

Dancing Roots

Dance Theatre of Harlem in Eugene.

Fundamentalist Christians notwithstanding, when God breathed life into Adam's clay, men and women acquired the ability to dance. Dancing is the most human of the lively arts, and the Dance Theatre of Harlem is arguably the most human of American ballet companies. Its 44 dancers perform with a warmth and heart, not to mention technical skill, that inevitably rocks whatever theater in which they are dancing.

From South Africa, where in 1990 it was the first American company to perform for a post-apartheid audience that included Nelson Mandela, to Eugene's Silva Concert Hall, where the company performs at 8 pm on Wednesday night, February 4. DTH brings to the stage dancing that is as stylistically versatile as it is theatrical.

The company was founded in 1969 by Arthur Mitchell, the first African American to become a principal dancer in a major ballet company. Mitchell was a spectacularly fine dancer who originated roles in such George Balanchine masterworks as *Agon* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which he developed the role of Puck. Because of Mitchell's background and training with Balanchine, the Russian-American choreographer whose centennial is being celebrated this year, DTH has neo-classical ballet technique as its platform.

Writing of the company's first performances of *Agon*, the *New Yorker* critic Arlene Croce said that "the possibilities of black classicism"

were crystallized in it, and the dancers were "revitalized and released." While Balanchine works are on the company's Seattle program, where it heads next, the Eugene program demonstrates the company's neo-classical roots in rather different style than the master's.

Robert Garland's "Return" is performed on pointe to the recorded singing of James Brown and Aretha Franklin. "South African Suite" is a joint choreographic venture created by Mitchell and DTH dancer Augustus Van Heerden following the company's South African tour. Performed to music by the Soweto String Quartet, the suite of dances blends Anglo-European classical art and cultural iconography with the same brilliance accomplished in the company's *Creole Giselle*, staged by Frederick Franklin in a Louisiana bayou, and *Firebird* recast in a tropical paradise.

The program closes, as it often does, with *Douglas*, a Caribbean

wedding celebration involving the entire company in a lavishly costumed signature work, which makes a "joyful noise" with dancing that is the breath of life itself.

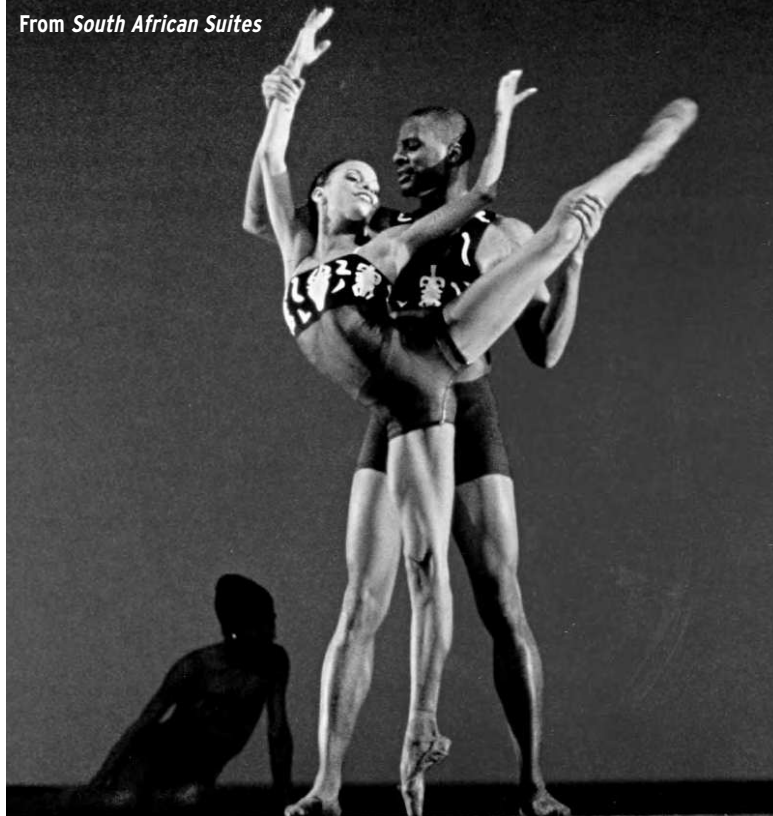
In a perfect world, DTH would be recognized not as a "multi-cultural" company practicing art as a social program but rather a 31-year old dance company that is one of the best in this country if not the world. But this is not a perfect world.

Mitchell is commendably committed to changing people's lives with the practice of art, which he has certainly done, and educating the public, which is certainly needed. His endeavors have been recognized with many honorary degrees, and in 1993 he was one of the youngest recipients of the Kennedy Center Awards for "an extraordinary lifetime of contributions to American culture through the performing arts."

The company is in town for only a short time, but there are several opportunities other than Wednesday night's performance to discover what this justifiably world-famous company is about. On Feb. 3 from 6:30 to 7:30 pm in Studio One at the Hult Center, a principal dancer will offer a master class in jazz dance at the intermediate to advanced levels. The class is free with a performance ticket, \$10 without; reservations are required. Please call Darrel Kau at 682-2057.

Two free public events: From 7 to 8 pm Feb. 3 at the Eugene Public Library's Bascom-Tykeson Room, company staff and performers will discuss the company's history and show video footage of the repertoire. And before Wednesday night's performance, dancers will discuss the evening's choreography in a pre-show session from 7 to 7:30 pm in Studio One. **EW**

From *South African Suites*



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