing there for two years, racial tensions and discrimination grew too high in the South and she left to dance with Dutch National Ballet.

“Then I started to have problems,” Wilkinson said in an 2019 interview with Pointe Magazine. “I remember one time in Montgomery, Alabama, the tour bus rolled into town, and everyone was running around with white robes and hoods on. They stopped traffic, there were so many of them. There was a rapping sound on the bus door, and this man jumped on in his hood and gown. Several big strapping male company dancers got up and moved toward him. He threw a fistful of racist pamphlets all over the bus before they chased him out. That afternoon, when we got to our hotel in Montgomery, a bunch of us went down to the dining room for dinner. When we walked in, it was full of lovely couples, families with little children—a wonderful family atmosphere. Then, as I pulled out my chair, I realized that they all had Ku Klux Klan robes on the seats next to them. I remember thinking, here are people who can be so cruel and ugly, and yet they’re so loving toward their own families. In a way it made me less frightened of them. They lost some of their power in my eyes.”

Mondesire pliéd on point for two eight counts and at one point the teacher leaned over and adjusted her right foot at the bar.

“Ballet isn't my strongest skill”: I can hear this statement of hers ringing in my head as she fell out of a turn and scrunched up her face, looking clearly frustrated. Mondesire’s body is noticeably more curvy and built than her fellow dancers, her strong calves carry her across the floor and her arms are strong and cut the air like glass.

“I definitely have been frustrated at times that I can’t wear the same cute strappy leotard my classmates wear due to my larger chest,” she said. “Having a butt or boobs in ballet is frowned upon; you are supposed to be a seamless line.”

Richardson also admitted that she's struggled with healthy eating habits due to the pressure due to be small as a black ballerina.“If someone tells me my butt looks big it’s not a compliment. I can’t have a butt, I can't stand out.”

Misty Copeland’s rejection letter, made famous in an Under Armour commercial, reads, “Dear Candidate, thank you for your application to our ballet academy. Unfortunately you have not been accepted. You lack the right feet, Achilles tendons, turnout, torso length and bust. You have the wrong body for ballet.”

Black dancers say Copeland’s rejection is not a singular experience but something black dancers have been grappling with since the dawn of time. For Olivia Campbell the struggle of body image kept her from reaching her full potential, which she details in a 2018 article in the Guardian. “’She’s good, but she’s big,’” I overhear the instructor say to my dance teacher as I am coming back down the hallway. I stop in my tracks, trying to process this comment without crying or letting on that I heard. In this profession, rarely is anyone bigger than a size 4. Ballerinas

Faith Mondesire and her cast performing her senior project “Essence” at SUNY Purchase
Photo Courtesy of Faith Mondesire

are supposed to be beyond human: to evoke ethereal, otherworldly beings that toe the line between the sensual and the virginal. To have noticeable breasts and hips is to interrupt this fantasy with grotesque sexuality, to remind the audience that you are indeed human.”

“Gorgeous, Faith,” Mondesire’s teacher called out to her as she is mid-arabesque on the floor. Of course it’s harder being a dancer of color, Mondesire said. “You always have to work 10 times harder than everyone else and sometimes still aren't noticed. But I try not to let that get to me. My mother always says, ‘Your work will speak for itself.’ I try to remember that as a dancer. I work my hardest and leave everything in my dance. My art form is my body so it’s a very vulnerable but rewarding space I’m in while I dance.”

“My feet are killing me,” Mondesire exclaims while stretching out her leg during a combination. The origins of ballet stem back to the 1500s in Italy, the word itself derives from

the Italian word “ballare” which means “to dance.” Atlantaballet.com breaks down the history and significance of ballet and why its deep-rooted history still shapes how some people believe ballet should look. When King Henry II married Catherine de Medici, she brought dance into the court. Originally dancers wear masks, the costumes were opulent with heavy brocading on them, large headdresses and ornaments. The costumes were beautiful but hard to move in, the dancing consisted of small hops, slides, curtsies, promenades, and gentle turns, much different than the ballet we know today. The shoes had a small heel that looked more formal than the sleek tied shoe of today. Over the next 100 years dancing was still mainly reserved for the King. Later professional dancers would be hired to perform after King Louis and other noblemen were done dancing at court functions.

The size of court dances began to grow and were then performed on stages of their own separate from the courts. The dances evolved with elaborate jumps and tricks. While originating in Italy, Russia then became a leader in the dance world in 1850. Their style was distinct and they coined dancing on pointe which became popular in the 19th century with dancers typically donned in white. Pointe dancing at that time was reserved for female dancers only. The dancers are supposed to resemble dainty heroines that are pure and mystical like a fairy. This obsession for white and pure dancers is the exact reason black ballerinas are not welcome or accepted. Young black girls are seen as less innocent and older than their white counterparts. This conclusion came from a groundbreaking study by Georgetown Law Center. From the ages of 5-14 young black girls aren't afforded childhood like white children.

“These results are profound, with far-reaching implications. Our findings reveal a potential contributing factor to the disproportionate rates of punitive treatment in the education and

juvenile justice systems for Black girls," the study concluded.

Ballet rests on this youthful and innocent premise, but how are black ballerinas able to fulfill this when they aren't even afforded to be looked at as a child when they are as young as 5?

Chelsea Richardson is an excellent example of why young black girls benefit greatly from being taught by people who look like them.

Photo courtesy of Faith Mondesire

"I was lucky enough that I never had to think about my race when it came to dance," Richardson said. "My high school dance class was filled with Black and Brown girls of all different shapes, sizes and levels of technique. My dance instructor Karen Eubanks, was a plus-sized middle-aged Black woman who understood all too well the micro-aggressions of the industry and how damning they could be. She set out to create a utopia for us, once again based on passion and your individual desire to integrate dance into your life."

“I’m grateful for the lessons taught which were more about humanity and how art and creativity could become an equalizer no matter what walk of life you came from. I'm grateful to have had teachers that look like my mother or aunts, who knew how to communicate with me and redirect my behavior if it seemed off course. I’m thankful for the routines and structure dance provided in my life, battle scars not included.”

The black dancers experience is not monolithic, but it’s impossible to refute that being black in ballet is not a constant struggle.

“I wouldn't have it another way,” says Mondesire. “Being a black dancer is 10 times harder, but also 10 times as rewarding.”

“Everything in the universe has rhythm, everything dances.”- Maya Angelou

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