

DANCE THEATRE OF HARLEM



Submitted photo by Rachel Neville

Ashely Murphy, of Shreveport, Louisiana, was accepted into the DTH Company in 2003 and toured with them throughout the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Italy and Greece.

This multi-cultural ballet theater brings its neoclassical technique to Astoria for the first time

“Using arts to ignite the mind.” That’s the philosophy of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. The New York City-based school has been introducing youth to dance, and the DTH Ensemble has been inspiring audiences at schools, colleges and festivals with their lecture-demonstrations for decades. The famous touring company, however, was brought to a close in 2004.

Happily, the dance theater began touring again in 2013. It has been three decades since they performed in Oregon, and this Saturday, April 25, they will appear for the first time in Astoria, at the Liberty Theater.

The original touring company grew to 44 dancers and two semi trucks full of costumes and props; the result was over \$2,000,000 in debt. The new company is 18 dancers and they now travel by airplane. Their costumes suggest

that much material has been eliminated to save on overweight baggage expenses.

“We’ll never be 44 dancers again,” says Virginia Johnson, founding member and current artistic director. “The world has changed, but I don’t need a spectacle. I need to be exquisite and life-changing.”

Dance Theatre of Harlem was founded by two accomplished artists: dancer Arthur Mitchell and Washington-born choreographer and ballet teacher Karel Shook. In 1955 Mitchell was selected by George Balanchine to be the first African American dancer with the New York City Ballet. The next year he was the company’s principal dancer, performing in all its major ballets. Although he danced with white partners throughout the world, he could not perform on American television until 1965.



Submitted photo by Matthew Murphy

Dancers of the Dance Theatre of Harlem perform “Gloria.”

Mitchell had grown up on the streets and in the gangs of Harlem, his father in jail, but he was helped by a guidance counselor who encouraged him to apply to the High School of Performing Arts. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Mitchell returned, determined to provide opportunities for other children to experience dance. It was a difficult time to create a dance school in the inner city. Memories of riots were fresh, and police and military repression was always in the background. It required the same sort of miracle that brought Mitchell to prominence as a dancer.

Mitchell and Karel, who had been his teacher, began in a garage with \$25,000 of Mitchell’s own money. A year later he received \$350,000 in matching funds from the Ford Foundation. In 1971 the professional company made its debut at the Guggenheim Museum and later collaborated with the New York City Ballet.

Dance Theatre of Harlem was on its way. The company went on to perform around the world to sold-out performances and rave reviews, all the time maintaining the dance school in Harlem, which each year serves over a thousand children from all over the country. It has matured into a multi-cultural institution

Dance Theatre of Harlem

7:30 p.m. Saturday, April 25

Liberty Theater • 1203 Commercial St., Astoria

TicketsWest: 503-224-8499

Liberty Theater box office open from 2 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and two hours before the show

Tickets begin at \$25, with 20 percent off for students, seniors, and groups of eight or more

of dance and allied theater arts, without losing the incredible energy and verve for which it has always been known.

And now they have arrived in Astoria, Oregon.

The DTH repertoire springs from neoclassical technique, which enables artists to dance in a variety of styles. While the program varies, you will likely see works like “New Bach,” choreographed by Robert Garland, who has also choreographed for the New York City Ballet and the Royal Ballet. Christopher Huggins, formerly of the Alvin Alley Company, has choreographed “In the Mirror of the Mind.”

The high point of the evening may be “Dancing on the Front Porch of Heaven (Odes to Love and Loss),” choreographed by Ulysses Dove for the Royal Swedish Ballet in 1993. Dove, who died of AIDS-related disease three years later, had recently lost 13 close friends and relatives, including his father. Of his work Dove said, “I want to tell an experience in movement, a story without words, and create a poetic monument over people I loved.” The dance is set to Estonian composer Arvo Pärt’s “Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten.”

“Ballet is a complex and beautiful human endeavor, the experience of which can change lives,” says Virginia Johnson. “Ballet does have a color. It is the rich color of humanity. That’s what Dance Theatre of Harlem is about — opening minds to what is possible.”

Saturday will be a night to remember.

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Story by DWIGHT CASWELL