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Ballet Review



**The Caramel Variations by Ian Spencer Bell
from Ballet Review Spring 2012**

Cover Photograph by Stephanie Berger, BAM: Silas Riener
in Merce Cunningham's *Split Sides*.

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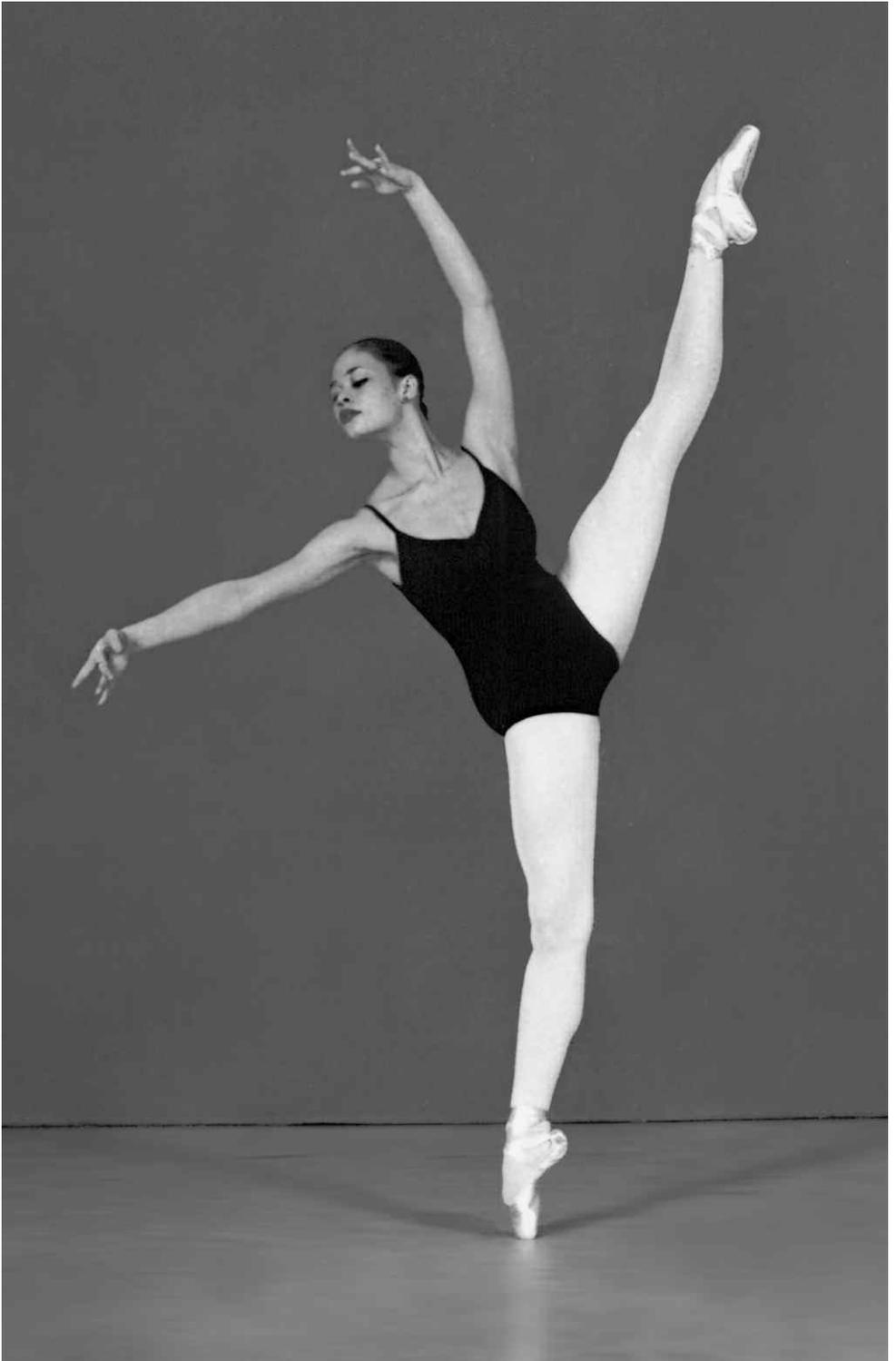
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Cover Photograph by Stephanie Berger, BAM: Silas Riener
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Natalie Wright. (Photo courtesy of Natalie Wright)

The Caramel Variations

Ian Spencer Bell

I am interested in black and mixed-race dancers, ballerinas in particular, because I see almost none in the major classical companies. Like me, the gay boy who didn't want to be Prince Siegfried but Odette, they too are "other." Now, when I am teaching "swan arms" to my students I think of Darci Kistler and Julie Kent. I wish an image of a black ballerina doing swan arms came to mind.

I was fourteen when I met Natalie Wright. She was walking toward me, or dancing, it was hard to tell which. We were in front of Studio One, on the fifth floor of Lincoln Center's Rose Building, at New York City Ballet's School of American Ballet. Her arms and legs were so long that when she walked her whole body seemed to make a swinging motion, like a chandelier earring, sparkling, dangling, golden. I fell in love with her immediately. She was everything I wanted to be: an exaggeratedly proportioned ballerina. She was exotic, too – caramel-colored, blond-streaked hair, eyes darker than the chocolate she ate every afternoon.

I'm not sure I knew she was black, or half black, rather. She was one of four black girls I befriended during my three summers at SAB. I recall only five black girls and four black boys during those months. I don't know why I was drawn to the black girls, other than maybe because my mother, whom everyone in our small Southern town thought was a "communist," made friends with the few black ladies who worked in our church, loved our nanny like a best friend, and picked up the old black guys in front of the Safeway and drove them wherever they needed to go. Maybe it was because I was a gay boy who, like the black girls, felt more than slightly out-of-place in that straight, white world.

Natalie wasn't black like anyone I'd ever

known. She didn't wear her hair in tight braids with pink plastic poodle barrettes, like my friend Andrea. She didn't shout and curse and slap my face and tell me she deserved to be the lead in the school musical, the way Porscha had. And she wasn't like those timid, overly polite girls who hid in their mother's skirt during one of those all-churches picnics, where we'd see the Baptists once a year.

At SAB, Natalie didn't call people out like Nikkia had: "Oh, hell no. Someone tell that white girl to stop staring at me." And she did not have a name like Aesha. She dressed like the ninety-nine other girls there: short denim shorts, Gap Ts, Keds, Lipsmackers lip gloss, hair tightly slicked back in a bun. In ballet class she was the same, too: black leotard, European pink tights. She looked like another girl I had fallen in love with, Riolama Lorenzo. I thought maybe Natalie was Latina, like Rio. They were both from Miami.

It was Natalie's third summer at SAB in 1993 when we met. Balanchine's muse, Suzanne Farrell, had recommended her for a scholarship and had taken her into the school a year early. Natalie had the highest extensions of anyone at SAB, except maybe Maria Kowroski. She could extend her leg to the front, and it would nearly touch her nose. To the side it tickled her ear. And when she lifted her leg to the back in arabesque, teachers occasionally looked concerned or told her to bring her leg down.

When Natalie stood on pointe, her feet looked gooey, like that caramel I mentioned earlier. She could turn three perfect pirouettes to the right, and beat her legs in the air as fast and neatly as anyone. She was also musical. In the late afternoon Natalie would take her hair down from her bun and let it loose on her shoulders and the sun would come in from the windows high above the studio. Then, she looked ready to dance one of Balanchine's ponytail ballets.

I was surprised and upset when Natalie called to tell me that she would not dance in NYCB. We were sixteen or seventeen then, and she was at the school full time. Her breasts

had developed, and the faculty told her that the company would not take her. They said her shoulders were too broad.

So she moved out to Seattle, to train at Pacific Northwest Ballet, a kind of sister company to NYCB. We were in the same class there. At PNB, Natalie was the only black person in the school and company. There were two other darkish girls in our class, an Italian girl and a Latina. They weren't even that dark. There were no black or brown boys. I don't think there were even any black people working in the building at the time.

In class the main correction aimed at Natalie was to dance less. "You move too much," they told her. Our favorite teacher told her she was "too sensual" for the company. Natalie was sensual all right: she used all of her senses to dance, as great dancers do. We weren't aware then that our teacher was saying the same thing SAB had implied: You're not right for the company because you have breasts like a woman and you move like a woman and it threatens the way we see ballet.

Natalie never did get a job in a major company. She pursued teaching dance in outreach and training programs in Miami, New York, and Los Angeles. She's teaching at Los Angeles Ballet now, and I talk to her nearly every day over the telephone. When I hear her, sometimes I imagine her walking, dancing, toward me.

Bell: How did you begin dancing?

Wright: My mom and whole a bunch of other moms organized classes out of a house. I took creative movement there. I don't know for how long. I first started ballet when I was five. I started with Miss Mahr, at the Martha Mahr School of Ballet. My mom had looked at a whole bunch of studios. As soon as she walked into this one, she knew she was going to send me there because they were so orderly. My mom was a schoolteacher – and English.

Each class we had to enter in a march, and when we were older a polonaise with our hands on our waist. Everything was in height order. After we entered, we made a perfect semicir-

cle and curtsied to the teacher and then to the pianist. Then we marched to the barre and did the entire barre in that same height order. We wore leotards that were different colors, a color for each class level, with matching belts. I think my mom thought it was run like a ship, and that's where she wanted me.

There was this girl at Martha Mahr named Elita Jarvis, and I remember thinking she was so beautiful. She had an incredibly beautiful face, and she was very tall, and her body was very long, and she danced very long.

Bell: What did you look like?

Wright: My hair was very fair and my eyes were always really dark – and the nose is unmistakable. I'm sure I had a little bit of tan. I was by no means white. My skin has never been white. Being in Miami, there were lots of people of color. There were girls there who were my color or darker. There were Cubans, a Brazilian girl who was darker than me. We were all variations of caramel. But I do not recall a black girl.

I have a distinct memory of being in second grade and the kids pointing out that my mother, a white woman, was dropping me off, and my dad, a black man, was picking me up. I remember the kids noticing it and me noticing that it might be unusual or unfavorable. That was the first time it was presented.

In first or second grade, I remember a girl named Xotcele. Her mom was white, her dad was black. I remember understanding that she was mixed like me. I thought, We have this thing in common: you're like me and our parents look the same. It was later in public school, in third grade, that it became an issue for the other kids.

I also remember early in my life that my dad used to go to city events, as an architect, in "black parts" of the community. I remember going to the parties and thinking, I don't look like the inner-city kids. I remember my dad being on the roof once and a neighbor, an old Jew, called the cops because she thought a black man was trying to break into the house. It was Miami Beach, and at the time, everyone was old and Jewish. The cops came, and

my dad had to go into the house to get his driver's license to prove that he lived there. My mother had no tolerance for social injustice. And I do remember her giving people tongue-lashings over things like that.

Bell: Were you perceived as black?

Wright: I don't know. To so many people, I look Hispanic, and since I'm also from Miami, people just assume you are. Suki Schorer called me Natalia for years. I remember in my later years at SAB Roland [Culler] saying to me, "I remember the first time I saw you, I knew you: that's a caramel girl with blond hair, or light-skinned black girl with light hair." There was that kind of chiming in on how I looked.

In retrospect, I think about how, when I got a little older, my body wasn't that different from white kids'. It was that my feet were different from black kids'. I remember when I was a kid other kids saying, "You black, but you got white feet."

Bell: Was there a dancer at SAB you wanted to be like?

Wright: Not really. And I never was very interested in the culture. I never read the ballet books or kept the programs. I did collect a few pairs of pointe shoes. I had some from the Royal Ballet, when I performed with them at Lincoln Center. I was maybe twelve or thirteen. I wonder how much of that was because I was swept up with the other girls collecting them.

But I don't ever recall wanting to be like a dancer in City Ballet or ABT. I had an affinity for certain ballets. I kind of looked up to them, like one day I might want to do that. I do remember the Wendy Whelan craze. I remember looking up at her picture on the sixteenth floor, taking time to look at her workshop photo. She wasn't a soloist or anything. She was just one of the girls. I wanted to dance everything from *Agon*, anything from *Four T's*. Interesting that they are the black-and-white ballets.

Bell: Were you aware of black ballerinas then?

Wright: There was Andrea Long, who had been in the company [NYCB]. I was in school with Aesha Ash. She was black. I was aware

that she was black, that she was black in a white environment.

I felt I had an understanding with her not because we were the only people of color at SAB, but because I grew up in Miami, and I felt like I could imagine what it was like for her to be a black girl living a normal life in Rochester, where she grew up. I knew of black dancers at Dance Theatre of Harlem. I believe I knew of Lauren Anderson at Houston Ballet.

Bell: Do you feel like you were treated different from your peers because of the color of your skin?

Wright: I was different because of my D boobs. I remember when SAB told my mother that my shoulders were too broad. My mom had asked for a meeting. They told her that I hadn't developed as they thought I would, and that my shoulders were too broad. I remember my mom telling me and me crying in the cafeteria downstairs. I wasn't upset that I wasn't going to get a contract. I felt like a disappointment to everyone: SAB, my teachers in Miami, my family.

I remember feeling a sense of shame about my body then. Looking back fifteen years, I feel I can be objective now. Even if I had felt like there was racism, I'm not sure how I would have perceived it. I did have a sense of "other" there, but I wouldn't say I was ever singled out.

I told Natalie I'd call her back. I was thinking of Misty Copeland, the only black female soloist in American Ballet Theatre. Misty is black like Natalie is black: caramel or mocha or dark cream, depending on the makeup and lighting. I see her as I saw Natalie: an extraordinarily attractive dancer with legs and feet so perfectly pretty for ballet that her racial ambiguity is secondary to her identity as a dancer. Misty is one of two black women in the company and one of three black women to have ever been a soloist in ABT. There has never been a black female principal dancer in ABT.

The first time I saw Misty dance was in ABT's Studio Company. I watched her perform the wedding pas de deux from *The Sleeping Beau-*

ty. Princess Aurora is one of the big three – along with the leads in *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* – for a classical ballerina, designed to show off your technique and style. Copeland was exquisite. She was in control of the slightest details: the tilt of her head, the shape of her hands, the height of her legs. But in the decade she has danced for ABT, I have rarely seen her perform these classical roles. I see her onstage in contemporary work mostly. I wondered if it had anything to do with the color of her skin.

I met Misty in the lounge at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, uptown near Lincoln Center. She had just come from a late afternoon rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera House. She strolled in wearing black leggings and tall shoes and a chain necklace and hoop earrings. She was glamorous, sexy too, ready to work an MTV red carpet. But her soft manner and thoughtful gaze dispelled any notions of her as a strident starlet.

Up close, Misty has all the attributes of a classical ballerina: delicate hands, gentle countenance, warm and sweet and friendly. When she sat, she sat like Giselle on that little wooden bench in the first act of that “white ballet,” so called because of all those long white girls in long white tutus.

I had arrived early and was having tea and thinking about the opening of Nella Larsen’s 1929 novella, *Passing*. Irene Redfield is seated at a table in a fancy Chicago hotel restaurant observing her color rise as a woman stares at her. Irene wonders, “Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?”

Thinking of Misty, I was wondering if passing for white or Latina has helped the twenty-eight-year-old achieve success in our “national ballet company.” I asked her if she had ever read the Larsen book. She said she hadn’t. She had been reading *Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority*, by Tom Burell.

Bell: How do you identify yourself?

Copeland: My mom told me I was black. I

filled out paperwork at school that said I was black. Those were the boxes I checked.

Misty laughed. She laughs a lot. But she’s serious when discussing race. Both of Misty’s parents were mixed race. Sylvia DelaCerna, Misty’s mother, was Italian and black, adopted and brought up by a black woman and her black husband in Kansas City, Missouri. DelaCerna’s adoptive mother worked for child services. DelaCerna grew up to be a professional cheerleader for the Kansas City Chiefs. Misty’s father split for Chicago when Misty was a child and left her mom with six kids.

Copeland: My mother was my role model. Growing up I felt close to Mariah Carey because she is a mixed-race woman. I’d dance to Mariah – lyrical, flowy movements – and I’d choreograph on friends.

Misty’s mother choreographed on her for talent shows. But Misty didn’t pursue dance training until she was thirteen. They were living in California, and at DelaCerna’s urging, Misty auditioned for the San Pedro Middle School drill team. Misty choreographed a routine to George Michael’s “I Want Your Sex.” She became the team captain: “If I’m going to do this, I’m going to be captain.”

Elizabeth Cantine, her drill coach, led a ballet class in the gym and encouraged Misty to dance. She told her she had the body and feet for it. The Boys and Girls Club offered free classes, and Misty started taking ballet there, on the basketball court. At first, she watched from the bleachers but eventually was coaxed onto the court.

Shortly after, Misty began training with Cynthia Bradley, at San Pedro Dance Center. Bradley was like a mother, and Misty began taking two classes a day, five days a week. She was on pointe after a month and was accepted to San Francisco Ballet School, where she studied for the summer. She continued her training at the Lauridsen Ballet Centre, in Torrance, and eventually won the Music Center Spotlight Award, in Los Angeles.

Copeland: I never thought of my color during that time. I can’t remember a black girl around, but it never bothered me. My talent

got me everywhere. I was looked at as a dancer. All of that changed my first year in ABT. A board member said, "There hasn't been a black woman in the corps de ballet in fifteen years." That had always lingered in the back of my mind. It was the first time I thought my talent wasn't going to get me what I wanted.

Then that thing in the back of my mind made me begin to question myself. I was becoming an adult. I was sixteen or seventeen. I felt lonely in the company. I felt a huge separation from the other dancers. I was relieved when Danny Tidwell and Eric Underwood [black corps de ballet dancers] joined. They could relate to little things, like a new musical artist.

I felt pigeonholed into contemporary work. I wasn't trained in tap, jazz, or hip-hop. I'm a classically trained ballet dancer. Mark Mor-

ris' *Gong* was one of the first things I did, and they saw I was a good mover. It's easier to slip me into neoclassical ballets. I don't think I pass. For the white ballets I powder my body.

In all the photos, I think I look darker than all of them – even the Thai and Spanish girls. *Swan Lake* is the pinnacle of classical ballet. I can't imagine any company giving it to a black woman. Black women are thought of as the complete opposite of what a ballerina is supposed to be: black women are thought to be loud and strong. I feel like they picture black women as big butts and flat feet. Company members say, "We don't think of you as black."

Black women in general aren't encouraged to do ballet because they know what the outcome will be. The girls I mentor are told, "Maybe you should try a contemporary company," so not many even go to the auditions.



Misty Copeland. (Photo: Weiferd Watts)

Complexion has something to do with it. There are no dark-skinned women except Lauren Anderson at Houston Ballet.

I had never considered anything like that, being a principal, until I saw Lauren Anderson on the cover of *Dance Magazine*. People say I'm the first, but I'm not. I had to do the research myself. There were other women: Janet Collins, Raven Wilkinson, Virginia Johnson, Nora Kimball, Anne Benna Sims. My career would be completely different if I were darker. I'm not sure I'd be given as many opportunities as I'm given now. It's like the ballet world hasn't changed since the 1950s.

I called Natalie back. She was pacing, or walking. Often in the late afternoon when we talk, she is hiking up to the Griffith Park Observatory.

Wright: I'm acutely aware of the lack of minorities in the arts. I am aware of just how unique it is to be a minority in ballet – not unique like special, but unique like atypical. Ballet is an elitist art form – well, the culture is, I'm not sure the art form is. Because of that, there is not really a large black audience for classical dance.

I think the reason there is not a large black audience is because ballet companies don't think to include minorities in their audience because they haven't done so for four hundred years, so they don't really create an inclusive repertory or have black dancers. As an audience member, what attracts you is the ability to recognize yourself in the work. And if you don't see yourself, you can't be drawn in.

Minorities are not given quality classical ballet training. There are thousands of ballet schools in the United States, but only a fraction of them offer quality training. And only a fraction of those schools focus on teaching children of color. I don't think that schools are even conscious of that. That lack of consciousness and inclusion creates no desire for families of color to participate.

I'm not even touching on poverty. As far as socioeconomic problems, ballet is a very expensive hobby – for any neighborhood. It's

notoriously expensive. So poor kids can't get into schools. Then there is this mentality that blacks don't want to do it, but it's just that they haven't had the opportunity.

There is so much about ballet that seems unattainable. And there has been no template for young black girls to see themselves. During a lecture-demonstration, Ruth [Weisen, director of the Thomas Armour Youth Ballet and the Miami Conservatory] had a little girl tell her that she wanted to be a ballerina, but that she knew she couldn't because she is black.

When Ruth looked onstage, she saw only me – and I looked Puerto Rican. That was the spark for Ruth to begin her entire outreach program. She said to herself, I can't ever do a performance with only white kids again.

Natalie stopped walking. She was panting. "Who's going to the ballet anyway?"

Next I called my old friend from SAB, Riolama Lorenzo. She does Odette in Christopher Wheeldon's *Swan Lake* at Pennsylvania Ballet, where she is a principal dancer. It was a Sunday morning. Her three-month-old baby girl was sleeping and her four-year-old son and husband were at church. Her voice was soft and warm, and I could picture her deep-set eyes and long dark hair. She told me she was retiring soon, in February, dancing some ballets made for her by another SAB friend, Pennsylvania Ballet choreographer-in-residence, Matthew Neenan.

The last time I saw her dance was at New York's City Center in *Serenade*. She and principal dancers Amy Aldridge and Arantxa Ochoa made the ballet look new to me. I recall being told that when Balanchine wanted to make a ballet look fresh, he put a young dancer in the lead role. These women danced with the freedom of sixteen-year-olds.

Bell: You've said you don't remember exactly when you started ballet. Your mother, Maria Eugenia Lorenzo, danced for the National Ballet of Cuba. In 1980, during the Mariel Boatlift, when you were two years old, your family left Havana for Miami.

Lorenzo: I would go to ballet with my



Riolama Lorenzo with Sergio Torrado in *Giselle*. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, Pennsylvania Ballet)

mom and sit in the corner and watch. We had just come from another a country and had no money. I remember my mom complaining about how her older students never knew what they were doing. One time, when someone wasn't there, I raised my hand and said, "I know it." I was five, and I knew the steps, and mom organized the older girls around me.

Bell: You began formal ballet training at the Martha Mahr School of Ballet, where you and Natalie met, and continued training at the Harid Conservatory in Boca Raton, and then at the School of American Ballet, first for the summer and then the school year.

Lorenzo: I never realized I was so different until I went to SAB. Never did it occur to

me that I was dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-skinned, and curved. Then it got all wrong.

It got even worse when I joined NYCB in 1995. There wasn't any particular moment at SAB. I think Nikkia [Parish] had a lot to do with that. She was the only black girl, and I was the only Hispanic girl. We stuck together like flies on flypaper. We weren't around any other people. We didn't feel accepted, and we didn't want to put ourselves in a position where we felt uncomfortable. We pretty much isolated ourselves.

There was an incident at City Ballet. It was during one of my many meetings with Peter [Martins] to talk about my weight and my body. He basically said that he would use me more if I looked more like Wendy [Whelan]. Even if I starved myself to death, my body would never look like Wendy's.

I met with Peter more often because I did not have that typical body; American women don't have the Cuban curves and the rounded butt and hips and breasts that come with being Hispanic. It didn't matter how thin I was, those things weren't going to go away. That's my heritage.

There was a joke going around NYCB when I joined: If you want to be promoted, you'd better be blond. There were very few brunettes in the upper ranks when I was there. I tried highlights one summer and ended up looking like JLo. It didn't really work. There are the light-skinned Hispanics, like Puerto Ricans, and then the darker ones, like the Dominicans. The light-skinned Hispanics can get away with more. They sometimes look like brunettes.

Bell: You left NYCB in 2000, following an injury, and joined Pennsylvania Ballet two years later.

Lorenzo: For once I had the correct hair color. Roy [Kaiser, artistic director of Pennsylvania Ballet] likes his brunettes. Both Amy Aldridge and Arantxa Ochoa have dark hair.

Sometimes younger dancers see their differences as a crutch, or a disability. You just have to accept who you are and that will shape you. I was more of a Jerry [Robbins] dancer. Most of my principal roles at NYCB were

in Robbins ballets. He always struggled with being different. I wasn't that cookie-cutter ballerina. Jerry knew that about me. If it had not been for him, I wouldn't have lasted six months.

I then called Nikkia Parish. I wanted to hear her voice. Nikkia grew up in Fort Worth, Texas. She began ballet at a school named for Sojourner Truth, and was recruited by a dancer named General Hambrick to attend the Gayle Corkery School of Ballet.

Parish: It was an extremely segregated city. There's still a place in Fort Worth called White Settlement. Can you believe that? When I was in third grade, I got the opportunity to attend a private school. There were like five minorities. Pakistani was more acceptable than plain old black.

That was something I learned from the third grade. It was something I already had to deal with, prior to going into professional dance. Where I lived, everyone looked like me. Getting the opportunity to go away every summer was not something that kids in my neighborhood were exposed to. My dad told me, "You can go anywhere you want to go, but don't forget where you came from. They won't forget. At any given moment they might throw it against you."

My experience at SAB was extremely difficult. In the summer of 1993, I got called into the office. [Nathalie] Gleboff, Kay [Mazzo], Suki [Schorer], and Susie [Susan Pilarre] were there, by Gleboff's desk. They said, "We understand that your mother has made arrangements for you to stay, but we don't think you'll ever be a professional ballerina. Your body has changed. And we heard you're really smart. We heard you people" – and I'm quoting – "we heard you people are really good at modern." It took everything in me to not burst into tears.

You can't be shaped like a twelve-year-old boy forever. I had to spend the rest of the summer session with a plastered-on smile like, I know they don't want me. But my mom said, "Well, pumpkin, we've already made financial commitments." They made huge sacrifices for



Nikkia Parish. (Photo: Rosalie O'Connor, Washington Ballet)

me. That was a very difficult time for me. I had to be there knowing they didn't want me because I didn't fit their mold. You get your junk. It all starts to fill in.

I was so fortunate to room with Riolama. She felt the same way. She's Cuban American. There was nothing I could identify with the other girls. I remember there was this one little girl, giggling. I heard out of her mouth, "I don't need a boyfriend. I have ballet."

I thought to myself, This girl is going to kill

herself. That was a turning point in my life. I determined that ballet was not going to define me. I was going to make it my own.

I quit for a couple of years and enrolled at TCU [Texas Christian University]. Fernando Bujones was the choreographer in residence. I took classes as an elective. I got my love for it back. There were people there who wanted to be there and teachers who wanted to teach. It wasn't a cattle mill. It wasn't: Who's right for the slaughter? We've got to cut you up in pieces first. I was able to enjoy it for me.

My teacher asked, "Are you ready to audition?" It was a total setup. She got me. It was for The Rock School at Pennsylvania Ballet. These little girls got all this glitter on, pink tights, bun pulled back tight. I was not prepared to audition. I had on cut-off tights, a ponytail with hair stickin' out. I was eighteen. I already looked like a grown ass woman with all these girls. I'm go-

ing to an audition with all these white folks! I remember them looking at me with this kind of, What is she doing here?

Then I heard it, this lady say, "You stand next to her." I was thinking, I know why you tellin' your daughter to stand next to me. And this woman gets this grin on her face. I was thinking, If I could take your ass outside right now . . . I'm the only black girl in there. It's like having a 'hood rat in there with all those cookie-cutter girls.

Class started. Gloria Govin taught. Once center started, I remember my dance teacher telling me that that lady leaned over to her and said, "Where does she train? She's beautiful." Now you want to know where I train? Save it! I don't need it!

When class was over, I started walking toward the back of the room, putting my stuff in my bag. Everyone was standing, waiting to hear their numbers. They called my number, and I thought, What the hell? Bo Spassoff, the director of the school, asked, "Were you auditioning today?" I said, "I'm sorry if I was in the way. I didn't mean to be disrespectful with my attire. I was just trying to get my confidence back." He said, "Can we offer you a scholarship for the summer? We really think the artistic director should see you. It will be like an extended audition."

That was what launched my career with Pennsylvania Ballet. You know Heidi [Cruz, former corps de ballet dancer at Pennsylvania Ballet]. Honey, we would always ki. [laughs] They had to keep us as bookends. If she was stage left, I was stage right. I loved it there because we were in a city that was very mixed, and they tried their hardest not to see color. At the end of the day, it's not something they can avoid.

For whatever reason, I don't think ballet has progressed to that point. It shouldn't have taken Misty as long as it did to become a soloist. Heidi did a lot of parts, but I don't think she ever became a soloist. It's crazy. Not one of us wants to think it's a conspiracy. It's not in our nature. But this is becoming too obvious. I'm sure you understand it as a gay man.

Bell: So you left Pennsylvania Ballet to perform with Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Parish: "That Girl That Talks Back To Me" – that's what Arthur Mitchell called me. I sat in a meeting with all of DTH one day. Eric Underwood [former DTH and ABT dancer, now a soloist at the Royal Ballet] muttered, "This is going to be funny," and I said, "We need to get a priest in here." Mitchell said, "You think you can leave me? They don't want you anywhere else." I couldn't believe it. The older dancers

were nodding and crying: "You're right, you're so good to us . . ." but I thought, This is some slave stuff. He was looking at me and saying, "Those of you from other places . . ."

After having dealt with Arthur for a period of time, I get it. You go off your meds, boo. But to see the older dancers nodding in agreement! Eric and I did come from other places. To us, it was any other company. You would think there you would feel more in place. But I never felt so out of place in my life. It was the complete opposite of what it should be.

I started to be Sojourner Truth. If there was an audition anywhere, I'd ask, "Anyone need a ride? There's an audition? Meet me at 145th Street, and we'll drive down." I started wearing pink tights. I got very SAB – leotards with spaghetti straps. If I hadn't learned anything else from my experiences I'd better at least have the right outfit on, if I'm going to have a tan darker than everyone else. Pink tights to us are like white tights. I got a lot of backlash from the other dancers: "You're not being loyal. This company is for us and by us." I just knew it was so wrong and I didn't need to be there.

That's when I got my position with Washington Ballet. I have always been typecast. Every director tells me, "We see you in a strong, powerful role, a Hippolyta. I never felt comfortable with that. I liked the soft roles, the Auroras. We might hold muscles in different places. But why do we immediately get typecast into athletic roles?"

I have a degree in business management. They didn't expect me to ask questions about the contract. At the end of the first season, he [Septime Webre, artistic director] said, "I think we may have had a rocky start. But people love you onstage. I want us to work on our working relationship. I think what you want to do . . . well, I read an article about how black women are getting typecast as a sassy sister girl kind of thing."

He was suggesting that maybe I not speak up for myself so that people didn't take it the wrong way. I never did any of that kind of

thing: "Hold up, hold up, you tellin' me my money goin' be late?!"

In the second season, the dancers wanted to join the union. I got blamed for it. I was already a card-carrying member. I could not have changed twenty people's minds. I don't have any bitterness against the industry because I'm a black woman in a white field. My bitterness came from them not caring for the dancers the way they should have.

Bell: You took a leave of absence from Pennsylvania Ballet to complete your degree at TCU, and now you work in federal contracting. Did you ever think about teaching?

Parish: I don't mind teaching black students. I don't want to teach their parents: "Those shoes cost too much." "Sorry I'm late - I had to get my nails done." Because the ballet is not something they were exposed to, they do not take it seriously. People, white and black, don't encourage their kids to do something seriously.

I started thinking about our old classmate Aesha Ash. She retired from dancing a few years ago and is a stay-at-home mom. Aesha has been working on a photo essay, *The Swan Dreams Project*. The images picture her in a white practice tutu on the streets of her hometown of Rochester, New York. She is just as I remember: assertive, bold.

Ash: It's bigger than just bringing a kid to the ballet. It's bigger than saying let's hire some more black dancers. It didn't take me seeing an African American woman to start ballet. My mom would see me dancing. And I started up the street. They thought I was go-

ing to be a Broadway dancer. A guest teacher came and said I had a lot of talent for ballet. It was really hard for me. I was a jazz baby. Then I remember starting to hear chitter-chatter. I heard another mom tell my mom



The Swan Dreams Project: Aesha Ash. (Photo: Paul Van Hoy II)

that it was hard for black women in ballet, and I thought, This is it.

Bell: But you trained at SAB and were accepted into the company.

Ash: I really had a mission at City Ballet. When I left, I could just dance. The main reason I started ballet in the first place was because of the challenges that I could overcome,

the stereotypes. For me, it's always been this feeling that everything is different – my skin and hair. Everything is so different. We have nothing to relate to. My life as a ballet dancer was constantly trying to show that we are more than just stereotypes. We are multidimensional. We can be that vulnerable, angelic character that we see in so many ballets.

Most people are being politically correct. Maybe there was something in my career, but I cannot say that this and that happened because I was black. It's definitely prevalent, though. Just look at the major companies and it's obvious: what is not seen is just as powerful as what we see.

There was never any comment that made me feel uncomfortable while I was at City Ballet. At the same time, you still feel so different and other and like you're constantly trying to fit in, into a world that looks like it has nothing to do with you. The only real instance was when one of the ballet mistresses said [for *Swan Lake*] that she didn't want to see any tans. I was like, What am I?

When I left, it was definitely a challenge, but that alone wouldn't have pushed me out the door. When I went to ask for a leave of absence, he [Peter Martins] said, "You're not going to be a star here." It was very hard for me to leave City Ballet. I didn't feel I had done enough.

Bell: You danced with Béjart Ballet in Lausanne for two years, after the seven-and-a-half years at NYCB. Did you still feel a sense of otherness?

Ash: In rehearsal one day, Béjart wanted

to see each girl throw down her hair for a ballet. When I took out all the pins, my hair puffed out, and he laughed. Had I not been so mature as a dancer, I would have felt crushed.

But it doesn't take those moments. You feel it immediately. It's what you don't see. If I'm one black girl entering a studio of all white girls you feel other immediately – like watching girls take down their long flowy hair.

Bell: You then moved to San Francisco to dance for Alonzo King's Lines Ballet.

Ash: After a while, with Alonzo, you just become a dancer. He really wanted to see you. He wanted me to start from scratch. Not having to fit in was foreign territory. I'd spent so many years trying to be someone else. I was trying to figure out who Aesha was. There was never a moment I wished I was white. But I have been angry: Why do I have to work harder to get noticed? I wanted to feel I didn't have to prove my worth.

After talking with Aesha, I repeated the word to myself: worth, worth, worth, worth. As I said it, I thought of Lauren Worth, née Porter, spinning twelve pirouettes in old black clogs in the lobby of the Rose Building. Why had I forgotten to include her here? She had been my other mixed-race ballet friend. Lauren had been enormously talented and had also danced for Alonzo King. We used to dye each other's hair blond. Dancers had joked that she sounded and acted white. Then it occurred to me: I had forgotten to include her here because she never felt like an "other" to me. She always seemed to fit in.