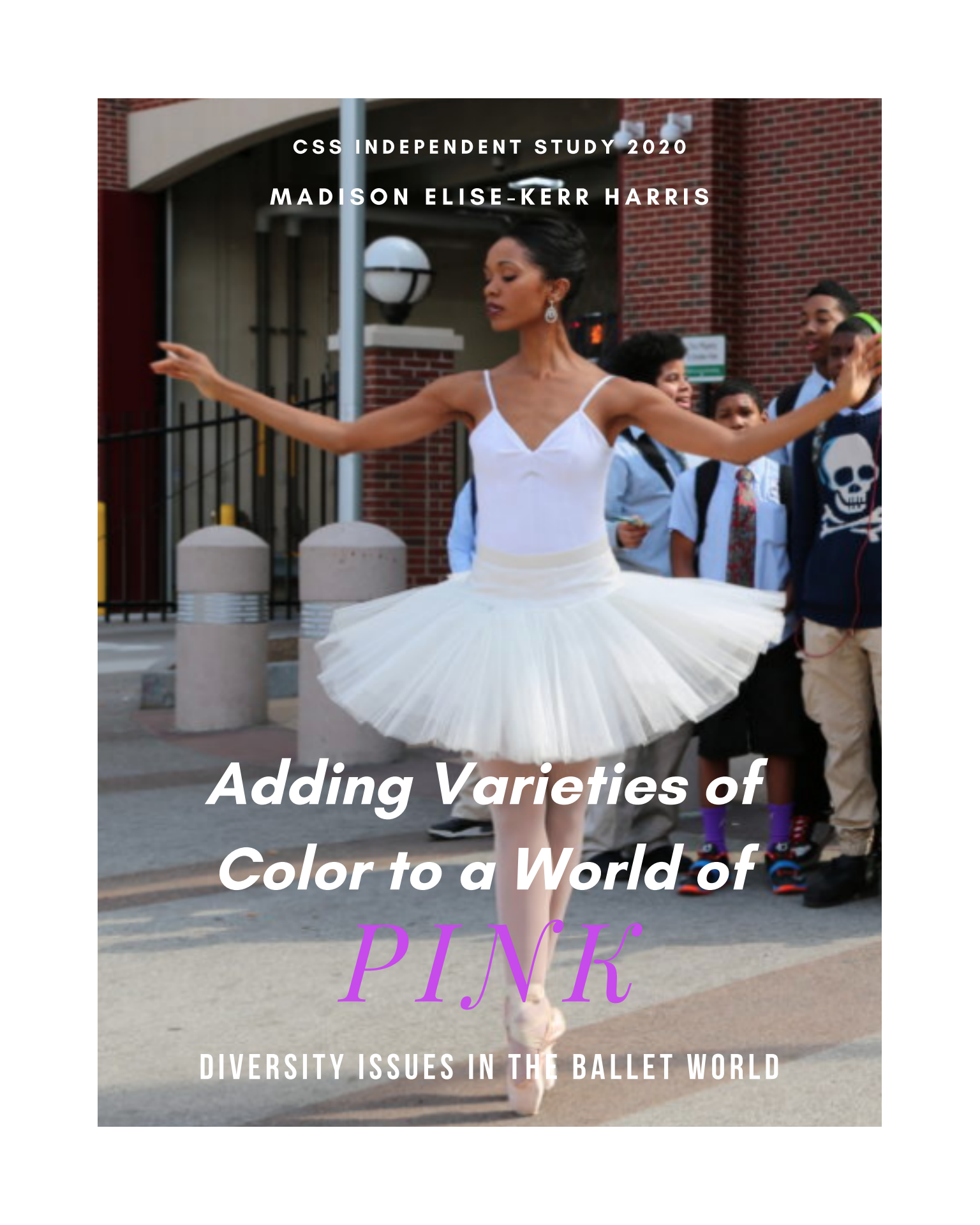


A Black ballerina is captured in a graceful pose, wearing a white leotard and a full white tutu. She is performing outdoors on a paved area in front of a brick building. In the background, several children are visible, some in school uniforms and others in casual clothing, including a boy in a blue shirt with a skull design. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting daytime.

CSS INDEPENDENT STUDY 2020

MADISON ELISE-KERR HARRIS

*Adding Varieties of
Color to a World of
PINK*

DIVERSITY ISSUES IN THE BALLET WORLD



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INTRODUCTION

Several times, I've been asked what my project is, and what it has to do with sustainability. My sustainability topic is diversity in the ballet world, including how the dance world is evolving thanks to ballet icons of color (such as Misty Copeland, Aesha Ash, Maria Tallchief, and others). Essentially, if ballet does not evolve and invite more diversity, including dancers of color, into the art form, it will probably not be able to thrive culturally and economically in the modern world. The ballet world needs to grow more diverse in order to continue to thrive.

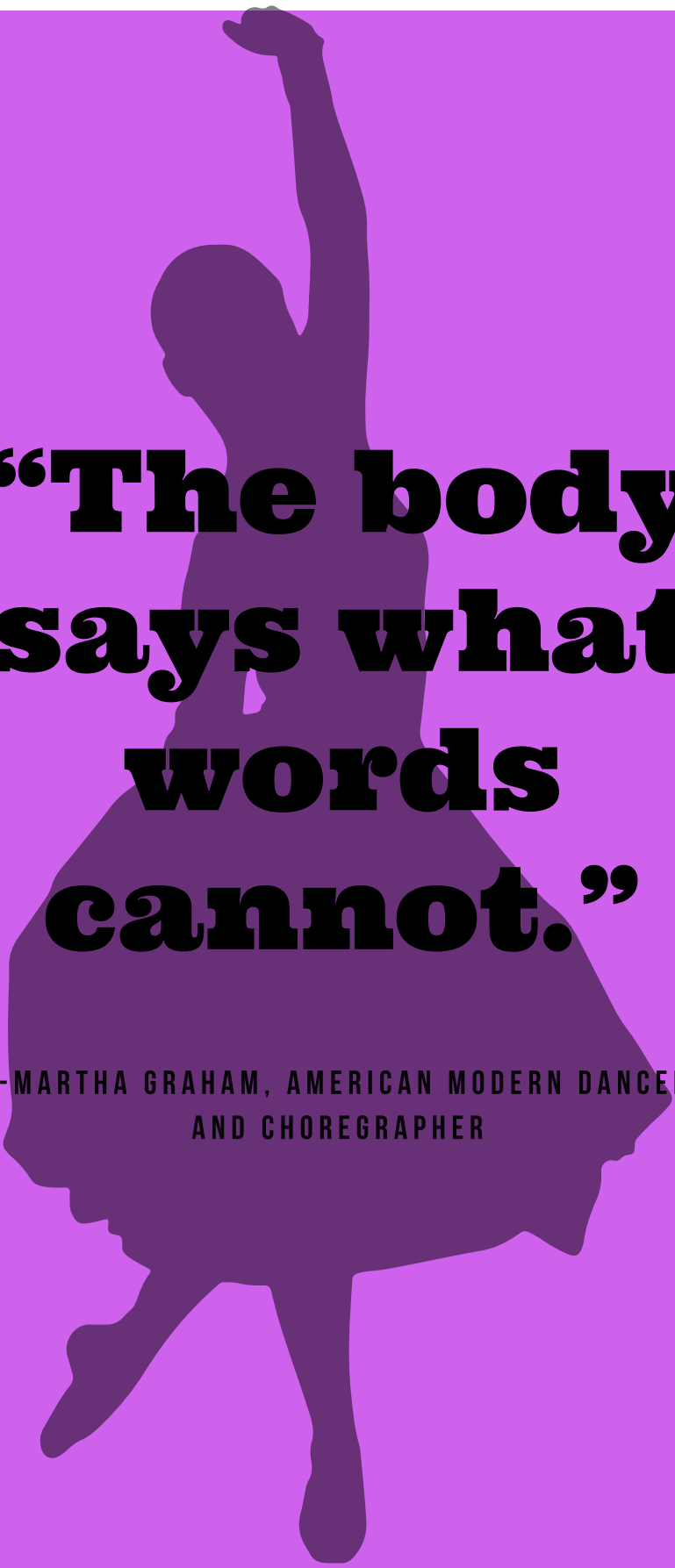
So this project considers contemporary efforts to diversify the art form. Throughout history, ballet has been an art form by and for people of European descent, lacking racial or ethnic representation; this a result of ballet originating in the Italian Renaissance. However, there have been efforts over the years to make ballet a more inclusive art form. This is what I have been studying. In this eBook, I will include an interview with a former dancer, Renuka Gandhi. Also, I will be sharing a brief history of ballet and sharing the history of Raven Wilkinson, who is the first African-American woman to perform as a soloist. I hope you enjoy my eBook and learn a lot of new things while reading it!



THE EARLY HISTORY OF BALLET

Ballet originated in Italy during the fourteenth century, the period known as the Italian Renaissance. Over the course of the following hundred years, it grew to become a popular form of entertainment for rich noble-women, especially in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in France. It became popularized in the mid-sixteenth century, during the court of Cathrine de Medici, the wife of King Henry II of France. Catherine de Medici is credited with being the first “financier” of ballet, supporting the development of dance around France. It subsequently became a popular art form in Russia. In 1661, the first formal dance academy opened in Paris, and in 1681, ballet left the courts and moved into being performed in opera houses. The art form began with combining choreographed dances and operas to create performances, until around the 1700, when Jean Georges Noverres, a French ballet master, said ballet should be a separate art form from opera.

Noverres argued that ballet could have dramatic movements that express feelings, telling a story. As American modern dancer and choreographer Martha Graham said, “The body says what words cannot.” Jean Georges Noverres’s theory introduced ballet d’action, the style of ballet most people know today, which portrays a story through dance steps and movements. Early ballets, such as *Giselle*, were created during the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century. The name “romantic ballet” spoke to the time, a period when romance influenced the creation of ballet. These dances often consisted of love between the paranormal and mortal, and often portrayed women as pale, fragile, and naive. This was also around the time ballerinas dancing on the tips of their toes became the norm for ballet. This is called pointe work. Women dancers strengthen their ankles to have the ability to rise up onto the box of their shoes; from strengthening their ankles, they would learn to turn on one foot, or leap, or hold pointe positions for long periods of time. Pointe shoes start out stiff in order to support the dancer’s ankle, but that makes them hard to “push off” into leaps. As the dancer dances, pointe shoes begin to soften and mold to the shape of the dancer’s foot. In the later half of the nineteenth century, Russian choreographers and composers began taking ballet to its fullest height. They choreographed dances that required increasingly complicated stepping patterns, difficult turns, and leaps.

A dark purple silhouette of a dancer in a dynamic pose, with one arm raised high and the other extended downwards, set against a lighter purple background. The dancer's legs are spread wide in a powerful stance.

**“The body
says what
words
cannot.”**

**-MARTHA GRAHAM, AMERICAN MODERN DANCER
AND CHOREGRAPHER**



MARIA TALLCHIEF'S STORY

When I think of diversity in ballet, the first image that comes to mind is Misty Copeland. On June 30, 2015, Copeland made history when she was promoted to prima (or principal) ballerina at the American Ballet Theater in New York, becoming the first African American woman to achieve this. Prima ballerinas are the highest paid and ranked dancers in a professional ballet company. Although a lot of people know about Misty Copeland and how she changed the ballet world, there were dancers of color before Copeland who paved the way for her. Elizabeth Marie Tallchief, known as Maria, was considered America's first major prima ballerina, and was also the first Native American to become a prima ballerina. Tallchief was born in Fairfax, Oklahoma on January 24, 1925. She was the daughter of Alexander Joseph Tall Chief, who was a member of the Osage Nation, and Ruth Porter, an American of Irish descent. Maria had five other siblings: Alexander, Frances, and Thomas, who played football for the University of Oklahoma, Gerald, and Majorie, who was a gifted dancer like Maria, and was a best friend to her.

Tallchief started taking formal dance lessons when she was three, joining dance summer programs with her sister. In 1930, a ballet teacher from Tulsa, Mrs. Sabin, visited Tallchief's home town looking for young dancers. She took Tallchief and Majorie to be her students. In 1933, Tallchief and her family moved from Fairfax to Beverly Hills, where Tallchief was enrolled in a nearby school. She began taking dance classes with Ernest Belcher, the father of Marge Champion, who was a well-known American dancer and actress at the time. After beginning dance training with Ernest Belcher, Tallchief discovered she had received poor dance training from Mrs. Sabin, which resulted in her having to start ballet from the beginning. She was taken off pointe immediately, saving her from possible injuries. Later in her life, in her autobiography, Tallchief wrote about Sabin as a horrible ballet teacher who failed to provide her with appropriate basic training. Tallchief had been put on pointe two years after dancing with Sabin, at age five, an unrealistic age to start pointe by any measure. In addition to ballet, Tallchief was taught tap, Spanish dancing, and acrobatics (which she very much disliked). At Tallchief's high school, Tallchief said she experienced hurtful discrimination because of her Native American background. In her autobiography, Tallchief said a few kids in her class made fun of her name, which was originally spelled "Tall chief," so she changed it to one word, "Tallchief."

In 1942, Tallchief graduated high school at around age seventeen. She wanted to attend college, but her father refused to finance her education. Instead, Tallchief found herself with a part in a musical called *Presenting Lily Mars*. Though Tallchief enjoyed the music and acting of theatre, she didn't find the dancing challenging enough to help her evolve as a dancer. Having seen Ballet Russes de Monte-Carlo earlier that year, Tallchief set her sights on professional ballet. At that time, Ballet Russes was regarded as one of the most influential dance companies in the country. Tallchief's mother, Ruth Porter, decided that Tallchief would take a train to New York and, once there, she could audition for Ballets Russes. When she arrived in New York, Tallchief asked around about Serge Denham, one of the founders of Ballet Russes. Though she was told that the company had no need for more dancers, a few days later, a spot opened and she immediately took it. The first ballet Tallchief ever performed with the company was a ballet called *Chopin Concerto*. *Chopin Concerto* was not created to be performed as a ballet like *Firebird* or *Swan Lake*, rather, it was a musical piece composed by Frédéric Chopin around which dance companies performed. When Serge Denham first saw Tallchief dancing, he thought she was amazing and cast Tallchief as the understudy of the lead role, which was danced by a Russian ballerina named Nathalie Krassovska.



He saw right away that Tallchief would be a star. Nathalie Krassovska thought Tallchief was too young for the role though. This was a part of a larger dynamic where Russian dancers often didn't get along with the American dancers, perhaps. The Russians thought they were the superior dancers because of ballet's early history in their country, so Tallchief being cast as the understudy for the lead role in her first year dancing with the company likely made Russian dancers -- who'd been working very hard to be cast as the lead -- extremely jealous.

Within the first two months of Tallchief dancing with Ballet Russe, she was cast in seven different ballets as part of the corps de ballet. This is a group of around twenty dancers who complete one routine all together, like the party guests in the beginning of *The Nutcracker* ballet. In 1943, after many artistic differences between Denham and Nathalie, Nathalie walked out of the studio and didn't return. This meant Tallchief would be dancing the lead role. Tallchief was terrified to make the leap from corps de ballet to a soloist (the soloist is a dancer who is the lead of the ballet, and gets his/her own performance. Most soloists later become prima or principal dancers in the company); however, she knew Nathalie's part in the ballet by heart. Later in 1943, Tallchief performed her first solo role in *Chopin Concerto*, and she became an instant success!

She received many complimentary reviews from critics, though Tallchief's fame lasted for a short time. Once the *Chopin Concerto* performance was done, Tallchief returned to being in the corps de ballet. As her career evolved, Tallchief received bigger roles in ballets with Ballet Russes performed later in her years dancing with them. She was made a soloist in a dance called *Le Beau Danube*, and in another called *Ancient Russia*. In 1946, Tallchief married a man named George Balanchine, who was a well known choreographer hired by Ballet Russe to work on a piece that they were performing called *Song of Norway*. He'd been working with Tallchief in the company for two years, casting her in most of the lead roles. In 1947, after Tallchief's six-year contract with Ballet Russe expired, Balanchine accepted a temporary job as the choreographer for the Paris Opera Ballet and Tallchief traveled there by boat to be with him. She would also be dancing with the company while her husband was in residence there. Balanchine's first ballet with the company was *Apollo*, and a dancer named Tamara Toumanova had the lead role in it. Tamara was an actress and a prima ballerina who was well known in Paris. When she was only ten years-old, she made her debut at the Paris Opera, which is the premier ballet company of France. On the opening night of *Apollo*, Tamara became very ill and Balanchine decided Tallchief would take her place in the performance. That evening, the King and Queen of Sweden were in the audience. Tallchief was deathly afraid she would miss a step or slip in the middle of the performance, but the ballet was a success! Tallchief immediately became known as the first American to dance at the Paris Opera House. Tallchief was also considered America's first prima ballerina. She's just one example of America's relationship with women of color in ballet.





RAVEN WILKINSON'S STORY

Raven Wilkinson is another example of this. She was the first African American woman to dance for a major classical ballet company; she danced for Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and was promoted to soloist during her second season with the company. Wilkinson was born in a middle class neighborhood in Harlem on February 2, 1935. Wilkinson grew to love ballet after seeing Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo perform, and for her ninth birthday, her gift from an uncle were lessons at the Ballet Russe School. Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Ballet Russe School were not connected at the time though. The Ballet Russe School was very international, and with her fair complexion some of the other dancers urged Wilkinson to say that she was Spanish, but she refused to. The director of Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo bought the Ballet Russe school in 1951, and that gave Wilkinson a chance to audition for the company. She may have been very light skinned, but it was still challenging for Wilkinson due to issues with the company regarding her race. Wilkinson was rejected twice when she auditioned, and was accepted for a six-week trial after her third audition. She remained with the company for six years and was promoted to soloist in her second season. Wilkinson faced many difficulties while on tour as an African American, particularly in the segregated South. When the company stayed in "whites only" hotels, Wilkinson kept her race a secret, which was an option for her since her skin was so light.

If anyone questioned her about this directly though, Wilkinson said she'd never hide her true racial identity. She was encouraged to wear paler make up onstage and around the hotel, but she said she wouldn't. In 1957 still on tour in the South, a hotel manager asked her if she was black, and Wilkinson did not lie. Word of Wilkinson's racial identity spread and discrimination became increasingly problematic in both her personal and professional life. The director of the company forbade her from dancing in certain locations and told her she could dance in some of the safer cities they toured. In the end, one of the company's ballet mistresses told her she would not go be able any further in her ballet career and should leave to start a school of African dance. Exhausted by years of discrimination, Wilkinson left the company in 1961. In the mid-1960s, an African-American principal dancer with the Dutch National Ballet, suggested Wilkinson audition for that company. After speaking with them, she was invited to join the company as a second soloist. She moved to the Netherlands and stayed with the National Ballet for seven years.



MADISON'S INTERVIEW WITH RENUKA GANDHI



On March 12, 2020, I interviewed Renuka Gandhi. Though she is Director of Admissions at Cold Spring School now, she was previously an apprentice in the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company and danced professionally with the David Dorfman dance company. In this interview, we dove into what it's like to be a female dancer of color in a world where there aren't many. I hope this interview shines some light on what progress has been made in the dance world, and what work still needs to be done.

So... My first question is, can you tell me a little bit of how you became interested in dance?

Sure. Um... I started dancing when I was three years old... and it's because my preschool teacher, at the time, said that I had ants in my pants and that my parents needed to find some way to get my energy out, like in a productive way. So they put me in dance, and I loved it! I danced after school, all the way through high school. I was a dance major in college, at Columbia University, and I danced professionally for four years after college in New York.

What type of dance did you do?

Yeah, so, I grew up doing tap, and ballet, and jazz... and when I got to college, I started doing modern dance. And that is the type of dance I ended up doing professionally.

Do you have a background in dance training?

So, most of my training in school, before college, was in classical ballet. I did a little bit of Cecchetti ballet, which I hated. I did some jazz and some American tap. When I got to college I tried a lot of different types of modern. So I did, Horton I did, a little bit of Graham. I really loved Cunningham technique and I used to take class at the Cunningham studios in New York. Let's see... You know, Postmodern is the kind of dance training that I ended up doing mostly, and then I ended up doing professionally.



Do you have a favorite type of dance?

Do I have a favorite type of dance? Yeah. I love jazz. I grew up doing jazz and it will probably always be my favorite.

What was your experience as a woman of color in the dance world? Where were there different forms of dance you studied where there weren't a lot of women of color?

What was my experience as a woman of color in dance? We moved a fair amount as a family when I was younger. My parents were in the military so I went to a few different dance studios. I started dancing when we were in Texas, and then we moved to Maryland, and then we moved to a different city in Texas, and then to Atlanta. And in all of those places, I would say I was the only, or one of the only Black dancers in those schools. And I don't think I noticed it affected me until-- you know, everyone was wearing costumes, wearing these horrible suntanned tights that didn't match anyone's skin tone, but they really didn't match mine. I used to have to, like, dye my pointe shoes brown, and there was no one else in the dance studio who was doing that, so I really didn't know how to do it. I ruined a few pointe shoes, doing it the wrong way, and got dye all over some of the costumes. And then things like, my hair... I used to do competitive dance in middle school, and everyone would have high ponytails and curls, and that was really hard for me to figure out how to do with my hair. Those kinds of things really affected me. When I got to college, there were more Black dancers around me. I went to Columbia so I was in New York.



There were more Black dancers and there were more Black dance teachers, and I really appreciated that. I started trying new forms of dance, like Horton, which traditionally has maybe more African American dancers... Especially with Alvin Ailey being a Horton- based company. So that kind of opened up my world in terms of what types I would be more eligible for or more interested in. After college, I joined one dance company and apprenticed for another company. I apprenticed right after college for Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company. I don't know if you know them. So they're a Postmodern dance company. At the time, it was a very diverse company- - there were probably at the time ten company members, four of which were probably Black, four were maybe white, one was Asian, and one was Latino at the time. The co-director -- I don't actually know what her official title was, at the time-- Janet Wong, was an Asian woman. The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company has a very long history of having diversity-- diverse body types, diverse ethnically, international diversity- and I really loved that about him and his company. The company that I ended up actually dancing for is actually kind of based in New York and Connecticut. So, it's called David Dorfman Dance. And David Dorfman is the director of that company, and he is also the Director of the Dance Department at Connecticut College. So I actually spent a lot of time at Connecticut College because we would practice there weeks at a time. When I joined David's company, there were eight company members including myself, and two of us were Black. The rest were white. I don't know how much you know about post modern dance, but a lot of it is not just about the physicality of the dance, but the content. The piece that I joined was called *Disavowal*, and it was an evening-length piece that explored racial dynamics in the U.S. It was sort of specifically centered around a historical event which was a raid at Harpers Ferry, led by John Brown. And so that informed a lot of what we were doing in the company.



We later, after that piece finished, did probably my favorite piece as a dancer called *Prophets of Funk*. At that time there were still eight company members, but four were Black and four were white. In that piece, we were using the music of Sly and The Family Stone which you probably don't know-- I wasn't old enough to know the music personally. And so that piece was also very interested in the dynamics specifically of white Americans and Black Americans and a lot of the piece explored that. It was really interesting how all of a sudden all of my dance was all about me being a Black dancer. It was not something that I grew up doing, but it ended up becoming a very big part of my dance career.

I'm also really interested in wage inequality in dance. What did you experience about the way dancers are compensated for their art and do you think they are fairly compensated?

No! Compensated in comparison to other industries?

Yes.

Then definitely not. I was living in New York, dancing full time, but I also had to have other jobs. So I taught dance, I babysat, and I was living in Brooklyn at the time. I had no savings, I had no retirement money. No, I don't think dancers are adequately compensated. I did not have health insurance through the dance company. I was young enough that I could still use my parents' health insurance, but no, I don't think dancers are compensated at all fairly.

Do you think there's a difference between the way female dancers and male dancers are paid?

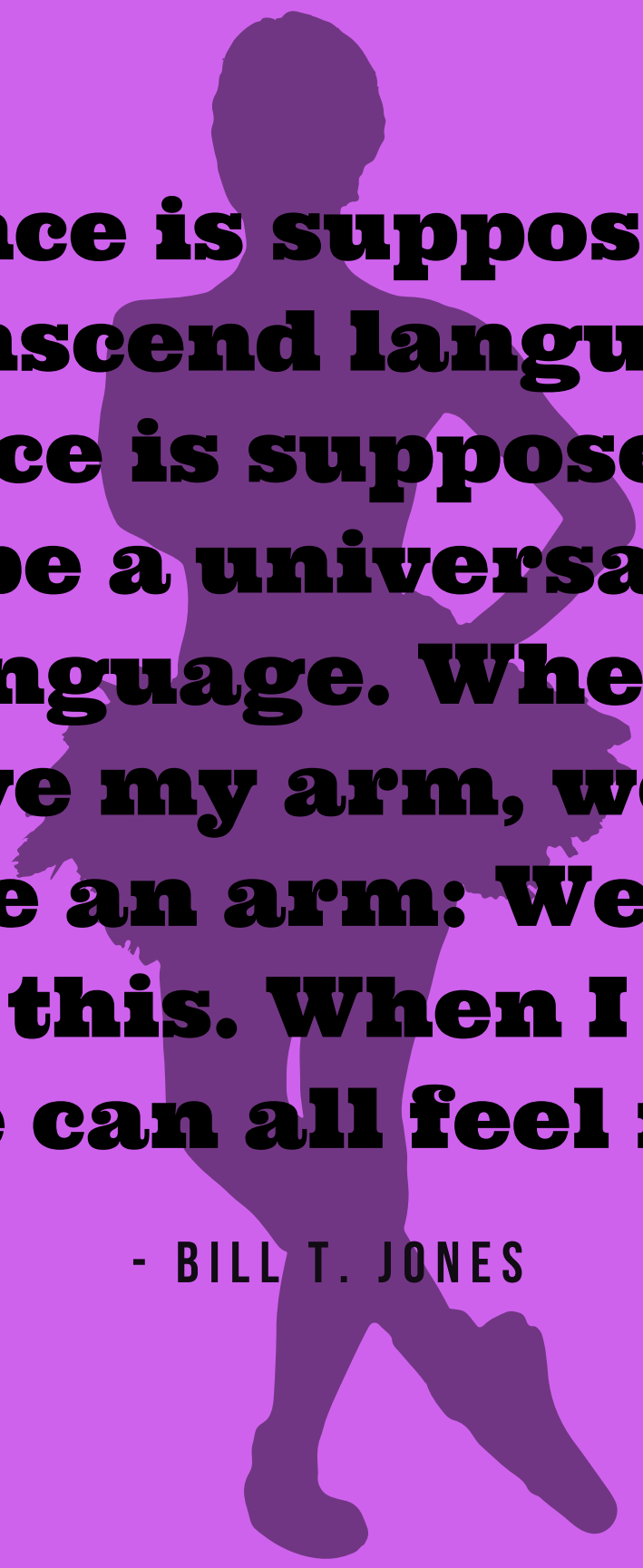
I don't know enough about how different people are compensated specifically to say if there's a difference in dancers, but there's absolutely a difference between dancers and directors. And historically, most company directors are men.

Have you heard of Project Pliè?

I haven't-- except maybe from you. Tell me a little about it.

It's a project that ABT is doing-- well, there are like several different versions of it. One is with Aesha Ash called the Swan Dreams project, which is basically where she walks around in ballet apparel teaching kids in generally black neighborhoods ballet. And there's Project Pliè, which is the American Ballet Theatre doing a project to introduce more kids of color to dance. Do you think people like Misty Copeland have changed the way we think about dance?

I do. I think she's doing a lot to do that. I mean when I was growing up, there were not any dancers of color whose names everyone in society knew. I think it's been really hard because some people say Misty isn't doing enough, but I think she's doing a lot. I hope that for you growing up, seeing someone like Misty in the position that she's in, makes you feel like that's something you could attain.

A dark purple silhouette of a ballerina in a tutu, positioned centrally behind the text. The ballerina is in a dynamic pose, with one leg extended forward and arms slightly out to the sides.

“Dance is supposed to transcend language. Dance is supposed to be a universal language. When I move my arm, we all have an arm: We can feel this. When I run, we can all feel it.”

- BILL T. JONES

CREATING A MORE DIVERSE BALLET WORLD

Ballet is behind many other dance forms in diversity, and though there have been many famous ballerinas of color in the past who have had great opportunities in the dance world, there are still many things that can be done to make sure dancers of color have just as many opportunities as other dancers. In 2014, the American Ballet Theatre (ABT) launched something called Project Plié. It is a project to expand ABT's diversity and inclusion efforts, and bring greater awareness to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the classical ballet community. This project was started shortly before Misty Copeland was promoted to prima ballerina at ABT, as her story was becoming more popular around America and in the dance world. Copeland's dance talents were discovered when she was in the right place at the right moment; while at a Boys and Girls club she was spotted by a dance teacher who noticed her elegant way of carrying herself and pushed Copeland to study ballet at the age of thirteen. Ballerinas usually begin their dance training at age three or four, and Misty was the oldest in her class.

She attended classes five days a week though, and after a year of training, she began pointe work. Copeland had a remarkable talent of being able to see a combination, and be able to do it with ease. Even though Copeland had this talent, she was rejected from many dance companies she auditioned for because she did not have the "ideal" dancer's body; she was not slim, tall, and pale. Copeland did not allow this to bring her down. She kept working hard, and she didn't take no for an answer. In the September of 2000, she joined the American Ballet Theatre as a member of the corps de ballet. In 2007, she was promoted to soloist, and in 2015, she was promoted to principal ballerina, becoming the first Black principal in the company's history.

Of course, not many dancers of color have the opportunities Copeland had when her talents were discovered. Project Plié is a series of weekend dance classes for kids in second-to-third grade from the New York City Public School system. A goal is to find the "next Misty Copeland" and give everyone and anyone from any background the opportunity to be seen. Another project with a similar goal to ABT's Project Plié is the Swan Dreams project started by Aesha Ash. Aesha Ash is a well known ballerina of color who at age eighteen danced in the corps de ballet with the New York City Ballet. She later moved to Switzerland to join the famed Béjart Ballet, where she performed as both a soloist and principal ballerina.

The Swan Dreams Project's goal is to “convey the message that beauty and talent are not constrained by race or socio-economic status,” and introduce as many people from all over Compton, California -- from different backgrounds and races -- to ballet. In this project, Ash would walk around inner-city neighborhoods in Compton in a tutu and ballet shoes, approaching little children and teaching them simple beginner ballet steps to introduce diverse audiences to ballet. A third example of an effort to diversity ballet is a project led by Dance Theatre of Harlem and Dance/USA, called the Equity Project. Dance Theatre of Harlem is a well known dance company that was founded In 1969, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

The founder of Dance Theatre of Harlem was Arthur Mitchell, who was the first Black principal dancer at the New York City Ballet. The Equity Project is a partnership that Dance Theatre of Harlem has with several other dance companies around the country. They host meetings with representatives from each company to educate the companies about topics like undoing racism, creating a more sustainable dance community, and determining ways companies can create a more diverse ballet community.

This is a major project, but the ballet world still has a lot of work to do-- Affordability: How can we supplement the high cost of ballet for urban dancers with low incomes?; Funding minority classic ballet companies: How can the ballet world support mainly minority dance companies that need more recognition?; Widespread diversity education in dance as a part of learning ballet: How can we create educational programs that teach ballerinas about the history of diversity in ballet as a part of the study of classical forms?

