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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

Theater & Dance

## In Kennedy Center's Ballet Across America, a women's movement

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Review by [Sarah L. Kaufman](#)

Fifty years ago, the celebrated black ballet star Arthur Mitchell launched one of the century's best ideas — building a ballet company expressly for dancers of color.

That's how Dance Theatre of Harlem got its start in 1969, first as a school and eventually as a premier ballet company and global ambassador for excellence and diversity. Now DTH, as it is known, has added another dimension to its vision of opportunity and inclusion. The company is a shining example of female leadership and creativity, both of which were abundantly in evidence at Tuesday's opening performance at the Kennedy Center.

DTH is part of the center's [Ballet Across America series](#), which typically offers shared programs of various regional troupes that rarely have the chance to perform on their own in this venue. This iteration is different: There are only two companies, DTH and Miami City Ballet, each appearing separately (DTH performs through Thursday; Miami dances Saturday and Sunday). Additionally, the troupes will come together in a single performance Friday.

Women run both companies. Virginia Johnson is DTH's artistic director, Lourdes Lopez directs Miami, and both share governance with female executives, which is significant in the male-dominated arena of ballet leadership. DTH's program also features two poetic and highly physical works by female choreographers of color: Dianne McIntyre's "Change," from 2016, with recorded gospel singing by the all-female Spelman College Glee Club, and Claudia Schreier's new "Passage," with music by violinist and composer Jessie Montgomery. DTH's conductor, Tania León, led the Opera House Orchestra.

Taken as a whole, the DTH program brilliantly consolidates a slowly progressing shift in who gets to lead and create for ballet audiences, let alone who gets to dance for them. But in a more general sense, there's a provocative entwining of art and social consciousness here, particularly in the pieces by McIntyre and Schreier.

McIntyre, the respected veteran, centers "Change" on a vision of disruptive women of color. It's a layered concept, realized in the music, dance language and costumes for the three dancers (Lindsey Croop, Ingrid Silva and Stephanie Rae Williams). Partway through, the women trade their black gowns for bare legs and leotards in a patchwork of brown and beige. A program note says they're made from tights worn by former DTH dancers, dyed to match their skin color, and so the three women "perform clothed in the legacy of their predecessors." The gospel singers and the DTH women filter African American culture through classical training. That training is brought forward here, or rather hurled forward, into a vigorous, self-sufficient new mode of expression. These women dance on pointe but without male partners; this is ballet without dependency, weight firmly balanced, defiant.

Schreier's "Passage" deals less directly with its subject, the slave trade, with a focus on the resilience of the human spirit. This piece for a dozen dancers has a lot of moving parts, yet Schreier controls the flow firmly and sustains it; there's a sense of disciplined industry throughout. Montgomery's pleasant but unemphatic score matched the tone a bit too well. It felt overly organized until the end, with the sudden arrival of two powerful images: a man falling backward in a deliberately off-balance and impressively slow, melting arc, then being raised by the ensemble, appearing to fly toward a distant light in a breathtaking finish.

DTH is a smaller company under Johnson's leadership — 20 dancers, including guest artists, perform here. But its twin roots in the Balanchine tradition (Mitchell's artistic home had been New York City Ballet) and in colorful theatrical works are still thrillingly in evidence. "Douglas," Geoffrey Holder's Hindu African pageant of flamboyant costumes and bare skin, all accessorized with attitude, was a tribute to Mitchell; in his day, this crowd-pleaser was a perennial closer. Here, a downsized DTH has been augmented by members of the Memphis-based Collage Dance Collective, which is led by former DTH principal Kevin Thomas.

A fine account of Balanchine's "Valse Fantaisie" — a buoyant ode to Russian composer Glinka's work of the same name — opened the program. The cast of five festively gowned women and a lone man caught the ballet's spirit, outward energy and lightness, as if they were dancing entirely for our pleasure. Even as the weather changes — the music deepening, verging on gusty — the dancers circle like bees, weightless and untroubled. One could glean a bit of philosophy there.

**Ballet Across America** Through Sunday at the Kennedy Center Opera House. \$29-\$119. 202-467-4600. [kennedy-center.org](http://kennedy-center.org).