

Joe Wyatt

an Artist of Excellence

By Wanda Washington

Arthur Mitchell, Artistic Director of the World-Reowned Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) founded the DTH in the basement of Harlem Church in 1968. He has since produced quality dancers, and shaped the attitudes of winners. Portland has been blessed to attain a protege of Mitchell's work. Joe Wyatt former member of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and current Director of the School of Oregon Ballet Theatre shares his love for the arts, his admiration for Arthur Mitchell, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Fourty One year old Joe Wyatt was born in Trinidad West Indies from a loving and supportive family. Joe realized at an age that is usually considered too late that he wanted to become a classical ballet dancer. His late arrival did not stop him, Joe was determined to become the best he could be. "I was always the most ambitious and determined in the family, and I made the best and most of any situation beneficial to me. Dance encouraged me the most, and I go where I feel I can be appreciated. People felt I was talented, and in return I worked harder."

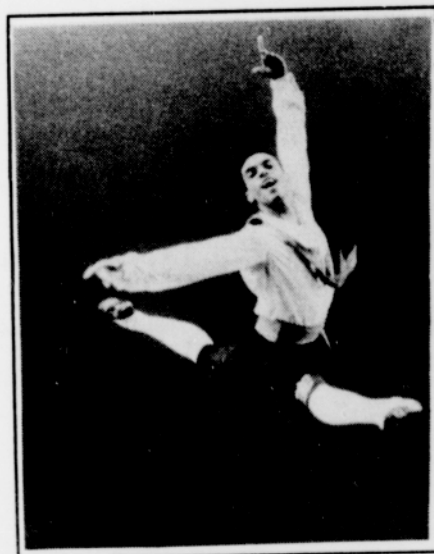
As a swimmer on the National Swim Team Joe's father always recognized his son's athletic ability, and encouraged him to go after his dream to become a classical ballet dancer. From Trinidad to New York Joe ventured on to attend college at the State University of New York in Brockport. There Joe took his first formal ballet class. Joe first read about the Dance Theatre of Harlem as a freshman in college. In 1971 he saw the DTH perform. Joe was so over taken by their performance he recalls saying to an instructor, "wow it would be nice to be in that dance company." The instructor replied, "aren't you too old." Still those words of discouragement did not stop him. In the summer of 1972 he attended Jacobs Pillows Dance Festival in Lee Massachusetts. There he had photos taken and sent them to Arthur Mitchell. Arthur Mitchell called Joe back for an audition. Upon auditioning Joe was accepted as an apprentice, giving him the opportunity to dance. After six months he became a member of DTH dance company. "One of my most memorable performances was my first solo in 1974. It was a ballet called Wings choreographed by Louis Johnston. It as very special. It dealt with the beauty of how birds fly."

Joe admits that he was a little over confident when he first came to DTH. It wasn't until he accepted the drive, determination and strength that Arthur Mitchell had to offer him that he truly excelled as a dancer. "Arthur Mitchell took me apart and made me realize that I had a lot to learn. Once he made that very clear, and he did, I took the challenge. Arthur Mitchell has a vision of the dancer that you can't see. I needed a third eye looking at me. Arthur Mitchell makes you into the dancer that he thinks and knows you can be. He is strong willed and a strong disciplinarian, and he molds you into perfection." Joe compares what Arthur Mitchell did for him to a young man who came to a Japanese master. When the young man came he told the Japanese master all that he knew, saying I can do this, and I can do that. The master replied, I can not do anything with you until you can come to me not knowing anything. In order to learn from you teacher one must come like an empty vessel ready to be filled. Arthur Mitchell is truly a remarkable human being says Joe, "He does everything and anything he can for his dancers to make sure you are happy, content, and well taken care of. In return he wants 100% dedication, and commitment as a dancer."

Speaking of racism in the art Joe has this to say. "As a dancer involved in a black dance company you were sheltered from that. Arthur Mitchell took the brunt of the battle so his dancers could survive and concentrate on their art. Being a member of DTH Arthur Mitchell fought and still fights all of our battlee. He is a very strong and determined man who wants to accomplish something for his company and his people and he does all he can do for that cause."

Mitchell endured so much as a dancer himself. In 1954 he graduated and was looking for work as a dancer. He was told no several times because he was black. Mitchell did not allow race to be a deterrant. He had the opportunity for two scholarships one at Bennington college the other at the School of American Ballet. Mitchell chose the School of American Ballet. There he was encouraged and mentored by George Balanchine. Mitchell wanted to be different and special, and he made his dreams come true.

He also helped keep the Dream of Martin Luther King jr. alive by forming the DTH as



Top: Joe Wyatt Former member of the DTH and Current Director of the School of Ballet Theatre.

Middle Left: Richard Witter in a performance of "Flower Festival In Genzano" with Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Middle Right: Charmaine Hunter as the Firebird in a performance by Dance Theatre of Harlem June 1991. Charmaine was recommended to Arthur Mitchell by Joe Wyatt.

Left: Arthur Mitchell Director and founder of the DTH.

He also helped keep the Dream of Martin Luther King jr. alive by forming the DTH as a reaction to Martin's death. In one of Martin Luther king's speeches he says, "That my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." This speech reminds Joe of the DTH. "DTH has a lot of character. The repetoire of DTH is a company created with a classical base never forgetting it's ethnic roots. Creating beautiful lines, beautiful bodies that just blow you away with talent. Arthur Mitchell has created something that all balck people can be proud of, and it is a wonderful statement of the very highest quality thta our people can produce. What Arthur Mitchell is saying is that with opportunity we can strive to be as quality as DTH. (continued on page 11.)