

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Karen Valby, author of the book, *The Swans of Harlem: Five Black Ballerinas, 50 Years of Sisterhood, and the Reclamation of a Groundbreaking History*. The book is also a history of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, which shifted the national narrative of who could be a ballerina. We're also fortunate to have with us today, Karlya Shelton-Benjamin, one of the titular dancers. So why don't we start with a brief introduction to each of these five women?

KV: Lydia Abarca Mitchell is one of the first women to step down those steps in Harlem for an audition to be a part of the company the great Arthur Mitchell was forming. She was 17 years old. She'd grown up in Harlem's Grant housing projects. She'd had very high-end training in ballet at Juilliard and the Harkness School. But for all those years of advanced technical training en pointe, no teacher ever thought to show her a stage. She never performed. So she was spending her childhood at the barre, but a dancer is meant to perform. And none of those adults in Lydia's life thought that this was a ballerina. So they kept her confined to the studio. So she's 17 years old when she meets Arthur Mitchell.

There's the beautiful Gayle McKinney-Griffith who grows up dancing in Connecticut and is so sophisticated and elegant of a dancer that she's accepted into Juilliard, where a year into her training there, the administrators try to say, "yes, yes, yes. You're a beautiful ballerina. You should do modern. You're never going to get an audition. No mainstream company is ever going to take you. This is a fool's errand. Be a modern dancer." She leaves the office and is crying on the floor. And a fellow dancer says, "there's this guy, Arthur Mitchell. He's auditioning dancers uptown. Get up there." She goes on to become the first ballet mistress of Dance Theatre of Harlem. Sheila Rohan, magnificent Sheila Rohan, is 27 years old when she learns that Arthur Mitchell is auditioning dancers. She has taken ballet classes, but it's long since put away her pointe shoes because she is the mother of three on Staten Island. And her sister calls her with the news that this man named Arthur Mitchell is auditioning dancers. And she thinks, "well, it's just going to be a little, like, community troupe but I would love to dance ballet with other Black artists." So she makes that trek from Staten Island up to Harlem and realizes, "Oh no, this isn't some little troupe. This man, this visionary is telling us we're going to shock the world."

And then there's Marcia Sells, who I think is 9 years old, Dance Theatre of Harlem is on its first year of touring. Gayle, Sheila, Lydia are in the company and Marcia, who's the only Black dancer in her ballet classes in Cincinnati. She and her mother go to the theatre on a Friday night to see Dance Theatre of Harlem perform. And when she sees Lydia and Sheila and Gayle and they're ballerinas, and they are at the top of their game and she's sitting there next to her mother in her theatre, best thinking, "Oh my gosh, I'm not alone. I could do that too. This world belongs to me too." And then, oh my gosh, there's Karlya Shelton-Benjamin!

KSB: Well, I grew up in Denver, Colorado, dancing with Colorado Concert Ballet. I was 4 years old when I started dancing and I was always the only Black girl, Black dancer. There were occasionally people that came and went, but for the most part, I was the only one. I became a soloist at the age of 16 there. And at 17, there was a group of us that, there was a guest teacher from New York that was going to bring seven of us to New York to audition for the big companies. And I was scheduled to audition for New York City Ballet, the Joffrey and American Ballet Theatre. But about a month before we were going to come, maybe less than that, on the cover of Dance Magazine was Lydia Abarca. And there was a feature on Dance Theatre of Harlem inside the magazine. First of all, I was really shocked because I'd never seen a Black ballerina. So I stared at that cover for, I don't know, and I went through those pages, I don't know how many times. So I asked the teacher, who was very well connected, if she would get me an audition with the company. And she did. And I went to New York and I auditioned with the company on stage. They were in season at what was then the Uris Theatre. I auditioned with them. It was very exciting. And Arthur Mitchell was very exciting. And he said, go backstage and put your pointe shoes on. And when I went backstage to put my pointe shoes on, there were two ladies, one was Gayle and I believe Susan Lavelle. And they were sitting over to the side on the steps and they were dying their pointe shoes skin color. And when I saw that, I just knew it was like a bell rang in my head. And I

just knew that this was the place for me. Obviously, I got into the company and I just, I couldn't wait until I could wear skin-colored tights and shoes because that was like the complete picture, that completed the line. I was wearing pink tights and pink shoes. And you're looking at everyone else and it looks fine, but you're looking at yourself and it's just, your lines are broken. But it doesn't occur to you that it could be any other way. And then when you see that and it's like magic, it just made total sense. It's like, why didn't anyone think of this before? This is exactly how it should be. I was very excited by that.

AT: Well, and you've just mentioned how important it was for you personally to see another Black ballerina as a Black ballerina yourself who was aspiring to do this on a larger scale. And it's interesting because the book opens talking about how Misty Copeland, when she rose to prominence, was treated as if she just appeared out of nowhere. Like there had never been a Black ballerina ever before, and she's the only one. And I find this is a larger pattern where women's stories don't exist without context. Like you see movies and other media where there is one woman in the room and she is meant to be *the* woman, right? The only woman. But when you look at actual women's stories, you almost never have a situation where that woman didn't have predecessors paving the way. And one of the things that I really loved about the book is you also talk about the strong mothers of the ballerinas. So not just Sheila was navigating being a dancer and a mother at the same time, but you really give the family context for the mothers that helped shape these young women.

KV: I'm so happy you bring that up because especially as the mother of Black girls, I remember sitting at Karlya's dining room table when I went to visit her at her house and meet her family and her incredibly beautiful and elegant mother, Jean, joined us. And Jean was describing how when Karlya was little and was deciding between - Karlya, was it? (KSB: the Viola.) viola or dance. She chose dance. She was all in on dance. And Jean admitted to me, "well, I just assumed there's no way she's going to make it. She's going to have to go to Europe. It's not going to happen in America, but Karlya is going to have to go her own way. It's a parent's job to stand alongside their child as they choose their path and then be there whatever happens, but not to chart the path for them." And as the mother of a 16-year-old, I was like, "wait, what?" You have to trust your child? And let them lean into their passion. And in some ways, in differing degrees, each mother in this book trusted their child and each child led their mother to believe, "this is where my heart is and I won't be talked out of it. And the world might not believe in me, but you have to, Mom and Dad." (KSB: Yeah,) And not just for parenting a ballerina, I think that's really beautiful parenting advice in general. It was Karlya's path. My daughters are on their own path. Karlya, your beautiful artist son is on his own path. I guess we all just sort of have to make our way in the world.

KSB: Yeah, it's true. You just have to have that faith. It's hard. It's hard. I think it helped my mom too that when I auditioned for the Prix de Lausanne, she was kind of like, "oh, maybe. Maybe it will happen, and she could get to Europe and that might help." But yeah, it is difficult to have that faith in your kids.

AT: Well, it also seems like these supportive childhoods probably helped with the resilience that was needed later because Dance Theatre of Harlem sounds like it was an amazing environment to be in, but it also sounds like it was not the healthiest place in a lot of ways, shall we say. And it seemed like a lot of that toxicity came out of this idea of Black exceptionalism. So the idea that if you are a dancer of color, especially in dance, because as Karlya was saying, a lot of these people were told, "oh, you should go do modern because there's no place for you in ballet" being the bit that went unsaid or perhaps it went said. But this idea that if you are going to occupy this white space, that you have to be the best. You have to be better than any of the white dancers who are out there because you've already got this assumption that you are not as good.

KSB: But that's kind of how we're taught anyway. I mean, we grow up that way. We're always, our parents have always told us, "you're going to set out to do that. You have to be better than anyone. That's just how we grew

up.” It’s a pressure that during that time, especially, this is how we grew up. You have to be better than anyone else.

KV: Do you think that’s changing at all?

KSB: I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t think I ever said that to Che. I don’t think so. But I don’t know. But I think I have that expectation. I don’t think I ever said those words to him. But yeah, I don’t know.

KV: It’s so it’s interesting. This book allowed for such rich conversations between the women and I from the beginning. But a lot of it also was this gift that I got as a white woman into the intimate experiences of five women and their youth, and their growing up. And it helped to inform my own sense as a white woman of parenting Black girls and that idea of exceptionalism and having to be the best and having to be better than and having to prove all the time because I’m so untested in that area. I’m a woman living in patriarchy, but I’m a white woman living in patriarchy. And you all would talk about having to be ambassadors and being the best. And there was always pride in your voices. And it was always like a mantle you took with honor. But to me, I always did feel a little exhausted and sad on your behalf. And on Ava and Zinnia, on my girls’ behalf, too, just of like it’s sort of like there’s that great scene in the beginning where Gayle is talking about how in Juilliard, she described, she would go into a room. And if she was the only Black girl in the room, you sort of zip yourself up in this protective armor where you’re confident in your skill set and you’re confident in what your mission is, but you’re also protecting yourself from the gaze in the room. And the way she described those early Dance Theatre of Harlem rehearsals were just the safety of numbers and not having to prove yourself to Lydia or to Sheila or to you, Karlya, and how that freed you from expectation or lack of expectation and just allowed you to focus on being an artist. I always found that so beautiful and relieving.

KSB: Yeah, I guess it’s just something that’s so ingrained, no matter what. It’s like when, after I left even dancing, and I went for job interviews, for example, with Van Cleef and Arpels. And I was the only one I knew that I had to carry myself in a way that maybe other people didn’t have to, you know what I mean? Because I knew I was probably going to be the only one. So it’s something that I take pride in doing, you know? So it’s fine with me. And like I say, I do expect it of Che. And I think he knows it. Even though I have never spoken those words, that you have to be better than everyone else. But he does know that I expect, we expect him to carry himself in a certain way. And to be below that would be unacceptable. Just because you should have that amount of pride in yourself. And I stress that too to the the young ballerina that I’m coaching, and for the reason that she does worry about what other people are saying around her, because she is one of the few Black ballerinas in that environment. And it does concern, or I don’t think it does anymore, but it was concerning her what people were saying. I said, “you walk in there like you own the place. You can’t worry about what they’re saying, because there’s nothing you can do. First of all, you don’t know exactly what they’re saying. Secondly, you can’t do anything about what they’re saying. So you might as well own the place, just walk and own it.” That’s what Arthur Mitchell told us to do, “walk in like you own it and make people say, ‘Who’s that?’”

AT: So if we could just go back to the formation of the company, and the context and what was going on around that time.

KSB: Arthur Mitchell was on his way to Brazil, actually, he had stopped dancing, left New York City Ballet and was on his way to Brazil to start a company there. And Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. And he thought, “Why am I going somewhere else to start a company when I should go back to my community and do something there for my community?” And so he went back and started what was going to be, I guess, a school in Harlem. And Arthur Mitchell has big ideas, always. And so it just didn’t stop it being a school, he wanted to

make a company. And the community responded, because there was a hunger and a thirst for something that the community could be proud of, could have like that. And so he started this, he opened the doors to the school. And I think within a very short amount of time, he had like 400 students. And then when he wanted to have the company, he played the flute and people came.

KV: It was two dancers. And then yes, that first audition. And that first little lecture demonstration was four dancers. But you have to realize this is in Harlem, the neighborhood in which Arthur Mitchell was raised, a neighborhood that is completely painted in the media as the worst of the worst American cities. And in many ways, Harlem is suffering. Housing is in such crisis, the trash system, there's piles of trash on the street, drugs, but there was still beauty, and there was still community. And Arthur Mitchell said, "my gift, my genius is ballet. And to me, ballet represents beauty, and it represents discipline. I'm going to bring those two things into my neighborhood, because I believe Harlem will show out, and that there's artists here. And if we can get these kids off the streets and into a dance studio practicing the discipline of ballet, well, they can do anything. They don't have to be professional ballerinas. But what they learn in my studio will make them better citizens."

KSB: Right. If you make things available to all people, you never know what's going to come out of those communities. People should have that opportunity to have everything available to them. Yeah, Harlem's a jewel. Well, now we know. I mean, everybody's trying to get there now. The media does such things that they want to tell you what something is, and without really completely understanding. So my view of what Harlem was, was what I saw on TV, and in the movies. And when I got there, it was nothing like that. I mean, it was like the community I came from in Denver. It was warm. I felt good. I felt comfortable. I had no fear. I was not scared of anything. I felt welcome. But what I saw in the movies was dark and drug dealers on the corners. And it was nothing like that. And the people in the community were very proud of us. They were happy and welcoming. And how's ballet class? You know, you better not eat too much today. Because, I mean, it was just really very, very good. I mean, very nice.

KV: Oh, man, even the people on the street were after you about your diet.

KSB: Yeah, come on. Did he plant those people there? (laughter)

AT: Something that really struck me as I was reading the book, as someone who has worked in the arts, I saw this very common trope of a genius man who is doing something incredible. I don't mean to undermine what he was working on and what he accomplished. But there is very much this undertone of what I would call abuse towards the dancers. So as you just mentioned, there was body-shaming. There are stories about how he tried to create rivalries between the dancers. He was very controlling and harsh at times. And of course, there's the colorism that was mentioned and adherence to white beauty standards in ballet as the ideal. So he's not pushing back against that at all. He is conforming and wanting his dancers to conform to it. And this is something that I have personally seen much more recently, where you've got a man who is in charge as a creative director and is just a bully, but it's allowed because they're the "genius," they're artists. And we have this idea that that justifies that kind of behavior, even as it's pretty clearly harming the people under him. And again, I don't mean to speak for everyone's experiences, but from what I was reading about different people's stories, that definitely seems to be a throughline.

KSB: I think you should understand, first of all, what time, the era that it was. And the fact that we were told, he was told, they did not want Black people to do ballet. So first of all, it's in the Civil Rights era. And he's going to do this thing that they told us that we could not do. So to start this company and try to get funding for this company, there has to be a gentle way of getting people to accept in order to get funding. So you can't just come in there, bang! And just expect to get funding because people are already pushing back hard, hard. So I

think as far as the look of the dancer, there's a certain look that you have to have when you're when you're in ballet specifically. So I think as far as body-shaming, there was a look that we needed to have. I think that that's what it was. I don't think, he may not have done it in the best way sometimes, but is there a good way to do it? I mean, you have to see that, I found this out later because I talked to him about it. And he said, when he would go downtown to get funding and people would promise him money. And by the time he got uptown, they had taken that money away from him. So, just trying to keep money, to keep this this company that he, that was his vision that he believed, he knew should be to keep it going was a was a difficult task. I'm not going to make excuses. I don't think the way he did it all was totally right, especially having been at the other end of this, let's say sometimes abusive terms that he used. I think that was not uncommon in that day. I think that there were many, many directors, and I'm not just going to leave that for a ballet. There were musicians. I did a book

discussion in California, and my son's piano teacher stood up and she said, "that happened to me when I was taking my piano lessons." She suffered abuse. So it was just kind of the way things were in the arts, let's say. It wasn't right. I mean, we all saw *The Red Shoes*, right? I mean, it was the same thing. So it wasn't right. It wasn't right. And I think we all took as much as we could, just because we suffered for our art, because our art form meant that much to us, and when we couldn't do it anymore, we left. There are sacrifices you make to do what you what your passion is.

KV: I wanted to say something about this idea of like the man in power, because Arthur Mitchell, by all accounts, he was such an egomaniac. He could be petty. He could be erratic. He could be moody. He could be demanding. He could be a dictator. He loved being called a controlled maniac. But something that's very different about Mr. Mitchell, a lot of times when men are in power, they abuse that role, there's sexual abuse. And that is a lever that people are very familiar with in artistic spaces, of the man in power wielding that like a weapon. And Arthur Mitchell said to his dancers early on, he's coming from George Balanchine, from City Ballet, where Balanchine married his dancers. There's so many famous scandals at the foot of George Balanchine with him and his ballerinas. And Arthur Mitchell said, "I'm never going, it is too hard to keep the Dance Theatre of Harlem alive and running. And we have too much on the line. Scandal is not going to play a role in our company." And my gosh, it didn't. He didn't sleep with the women. He didn't sleep with the men. There's no scandal like that ever. And it shouldn't be such a shock that there's an art institution where scandal doesn't play a role like that. And Dance Theatre of Harlem is it. Like, it's crazy. It's almost like Barack Obama's presidency or something. It's like, could anybody really have been that squeaky clean? Well, it mattered. It was the first. They weren't going to do anything to muck it up like every other jackass does.

KSB: Yeah, it was, for him, he had this vision, and he was determined to see it through, and at all costs, that was it. And he wasn't going to muck it up, like you said, by doing something like that.

AT: One of the things that I really liked about the book was this nuance, because something that's come up before in different conversations is this idea that someone either has to be a perfect idealized version of themselves, or they have to be a complete villain without any gray area in between. And so you have stories in there, like when he found out that Sheila had kids, he said, "Well, you should have told me. I would have paid you more." But then on the flip side, you have what happened with Gayle and *The Wiz*. So if one of you would like to recount that, because you know better than I do.

KSB: Yeah, well, he really encouraged Gayle to go for *The Wiz* because Arthur Mitchell and Louis Johnson had known each other for forever. And this was a huge thing for Louis to choreograph the movie of *The Wiz* and Louis adored Gayle. And so when when that opportunity came up, Arthur encouraged her, "yeah, go do go for it. Go do it. And, you know, she definitely made sure it was okay. "Are you sure?" Gayle really wanted to expand because by that time, I think everybody that had been there from the beginning kind of wanted to

spread their wings. And this was an amazing opportunity to do that. That cast of that movie had everybody who was anybody and everybody that was working on it, Quincy Jones, Sidney Lumet, every top model, Black top model was in it. And every top dancer was so yeah, who wouldn't want to go? And she was going to be one of the dance captains. So yeah, she went to do it, and then, with every intention of coming back. And when she did come back, he had his head flipped around. And he was angry. And he said no. And just really treated her badly. And she was so shocked. She just couldn't believe it. And he did not let her come back.

KV: I hope it comes across in the book sort of how ethereal and kind and gentle and beloved Gayle was. (KSB: Oh my gosh, yeah.) And as the ballet mistress too in the company, she had such a role in sort of tending to the dancers and soothing egos and encouraging and nurturing. But so it was such a big deal when she left for the whiz with Mr. Mitchell's blessing, but then 10 other dancers sort of quickly followed her, because it's a great opportunity. It's the biggest movie shooting in New York City. How are we supposed to not go? And so he kind of conflated that mass exodus with Gayle's leaving, which was incorrect. But then when Gayle came back to collect her things at the studio, and he was so ugly to her and acted like he didn't know her. And she wasn't welcome there. And she was persona non grata. That was so wounding because she had been his right, his extension, she had been his ballet mistress. And it's funny because my both my father and my 16-year-old daughter, when they got to that point in the book where Mr. Mitchell was ugly to her - that was it for them. Mr. Mitchell could not come back into my father's good graces nor my 16-year-old's because they loved Gayle too much. And they did not like somebody being that ugly to her. But I do just want to quickly say something that's really special about the book is, each of the five Swans have this very specific relationship with Mr. Mitchell that is very tested through the arc of their journeys together. And because sometimes we're brave and we risk being vulnerable, each of the women had repair with Mr. Mitchell before his death. Karlya, you had a very specific repair with him after a real fracture in your relationship. So did Marcia. Sheila, maybe because she was a mother when she started, she's so tough. She would never really let Mr. Mitchell get under her skin. But Lydia too reconnected with him before his death and even Gayle, in his own way, he tried to apologize and repair the break he had made with her. So that is something that's so soothing to me that no matter how badly Mr. Mitchell behaved with the women, he remained this giant in each of your lives. And you all got to mourn him in very clean fashion at the time of his death because some of those wounds were repaired and how lucky for that.

KSB: Yeah, I know there were a lot of dancers that wish they had been able to do that. And yeah, I'm grateful, so grateful that I was able to do that. It took a long time, but I was able to do that. And yeah, Gayle was so special for all of us because she was our cushion between, she was there between us and him, and she made sure that we, she promoted us to him, you know, "she knows that part. So you should put her in there." She was really, really something. And I think that she took the brunt of his anger for everyone that left, so that was unfortunate.

AT: But that's also not uncommon, is the idea that you have men who are allowed to be temperamental, shall we say, because there are women around them managing that so that it doesn't destroy anything. That was really the vibe that I got (KV: Oh yeah.) from Gayle's story. Something else that occurred to me in this story that, again, you see in the arts a lot is that when you have one person who is meant to be both the creative lead and the administrative lead, so like the CEO and the creative director, those are not often overlapping in the same person in terms of skill sets. And so to put it another way, artists are often not great managers. And when I was reading about like sort of his struggle with the financial side in particular, but also, the behavioral issues, I kept thinking that he needs an admin who can counter him, to balance him out, and to take some of that off of him as well. Because as Karlya was saying, a lot of his behavior was due to the immense stress that he would have been under in this situation. And so how, do you think Dance Theatre of Harlem would have been significantly different if he had had an administrative partner?

KSB: He did have people, he did. (KV: But it was his way or the highway.) Right. I mean, he had good people for, I can think of several people, they stayed for a while. And then, he's a hard guy to deal with. So when you have an ego like that, and it's your dream, it's your vision. And, you just can't hear when somebody is telling you different. And so I think that was probably the problem a lot of times.

KV: I did a lot of interviews with the first treasurer of the board, who was also one of Arthur Mitchell's best friends. And he diagnosed Arthur with "founders disease," (KSB: Yeah, that is a thing.) and just said that Arthur would always chase good board members away if they painted a fundraising picture that he didn't like. He didn't want to be told how to run the joint. Like when they started having computers and wanted to move it, since he didn't understand computers, he didn't want anyone else to use computers. And so yes, it's maddening. But I think he felt like "I'm the one. I'm the captain." It's like when I asked Sheila, "what would Arthur think if he was still alive? And he knew you were all were telling your stories and, and working on this book?" And she said he'd want to be like, "well, let me see it. Let me see it. And that's not how it was. And that's not how it was." And he'd want to take it over and he'd want to micromanage it. And he'd want to be in control. And it's, I don't know. I'd like to think we're all evolving, but if he wasn't that big of a nut and controlling and so wedded to his vision, could he have launched this and made it happen the way he did?

AT: Well, I think it's a question of, you need someone with drive, but who is also secure, because I think a lot of controlling nature comes from insecurity. And especially for someone in that position who had come up in a world that was not for him. (KV: Right.) It seems like that's probably where a lot of it was coming from.

KV: Yeah. How can you be secure if what you created was in a time where people said it wasn't done? Like how can you ever feel truly secure if every few years, The New York times is running an article with the headline "Ballet for Blacks?" And it's like, how many times do we have to, like when is this going to stop being treated with an element of like surprise or condescension? Yes! It's shocking.

KSV: I think that was the thing. I think we kept having to, for whatever reason, it felt like we kept having to prove it over and over again. And it was like, "okay, let's just not have to prove that, we've already done it. Let's move on. Let's do something else now." Because if they don't believe it by now, forget it, they never will. So let's move on. But I think he needed someone to balance him out. Like in the beginning, Charles was good and Lorenzo James was good. They balanced him. But after that, it was hard to find someone like that, because he was crazy. (laughter)

AT: And I think we're also nudging towards the *Swan Lake* production. And now my understanding is that from his perspective, it was one of those, "if we do *Swan Lake*, then they will have to accept us" sort of situations like that was the thing that you had to do to cross that line. And it doesn't seem to have been particularly popular internally. Like it doesn't seem like the dancers necessarily were super keen on this. And so that's why I find it funny that the title of the book is *Swans of Harlem*. Because then when I read about the *Swan Lake* production, I was like, Oh...

KV: It is definitely not a nod to *Swan Lake*, but it is a nod to that idea. It's the iconic image. And these women were icons. And like Karlya to me, Karlya had one of had a fabulous role as the cygnet in the swans and got amazing reviews.

KSB: I don't think any of us really wanted to do it. Because if we had wanted to do *Swan Lake*, we would have joined a company that did *Swan Lake*. We liked the ballets that we were doing, because they were different. We liked the theatre pieces, like *Fall River Legend* and things that were different, some of the Glen Tetley

pieces, things that we could identify or that would identify us. But *Swan Lake*, I mean...

KV: Did it feel like a capitulation to, "oh, we're just doing this to prove," like did it feel defensive on his behalf?

KSB: I mean, I don't know. I just, I never, it was Balanchine's. So that was a saving grace. So I mean, that was okay. But because it was only the second act. But I didn't feel like it was a piece that was going to show us off well. So I didn't really understand why we were doing it. You know, to do a piece like that, especially when you've seen people like Makarova and Cynthia Gregory, and I saw Toni Lander - I mean, you've seen the greats do it. Why are we doing it? I don't want to do that.

KV: Not because you're intimidated by the material, but because that belongs, that's a different...

KSB: That's not us. Yeah, yeah. And I didn't think we would ever do that kind of, and I didn't think we would do *Giselle* either. And I was like, "God, what's next, *Coppelia*? Please, no." (laughter) *Giselle* worked okay, because he took it to another place. He took it and set it in Louisiana. He did a lot of research on it. And it worked. But still, those kind of fairy tale, German folktale ballets, I just, we were different, we were doing things that were more theatrical, or like I said, the Balanchine pieces, those or the contemporary pieces. Those were (KV: Less stodgy.) Yeah, I mean, I just saw the company recently, and they did a William Forsythe piece, and they did the hell out of that piece. And I thought, we could have done that! But those are the kind of things that we we would do. Not *Swan Lake*.

AT: And this also makes me think of another topic that came up in the book, particularly in the early years, where there was pushback from some members of the African-American community, who didn't feel like you should be trying to break into ballet, you should be focusing on dance forms that had their origins in the African diaspora and African-American experiences. And I feel like you see this as well with people who are like, why are you singing opera, you should be singing jazz. And so it's, it's a false binary, I think, because it's not that these two things can't coexist, we can do both. But it's also that, this not wanting people to break the color barrier came from both sides of that barrier. Like there were there were Black people saying, you shouldn't be wasting your time on ballet, you should be focusing on "Black" art forms.

KV: I just remember Virginia Johnson, Karlya's great friend, and another founding member of the company, describing it as sometimes people in the Black community saying, "why do you want to be a part of this white man's art form?" And I think even just naming it that is like, because it doesn't belong to the white man. It's like, I remember asking Karlya, where did the audacity come from to keep dancing ballet as a child, if she didn't see anybody else that looked like her. And she said, "well, how could ballet not belong to me when I did it so well?" And I liked that idea of like, "you call it the white man's art form. I don't call it that." And neither did Arthur Mitchell, and neither did these women. And they sort of proved how much bigger ballet was with them in it. It's just, does art belong to anybody? I know its roots are in European courts, but Black dancers have been enriching ballet for forever. We just never told their stories.

KSB: Right. I think it's a matter of introducing it in a way that it appeals to people. For example, yeah, you can say that, but when we did *Forces of Rhythm*, which is to Aretha Franklin and Donny Hathaway and it's classical ballet. "Oh, okay. I see what you mean. I see what you mean." If you see it as *Swan Lake*, well, yeah, it's not as appealing. But if you see it in a way that, "oh yeah, that's still ballet because the technique is there, the music is different." That's a little bit more exciting. Then it's appealing, so it's all in the way it's presented.

KV: And so exciting for the audience. Karlya and the Swans always talk about the future of ballet. And if companies just keep with the *Sleeping Beauty* and the *Swan Lake*, well, no wonder it sometimes feels like a



snoozy tradition that's on its way out. But think of how many more sources there are to cull stories from and choreographers and the way Arthur Mitchell redefined what music could play through a ballet was so exciting and it's so exciting for the audience.

KSB: Right. It has to evolve. I mean, otherwise it's a snooze fest. You're not going to appeal to the masses if you keep doing *Sleeping Beauty*. Those tales have got to evolve. Let's see Anansi the Spider. That's an African folk tale. Let's see the Princess and the Moon Tower. Let's see that story. "What story is that? I don't know that one." Or let's see a Black Aurora or an Asian Aurora or let's see Pocahontas. I mean, there's just so many stories. Let's stop seeing the same ones. And let's see some different choreographers. Let's see some other music. There's just a lot of things that can be done and I realize that funding is a big issue, but let's fund some new stuff. Let's give money to new things. And that's the question I have for artistic directors. Wouldn't you want to broaden your audience? Wouldn't you want, look what happened when Misty Copeland, when her name goes up on the marquee. Do you know that how many little Black girls and actually little girls of all races flocked to see her do whatever? They sold out the house because there were little girls that wanted to see a ballerina that looked like her. You have to broaden your vision a little bit more. Kids are going to see Calvin Royal when he's dancing. People are going to see, the house sells out. He's coordinating a program at the Joyce Theater and you should see all the people he has coming in there. Just different things, a variety of things. People are flocking to see it because it's different and it's new and fresh. (KV: It's beautiful.) That's my advice to these artistic directors. Broaden your vision. Broaden your audience.

AT: Well, and I think something else to note is that it's not just novelty, right? People aren't just going to see Misty Copeland because, "oh, it's a Black ballerina and that's a novelty." And people didn't go to see Dance Theatre of Harlem because, I mean, I'm sure there was some of that aspect of it, but my impression is that Arthur Mitchell was very adamant that that not be how the company was viewed is, "we are incredible dancers and that's why people are coming to see us." Not just, oh, "it's a Black person doing ballet!"

KV: That maybe got some people in the door in the '60s and early '70s that wanted to feel radical and cool. If the artistry wasn't 110% people would have loved to say "see! We were right."

KSB: Yeah. I do think it did bring in a lot of new people that wouldn't have normally gone to the ballet that wanted to see and wanted to say, "look, we have a company! A ballet company!"

KV: I loved Virginia's description of the early performances of how you could feel when the curtain rose. People sitting skeptically in their seats (KSB: Side-eye.) and shoulders turned in, side eye, arms crossed. And then within the first movement, just the way the audience would open up and respond and give themselves over. It was like a (KSB: Surrender.) surrender! It was like seeing the act of falling in love. You're skeptical and then you release it's so powerful.

KSB: Yeah. Yeah. You can see, especially if they're sitting in the front there, you can see people that just don't want to, "yeah, I don't know why I came anyway." And by the end, "oh, okay. All right. I'm glad I came." Yeah.

AT: And so we've discussed the importance of representation of that idea that you can't be what you can't see and how important it is for really anyone, like not just young Black girls and boys, but also everyone else to see that, Black ballet dancers exist. They have been around for quite some time. This isn't a new thing.

KV: We've brought up Gayle McKinney-Griffith a couple of times, but something that is very devastating, but very important to note is that Gayle passed away before the book came out, which makes it sort of extra profound that she put her story down on record before her passing. And I guess that's just what I want to, you'd

mentioned in the beginning, all the stories we don't know, all the, the way women's history or Black history or American history or dance history is shrunken to just like stand on like the one representative's shoulders, but it's the specifics of Gayle's life that are so beautiful and inspiring. And so the fact that we have it on record is something to take heart from because her life is something to take heart from. And so I don't know what else to say other than, if I didn't know the very specific history of Gayle McKinney-Griffith, my life would be that much less rich. And so, tell your story and if you think you don't know the story, seek out the bigger one.

KSB: Yeah. There's so many stories out there that need to be told. There's us, but there are people before us too. Greats. Carmen de Lavallade, Janet Collins, Delores Browne, Joan Myers Brown, Cleo Quitman.

AT: I know there are stories in the book about dancers who were in a company's school, but then were either told implicitly or explicitly that they will never be hired for the company. Or there was at least one dancer who was straight-up told they weren't being admitted to the school in the first place because there's no point in training a dancer that they didn't think could get hired anywhere. And so I would hope that we have made a lot of progress since those days and that at least to that explicit level, this isn't an issue today, but what are the things that you would like to see? Because obviously we're still not at equity. What are the things that you're seeing happening and what would you like to see in the future?

KV: Just because my girls are at a Black dance studio in Austin, Texas. And it's like everyone talks about how like local elections are where policy is made and where we should like put our eyes. But part of it is because she's the artistic director and the executive director and that's artist meets business and it does not always go well, but she fights so hard to stay alive. And yet every Black history month, Ballet Afrique is sort of trotted out all over Austin because it feels good to see that. I would love to see towns and cities invest more in their local Black art spaces because it's Ballet Afrique that a future Karlya Shelton or Misty Copeland or Lydia or Aisha Ash or Lauren Anderson or Ingrid Silva, that's where they come from. And so I wish my local government made it easier for a place like Ballet Afrique to stay alive because it's these little small breeding grounds that make great artists. Like it's where Karlya went to school. I know Karlya, you didn't dance at a Black dance studio, but like those early years of training and those early teachers that believed in you are what grew your seed of talent.

KSB: Yeah. I'd like to see more Black companies. Like Collage Dance Collective. I would like to see more because they're definitely invested in promoting Black professional dancers, not just Black, a diverse company. Because for whatever reason, these other companies are slower at accepting or diversifying their companies. I personally, and this is just me, well, a couple of other people, a couple of the other Swans are just tired of, it's been 50 years that we are still talking about this. And I'm just tired of saying the same thing. I'm ready to branch out and start new companies that want to do that, that want to broaden their audiences, that want to have these new choreographers and new dance pieces. Because if you don't want to do it, then okay, then just keep your same way of doing things. But for funders that are looking for something bright and new and exciting, fund these new companies. Help Ballet Afrique, help Collage Dance, help Alonzo King's Lines, help the 152nd Street Black Ballet Legacy. We're trying to give scholarships to young Black dancers, help them with their shoes, help new choreographers, get these new ballets out there. Because if these same companies are getting all the money, they are not going to be inspired to do anything other than what they're doing. So that's one thing. And then the other thing I would say, if you are a dancer of color and you find yourself not moving anywhere in let's say three to five years, start looking around, look at other companies, look at their rep. If you see a company that's doing a rep, that has a repertoire that's interesting to you, make a move because ballet careers are not like you can't dance until you're 50. So make a move and make your years count. Get out there and dance.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well behaved women rarely make history.