

Black Ballerinas in U.S. Popular Culture

*Foreword*

As an African American ballet dancer, I've found myself asking, "how have gifted African American ballerinas negotiated their careers around the challenges of having brown skin in this European art form?" I found very few historical resources on blacks in ballet, so I decided to conduct my own research on black female ballet dancers, some of whom I have had the pleasure of interacting with, so that their stories and experiences might be heard and recorded. More research must be done on young dancers of color and African American aspiring ballerinas in order to thoroughly draw conclusions, but this research will continue to develop as more published resources become available and as I am able to interview dancers. A few notable authors and researchers on the topic of black ballet dancers include: Dr. Thomas DeFrantz, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, and Dr. Joselli Deans, and Anjali Austin.

*Research*

The Black Ballerina, her involvement with popular culture, and her struggle within the world of classical ballet will be discussed in the following pages according to the information currently available. On one hand, this research examines the lack of media attention and the type of portrayal she receives, and on the other hand it illuminates how she utilizes the media to assist her career.

The ballet world has not been a stranger to the bias of colorism; in fact, the difficulties that a black ballerina already faces in finding a place in a ballet company are exacerbated by

darker skin. Through the media, much of humanity spanning the entire skin color spectrum view images that oftentimes confirm or reaffirm the conclusion that lighter complexion, higher quality of life, and self-image are correlated. The media promotes these ideas through brightening and bleaching creams, through the absence of darker skinned individuals in advertisements-particularly those relating to beauty, but also in films, primetime television, and magazines.

The black ballerina has the additional burden of proving herself within the elitist form of classical ballet: a form of dance that has continually been preserved and performed by selected bodies that possess the prerequisite characteristics and aesthetics defined by European tastes and governed by tradition. Despite these barriers, the black ballerina has navigated toward her goals utilizing the opportunities available in popular culture to market herself and boost her career within the world of ballet.

The principles of ballet are based on the visualization of the line of the body, which requires certain congenital attributes such as outward rotation of the hip and ankles, highly arched feet, a small yet proportionate frame among other factors in order to produce it<sup>1</sup>. Ballet's prohibitive selectivity contributes to its distinguished position as a "high art" dance form, but also presents obstacles for those who do not fit the traditional look.

While these characteristics are very specific, and can certainly be developed over time, according to Carla A. Urena in her recent dissertation for Florida State University

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<sup>1</sup> Warren, 1-70. "To this day, the elegant carriage cultivated by the dancers of his [Louis XIV] court remains the primary stylistic characteristic of classical ballet." Also see chapter 2, "The Ideal Body Structure and Proportions for Classical Ballet Dancers."

<sup>2</sup> See Urena, 59-61.

<sup>3</sup> Debra Austin, Andrea Long, and Aesha Ash are the only three black women to have ever danced for New York City Ballet. There have never been any principal or soloist status black female dancers at NYCB. There have been two black male principal dancers and several male corps dancers in contrast.

entitled, *Skill Acquisition in Ballet Dancers: the Relationship Between Deliberate Practice and Expertise*<sup>2</sup> “the perception of what constitutes a talented or gifted dancer often effects the quality of training a student may receive and in turn impacts their motivation towards a higher level of expertise in dance.” Though it is important to note that people representing a wide range of skin tones and ethnic backgrounds (not just one) inherently possess these requisite traits, there are still dance instructors who believe that darker skin tones are less equipped to meet ballet’s requirements.

The prevailing standard appearance for women in ballet can be easily determined by noting the appearance of the majority of principal dancers in this country and around the world. Here are a few examples.

### Royal Danish Ballet Principal dancers

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<sup>2</sup> See Urena, 59-61.

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## Meet our dancers

The Royal Danish Ballet can't exist without its dancers. They are the impressive backbone of every ballet staged. On this page you can meet the 82 great dancers of The Royal Danish Ballet. About 2/3 of the dancers are Danish. The rest is a wonderful mix from the whole world including; USA, France, England, Spain, Australia, Brazil, Hungary, Sweden, Norway, Poland etc.

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## Principal Dancers

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[Gitte Lindström](#)
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[Mads Blangstrup](#)
[Marcin Kupinski](#)

## New York City Ballet (NYCB) dancers:

NYCB - Dancers

http://www.nycballet.com/Dancers.aspx

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A ballet doesn't — can't — exist without dancers. They carry within themselves the technique, knowledge, steps and understanding to bring countless works of art alive. They are the raw material, inspiration and institutional memory on which choreographers rely.

In these pages, you can learn about the marvelous dancers who are New York City Ballet today.

## American Ballet Theatre (ABT) Principal dancers:

Principals Soloists Corps De Ballet

Principals Soloists Corps De Ballet

Principals Soloists Corps De Ballet

Principals Soloists Corps De Ballet

[MAXIM BELGIERNOVSKI](#)
[ROBERTO BOLLE](#)
[HERNAN CORNIGAO](#)
[MARCLO GOMES](#)
[DAVID HALLBERG](#)
[PALOMA HERRERA](#)
[SILLIAN MURPHY](#)
[NATALIA ORIOVA](#)
[VERONICA PARI](#)
[POLINA SEMENOVA](#)
[HEE SRO](#)
[CORY STEARNS](#)

[IRINA DUBOVENKO](#)
[JULIE FANT](#)
[SOMARA REYES](#)
[JAN VASILEV](#)
[DIANA VIRNEVA](#)

## Cincinnati Ballet Principal dancers:



Cincinnati Ballet Dancers | Theme & Variation - George Balanchine | Photography: Peter Mueller

## The Company

### Principals



Cervilio Miguel Amador

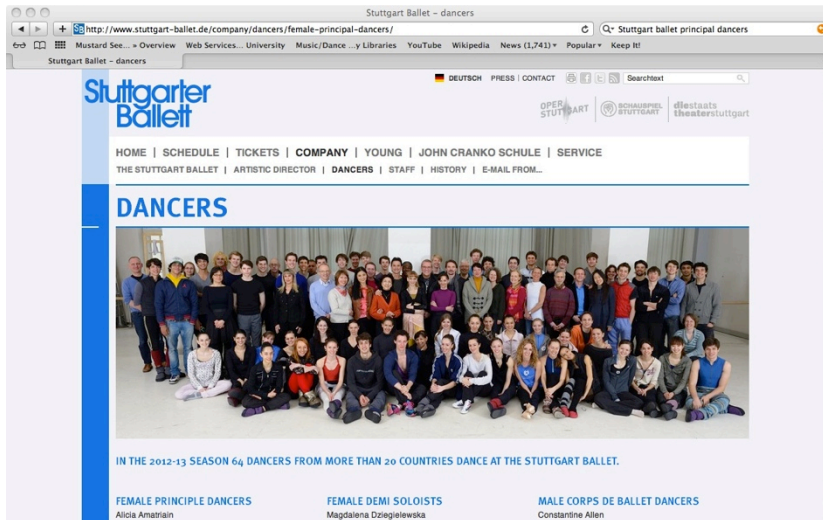


Sarah Hairston



Janessa Touchet

## Stuttgart Ballet dancers:



Though there are many factors that go into the making of principal dancers, the research indicates that having some or several of these European phenotypes appears to be positively linked with increased classroom attention, training and opportunities based on the presumption of success, the appearance of similarity, and the continuation of tradition. For women of color, not resembling a past ballerina may consciously or subconsciously send the message to those around them and even to themselves, that they have less potential, will receive less positive attention, training and opportunities because

in this particular area of appearance they do not fit within the established norm. Aesha Ash, a former corps de ballet dancer with the New York City Ballet and a former student at the School of American Ballet, said that, “it can sometimes feel like fighting.”



Aesha Ash ex-corps dancer NYCB



Tiler Peck current Principal NYCB

“It’s hard to be the only black dancer,” she said. “You feel separate, and you feel negated in a certain sense, and it’s not that people are trying to make you feel bad, but it’s just obviously around you. Everyone else can bond by similarity, and you have to make an effort, and making an effort makes you wonder, ‘Am I not being true to myself?’ It’s hard to be strong enough to be in that environment and to not feel wrong. It was very difficult. I fought my way through the school, and I felt like I continued fighting through the company — fighting with the image that I had of myself.”



Pacific Northwest Ballet Corps de Ballet Members April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009

The female ballet dancer of color is inarguably conspicuous in ballet. As a final slight, her history (the evidence that she ever existed) is oftentimes obscured as well. She once again comes colliding with the reality of her society *and* ballet's color biases. However, Aesha Ash, though frustrated with being singled out as one of three known African American women<sup>3</sup> to have ever danced for the New York City Ballet, did not give up, nor did she end her career as a dancer at the back of the corps de ballet<sup>4</sup>.

Instead, Ash indeed fought for and earned many opportunities to dance soloist and principal roles while with the NYCB from 1996 to 2003 because she was undeniably accomplished. What she didn't receive was the title of soloist or principal dancer or the status and compensation that accompanies these rankings. Being a principal dancer in a company such as the NYCB would have been a historical milestone for African American women and would also have bestowed on Ash the name: ballerina, one of the absolute highest honors for a female dancer. However, according to Ash in a 2007 article

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<sup>4</sup> "In 1933 Lincoln Kirstein wrote a passionate 16-page letter to his friend A. Everett Austin Jr., the director of the [Wadsworth Atheneum](#) in Hartford, introducing a man named [George Balanchine](#) and a dream: to remake ballet for America. The plan, as Kirstein wrote, was to have "four white girls and four white boys, about 16 years old, and eight of the same, negros.'" Kourlas, Gia.

by Gia Kourlas (and I quote), “[Peter Martins] (the artistic director of the NYCB) actually encouraged me to leave the company, because, in so many words, he told me that he didn’t see me really doing any more than what I was doing at City Ballet, period.” Though never acknowledged as a soloist or principal with the NYCB, Ash’s career was *not* typical. During her time with NYCB she was selected to be the dance double for Zoë Saldana in the year 2000 movie *Center Stage*. The opportunity to be a principal dance double as well as being only the third African American female dancer for NYCB makes her exceptional. Her abilities were recognized in Europe and the publicity from the popular movie made Ash stand out not as a black dancer, but as a *famous* one, able to take a literal leap across the pond to Lausanne, Switzerland and catapult her career at the Bêjart Ballet as a soloist in 2005. Soon afterward in 2007, she became a principal dancer for the San Francisco based Lines Contemporary Ballet.

Currently, Ash writes about her experiences as a successful ballerina and addresses the immense challenges she has had to face throughout her career because of her darker skin tone. She continues to dance as a successful freelancer with Christopher Wheeldon’s *Morphoses Ballet Company*, and she has become a social advocate for ballet dancers of color, in an effort to increase diversity in the world of ballet, and broaden the image of what a ballerina looks like. Her *Swan Dreams Project*, which sells notecards, posters and stationary with images of herself in pointe shoes and a white tutu features various city scenes and contrasts the beauty of the African American ballerina (Ash) against the harsh realities of urban life, but also her images appear to suggest that there is a place for ballet in these settings and for underserved populations.



Aesha Ash is not the only dancer whose career danced between the ballet and the entertainment worlds. Tai Jimenez, a former colleague is another example of what African American women have done to continue doing what they love and receiving recognition. She trained at top ballet schools in New York City before becoming a part of Dance Theatre of Harlem, first in the second company and later in the main company for 10 years beginning in her late teens. She performed on Broadway in 1998 as Ivy Smith in the show, “On the Town”, and as *Fran* in the film, “Letters to Cuba,” and in Debbie Allen’s “Soul Possessed” she played the role of *Ysabel*. She appeared in Prince’s, “Rave until the Year 2000” as a dancer, and she was *Mela* in the Hollywood film, “One Last Dance” with Patrick Swayze.

Unlike many of the dancers with the Dance Theater of Harlem, the world’s most internationally recognized black ballet company, Tai after having a career on Broadway, in film and in ballet, was able to find work at the *Boston Ballet*. At Boston, she was immediately hired as a Principal dancer and the dance world took notice. According to the 2007 *New York Times* article, “Tai Jimenez was the only *Dance Theater of Harlem* member to make a successful transition to a prominent ballet company. After freelancing and being turned down by both major New York companies [NYCB and ABT], she joined *Boston Ballet*, led by Mikko Nissinen, as a principal.” There were other DTH dancers who were hired by other prominent companies, however, the successful transition that is spoken of here, means that she was hired at a comparably large ballet company, and at the same rank that she held while with the DTH.

Though there are many factors that go into hiring a ballet dancer, Tai was a star

at *Dance Theatre of Harlem* and highly respected in part *because* she had experience on Broadway and in film. Boston Ballet took notice of her experiences as well. They called her an excellent role model, which she was, but her popularity as a featured dancer in a movie makes her someone to watch and sells tickets. Even the artistic director of Boston Ballet noticed this and said, “As an artistic director you seldom bring somebody in who is 35, but my reasoning was that she represented what a mature ballerina is with a really ideal work ethic. (Kourlas).” The question remains to be answered why the two New York ballet companies refused to hire such an exceptional and exemplary artist or other artists like her. Unfortunately, her talent, work ethic, and media involvement were not enough for American Ballet Theatre or New York City Ballet.

One of the youngest budding ballerinas of African American descent is Misty Copeland. Copeland, originally from Kansas City, Missouri and raised in Los Angeles is unlike many dancers including Ash and Jimenez because she started ballet late, at thirteen years old. She also had a challenging adolescence as the result of a well-publicized custody battle between her mother Sylvia DelaCarlos and her coaches the Bradleys. Coming from a disadvantaged single parent family with 6 kids, it was difficult for Misty to get the requisite amount of training to make up for her late start. The Bradley’s taking note of her talent offered to train her at there school 2 hours away and house her in their home. Her mother agreed, but soon wanted Misty back.

A nasty custody battle ensued for months with the fifteen year old Misty in the middle. Articles appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Dance Magazine*, and *Dance Spirit*, and her battle and the resulting publicity threatened to overshadow her budding talent and

career. Fortunately, the press also brought her into a national spotlight and she was offered a scholarship to American Ballet Theatre's summer dance program in 1999 where she was offered a contract in the second company. Though she turned the offer down to finish high school at home she joined the company a year later, and continued to climb in rank, becoming a *corps de ballet* dancer in 2001, winning the *Princess Grace Award* in 2002. Continuing her winning streak in 2007, she competed and won the *Erik Bruhn Contest* and in 2008 she was promoted to soloist rank.

This prestigious promotion to a soloist, the first experienced by an African American woman in two decades and only the third time ever that an African American woman has been selected for the honor, came before Misty had done a series of work for the famous pop star Prince. Prince, who had seen Misty and was intrigued by her talent, called her and asked her to be featured in his 2009 music video, *Crimson and Clover*. She also appeared in Prince's *Welcome to America Tour* and in Nice, France in 2010. Even without Prince and his \$250,000 donation to ABT, Misty was destined to succeed and is extremely talented.

What is most interesting is that *after* Misty had done work with Prince, she began to receive more press attention and more opportunities for featured classical roles: non-typical roles for African American women like the Giselle Pas de deux, and Don Quixote, as well as one of the fairies in the Sleeping Beauty. These roles are more exclusive to Principal dancers and Prima Ballerinas. Alexei Ratmansky a prominent choreographer has also taken an interest in featuring and creating roles for Copeland as well. The possibility of her romance with Prince suggested in some media outlets through

photos of her accompanying Prince at popular events also helps her to stay in the limelight and sell tickets for ABT's season. Though Copeland does not appear to have sought out media attention or Prince's admiration or collaborations, her career as a black ballerina doing classical roles has benefited from her popularity and prominence in popular culture. She is popular, people follow her, and she sells tickets. This is due to her talent, her beauty, her unusual coming of age story, and her engagements with mega pop star, Prince. Hopefully, her experience with Prince and her hard work will help her change history by becoming the first African American ballerina to have attained Principal status in any of the two national companies in the U.S., but only time will tell.

Misty Copeland, Tai Jimenez, and Aesha Ash are not the only dancers who have done things outside of ballet to successfully propel their careers, Janet Collins, Nora Kimball, Francesca Harper, Alexis Wilson, and China White have also been featured in films, and Broadway productions which helped enliven their careers here in the U.S. and abroad. However, it is unfortunate that the number of prominently featured dancers can be condensed into little more than a handful and that there are no black female dancers in the history of the United States who have danced with either of two national ballet companies as principal dancers.

There are many talented black female ballet dancers, but few are featured prominently. The one pictured here is Alicia Graf who was also turned down by the NYCB and ABT and found her home in the fourth highest grossing dance company in the U.S., the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, a modern dance and predominately black dance troupe based in New York.



Alicia Graf Mack  
Photographed by Andrew Eccles

Despite the obstacles the female ballerina of color faces from her society and from the world of ballet, a select few determined women, Aesha Ash, Tai Jimenez, and a few others have succeeded in achieving their aspirations.

Utilizing the opportunities available in popular culture entertainment, the woman of color is not only able to propel herself forward and upward in her ballet career, but is also able to impact society by being viewed by a larger audience beyond that of the ballet patron. When she is viewed, she has the opportunity to dispel some of the images that perpetuate colorism and to create change for herself, for future aspirants and for her society. Using the media exposure, the black ballerina assimilates herself into the mainstream ballet world and sheds some of her marginalized “blackness.” This allows her to be viewed as whiter, more similar to the oft-seen porcelain skinned, tutu clad, ballerina figurine, and capable even deserving of typically white-only roles in ballet. She is ultimately able to achieve her dreams as a recognized, and acknowledged, and perhaps even remembered ballerina.

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