

ARTHUR MITCHELL

b. March 27, 1934

d. September 19, 2018

PIONEERING BALLET DANCER

“The myth was that because you were black that you could not do classical dance. I proved that to be wrong.”

**He was the first
African-American
principal dancer of the
New York City Ballet.**

Arthur Mitchell was the first African-American to become a principal dancer with a major ballet company, opening the door to classical dance for people of all races. After achieving international stardom, he founded the Dance Theater of Harlem, the first black classical ballet company in the United States.

Mitchell was born in Harlem, New York. After his father's incarceration, he became the primary provider for his family at age 12. When Mitchell was in junior high, a guidance counselor spotted him dancing the jitterbug and encouraged him to audition

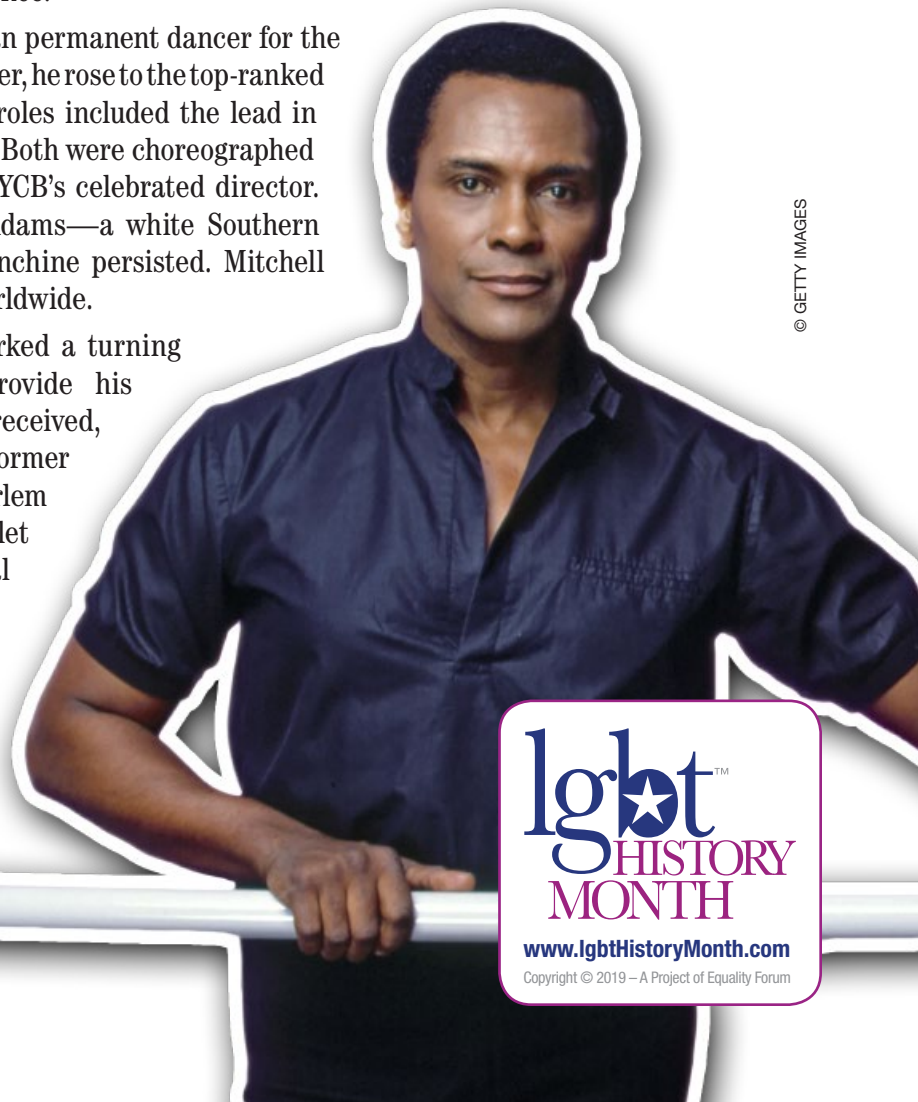
for the High School of Performing Arts. The school accepted Mitchell on a full scholarship. There, he explored modern dance and choreography and first encountered the racism inherent in the dance world. Though he was often passed over for projects in favor of less qualified white students, his exceptional talent and determination prevailed.

At 18, Mitchell was offered a scholarship from the preeminent School of American Ballet in New York. Despite the prevalent racism in classical dance and the urgings of his instructors to pursue other genres, Mitchell accepted. He was determined “to do in dance what Jackie Robinson did in baseball.” He would later describe himself as a “political activist through dance.”

In 1955 Mitchell became the first African-American permanent dancer for the renowned New York City Ballet (NYCB). One year later, he rose to the top-ranked position of principal dancer. His career-defining roles included the lead in “Agon” and Puck in “A Midsummer Night's Dream.” Both were choreographed specifically for him by George Balanchine, the NYCB's celebrated director. In “Agon,” the pairing of Mitchell with Diana Adams—a white Southern ballerina—was considered scandalous, but Balanchine persisted. Mitchell performed the role with white female partners worldwide.

The assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. marked a turning point in Mitchell's career. Determined to provide his community with the same opportunities he had received, Mitchell and Karel Shook—Mitchell's famous former ballet teacher—founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969. It became the first permanent black ballet company in America. Today, it is a multicultural dance institution with more than 300 students.

Mitchell received the Kennedy Center Honor in 1993 and the MacArthur Fellowship in 1994. In 1995 he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the School of American Ballet and the National Medal of Arts from President Clinton.



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