thINKingDANCE
Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

Photo: Matthew Murphy

Dance Theatre of Harlem: In Conversation with Brenda Dixon Gottschild

By Ellen Gerdes

This May, after an 8-year hiatus due to financial troubles, Dance Theatre of Harlem toured to the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, where it first performed in 1972. TD writer Ellen Gerdes and historian/choreographer/performer Brenda Dixon Gottschild attended the opening night show.

Their conversation, below, is a response that delves into questions of the contemporary relevance of Dance Theatre of Harlem, Balanchine, pink tights, and more...

EG: Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) was co-founded by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook in 1969, a year before Joan Myers Brown founded PHILADANCO. Both companies were created in response to the dearth of opportunities for black dancers on the American proscenium stage, especially ballet. Artistic director Virginia Johnson describes the current DTH company as integrated and stresses that the ballet world still needs to wrestle with the lack of access to dancers of color. What do you think is the contemporary importance of a predominantly non-white ballet company?

BDG: What this indicates to me is how little the dance world has changed. Back in 1970, when Joan Myers Brown started PHILADANCO, she had actually wanted to begin a black ballet company, but she knew that the American dance establishment would not be able to deal with two black ballet companies. Arthur Mitchell beat her to the punch by a year. Just to note, PHILADANCO is a ballet-based modern dance company, and that was Joan's training and her backburner intention for the company.

EG: You know, I've been going to large venue performances with my college students, and they've started to ask me why the concert dance world is still so segregated.

BDG: What I always say is that dance is a measure of society, that it is a barometer of culture. Dance can really be on the avant-garde of true integration and true diversity because we all have bodies. Black dancers can certainly do ballet...Whites certainly know how to shake their booty, do hip hop, and seriously take on dance forms like Senegalese sabar dance. We have the sense that all of us can, indeed, do the same if we are committed and have the same opportunity. In that sense, I think the dance world, instead of being so ethnically polarized, could really be at the forefront of leading us toward a truly multi-cultural world.

EG: I haven't watched that much live ballet because I have trouble relating to it. We are talking about exclusivity in terms of race, but I also find its body type and physical capability elitist. When I was a child, my hometown had *one* dance teacher—a ballet teacher. I stopped when I had back surgery at age 14 for scoliosis. I had the sense that ballet had unattainable body ideals.

BDG: You know there is this unattainable, unapproachable, aspect of ballet that is one of its attractions, from the audience perspective. As opposed to vernacular forms, concert dance, whether it is ballet or modern, has always posed a certain kind of problem for how people relate to it. You are an insider, a participant-observer, so for you, Ellen, ballet raised a barrier. But for many non-insiders, traditional concert dance forms represent a desired unattainable, if you will. For many people, the dance experience is similar to watching acrobats or gymnasts. Even new circus culture, like Cirque du Soleil, is blurring the boundaries between dance and acrobatics. Did you notice at the opening night performance of DTH, the most cheering and vocal explanation of pleasure went for the most difficult, not the most subtle, movements?

EG: Absolutely, many audience members, perhaps encouraged by TV competition dance shows, watch dance as a series of physical feats. As a dancer, I usually feel isolated when the bodies on-stage look and act superhuman; for the first time, however, the palpable excitement and generosity in the DTH audience made me feel part of this ballet experience. How would you describe the audience at the Annenberg?

BDG: The stage embraced us. The audience was warm and embracing in return. And the audience was, indeed, vocal about their support... Many people said to me, “This company has *got* to survive!” Of course, *Agon* invites audience response because the members literally take a bow after each section: it’s built into the choreography. Nevertheless, I do remember back in the day at City Center in New York, the DTH audiences were always very warm, with a sense of African-American pride in finally having a venue for our ballet dancers. (You’ll know from my latest book that blacks have been studying and performing ballet ever since it was possible, at the turn of the 20th century). Black folks used to turn out in droves—well, maybe 25% of the New York audience—and they would really be signifying, applauding when someone did four pirouettes or fouetté turns. Of course this is a modified form of call and response; it is truly Africanist behavior, African and African-American behavior. You don’t just sit still silently; you actively support the performers. As we both know, what is so interesting is that there is increasingly more of this behavior with white audiences taking on the thrill of this “response” to the “call” of the performance. I attend PA Ballet quite regularly, and you find it quite a bit there...and certainly during their more modern repertoire.

EG: I noticed a lot of spontaneous applause and gasps at difficult and flexible feats in both *Agon* and *Contested Space.*

BDG: Yes, and I certainly saw that last year when PA Ballet did *Agon*. And hooting. Four or five decades ago, you would never hoot at the ballet! This is an Africanization of American culture.

EG: Do you remember the first time you saw DTH perform?

BDG: It was probably in the late 70s, early 80s, when I started reviewing for an African- American magazine, now defunct, called *Encore American & Worldwide News*. Of course, I was doing it for the same reason so many of us review—so that my daughter and I could see performances!

EG: Do you remember your first impressions of the company?

BDG: When I attended their New York performances during the 1980s, the ensembles boasted several beautiful dancers, like Stephanie Dabny, Virginia Johnson, Mel Tomlinson, Eddie Shellman, Judy Tyrus. For my particular circle, black and white, dancers and non-dancers, we were delighted and thrilled with what they were doing. They performed certain ballets that no one else did, like Geoffrey Holder's *Dougla* and ballets choreographed by Arthur Mitchell and Karel Shook. For a long time it was Mitchell and Shook directing the company together, and when it began, Balanchine was still alive [DTH began as a Balanchine repertoire company]. So there was a circle of guardianship around the company at that point. It was very strong; it could stand up to any critique.

EG: I'd like to start with the first piece, *Gloria* (2012), choreographed by Robert Garland.

BDG: Oh, glorious *Gloria.* I must say that the choice of musical score of Francis Poulenc at his most celebratory and joyous... it's just so moving. *Gloria* could become the signature piece for the newly revived DTH. Geoffrey Holder's *Dougla* was the signature piece for the original ensemble, a dance created *for* the ensemble *on* the ensemble that really represented the ensemble. Both *Gloria* and *Dougla* seemed to function as a showcase for the company, showing not only their ballet chops but also their Africanist roots.

EG: And the children's participation! To me, they represented legacy and the importance of education to the mission of DTH. I felt their anticipation for their final relevé, facing upstage.

BDG: I'm right with you. The DTH school continued to function, even when the company was shut down. In fact, Joan's school started ten years before PHILADANCO, and it's still thriving.

EG: *Gloria* is dedicated to the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and to the spiritual legacy of Harlem. Da'Von Doane's solo to a very classical female voice singing "Domine Deus, Rex caelestis" was both soft and detailed.

BDG: I loved in the very beginning, in this tribute to Reverend Calvin Otis Butts III, that there were hints of sanctified dance movements, such as when you "get the spirit" in the black church. And you are referring to Doane's jazz aesthetic vocabulary. What I thought was really brilliant was Garland's smooth integration of ballet, modern, and Africanist accents – that gave Doane a wider berth of expression. Then in "Domine Deus, Agnus Dei," I wrote in my notes that Ashley Murphy was "the bourré princess wafting through" like an angel in blue. She performed her bourrés in a very interesting open-fourth at up-stage center—the "angel soloist."

EG: Yes, her ethereal bourré...I wrote "earth-shaking." I also noted when the men moon-walked while their female counterparts bourréd.

BDG: It really was an excellent integration, no pun intended, of many genres. It was a wonderful opener—I was just elated! In that moment, I was seeing the company as a rainbow of colors. It really represented what America looks like, and what we wish for more dance companies.

EG: What did you think about the dancers wearing tights and pointe shoes to match their skin color? I found myself distracted by wondering how exactly they measured or quantified skin color.

BDG: I find it so pedestrian, and I don't mean in a postmodern sense! Pink tights are a convention. Doing ballet in pink tights never meant that "white" women had legs the color of those tights. "White" women come in many shades, and no one ever assumed you had to have different colored tights for them, so why should this be the case for this company? And then, of course, it calls your attention not

even to different colors of skin, but to the different colors of the tights. I think it was an overly self-conscious means of allowing black ballerinas on the ballet stage, and I think we are beyond that now. There are pictures in *Dance Magazine* now of very brown-skinned girls dancing with pink tights on and you don't blink an eye. Just as you would not blink an eye if you saw a brown-skinned girl in the corps of *Giselle*.

EG: I'm thinking of your discussion in *Digging the Africanist Presence* of Balanchine's work, what is the significance of predominantly non-white bodies performing this piece? [For our reader, Balanchine choreographed *Agon* in 1957 for Arthur Mitchell—the first black dancer for New York City Ballet—and Diana Adams. Mitchell was not allowed to perform the duet on national television until 1966.]

BDG: *Agon* was one of the first dances performed by DTH. This is one of my favorite ballets of all times! I love Balanchine! We have to remember that any Balanchine work in the DTH repertoire was given to Arthur Mitchell by Mr. B, so he was well aware that he was giving his choreography to black dancing bodies. In my first book, I note that Balanchine wanted to start an integrated school when he came to the US in the 1930s, but he must have subsequently learned that racial integration was not the American way...The fact that he actually hired Arthur Mitchell is something in and of itself. So in *Agon*, I'm always curious to see, "Is the second male in the line up going to be black?" because that was the Arthur Mitchell role. And it is so interesting, that convention is always respected in this dance. I've never talked to anyone in the Balanchine Trust, but it must be something that is stated. Also, Mitchell has talked about how he is dark-skinned and Diana Adams very white; he felt that Balanchine was interested in that color contrast. Then it was done years later at New York City Ballet by Mel Tomlinson and Heather Watts, black and white, and brilliantly, years ago, by the PA Ballet, when Meredith Rainey danced with Leslie Caruthers—it was to die for! And very recently Jermel Johnson danced the role.

So the significance of non-whites dancing *Agon.* I would dare say it is the fulfillment of Mr. B's subconscious sub-rosa subtext!

EG: I've only seen other versions on video, so I can't really compare, but this one really resonated with me. I enjoyed the clever juxtapositions in the choreography—the sharp syncopation paired with moments of pause that undulated through the body. How do you think DTH approached it uniquely?

BDG: Mr. B ...had a brilliant, awesome way of moving groups, and using stage space, manipulating the dynamic of dancing bodies. I am at a loss for words to match how it makes me feel, except to say "exhilarated." He saw himself as a skilled craftsman; he lifted the craft to a place of exaltation. I have a deep appreciation and respect for his works like *Apollo, Agon, the 4Ts,* and *Symphony in Three movements,* works that represent the breadth and range of his achievement. Nonetheless, I loathe the fact that he was unable to integrate his company—particularly, while he was alive, to never have a black ballerina. And having one, or two, or even three black male dancers in a company of 95, was not integration; it was tokenism.

Here are my impressions: As it began, it looked a little studied. Of course, this dance could scare the tights off of the best of us! (I did look at the reviews on-line and realized in hindsight that it was probably the dancers' and directors' response to the *New York Times's* lukewarm review of the New York performance earlier this spring.) Some of it didn't have the grounded breadth that I have seen in *Agon* on other companies, like the beginning of the opening male quartet—after they turn to face the audience, they dig down into a soft plié in parallel and extend one leg side. It was done very straight up. But I felt the dancers began to warm up and then—and this is so difficult to do—I stopped comparing them to previous iterations. This *Agon* had sass!

EG: Yes!

BDG: And I don't mean this as an African-American stereotype, I mean a kind of brash, youthful energy. I feel like I'm saying this froman insider's perspective. There was a sensual dimension in the duet designed for Mitchell. Sensual in a purposeful kind of way. The wayhe touched his female partner was delicious! It also seemed to me that this was a very young *Agon*. Oh darn, here I go comparing again! (laughs) Meredith Rainey and Leslie Caruthers were sublime; they had such chemistry between them! As for DTH, I did feel like they got it in the end!

EG: During the closing piece, Donald Byrd's *Contested Space* (2011), the dancers' legs were sometimes spread precariously far on pointe, and two women bourréd in a slight shimmer, a vibration that amplified into a full shake of their bodies. And the prominence of the butt! The men often faced upstage; one woman even grabbed a man's butt as he lunged. I'm interested in how this piece borrows from the grinding hips and the booty-shaking of popular dance forms, especially thinking back to Balanchine's appropriation of black vernacular dance movement.

BDG: All I can say is Donald Byrd is being Donald Byrd. That means challenge and contestation. Controlled chaos. That's his meat and potatoes. And he kind of invites you to like it or lump it. He gives "in-your-face" movement. That's his idiom. For the company, this is a different kind of provocation than *Agon*, but it is just as demanding. Other contemporary choreographers, like Trey McIntire and Matt Neenan, use hip hop and other popular dance motifs on the ballet stage—there's nothing new about that. With Byrd, his use of the buttocks is part of his wit because it has been one of the conventional markers—to say that black people were not fit for ballet. As Ralph Ellison would say, he has changed the joke and slipped the yoke.

In other words, Byrd takes a body trope used against African Americans and turns it on its head. Of course, modern and postmodern dancers have a ball choreographing on ballet companies. I'm thinking about how Twyla Tharp pushed the envelope with her choreography on ABT—like *When Push Comes to Shove.* So Byrd is doing that as well. Not only in the emphasis and articulation of the buttocks, but again, in the extreme athleticism, the gymnastic demands on the dancers. And that moment near the end when he slipped in classical ballet's convention, the fish-dive pose, and there was even a little bit of ballet music—it's his satirical referencing of tradition in a duet that was anything but conventional. Then Alexandra Jacob came on with that incredibly floppy torso. I wondered if *Contested Space* was Byrd's riff on *Agon*. (laughs) Also, I loved that for several entrances he had the dancers come on stage and seamlessly slide into a perfect fifth position. It told us that this was home for them. I enjoyed the piece a lot, but I did feel that it was too long.

EG: I was disappointed, however, that this "exploration of contemporary couplings and relationships, examined through the lens of a 21st-century post-neoclassical sensibility" still emphasized hetero-normative partnering. I thought this could have been an opportunity.

BDG: I agree. Again, the conventions of ballet. But he did a lot. I do feel that it was adventurous for Virginia Johnson to take on the Donald Byrd work on her maiden voyage.
Really, between the three dances, what an interesting repertoire!

EG: And Brian Siebert for the New York Times said the Byrd piece was "all wrong for this troupe." I totally disagree.

BDG: Me too. All of which brings up my beef with review writing, which is why I am so pleased with the kind of writing from thINKingDANCE. I almost feel like the old review format has outlived its time. I think it is a post-review millennial era, now. (laughs)

EG: (laughs) I think newspapers feel that way, too; most don't fund dance critics. And I think it is just too difficult if you are given only 250 words.

BDG: Oh, it's awful. And then what happened with the *Village Voice*... I wrote and called when they were not re-hiring Deborah Jowitt and they said, "Well, she doesn't critique. She never puts anyone down." And I couldn't believe it because Deborah's writing was so thoroughly involved in giving the reader a feel for what she had seen.

EG: And she argues for movement description as analysis and writing as kinesthetic. I admire her a lot. I think it is worth it for all of us to experiment with new ways of responding to dance.

For a complete biography of Brenda Dixon Gottschild, please visit her website.

Dance Theatre of Harlem. Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, May 16-19.

By Ellen Gerdes
June 8, 2013