

Book Review

African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond, by John O. Perpener III. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001. 284 pages. Index. Price: \$29.95 (cloth). 26 photographs. ISBN 0252026756.

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African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond is a straightforward, honest and lucid account of the politics of racial and cultural difference and its impact on African-American artists during the development of concert dance in the United States. The book provides valuable biographical and historical information about a seminal group of artists who worked during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s to legitimize black dance as a serious art form. Perpener's work is of interest to anthropologists of human movement because he situates these artists and their innovations in the contexts of African-American culture and American modern dance as a whole.

The book significantly advances the study of pioneering black dancers by showing us that to date, the formative years of the American concert dance scene have been viewed through a distorted racialized lens. Perpener argues convincingly that who danced and who did not was directly related to the racial ideologies practiced by the white majority. In particular, he documents a wide variety of exclusionary practices common at the time, such as the biased reporting of white critics, the prejudicial hiring practices of company directors and dance instructors, and the unwillingness of arts promoters to promote black artists. These factors severely limited black artists during this period. However egregious these individual overt and covert acts appear to us now, prior to the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, it was the whole of American society that perpetuated such racist behavior as the norm. It is to his credit that Perpener recognizes this and presents his observations in a balanced, non-judgmental way, rather than focusing on certain individuals as specific "culprits." His subtle insights into the way African-American concert dance developed illuminates the conditioning forces that shaped the careers of these artists. He provides readers with an informed perspective that prompts us to reconsider the contribution black dancers have made to American modern dance as a whole.

Perpener acknowledges the seminal work of Lynne Fauley Emery whose book, *Black Dance in the United States from 1619-1970* fortified his own dancing and developed in him a hunger to know more about the black artists who had active performing careers in American concert dance during the 1920s-1940s. Emery's text, published in 1972, thus acted as a springboard for Perpener's own scholarship. He relates that he began to recognize the prevalence of huge gaps in the historical record, particularly as this related to the role of black dancers in the American concert scene. In his search to understand this time period and to know more about these artists, Perpener immersed himself in a process of primary data collection that would prove daunting to many researchers. He refused to settle for the lack of information in major dance journals, magazines and library dance collections, nor was he satisfied with published accounts that

were too brief to be helpful or too biased to be believed. Searching through obscure documents and publications for original sources and primary documentation soon became the norm. Perpener's methodological rigor sets a fine example for future scholarship in historical research on the dance.

Perpener also details the rigid preconceptions of African-American dance that white critics imposed on black artists, shedding further light on mainstream American attitudes of the time. For example, black dancers were viewed as "exotic" performers, and "novelty" dancers; at their best only when performing "purely Negro" dances. Euro-American dance activities were seen as being contrary to the "natural" movement capabilities of African-American dancers. For example, the famous dance critic John Martin noted that Euro-American dancing was an "alien culture" to black dancers. This "alien culture" theory (an attitude that has not entirely disappeared), effectively masked the actual role that black dancers played in the development of concert dance. Perpener effectively challenges this assumption by asking whose culture is alien to whom, exactly? He supports his argument with examples of ways in which African-American cultural practices have mixed with Euro-American ones in very productive ways. Sometimes critics and writers simply dismissed the contributions of black artists. Even when recognized, a brief mention frequently amounted to nothing more than token acknowledgement.

African American Concert Dance focuses primarily on the lives and works of eight individuals: Hemsley Winfield, Edna Guy, Randolph Sawyer, Ollie Burgoyne, Charles Williams, Asadata Dafora, Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus. Perpener acknowledges that he had no idea who Hemsley Winfield was when he first read Emery's book. Unfortunately, I would venture to guess that, with the possible exception of Katherine Dunham, Asadata Dafora, Pearl Primus and perhaps Edna Guy, most students of American dances and dancing today would not recognize these names. If Perpener's book contributes nothing more than an awareness among students and teachers of how partial the historical picture has been to date, it will have served a valuable purpose. However, his book is sure to become a standard reference work in the history of American dance and African-American studies.

In focusing on these eight artists, Perpener highlights their individual struggles, disappointments and accomplishments, but also documents ways in which their careers interconnected. As a result, while the reader learns to value their individual artistry and unique contributions, one also comes to appreciate a sense of their place within the whole world of professional dancers and dancing in the United States at this time. For example, we learn that Hemsley Winfield was a versatile performer and director whose company, the New Negro Art Theatre, launched the careers of Edna Guy, Randolph Sawyer, and Ollie Burgoyne, among many others. During his career, Randolph Sawyer not only danced with Winfield, but also with Dafora and Dunham, and was active in a number of Broadway musicals, as were a number of others. Many dancers collaborated in order to present their works to the public, an example of which is the "Negro Dance Evening" held at the YM-YWHA in New York City in 1937, which featured the works of Edna Guy, Asadata Dafora and Katherine Dunham. Asadata

Dafora, himself an African, established an African Dance Troupe during the 1930's. At one point it came under the umbrella of the WPA Federal Theatre Project and was a focal point of the famous "voodoo" *Macbeth*, an all-black production set in Haiti, directed by the young Orson Welles.

Contemporary students of American dance and its history clearly recognize the individual contributions of modern dance pioneers such as Ruth St Denis, Ted Shawn, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman and Martha Graham. They are taught how these artists influenced, departed from, and supported each other, or grew apart during the course of their careers. These artists are thus endowed with both individual and group identities. The same cannot be said for our understanding of African-American concert dancers. For example, I have found that written accounts of Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus -- both of whom studied anthropology and engaged in fieldwork that infused their choreography with Caribbean and African influences -- frequently present them in isolation. In the absence of any commentary about those who danced with them, one comes to understand them as exceptional isolated individuals rather than connected in any way to other artists. To date, scholars and teachers of American dance have rarely if ever raised questions about the existence of other black dancers. For example, who are those dancers that appear in the photographs of Dunham's choreographic works? While the contributions of Dunham and Primus have been widely recognized, Perpener's book alerts us to the fact that whole cadres of black artists whose efforts also deserve recognition have been neglected. His book is a valuable step toward correcting such injustices.

Perpener not only shows how these eight artists worked with each other, he also documents important occasions when they interacted with white artists, such as Doris Humphrey, Ruth St. Denis, Helen Tamaris, Lester Horton and Ted Shawn. We learn that Ted Shawn played an important role in the development of dancing at Hampton Institute in Virginia through his artist-in-residence performances. Shawn also had an enormous influence on Charles Williams who founded the Hampton Creative Dance Group which toured the United States. Perpener also acknowledges the efforts of Agnes deMille, who choreographed a work called "Black Ritual" in 1940 as a means to justify American Ballet Theater adding a "Negro wing" to its company.

Perpener is adept at writing about the struggles and disappointments of black artists due to racial prejudice. Stories that are cause for anger and sadness do not chastise the reader, but provide reason to pause, reflect and question. Particularly poignant in this regard is his discussion of the relationship between Edna Guy and Ruth St Denis. As a young black dancer, Edna Guy loved and admired St Denis as her mentor and as a revered figure in the dance world. Although it was acceptable for Edna to serve as St Denis's personal assistant, it was not acceptable for her to be a performing member of the Denishawn Company. According to St Denis, audiences of the 1920s were just not ready to view an integrated dance company. This case draws our attention to the ways in which such racialized practices damaged the careers and aspirations of numerous black artists.

Perpener notes an equally distressing experience with Randolph Sawyer. In Baltimore in 1933, Sawyer was performing a pseudo-Arabian dance number as part of a burlesque show presented by Harold Minsky. Sawyer was asked to paint his body green in order to hide the fact that a black male dancer was dancing with white females! Such were the strict segregationist norms of the day. From our current perspective, we might wonder why these artists would acquiesce to such demeaning demands, but there were no alternative opportunities to perform. Perpener brings this point home in his accounts of teachers who refused to have black students in their classes for fear of what other students and their parents might say or do. Occasionally a white teacher might instruct a young black dancer, but the teaching would be private and take place in a separate room.

In the last chapter of the book, Perpener attempts to discuss black dancers from the 1950s to the 1990s, and how they have extended and diverged from traditions established by their predecessors. While this discussion is extremely worthwhile, I find it too ambitious a task given the limited space available in the final chapter of this substantial book. As a result important contributors have been excluded or their accomplishments diminished. Perpener acknowledges this dilemma and suggests that further research is critical.

In this chapter, Perpener makes a compelling argument against viewing black artists as a monolithic whole. Although African-Americans are part of the diverse population that constitutes the United States, he urges us to recognize and value the diversity to be found within the African-American population. He also draws attention to the expectation that African-American artists are obliged to give pride of place in their creative work to subject matter grounded in their racial and social histories. He argues against such limitations, holding that each black artist has the right to pursue his or her own dreams and aspirations. He cites myriad examples of African-American dance artists who are creating unique paths in the American concert dance world today. These include Bebe Miller, Jawole Willa, Jo Zollar, Bill T. Jones, Ralph Lemon and Blondell Cummings. In his analysis of their contributions, Perpener builds on the research and observations of other leading scholars in the field such as Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Gerald Myers, Ann Daly, Sally Banes and Urta Goller.

From an anthropological perspective, Perpener's examination of the politics of race and culture as they applied to early African American concert dancers demonstrates how a serious investigation of dances and dancing, when placed in historical and social context, can facilitate an understanding of issues that impact the whole of society. This book also provides encouragement to those scholars and practitioners committed to a critical reevaluation of what has hitherto been taken for granted as "historical fact." Perpener accurately notes that the "place of African-American art in relationship to mainstream culture will no doubt continue to be of concern to artists and scholars of all colors, as long as racism – whether subliminal or blatant – plays a central role in American life (page 223).