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21st Century Ballet, 20th Century Racism

One incident startled a young dancer in class and causes her to wonder: Why can't the ballet world move forward? What can we do to incite change?

by Lauren Evans

I was sixteen when I flew to Phoenix, Arizona with my home studio's ballet company for the second time. We were participating in the Regional Dance America festival, an event I always looked forward to for the chance to perform, meet dancers from around the country, and especially to take the plethora of master classes from some incredible teachers offered there. It was during one of these master classes that the incident occurred. As a dancer solely trained in classical ballet, I was trying to enjoy a fusion modern/jazz class and trying my best not to look like a four-year-old taking their first dance class. Midway through class, I guess the teacher wanted to give me a comment. So, to get my attention, he didn't ask my name, nor did he walk just a few feet forward to read my name tag. No, instead he yelled out, "Hey, you, Black girl!" *Um...what?*

I think my initial reaction was simply disbelief that he thought that would ever be an okay thing to say. But then I stayed silent. Listened to his comment, finished the class. Even laughed it off as a funny story with my ballet company and the ballet mom chaperones immediately after. I managed to convince myself this incident was nothing really, that I was reading too much into it, but inside, it definitely felt like something. It felt like just another moment on top of so many others that made me feel out of place, "other than," "less than," in the dance world. It felt dehumanizing—I have a name, don't I? Is my race all you see? I'd like to think the teacher didn't mean to cause harm, but regardless of intention, it hurt me.

Thinking about it now, I wonder what the worst part of the story is. Is it that the teacher thought that that was okay to say? Was it that I felt like I couldn't even speak up for myself? Was it that I *knew* he had to be referring to me, because in a room of fifty dancers there was only one other Black dancer, and she was standing nowhere near me? In this one small incident, a whole host of evidence of the ever-present undercurrent of racism in the dance world comes to the surface.

My story is not unique, and is most definitely not even close to the worst of it. Racism has deep roots in dance and manifests in many ways. There are small scale microaggressions, like the story I just described. Professional dancer Gabrielle Salvatto, formerly with Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballet West, has written about some of the microaggressions she's experienced as a Black dancer in classical ballet. As just a few examples, she lists being referred to as "an ethnic" by staff in the marketing department, and ballet mistresses remembering the names of every white dancer, yet being unable to differentiate between the Black dancers in the company. Often the racism can be subtle, which Salvatto points out. This aspect can make it more difficult to address discriminatory acts, easier to dismiss as non-existent or "all in your head." Incidents like these may continue to exist as part of the daily lives of dancers of color.

Along with these subtle acts of racism, there also exists even larger and more overt issues with racism embedded in ballet as an art form and institution. Acting as a reflection of American culture and history, classical ballet especially seems intent on holding onto its roots in white supremacy. Born in European royal courts, ballet has kept many of its original values and issues—elitism, exclusivity, an emphasis on conformity and "purity." Combine these traits with an American culture entrenched in racism, and we land where we are today. Misty Copeland, the

American Ballet Theatre's first African American principal ballerina, has spoken out against the racism she has faced and continues to experience in her career. One example she cites is being pulled from a production of *Swan Lake* due to claims that she would "ruin the aesthetic of it."

When whiteness is seen as the highest standard, then everything and everyone outside of that falls short. Brenda Dixon Gottschild writes about the effect of institutional racism in dance in her book, *The Black Dancing Body*: "Therein lies one pitfall of institutionalized racism: the belief that whites, white endeavors, and white institutions are the norm... what this perspective does is to circumscribe variations from the norm as Other." The belief that whiteness is the default, the norm, or the correct way to be is at the root of so many issues that plague ballet. It can leave dancers of color feeling isolated, Othered, and less than, and often leads to consequential disadvantages.

Even when those who hold power in the dance world—teachers, choreographers, artistic directors, for example—become aware of racism, implicit bias may still lead to inequality and discrimination. Though someone may not consider themselves to be racist, we've all been living in this culture where "whites, white endeavors, and white institutions are the norm." This can be unknowingly internalized and subconsciously influence important decisions about who gets hired, who gets cast, and who gets funding for their choreographic projects. However uncomfortable, it is absolutely vital for everyone to confront and question their implicit biases and beliefs if we're going to make progress in this art form.

Everyone—*especially* those belonging to groups that hold power and privilege in society—must not shy away from this discomfort. It's difficult and sometimes painful to fully confront the prejudice and discrimination that BIPOC dancers face in classical ballet (and the dance world at large). It's challenging to continually try to question your own internal beliefs and world constructs. However, it is imperative that individuals learn how to sit in this discomfort; this is the space where we can grow, where we develop the empathy and drive to pull at the roots of white supremacy that have been allowed to thrive for far too long in this art form.

We cannot ignore this problem and hope it goes away. We also can't make one hollow solidarity statement on social media and pretend that that could ever be enough. Education, internal reflection, and outspoken advocacy are needed. As Dixon Gottschild eloquently summarizes, when it comes to tackling racism in dance: "The way to break the code is to examine it. The way to understand the image is to acknowledge it. The only way out is through."

Lauren Evans graduated in 2022 with a BA in Dance and BS in Biological Sciences. She aspires to join a professional dance company post-graduation, and eventually enter the STEM field as a biomedical researcher.

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