

Intersectional Inquiry: Research Across Difference

Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH)
Anthology
Embodied Intersectional
Research

Arthur Mitchell (1934-2018)

Arthur Mitchell was the first African American male dancer hired by a major American ballet company, the New York City Ballet. He made his debut in 1955 and subsequently became a principal dancer until 1971. He founded DTH as a school and international touring ballet company after Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Born in Harlem, he headed DTH, this mostly Black ballet company, from 1969 to 2004. That last year, the performing company went on an extended hiatus. Mitchell retired from running the school in 2010. The company returned to performing as a smaller company in 2013, under the leadership of ballerina Virginia Johnson, and since 2023, Robert Garland, resident choreographer, is its current artistic director.



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Intersectional Social Identities: Race and Gender

Some of the intersectional social identity structures that have been and continue to be underrepresented in American ballet-though represented by DTH-include both Black and Brown males and females dancing ballet. Additionally, Black choreographers who created ballet works for DTH are rarely acknowledged in documented American ballet history.

Intersectional Social Identities: Social Class

- Working-class individuals found support against discrimination at DTH. Their talents and interests took precedence despite their inability to afford ballet lessons, dancewear, and other expenses. Numerous students received scholarships.
- Middle—and upper-class individuals who could afford lessons were also embraced at DTH, not for their tuition but for their talent.
- Dancers of all abilities were welcomed to the student body, and there were adult classes as well.

Local Community

- Mitchell also provided training for young people in the working-class neighborhood to sew and play percussion instruments. He subsequently hired them to construct costumes, accompany dance classes, and perform in the orchestra.
- DTH not only brings ballet to Harlem but also integrates into the Harlem community through its interactions and inclusive practices rather than relying solely on outreach programming to engage the community.





Intersectional Social Identities: Ableism

Arthur Mitchell hired his former partner, Tanaquil LeClercq, who was in a wheelchair, to teach the performing company and in the school decades before laws were implemented to support “disabled people.”

World Community

The people belonging to the social identity structures that studied at DTH could all find a place of belonging and achieve excellence in the art of ballet at the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

It was an educational, socially active, and artistic community.

Photo of Arthur Mitchell and some of the DTH dancers in Barcelona, Spain being film by 60 minutes in 1983.

Photo Source: Joselli Deans' Archive

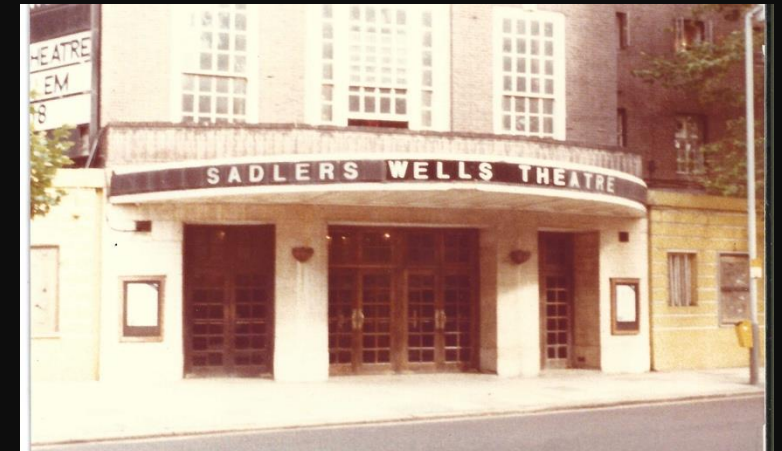
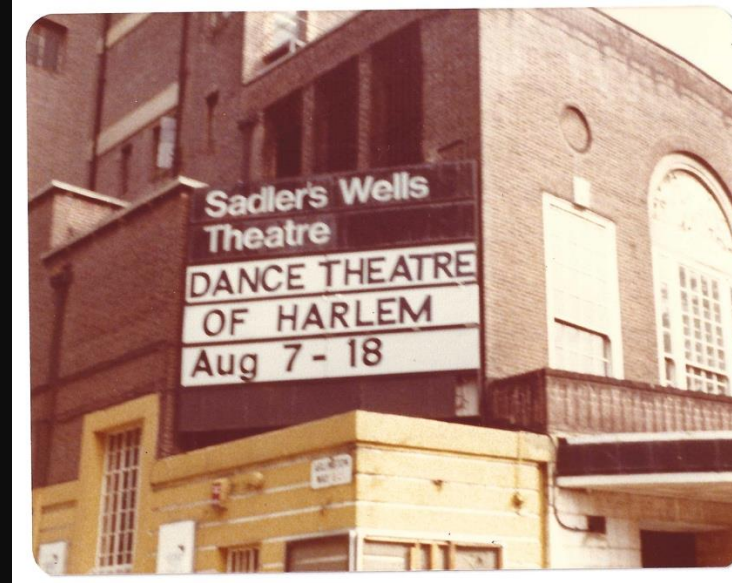


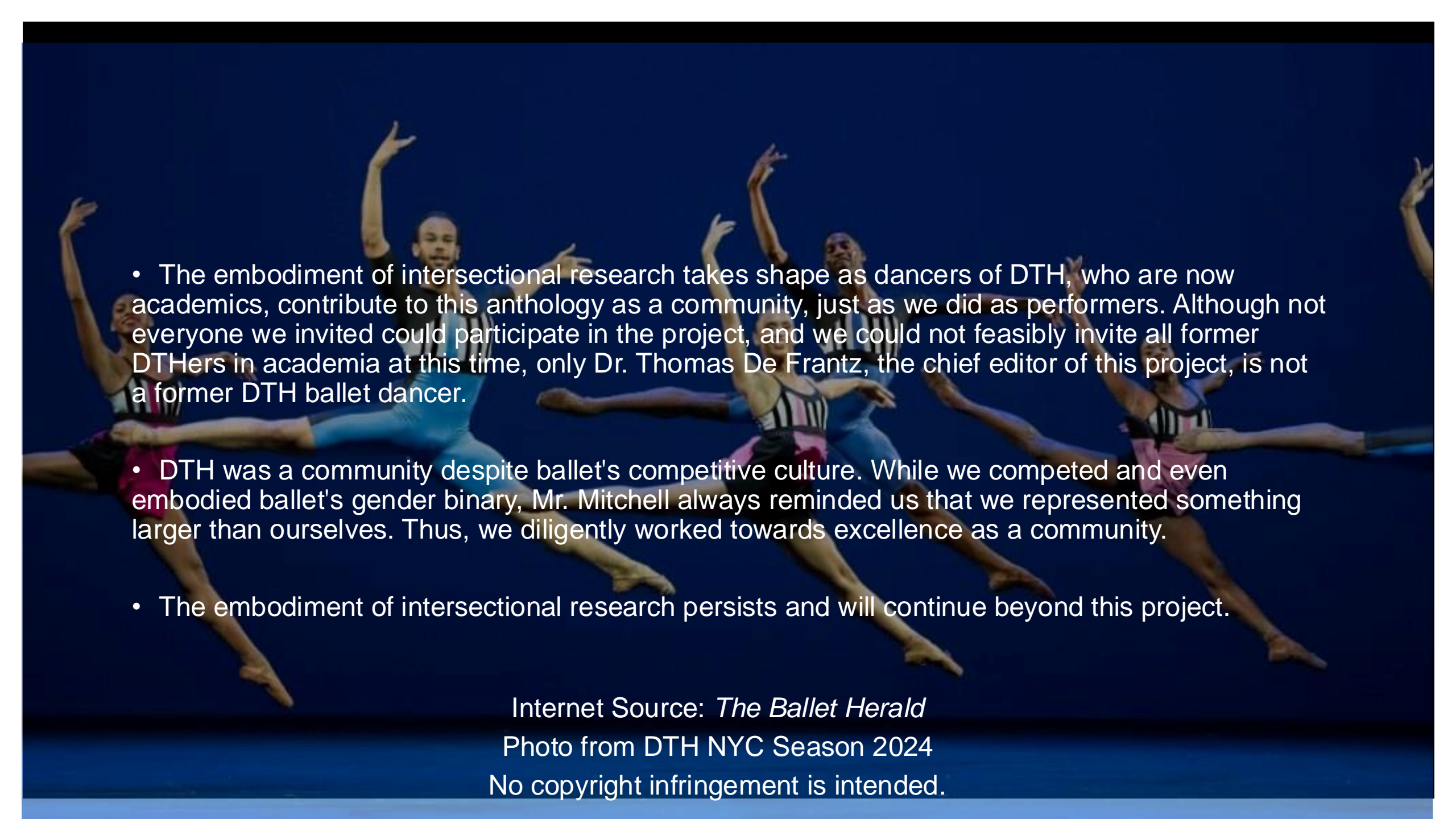
Intersectional Research

- Though hundreds of performance reviews and articles exist, few scholarly works record the work of the Dance Theatre of Harlem. No books exist about the Dance Theatre of Harlem and its accomplishments in scholarly dance literature. Most dance history books provide only a few sentences, and some do not mention the Dance Theatre of Harlem at all.

- These photos show Sadler's Wells Theatre in London, England, during DTH's performances from August 7th to 19th, 1979.

- Photo source: Joselli Deans' Archive



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- A group of dancers, both men and women, are captured in a dynamic, synchronized leap or jump. They are wearing matching costumes consisting of a blue long-sleeved top and a pink skirt or shorts. Their arms are raised, and their legs are extended in various directions, creating a sense of movement and grace. The background is a solid, dark blue color.
- The embodiment of intersectional research takes shape as dancers of DTH, who are now academics, contribute to this anthology as a community, just as we did as performers. Although not everyone we invited could participate in the project, and we could not feasibly invite all former DTHers in academia at this time, only Dr. Thomas De Frantz, the chief editor of this project, is not a former DTH ballet dancer.
 - DTH was a community despite ballet's competitive culture. While we competed and even embodied ballet's gender binary, Mr. Mitchell always reminded us that we represented something larger than ourselves. Thus, we diligently worked towards excellence as a community.
 - The embodiment of intersectional research persists and will continue beyond this project.

Internet Source: *The Ballet Herald*
Photo from DTH NYC Season 2024
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Arthur Mitchell

“There were always black classical dancers in America-they just never got on stage!”

Quote Source: *Blacks and Ballet*
By Zita Allen
Dance Magazine, July 1976

Photo Source: Eve Glasberg
Columbia Magazine (2015)



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Arthur Mitchell's Love Letter: Dance Theatre of Harlem and its Legacies



Source:
Joselli Deans'
Archive

DTH 30th
Anniversary
Souvenir Book
(1999)

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