

Fall 2014

Ballet Review



A Conversation with Sylvester Campbell Ballet Review Fall 2014

On the cover: Bijayini Satpathy and Surupa Sen in *Songs of Love and Longing*. (Photo: Stephanie Berger, Baryshnikov Arts Center)

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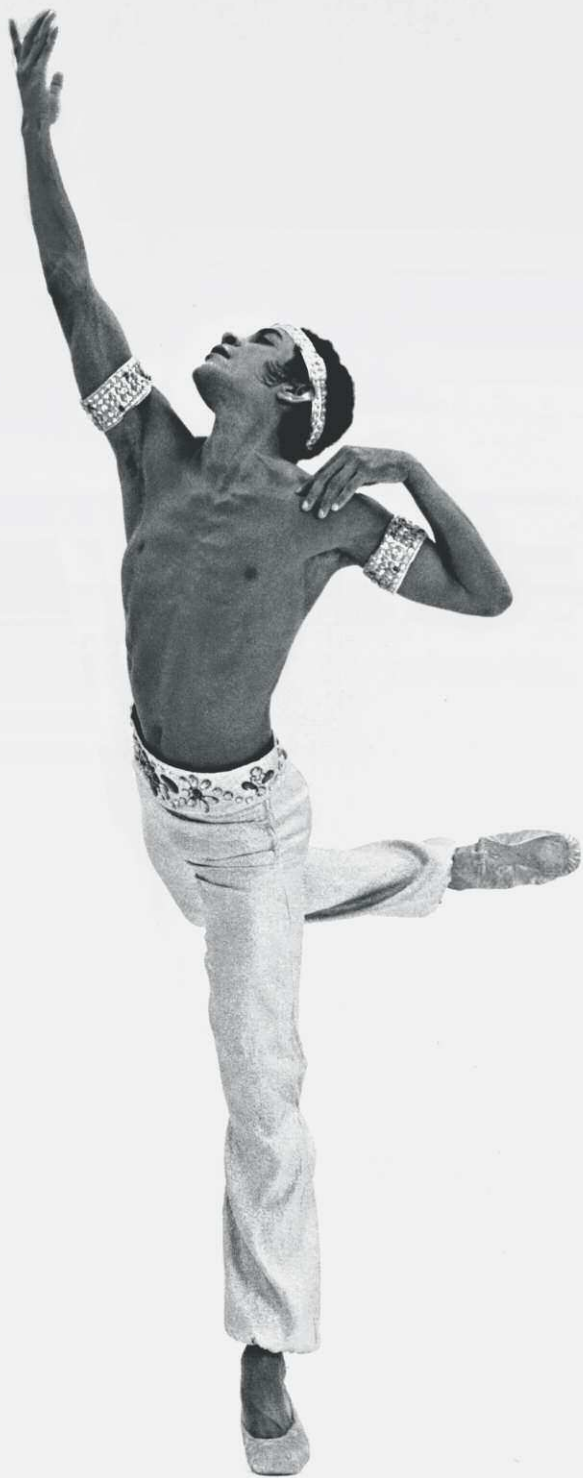
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Cover photograph by Stephanie Berger, Baryshnikov Arts Center:
Bijayini Satpathy and Surupa Sen in *Songs of Love and Longing*.



Sylvester Campbell. (Photo: Peter Garrick, Royal Winnipeg Ballet. All RWB photos courtesy of Ted Patterson)

A Conversation with Sylvester Campbell

Dawn Lille

Sylvester Campbell: Originally I was interested in puppets and made them out of papier-mâché. I was also interested in staging things. I had a little theater in my backyard that I built in a woodshed. My twos were spent studying at the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet and that's how I got into dance training, because they took me up there to see them rehearse one day. I wanted to show the teachers my tap dancing, but they were only interested in my legs and things for ballet.

BR: Did you study tap formally?

Campbell: No. My sister taught me tap, and whatever I could I just picked up myself. But I loved it and wanted to be another Bill "Bo-jangles" Robinson. Luckily for me, probably, that didn't all work out because tap dancing died out and there were no jobs for tap dancers during the time that I came up anyway.

BR: How old were you when you started in ballet?

Campbell: I was eleven when I started officially to do those lessons. I stayed there until I got out of high school. Before that, I had a scholarship to go to The School of American Ballet, which I wasn't able to take because my parents didn't have any money. All I had to have was the money to stay someplace because the money for lessons was paid.

BR: What happened after high school?

Campbell: When I was eighteen, I went to New York and joined the New York Negro Ballet Company. My cousin Barbara Wright was in the group. That's how I got in. She also got me a job in New York at the International In-
Sylvester Campbell (1938-1997) was the head of the dance department of the Baltimore School for the Arts when he was interviewed in 1991 as part of the research for *Classic Black*, an exhibition at the Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

stitute of Education, which I really had a hard time keeping up.

BR: The New York Negro Ballet had already been formed by Theo Hancock and Ward Fleming and a Mrs. Thorndike from Boston?

Campbell: Yes. It was around 1956. We performed in a few small places before we went to London.

BR: I gather that you never actually performed in London during the British tour.

Campbell: We didn't. We were getting ready to open. We had done a tour throughout England – Leeds, Manchester, and so on. It went very well. We were getting ready to open, I think at the Palladium or something like that, and that fell through, probably because of lack of funds. We would have had a fabulous opening because everybody was running to Manchester and to Leeds to see us. The critics were all very excited.

BR: Do you remember the repertory?

Campbell: We had works by Louis Johnson, Ernest Parham, Joseph Rickard. I forget what the ballet was called that Parham made. It was a beautiful ballet, like an Alvin Ailey *Revelations* kind of thing, with all these umbrellas and white dresses, which I'm sure came right out of Katherine Dunham because Parham was with Dunham. I had a little featured part in it. That's when I first started getting leading roles.

BR: What about Michel De Lutry?

Campbell: Yes. He came in as a ballet master one time, but not for long, because after that we had Jack Carter, who was making a work for us. We were rehearsing at the Drury Lane Theatre.

BR: Who had gotten the theater for you?

Campbell: Who knows? At that time I was really completely spacey and just glad to be in the company, plus there was the excitement of being in Europe.

After the opening in London didn't go through, they all went back to New York, but I decided to leave the company and stay in England.

By that time I was already working with Jack Carter. He took me right over from there

to the BBC. I used to do these weekly musical things on the BBC called *Journey into Melody* or something like that, with Carter choreographing and [Robert Farnon's] big Canadian orchestra, and guests like Toni Lander.

After that I ran away to Stockholm. I joined a variety show – I auditioned in London and it opened there. I had to do jazz dancing and sing songs. I hated it, but I did that in order to earn a living. While I was in Stockholm, I studied ballet and did some performances there. Anything to keep me in training for what I wanted to do, which was classical ballet.

BR: You had decided at that point that you were going to do classical dancing?

Campbell: Oh yes. I knew that already when I was in Washington, D. C.

BR: Did you think at that time of the obstacles that stood in front of a black dancer aiming at ballet?

Campbell: I don't think I even gave it a thought because I didn't run into real problems until I started to audition. I auditioned for Ballet Theatre one time and I found a rude awakening. They just weren't having any. And then a couple of other places, and I decided that, well, they're not even using black dancers here.

The ones like Arthur Mitchell, he sort of faded in a way because the only thing I saw him doing was one of the hunters in *Swan Lake*. I wanted to do the Prince. Or maybe I would start off being a hunter, but I definitely wanted to do the Prince. I didn't want to be doing hunters all my life. Or modern pieces.

I wanted to do classical things. So I said, "It's not going to happen. I'd better get out of here. There must be someplace where I can perform this stuff."

BR: Was this after Europe? Because you were still fairly young then.

Campbell: No. The experiences I had with these ballet companies were before I went to England. I had already auditioned for those things. Then I settled in with the New York Negro Ballet Company to stay there permanently, because that was my ticket over there.

It didn't make much sense to me to come back. By that time I was studying at The Royal Ballet and it took me a long time to be accepted there because people just didn't believe it.

BR: That you were a black ballet dancer?

Campbell: Then they said, "He's actually doing the steps. Can you believe that? He actually has feet like these people in The Royal Ballet." They could not get over it. Once they got past that hump, I was accepted.

Of course, I couldn't get work because I was American. They were an all-British thing. So I had to think about how to get more work after I finished that stint of television shows with Jack. I started passing for a Jamaican. Finally, the tax people caught up with me. I had to get out of London.

I always had contact with Jack. He sent me along for an audition one time for a concert group that was going on tour. It was sort of an offshoot from Festival Ballet. Not an audition, really, but a job interview. I walked in and all these English people from the Festival Ballet were sitting there, and the head said, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "Well, I'm that dancer that you were advertising for." It looked like he was in shock. Then he said, "Well, we'll see what you're like." I got in because of Jack pushing me.

I did my first performance and they came back and said, "Well, you know this is not going to work. You look like you're from the Nairobi tribe." There was a very unfortunate newspaper picture with the side of me and I just looked like . . . I don't know what I looked like. He said, "You have to put on lighter make-up."

I had to go along with him. This was a concert group. I was doing Bluebird and the pas de deux from *Nutcracker*. He said, "You know, Duckie, I could never give you a job in Festival Ballet, because you're black. It just wouldn't work; it couldn't happen. I don't care if you're the greatest dancer in the world. It just wouldn't work."

Then he came to see my performance and he said, "You know, I think that this could work. You look bloody good in the *Nutcracker*



Giselle with Calliope Venieris at Dutch National Ballet. (Photo: Hans van den Busken, courtesy of Dawn Lille)

pas de deux and the Bluebird – fabulous.” It looked like he was really astounded that I could do that.

Then I did a performance of *Giselle* that he had something to do with, too. And he said, “This could work.” But, of course, I never did get a job with Festival Ballet.

BR: From there you went to Stockholm?

Campbell: I did. Then I went to Paris and got taken for just about every job that I auditioned for. I took all of them. I just worked from nine in the evening until two in the morning. All these dance jobs, just hoarding all this money. It was like a vacation for me in a sense, moneywise, because I was loaded.

Then I decided that was enough. I wanted to go back with this small ballet troupe and tour around the English countryside and in London as well. Then I went to the Dutch National Ballet and joined them.

I don’t really know how I got there, but I

think through somebody’s recommendation. When I got there they had lots of leading dancers and one of them was Billy Wilson, who is a choreographer on Broadway. When I came in I was young and very technical; it sort of knocked all of them off their pedestals.

Billy was a big star, and another dancer was a big star. But when I came in with my technique and stuff, it lowered their status. I started getting all the attention from the critics and audience; I got very well-known there.

Then I wanted to have my own ballerina. I found that everywhere I went: I had to make my own ballerina. I picked a girl from the school, sixteen years old. She became a huge star in Holland. She was sort of the Margot Fonteyn of Holland. I went and got her out of the school and made her my partner.

BR: And Raven Wilkinson?

Campbell: I brought her there and I brought another boy, a black boy, Bernard Stanley, I



Neumeier's *Nutcracker* with Violette Verdy at Royal Winnipeg Ballet. (Photo: Norma McLain Stoop, RWB)

had met. I had asked Raven to dance with me in Washington with my teacher's company, Capitol Ballet. Then I asked her if she'd be interested in going back to the Netherlands because I could probably get her a job there as a soloist. She said yes, and I got her a job. Stanley was terrifically talented – ten pirouettes, big jump, split.

BR: What happened to him?

Campbell: I don't know; he joined Roland Petit who was dancing with Zizi Jeanmaire, with his name up in neon lights with hers.

BR: You said you had to find your own ballerinas?

Campbell: Yes, because whenever I got to a company, they had girls there. I call them girls because they weren't really ballerinas. They didn't have that rightness that a ballerina has. They didn't have the knowledge that she has.

So I had to try to get girls and try to instill enthusiasm in them. I was always making my thing.

BR: Did you dance with Raven at all?

Campbell: Yes, I did. Because she was there and I said, "One of the ballerinas is sick. Now is your chance to get out here and you can dance with me."

She told me something like, "Oh, I've got to eat." I said, "You don't have time to eat, honey. You'd better get this role under your belt."

Anyway, she got brilliant reviews but they never put her back on the stage, because she was overweight. She had her one and only chance. I was pushing for her to do *Swan Lake* and these kinds of things. That's what she always wanted.

I think she was sort of ruined by that time because she went through quite a lot here with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. She had traumatic experiences. I heard that one time in the South they came and they were looking for this Negress and this man was looking and the Negress was

standing right next to him.

BR: Did the Netherlands company ever indicate any racial feelings? Did it make any difference to them?

Campbell: No. But you know how people are. They can use that kind of stuff to get what they want. There were people who were nasty, just plain nasty in general, just because Billy and I were the only black males in that company and it was a company of 120 dancers to supply the opera house and to have the ballet company that toured all through Europe. We were the only two leading men, black, and when Billy left, I was the only one.

That's a stressful position in itself because there's a certain thing of negativeness that just doesn't go away. There are a lot of people who just want you out of there so they can do your roles. I had a lot of nasty things done to me,

Billy included, before he left. So that's when I found out about friends. You think your best friend is your best friend only to find out he's your worst enemy because you're competing.

BR: Well, the natural competition that happens . . .

Campbell: He wasn't having it. He was pushing me out of roles and things through his wife, who was the ballerina.

BR: Who was that?

Campbell: Sonja van Beers, a Dutch girl,



Don Quixote Pas de Deux. (Photo: RWB)

beautiful dancer. I learned how to negotiate a salary from Billy. Just bang on desk and insist on things, and I started getting them. But you know, I learned that from him.

BR: How long were you in the Netherlands?

Campbell: I was there for twelve years, with

that company. During my vacations, I would come back every now and then because my teachers in D. C. would pay for me to teach their students and to appear with their company.

BR: This was Doris Jones and Claire Haywood of the Capitol Ballet?

Campbell: Yes. So I would do that year after year. Arthur [Mitchell] would be appearing with them and various people from the New York City Ballet, stuff like that. That was a nice thing to do. I felt a connection that was very good.

BR: Would you call the Capitol Ballet really just an advanced-student company?

Campbell: Yes. But excellent dancers – very professional. There was nothing amateurish about them.

BR: Did you choreograph?

Campbell: Yes, I did. I forget what, but I did five or six ballets for them.

BR: Now that you are at the Baltimore School for the Arts, are you still choreographing?

Campbell: No. The teaching really consumes all my time. So it's just about teaching the kids, coaching them, and preparing for various competitions, things like that.

I find myself in an advisory position as far as jobs are concerned. I guess I'll have to become an agent next. But you find yourself getting into that category because they start calling you to ask, "I've got this job offer and that job offer. What do you think? Which

one should I take?" I feel that's part of my responsibility – that I have to get involved in that, too.

BR: What was your repertory in Holland?

Campbell: *La Sylphide*, *Les Sylphides*, *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Giselle*. That was al-

ways my dream, to do those ballets, and I finally wasn't dreaming anymore.

BR: After your twelve years in the Netherlands, you went into the Royal Winnipeg Ballet.

Campbell: Yes. It was through Agnes de Mille that I got to Canada.

BR: How did you know de Mille?

Campbell: She was one of the judges in a competition in Russia. I competed in 1969. My partner and I won a prize.

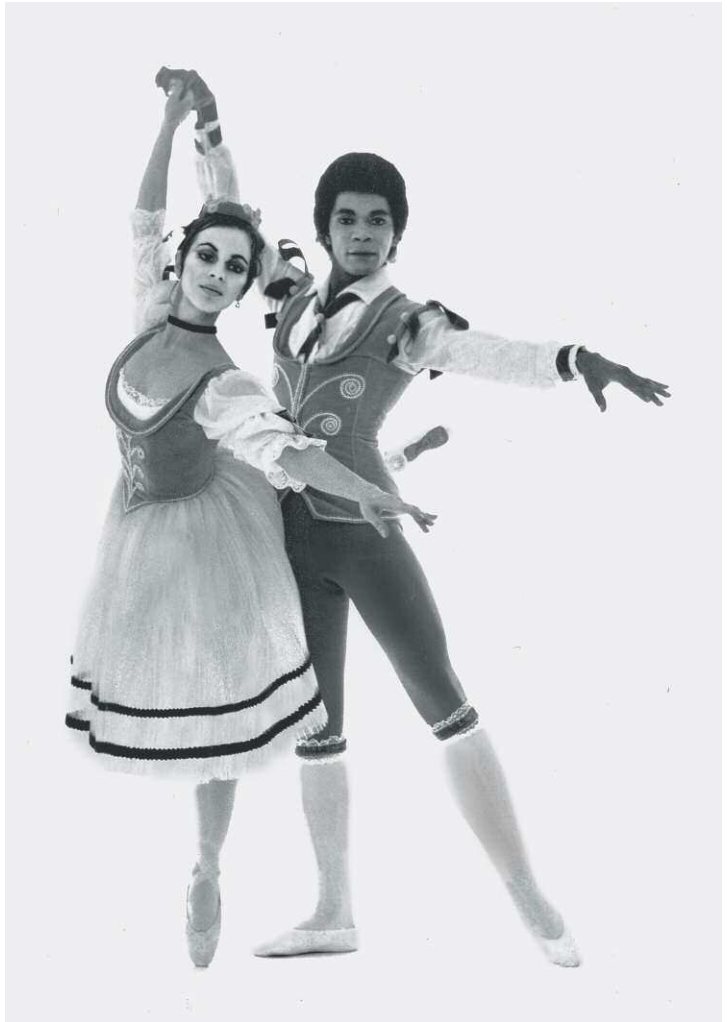
I was in that big hotel in Moscow. De Mille was in the elevator, and I knew who she was. She said to me, "You want to know, son, I saw a lot of dancers out there on that stage doing things, but you were dancing. I need to talk to you about something. You need to go back to the States, because you're a classical dancer and this is something that the American people need to be seeing."

On her advice, I came back to the States via Canada and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. I never really got back to the States, you might say. I was in Canada for three years during which time I was sent on a European tour and a South American tour.

BR: Is that when you did *La Bayadère*?

Campbell: No. I was doing *Bayadère* in Holland. That was when the Russians were there. We had a five-year cultural exchange with Russian teachers. It was wonderful. I mean, I'm Russian trained now because of that. A different teacher came each year. I loved it.

BR: What did you dance with the Royal Winnipeg?



Jack Carter's *Pas de Deux Romantique* with Marina Eglevsky. (Photo: RWB)

Campbell: When I first came in, I would get the third thing in the evening, the section in the program where they do the pas de deux; I would get that every time.

Arnold Spohr could make anything successful. All he had to do was rehearse it and it was an instant hit. I don't know what that was. Some of those ballets were lousy, but if he rehearsed, it would look like a jewel on the stage. And those kids were phenomenal. Every one of their performances was letter perfect and they all came in to class twice a day if there was a matinee. They really worked in that company. Basically I came in because he was

very excited about my reviews – “the black Nureyev” and all that.

BR: You were tremendously successful in South America, particularly Rio. Do you think they identified with you?

Campbell: Yes. When I got to Rio, it was an all-out battle. They were just eating me alive. I just had to appear and they were like bees coming out; it was frightening. A couple of nights in Rio, the show just stopped around me. I was doing a pas de deux that Jack Carter had made for me, *Pas de Deux Romantique*. So of course the Winnipeg press and the Canadian press came in, and I got big stories back there about stopping the show.

BR: Did you get that same kind of reaction in Winnipeg?

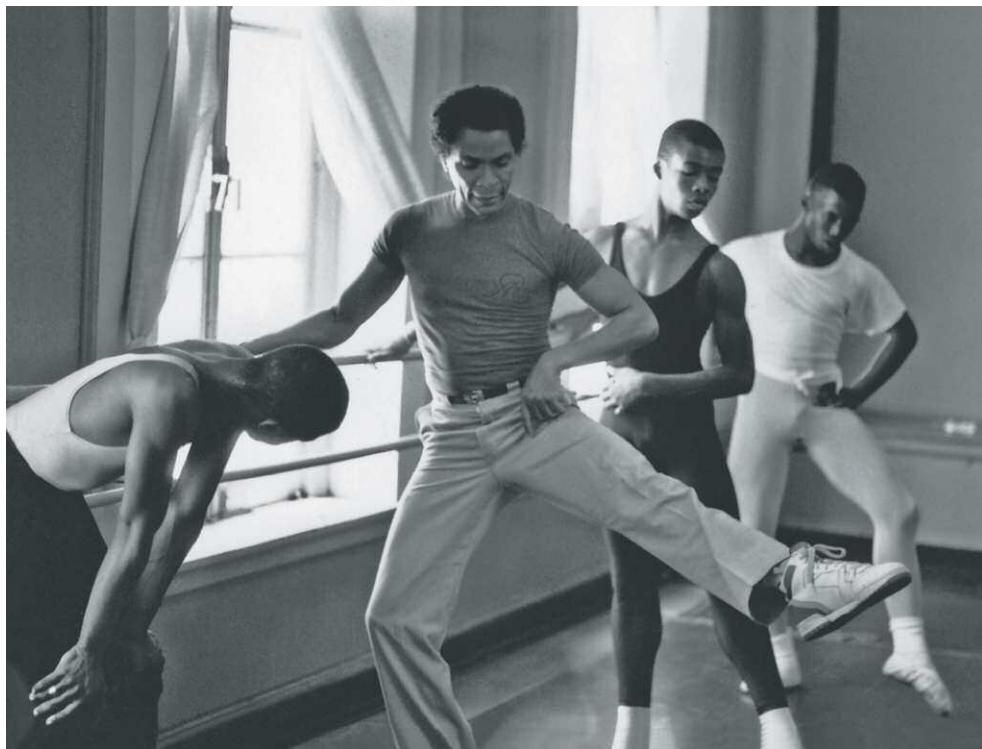
Campbell: Not immediately. They had to get to know me. You had to build it up there. I liked thrilling the audience. I liked the tricks that excited the audience. I thought about that only in the beginning when I was young. Later on, I began to get deep and to want to get

the meaning out of things and to want to act. And I became very good at that, too.

I used to get into silent landings. I didn't want the audience to hear them. I had a ball. I guess I just loved dancing and being on the stage. I'd wanted to be a classical dancer, so that's what the formula was. I was a good classical dancer; I stuck to my guns and that formula worked.

BR: Did it ever occur to you while you were doing all this that you were unusual for your time? That there were not that many black ballet dancers?

Campbell: Yes. All I had to do was look around. I didn't see any. There were none, really. There was Arthur Mitchell. But you know, there was really not an awful lot of competition. There were black dancers studying classical ballet, but whether they were doing the steps . . . Today you can go into a class and you can see somebody actually tearing up those steps, black dancers. But in that time, it was rare.



Baltimore School for the Arts: Askia Swift, SC, Roger Cunningham, Jason Reynolds. (Photo: BSA)

We were like pioneers. Arthur Mitchell, Louis Johnson, and people like this were definitely pioneers who opened the doors for those things to happen. And also the New York Negro Ballet Company and the Joseph Rickard Ballet [First Negro Classic Ballet]. That opened a lot of doors. Even those companies didn't get credit for that.

BR: Nobody's ever heard of them.

Campbell: You see? But that's wrong, wrong because you cannot erase things that have happened – bad or good. They happened.

BR: Why did you leave Winnipeg?

Campbell: For various reasons. I was very unhappy. I had never really been happy in a company because I was always like an outcast. I had a high position in the company whether I liked it or not. Eventually, I became that person to the point where I'd ask choreographers, "Could you just give that to them, because I'm going to get hell if you give me that role."

BR: Did you have other problems in Winnipeg?

Campbell: Yes. People were devious in dif-

ferent ways in getting me out of my position, which is finally why I left. Every time I would go out and do a guest performance somewhere, I had to sneak. I had my own costumes, but if they saw me leaving the hotel with costumes and everything, dancers immediately jumped on the bandwagon and said, "Why is *he* doing guest performances?" I could have given them a good answer for that: they simply weren't being asked, and I was.

I wanted to stay there because I liked working with them. It paid a lot of money, more than I get here. So I was just quite honest with them about that.

The dancers held meetings while I was away. One woman supposedly said, "Look at these reviews. Why don't we just put his name on the top of it and call it the South American tour of Sylvester?"

BR: Where did you go when you left Royal Winnipeg?

Campbell: I came home. I went back to Washington. The Capitol Ballet Company again, as associate director and choreographer and bal-



Baltimore School for the Arts: Doris Jones and Claire Haywood's *Rhapsody in Blue*. (Photo: BSA)



Baltimore School for the Arts: Kimberly Dillard, SC, Megan Monroe, and corps. (Photo: BSA)

let master – and lead dancer. I was doing it all. My old teacher from England, Kathleen Crofton, was here with a ballet company called the Maryland Ballet. I came over to guest with her and she kept me. I stayed with the Maryland Ballet until they folded and then they became the Baltimore Ballet.

BR: So in other words, you were here when they opened the Baltimore School for the Arts in 1980. They knew you.

Campbell: I applied, but they were shaky and I had the company in Washington, which I continued to work with. I always worked in two places at once, just to be safe, because you never knew. I was getting my salary over there, and I was working here and not getting too much money, and then I decided to apply for the school. I was kind of a shoo-in because I had been one of the consultants.

BR: When you first came here did you ever choreograph on the students?

Campbell: Oh, yes, in the beginning. I'm do-

ing less, but I set other pieces, like *Sylphides* or *Giselle*.

BR: Is this school based on the High School of Performing Arts in New York?

Campbell: I think it's more like the North Carolina School of the Arts. But they're all the same kind of setup.

BR: You're training students, a certain number of whom will go right into the professional world, and others will go on to college?

Campbell: We hope. But it's been very good because we've had dancers who have gotten jobs as dancers with Alvin Ailey, American Ballet Theatre, Milwaukee Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, Hubbard Street, and other troupes.

BR: And this school is multiracial?

Campbell: Yes. It's almost fifty-fifty. It's a very exciting school and within the past ten years, we've managed to produce really good dancers. I said to the director in the beginning that if we're going to be serious about pro-

ducing dancers who will be able to qualify to get into companies and be professional dancers on Broadway or whatever, we needed to get really young kids. High school is almost too late. And that's what this is. I said what we need to do is start a program here for the younger kids after school, and these are our strongest dancers now.

BR: Would you encourage black dancers to go into classical ballet?

Campbell: Definitely. They've got the bodies that are wonderful for classical ballet. The bodies have changed for the black dancer, too. The body has changed. I don't know whether it's food or what, but I would say that the American body has changed. Wouldn't you agree?

BR: Yes, it's gotten taller; it's gotten leaner.

Campbell: It's more beautiful. It's just striking in some cases and this is the same with the black body, which has always been beautiful anyway, but there's something more these days and there is no reason to say that we don't have classical ballet dancers who can do that kind of technique or work because that's a farce.

BR: Do you think that they will get work?

Campbell: They *are* getting work. Now there are people being taken into American Ballet Theatre and various companies. If you notice, any company, any classical company has a black dancer in it. I don't know if you've looked around and seen that, but that has happened. Now, what's done with them after they get there, that's another story. Whether they're given the Prince in *Swan Lake* and things like that is another story.

I don't think they should be in there in the first place unless they're going to get those roles. If the company doesn't think they're qualified, they shouldn't take them because that's defeating the whole purpose. What are

they in there to do? Modern dance? That does not make sense to me. They can go to Alvin Ailey and do that.

BR: Do the local ballet companies around here have black dancers?

Campbell: Every company has them. That's a milestone from the days when I was coming along because there weren't any in any company. You were lucky if you found one. We were all lucky to get those jobs. But today there's no excuse for them not to be in there.

It's a scandal that I'm still one of the few black dancers in this world who has done Siegfried in *Swan Lake*, the Prince in *Sleeping Beauty*, James in *La Sylphide*. Just look around in these companies and see. Maybe I missed one, but I don't think so. I think there's still a void there.

BR: Do you think it will be overcome?

Campbell: It's going to have to. But it will be up to those dancers who are in those companies to make that happen, like I did.

BR: You have to be aggressive. Is that what you mean?

Campbell: Well, I wouldn't say aggressive. I got cast in *Swan Lake* because I was the best dancer in the troupe. That's how I got the part. Not because I was black or because of this or that, but because I was executing the steps the best.

That's what's going to have to happen here: if they are executing the steps better than anybody, or however you want to put it, they're going to have to be accepted in those roles. I just cannot believe that that's still not happening.

BR: Do you think that the impending cuts in the arts are going to affect this at all?

Campbell: Probably, but that's going to affect everyone, white or black. That has no discrimination. It's just bad for everyone.