

Dance Moves: An African American Ballet Company in Postwar Los Angeles

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This article argues that a group of young African Americans in the 1940s and 1950s used ballet as a means of crossing racial and class barriers of an art form in which few blacks had until then participated. Founded in 1946 by white choreographer Joseph Rickard (1918–1994), the First Negro Classic Ballet was one of the first African American ballet companies in the country's history and the first black ballet company known to last over a decade. With the goal of multiethnic cooperation in the arts, the company created a series of original "dance-dramas," several with musical scores by resident composer Claudius Wilson, to perform for white and black audiences in venues throughout Southern and Northern California during the postwar era.

Key words: Ballet, Los Angeles, African Americans, classical music, civil rights

Joseph Rickard wanted to do more than dance; he wanted to found a ballet company for African Americans in postwar Los Angeles.¹ Yet he faced three potential problems. First, Rickard was

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1. On the history of African Americans in Los Angeles, see Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley, 2003); Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley, 2005); Delilah L. Beasley, *Negro Trail Blazers of California* (1969; New York, 1997); Lonnie G. Bunch III, "A Past Not Necessarily Prologue: The Afro-American in Los Angeles Since 1900," in Norman M. Klein and Martin J. Schiesl, eds., *20th Century Los Angeles: Power, Promotion, and Social Conflict* (Claremont, Calif., 1990), 101–130; Raphael J. Sonenshein,

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white and had little prior connection to the city's black community. Second, there had been no resident African American ballet troupes in Los Angeles, and so there were no patrons, white or black, who had yet stepped forward to support such a venture. That led directly to his third challenge: He had no funds to launch the company. Nonetheless, benefiting in part from the talent of recent migrants from the South, Rickard founded a ballet troupe he eventually called the First Negro Classic Ballet (hereafter the FNCB) in 1946.² Over time the company came to include more than thirty dancers, over two-thirds of whom were women; a resident composer/pianist also joined the troupe. Together they created something unique: an African American ballet company that for over a decade performed for both white and black audiences at venues throughout California.

Scholarship on African Americans and ballet is scant. In studying the performing arts in black communities, scholars tend to focus overwhelmingly on popular music and dance. We are well informed on such subjects as jazz during the Harlem Renaissance, the music scene of Central Avenue in Los Angeles from the 1920s through the 1940s, and the lives and careers of black entertainers from minstrelsy

Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles (Princeton, N.J., 1993); Keith E. Collins, *Black Los Angeles: The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940–1950* (Saratoga, Calif., 1980); Lawrence B. de Graaf, “Negro Migration to Los Angeles, 1930–1950” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1962); de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Seattle, 2001); Kevin Allen Leonard, “Federal Power and Racial Politics in Los Angeles During World War II,” in Richard White and John M. Findlay, eds., *Power and Place in the North American West* (Seattle, 1999), 87–116.

2. I refer to the First Negro Classic Ballet here as the FNCB for the purpose of brevity, although its members did not refer to the troupe as the FNCB. Materials concerning the troupe are in the Joseph Rickard Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif. (hereafter Rickard Papers). On the FNCB, see Peter J. Blodgett and Sara S. Hodson, “Worlds of Leisure, Worlds of Grace: Recreation, Entertainment, and the Arts in the California Experience,” *California History*, 75 (1996), 68–83; Sara S. Hodson, “L.A. Confidential: The First Negro Classic Ballet,” *Archival Outlook* (Jan./Feb. 2003), 8–9, 28; Kenneth H. Marcus, “‘A New Expression for a New People’: Race and Ballet in Los Angeles, 1946–56,” *Journal of the West*, 44 (2005), 24–33; Kathy Harmon Ho, “First Negro Classic Ballet” (M.A. thesis, California State University, Los Angeles, 1994); and Ho, “The First Negro Classic Ballet: The First African-American Classical Ballet Company in the World,” manuscript, HM [Huntington Manuscript] 69015, box 3, Rickard Papers. The troupe’s programs list a total of twenty-four women and eleven men. Programs, HM 69016 in *ibid.* See also “Cinders in Sepia,” *The Illustrated London News*, July 14, 1951, HM 69019, in *ibid.* My first article on this subject, “‘A New Expression for a New People,’” was written before the Rickard Papers had been formally inventoried and categorized, so the archival citations in that article are no longer applicable.

to the present.³ Less understood is the role of African Americans in classical music and dance. In a collection of essays on African Americans in the West, historian Albert Broussard noted that “Black Westerners have contributed significantly to music, dance, and the arts as both slaves and freedmen, yet little attention has been devoted to African American representation in the fine arts.”⁴ In terms of ballet, dance historian Carrie Gaiser recently explored the challenges of an African American ballet troupe in her analysis of a work produced by the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Although erroneously claiming that the Dance Theatre of Harlem was America’s “first successful African American ballet company,” Gaiser noted an enduring theme: White Americans were reluctant to accept the idea of African Americans performing in what long remained a white-dominated art form.⁵

3. On jazz in the Harlem Renaissance, see Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, N.C., 2001); Robert Phillipson, “The Harlem Renaissance as Postcolonial Phenomenon,” *African American Review*, 40 (2006), 145–160; and Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1971). On Central Avenue in Los Angeles from the 1920s to the 1940s, see Michael B. Bakan, “Way out West on Central: Jazz in the African-American Community of Los Angeles before 1930,” in Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje and Eddie S. Meadows, eds., *California Soul: Music of African Americans in the West* (Berkeley, 1998), 23–78; Gary Marmorstein, “Central Avenue Jazz: Los Angeles Black Music of the Forties,” *Southern California Quarterly*, 70 (1988), 415–426; Ted Gioia, *West Coast Jazz: Modern Jazz in California, 1945–1960* (Berkeley, 1992), esp. chaps. 1, 6, and 15; Clora Bryant *et al.*, eds., *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* (Berkeley, 1998); and Bette Yarbrough Cox, *Central Avenue—Its Rise and Fall (1890–c.1955), Including the Musical Renaissance of Black Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, 1996). On black entertainers, see Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), and John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult and Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York, 2006).

4. Albert Broussard, “African Americans in the West: Introduction,” *Journal of the West*, 44 (2005), 6. Ethnomusicologist James Newton made a similar comment, stating that “[w]e see consistently in our culture a substandard treatment that’s given to Black culture—particularly Black culture that embraces the intellectual. We can be entertainers, and everybody is happy. But when we embrace profound thought, that is not given a resonance.” Kendra Hamilton, “Cal State Music Professor Sues Rap Group For Copyright Infringement,” *Black Issues in Higher Education*, Oct. 10, 2002, pp. 30–31. Scholarship on African Americans in classical music and dance includes John Perpener III, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Urbana, Ill., 2001); Kenneth H. Marcus, *Musical Metropolis: Los Angeles and the Creation of a Music Culture* (New York, 2004), 51–55, 81–82; Marcus, “Living the Los Angeles Renaissance: A Tale of Two Black Composers,” *Journal of African American History*, 91 (2006), 55–72; Lawrence Kramer, “Powers of Blackness: Africanist Discourse in Modern Concert Music,” *Black Music Research Journal*, 16 (1996), 53–70; and Cox, *Central Avenue*, 14–22, 28–29, 46–56, 93–96, 147–158, 213–229.

5. Carrie Gaiser, “Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability, and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem’s Creole *Giselle*,” *Theatre Journal*, 58 (2006), 269–289. Gaiser (now

This article consists of three parts. The first addresses the challenges in founding and maintaining an African American ballet troupe in Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s. The second explores the unique kinds of dances that the group performed; rather than borrowing from the standard ballet repertoire (such as *Swan Lake* or *The Nutcracker*), the FNCB created its *own* ballets, often with music written specifically for those ballets, that made the troupe a model of black agency. The third concerns reception: How did audiences and critics respond to the troupe's performances? I argue that in appearing at some of California's premier theaters, from Los Angeles to San Francisco, the FNCB was making a social and cultural statement. These young women and men used ballet to cross racial and class barriers of an art form in which few African Americans had until then participated.

Founding a ballet company

The challenges that confronted the FNCB from the outset involved primarily financial constraints and racial stereotypes. Rickard's inspiration to found a ballet company allegedly occurred when he saw a young black girl being denied her request for ballet lessons by a dance instructor, who instead pointed her in the direction of a tap dance school. Rickard, a migrant from the Midwest, had lived in Los Angeles for nine years and was studying ballet with Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972), the sister of famed Polish-Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. Seemingly eager to make a stand for racial equality and to apply his skills in ballet, he decided that there should be a place where black children and adults could learn classical dance. Because there was no ballet school in Los Angeles for African Americans, Rickard decided to found that school. The young black girl who had been turned away became one of Rickard's first pupils, and her mother, Bernice Harrison, later became his troupe's leading ballerina. As more children, as well as young women and men, joined the school, Rickard named the troupe the First Negro Classic Ballet, one of the few ballet companies for African Americans in the nation's history (see Figure 1 and Appendix 1).

known as Carrie Gaiser Casey) claimed that the "New Negro Classic Ballet" [*sic*] survived for only "a few years." Further, Eugene von Grona founded the American Negro Ballet in 1937, not 1934, as Gaiser asserts. *Ibid.*, 272 n. 11.

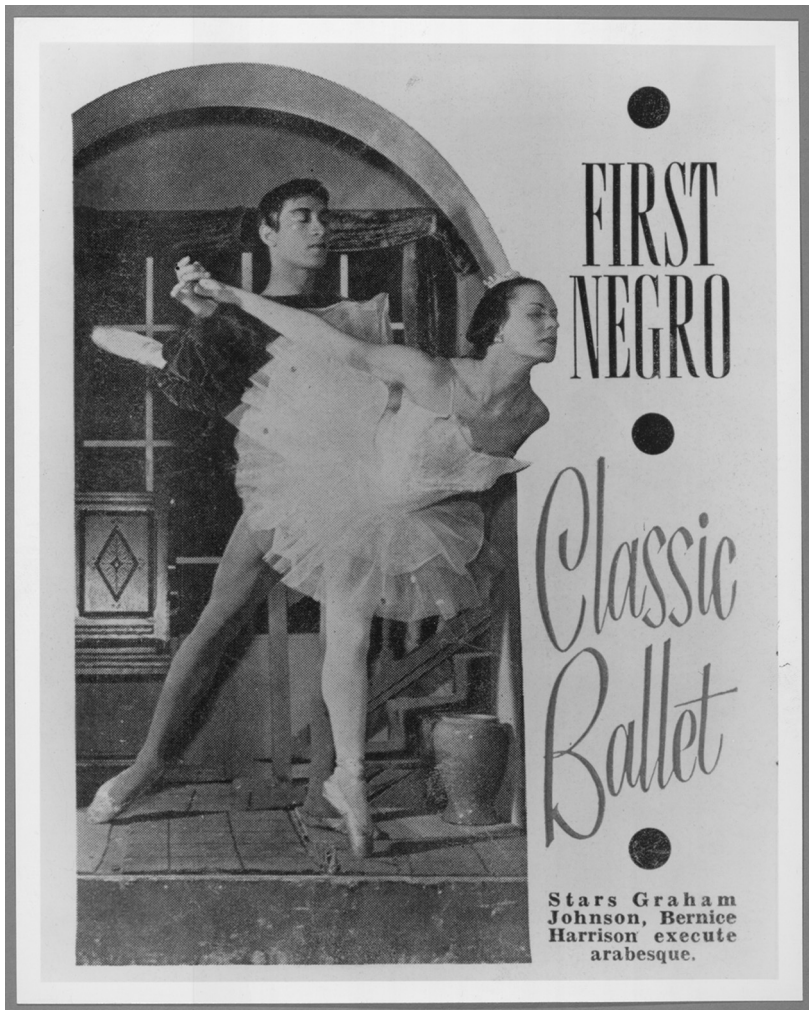


Figure 1. In this early publicity photograph, the two stars of the First Negro Classic Ballet (FNCB), Graham Johnson and Bernice Harrison, demonstrate an *arabesque* in the classical style of Russian ballet. During the 1940s and 1950s, the FNCB crossed the cultural barrier that ballet was predominantly a “white” art. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif., Joseph Rickard Papers.

It is sobering to realize that those African American ballet companies that had arisen prior to the FNCB each lasted scarcely more than a year. One of the earliest was the Ballet Nègre, which Katherine Dunham co-founded with dancer/poet Mark Turbyfill in 1930. The troupe performed in New York and Chicago; they practiced at the

studio of renowned choreographer Adolph Bolm “until the landlord began to complain about the black students attending classes.”⁶ An early victim of the Great Depression, the group folded within a year. A second troupe was the American Negro Ballet, founded by choreographer Eugene von Grona in 1937. It debuted at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, and, while its performances earned good reviews, little record of the troupe remains, in part because the company lasted only one year; perhaps, like Dunham’s company, it lacked major sponsors during the Depression.⁷

Other efforts in African American ballet took place during the early twentieth century. There is evidence of all-black troupes who performed ballets with scores composed by William Grant Still. Bolm commissioned a ballet by Still in 1927, *La Guiblesses*, which premiered with white dancer Ruth Page and an all-black troupe in Chicago in 1933. After his move to Los Angeles in 1930, Still wrote two other works in collaboration with librettist and composer Bruce Forsythe: the black ballets *Sahdji* and *Central Avenue*.⁸ Both ballets appear to have been performed by ensembles brought together expressly for these two productions, however, rather than by a permanent company. Nonetheless, on the threshold of what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall refers to as the “long civil rights movement,” there were efforts by African Americans to perform ballet, yet with relatively few opportunities to do so.⁹

6. Perpener, *African-American Concert Dance*, 134. The group premiered at the Chicago Beaux-Arts Hall in 1931, where Katherine Dunham performed her first choreographed work, *Negro Rhapsody*. On Dunham, see Anthea Kraut, “Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham,” *Theatre Journal*, 55 (2003), 433–450. On Mark Turbyfill, see “Biography of Mark Turbyfill,” Inventory of the Mark Turbyfill Papers, 1911–1985, *The Newberry Library* (2008), online at <http://mms.newberry.org/html/Turbyfill.html>, accessed May 10, 2014.

7. Hodson, “The First Negro Classic Ballet,” 8, also cited in Zita D. Allen, “Blacks and Ballet,” *Dance Magazine* (July 1976), 65–70, here 66. See also Blodgett and Hodson, “Worlds of Leisure, Worlds of Grace,” 80.

8. On the ballet *Sahdji*, see Bruce Forsythe, “The Significance of Sahdji,” manuscript, box 12, Harold Bruce Forsythe Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif. Although written in Los Angeles, *Sahdji* was premiered in Rochester, New York, in 1931. On *Central Avenue*, see Marcus, “Living the Los Angeles Renaissance,” 59–60, and Marcus, *Musical Metropolis*, 156. William Grant Still retitled the score as *Lenox Avenue* and recorded it in New York in 1938; see *ibid.*, compact disc, track 18. On *La Guiblesses*, see Perpener, *African-American Concert Dance*, 135–136.

9. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History*, 91 (2005), 1233–1263, here 1235.

Thus, to found an African American ballet company in Los Angeles, which, unlike New York, Chicago, or even San Francisco, did not have any permanent, resident ballet company, must at first have seemed like sheer folly.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there was a growing audience for ballet performances in postwar Los Angeles. As dance historian Naima Prevots has shown, several famous dancers in the early twentieth century came to Los Angeles to experiment with new dance forms, among them Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Ernest Belcher, and Adolph Bolm, who invigorated the fields of both ballet and modern dance.¹¹ After World War II, ballet performances became increasingly common in the United States as a whole, in part because ballet troupes could tour more often as transportation options increased. This was certainly true for Los Angeles, which had long had difficulty attracting East Coast troupes due to its distance from major dance centers. Even so, beginning in the late 1940s, regular visits from the New York City Ballet, the Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet from Britain, and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo found eager audiences.¹² Besides its pioneering nature as an African American ballet troupe, the FNCB became the resident company that the city had lacked for so long.

The financial challenges were daunting. With no major patron or government grants, Rickard found a home for his dance school in an abandoned ballroom at the corner of Jefferson and Normandie, in an African American neighborhood five blocks west of Central Avenue near downtown Los Angeles. The ballroom was on the second floor of a building called "Music Town," which community activist

10. Ernest Belcher wanted to found an American ballet school in Los Angeles in the 1930s but was unsuccessful. The Los Angeles Ballet Company, founded c. 1953, seems to have lasted almost a decade. See "L.A. Ballet Readied for Invitational Performance," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 27, 1953, p. A6; "Whittier Ballet Bonus Event Set," in *ibid.*, May 11, 1958, p. SG7. A second Los Angeles Ballet, which choreographer and dancer John Clifford founded in 1974, ended in 1985. See Jack Anderson, "Dance: Balanchine Work from Los Angeles Ballet," *New York Times*, Feb. 22, 1988.

11. Among Los Angeles's legendary modern dancers were Norma Gould and Bella Lewitzky; Gould worked with Ted Shawn, while Lewitzky worked with Lester Horton, among others. Naima Prevots, *Dancing in the Sun: Hollywood Choreographers, 1915–1937* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1987).

12. The New York City Ballet formed in 1948, drawing on an earlier group that Lincoln Kirstein and Russian choreographer George Balanchine had founded in 1935. See also Jack Anderson, "Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo," in Kristin L. Spangenberg, comp., *The Golden Age of Costume and Set Design for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, 1938 to 1944* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 2002), 13–25.

Frances Williams had used earlier for her short-lived, interdisciplinary arts project that targeted black defense workers during World War II.¹³ The hall was not ideal, however, since its waxed floor proved unacceptable for ballet practice. To solve this problem, Rickard obtained a tarpaulin for dancers to dance on, and chairs served as the first *barre*. He supported himself with a job in the mailroom at Paramount Pictures, and, to save money on rent, he lived at times in the ballroom and even drove an ice cream truck to raise funds for his dream. With these modest beginnings, a group of young African American men and women came together each week to learn classical dance.

To economize further, Rickard invited several white colleagues to join the FNCB, most of whom worked in the entertainment industry and could help with the company's infrastructure. These included costume designer Nancy Cappola (c. 1911–1987), Academy Award-nominated art director Robert Usher (1901–1990), and German émigré artist Richard Kollorsz (1900–1983), all of whom appear to have donated their services. A native of Quincy, Massachusetts, who moved to Hollywood in her youth, Cappola worked in a dress shop and had been one of the first supporters of Rickard's company. Like Rickard, both Usher and Kollorsz worked at Paramount Pictures. Usher, a native of Missouri, designed film sets; Kollorsz had studied at the Art Academy in Dresden, Germany, notably with New Realism painter Otto Dix, before coming to Hollywood to work with director Josef von Sternberg in 1929.¹⁴

Other friends and colleagues also joined the venture. A friend of Rickard's, Roy Victor, agreed to serve as manager. Aaron Sapiro, an entertainment attorney whose clients included composers Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Rachmaninoff, was evidently so impressed with the troupe that he arranged *pro bono* for it to become a nonprofit company, with one dancer serving as secretary, another as treasurer,

13. Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, N.C., 2010), 33–34. Music Town, at 1480 W. Jefferson Blvd., functioned as a music hall, arts gallery, and classroom. See "Paintings Effectively Depict Story of Negro Migration," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 19, 1943, p. C6.

14. The three films that Robert Usher worked on that were nominated for Academy Awards were *Arise, My Love* (1940), *Hold Back the Dawn* (1941), and *No Time for Love* (1943). Examples of costumes that Nancy Cappola designed for the troupe are in HM 69013, box 3, Rickard Papers. For a synopsis of Richard Kollorsz's career, see "Richard Kollorsz, 1900–1983," *Papillon Gallery* (n.d.), online at www.papillongallery.com/sold/richard_kollorsz.html, accessed May 10, 2014.

and so on.¹⁵ In addition, three impresarios helped book the troupe during its ten-year existence: Irwin Parnes, Mary Bran, and John Bauer.¹⁶ What united the dancers, resident composer, and staff alike was a love for classical dance and the conviction that they were doing something different in an era that permitted a multiethnic dance troupe to survive in Los Angeles.

The challenge of race, however, was ever-present, because few professional ballet companies invited blacks to join their ranks. During most of the troupe's existence, ballet remained almost entirely a white person's pastime, in direct contrast to modern dance in which blacks were increasingly making inroads in the postwar era. According to one of the FNCB dancers, Marion Spencer, many choreographers believed that "black women were not built for ballet."¹⁷ She recalls hearing that their bottoms were too large, or that their bodies were otherwise not adapted for the severe demands that classical ballet made on the human body. That belief, in turn, led to the infrequent hiring of African Americans to dance in professional ballet companies. Historians often herald Janet Collins as the nation's first black prima ballerina after she premiered with the New York Metropolitan Opera company in 1952, and, while the FNCB was a far smaller company, its prima ballerina, Bernice Harrison, preceded Collins by six years.¹⁸

To defeat such stereotypes, Rickard encouraged dancers to join wherever he could, placing notices in local grocery stores, record stores, and gymnasiums. The dancers came from various

15. Joseph Rickard Memoirs [taped interview], typewritten manuscript, pp. 4, 12, HM 69005, box 2, Rickard Papers (hereafter Rickard Memoirs). The nonprofit status is in Articles of Incorporation of First Negro Classic Ballet Company, Inc., No. 109278, Feb. 8, 1951, endorsed by Frank Jordan, Secretary of State of California, Feb. 20, 1951. The seven directors of the company were Joseph Rickard, Roy L. Victor, Nancy Cappola, Bernice Harrison, Graham Johnson, Yvonne Miller, and Claudius Wilson. HM 69014, box 3, Rickard Papers.

16. For example, Irwin Parnes booked the troupe at the Assistance League Playhouse, Hollywood, for November 25 and 26, 1949; Mary Bran booked performances at the Philharmonic Auditorium in 1950 and the Lobero Theater, April 27, 1951; and John Bauer arranged at least two bookings at the Philharmonic Auditorium on October 5 and 6, 1951, and at the Sartu Theater, Hollywood, February 1, 1954. Programs, HM 69016, box 3, in *ibid.*, and Program, First Negro Classic Ballet, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles.

17. Marion Spencer, interview by phone with author, Los Angeles, May 2, 2003.

18. "This Week in Black History," *Jet*, Nov. 15, 2004, p. 19. On Janet Collins's career, see Yaël Tamar Lewin, *Night's Dancer: The Life of Janet Collins* (Middletown, Conn., 2011).

backgrounds, including a steel plant worker, a janitor, and an artist's model.¹⁹ Rickard met one dancer, Theodore Crum, in a record store when Crum was purchasing an album of Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*.²⁰ Many of the dancers had little prior training in classical dance, which posed a special challenge, since ballet usually requires an early start in childhood to achieve perfection as an adult. All had to be willing to practice long hours for little or no pay, since Rickard relied on the dedication and enthusiasm of the young troupe. They proceeded to live dual lives: working in various jobs during the day, and studying dance at night and on weekends. Most seem to have come from South Los Angeles and the West Adams district, which still had several multiethnic neighborhoods during the 1940s.²¹ Not all members were African American; at least two white dancers joined the troupe, notably Diane Gordon (Figure 6).²² Eventually, a group of five dancers became stars of the FNCB: Bernice Harrison, Graham Johnson, James Truitte, Yvonne Miller, and Theodore Crum.

Bernice Harrison, whose daughter had been the catalyst for the school, quickly rose to prominence as the prima ballerina. She was decidedly unusual among the nation's ballerinas. A former seamstress and the mother of three children, she stated in an interview in *Ebony* magazine that she often brought her children to the rehearsals, and, when they started acting up, "[s]ometimes I have to stop right in the middle of a lesson and slap one of them down in his seat" (see Figure 2).²³ While the article presents the dancer in a rather sexist

19. "Cinders in Sepia."

20. Hodson, "The First Negro Classic Ballet," 8–9, 28.

21. In the Articles of Incorporation, the addresses of the seven directors of the company, all in Los Angeles, were given as: Joseph Rickard (2520 West 7th Street), Roy L. Victor (2520 West 7th Street), Nancy Cappola (1651½ West 24th Street), Bernice Harrison (2812 South Hobart Boulevard), Graham Johnson (1571 East 25th Street), Yvonne Miller (2102 West 24th Street), and Claudius Wilson (1128 East 80th Street), in HM 69014, box 3, Rickard Papers. See also Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley, 2005), 12–14; Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 121–124.

22. Diana Levy (formerly Diane Gordon) noted that there was another white dancer in the troupe, whose name was possibly Charlene Dwyer. Diana Levy, interview by phone with author, Los Angeles, April 14, 2008. In addition, three dancers had Hispanic surnames: Shirley Valdez (who also danced under the name of Vargas), Kathleen Valdez, and Marcos Lorango.

23. "Housework in Ballet," *Ebony*, April 1952, p. 54, HM 69017, box 3, Rickard Papers. Rickard affirmed that Harrison was twenty-two years old when she began to study ballet with him. Rickard Memoirs, p. 5.



Figure 2. Bernice Harrison was a mother of three children and a homemaker. After her daughter joined the FNCB's ballet school, she took up lessons as well and soon began performing with the troupe. *Ebony* magazine, which featured her in this April 1952 issue, emphasized her "poise and grace" while practicing ballet four hours per day. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Joseph Rickard Papers.

portrayal, as a homemaker doing her chores while practicing, the point is clear enough: A mother as a prima ballerina was news. Critics and audiences responded enthusiastically to Harrison; by her very presence on stage, she became a symbol of the troupe, and she appeared in most of the FNCB's productions throughout its existence.

Another star was Graham Johnson, who typically performed duets with Harrison; the two often appeared together in publicity materials (see Figure 1). A strikingly handsome figure with a stunning physique, Johnson had played football at Manual Arts High School, a multiethnic school of African Americans, Latinos, and whites on Vermont Avenue near downtown Los Angeles. It is impossible to imagine the troupe's history without his remarkable skills, both as a dancer and later as a choreographer. When the FNCB eventually folded, he was one of the few dancers to join the immediate successor to the FNCB, the New York Negro Ballet.²⁴

One of the first dancers Rickard persuaded to join the troupe was James Truitte (1923–1995). Admiring critics commented on the sensitivity and maturity Truitte brought to his performances. "Mr. Truitte," one writer later wrote, "approached dance and dancers with a sense of genial detachment that made him a clear-eyed, gifted teacher and exponent of the [Lester] Horton technique, as well as a witty raconteur and a wry observer of American dance history."²⁵ In one early publicity shot we see him posing with prima ballerina Harrison (Figure 3). Truitte eventually left the FNCB to join the Lester Horton Company in Los Angeles, where he met Alvin Ailey; together Truitte and Ailey moved to New York to co-found the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company.

Aside from the challenge of finding dancers, the FNCB also needed a musician for both rehearsals and public performances. Fortunately, Rickard persuaded Claudius Wilson to join their ranks as a pianist and resident composer. Wilson had studied at Dillard University in New Orleans—an example of the role that education

24. On the little-studied New York Negro Ballet, see Dawn Lille Horwitz, "The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain," in Thomas F. DeFrantz, ed., *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (Madison, Wisc., 2002), 317–339; this essay first appeared in *Proceedings of the Society of Dance History Scholars*, Fifteenth Annual Conference, University of California, Riverside (Feb. 14–15, 1992), 283–297. See also Gaiser, "Caught Dancing," 272–273.

25. Jennifer Dunning, "James Truitte, 72, a Dancer, Teacher and Historian, Dies," *New York Times*, Aug. 24, 1995, p. D21.



Figure 3. This early publicity photo shows James Truitte practicing with Bernice Harrison. Truitte subsequently danced in the troupe of Los Angeles choreographer Lester Horton before joining the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Joseph Rickard Papers.

played during the early civil rights movement—and moved to Los Angeles around the time of the founding of the FNCB.²⁶ Wilson met

26. Marcus, “Living the Los Angeles Renaissance,” 43–67. On black education and educators, see Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007).

Rickard at Gray's Conservatory of Music, an African American music school near Central Avenue that pianist John Gray had founded in 1931.²⁷ Wilson was teaching piano, and Rickard was looking for an accompanist so that the troupe could dance to live music rather than to recordings. After accompanying the troupe on piano for over a year, Wilson began writing scores to ballets, and he and Rickard collaborated in creating new productions for the rest of the troupe's existence. The presence of a black resident composer broke a further stereotype—the notion that black musicians almost universally specialized in jazz and popular music.

Ballets

Although the troupe was largely African American, the type of ballet performed was decidedly Russian. Rickard's mentor, Bronislava Nijinska, had become a highly gifted choreographer in her own right. She first gained international fame by dancing in the Ballets Russes; Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev formed the ballet company in Paris in 1909 and then took Europe by storm in the 1910s and 1920s. After choreographing several dances for the Ballets Russes—one of the few women choreographers of the era—Nijinska immigrated to the United States in 1938 and set up her own studio in Hollywood, called Nijinska's Hollywood Ballet.²⁸ What Rickard learned there became the foundation for the FNCB.

Nijinska identified strongly with her brother's work, and Rickard identified strongly with her. She taught with her daughter Irina Nijinska, and Rickard was one of their first students, eager to take up the legacy of Nijinsky.²⁹ Nijinska remained utterly devoted to the

27. John Gray studied with legendary pianist Alfred Cortot in Paris before returning to Los Angeles to found his own music school, located at 1106 E. 38th Street. Marcus, *Musical Metropolis*, 54–55; Cox, *Central Avenue*, 19; Thomas Wagner, interview by phone with author, Los Angeles, April 12, 2003.

28. Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes toured the United States in 1916, performing choreographer Michel Fokine's *Petrouchka*, *Scheherazade*, and *Les Sylphides* and Vaslav Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* with Leonide Massine in the main role. Nijinsky arrived somewhat later and with the company created one ballet in the United States (and the only one the company premiered in North America): *Till Eulenspiegel*, based on Richard Strauss's symphonic tone poem. Anatole Chujoy, ed., *The Dance Encyclopedia* (New York, 1949), 43–44.

29. Bronislava Nijinska gained renown working with Diaghilev and with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, where she choreographed *Dances Slaves et Tziganes* in 1936. Chujoy, ed., *The Dance Encyclopedia*, 51–52. Rickard first took lessons with Bronislava Nijinska's

legacy of her brother all her life: "I sought to realize the potential of my brother's creativity."³⁰ She emphasized *mood* and *emotion* in ballet, two aspects that distinguished her brother's work and that Rickard later emphasized in his own school. It was also Bronislava Nijinska who made it possible for Rickard to dance with one of the foremost ballet companies in the world, the Ballet Russe of Monte Carlo, in the early 1940s. As a professional dancer in a major company, Rickard had firsthand experience with a model of an innovative ballet company. As he wrote, "[w]ithout Bronislava Nijinska's training and inspiration and the encouragement of her daughter Irena [*sic*] I could not have created the First Negro Classic Ballet."³¹ Dancers learned to perform on toe (*en pointe*) and to execute movements common in Russian ballet, such as the *arabesque* (Figure 1).³² Nijinska's influence was thus evident in all of the dances the FNCB performed. Her emphasis on mood, emotion, and creativity prompted Rickard to develop a choreography that emerged from the individual skills of the dancers themselves.

In emphasizing mood and emotion, the FNCB's first ballets were "dance suites" based on classical music (see Appendix 2). Just as Nijinska choreographed over fifty ballets based almost entirely on the music of earlier classical composers, so too did Rickard begin with this approach.³³ The *Variations Classiques*, for example, drew on

daughter, Irina Nijinska, for eighteen months (five classes per week) before moving into Bronislava Nijinska's professional classes. Rickard Memoirs, p. 17.

30. Joan Acocella, "Vaslav Nijinsky," in Nancy Van Norman Baer, comp., *The Art of Enchantment: Diaghilev's Ballets Russes 1909–1929* (San Francisco, 1988), 100. Nijinsky was declared insane by 1920.

31. Joseph Rickard, autograph notes, HM 69004, box 2, Rickard Papers. He also recalled that "[w]hen the Ballet Russe came into town and the Ballet Theater, Nijinska would send me there to do small parts for them." Rickard Memoirs, pp. 27–28. Rickard corresponded with both Bronislava and Irina Nijinska long afterwards; see HM 68969–68973, box 1, Rickard Papers.

32. The poster in Figure 1 appeared in *Hue*, June 2, 1954, p. 12, HM 69017, box 3, in *ibid.* On the *arabesque*, see Chujoy, ed., *The Dance Encyclopedia*, 35. Most classical ballet performance in the United States was thoroughly Russian in inspiration albeit French in origin; French choreographer Marius Petipa (1819–1910), the "father of classical ballet," brought ballet to Russia in the mid-nineteenth century. The FNCB, in turn, directly reflected this Russian/French influence. On Petipa's legacy, see Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, Conn., 2003), 37–38.

33. One of the few exceptions to this approach was Bronislava Nijinska's work with Russian/French modernist composer Igor Stravinsky. A list of Nijinska's fifty-six choreographed ballets, created between 1921 and 1953, is in "List of Ballets," HM 68999, box 2, Rickard Papers.

suites by Johann Sebastian Bach, whereas the playful *Rondo Capriccioso* arose from a work of the same name by Felix Mendelssohn. The elegant *Trois Etudes de Danse*, with music by Frederic Chopin, contrasted with vibrant waltz music by nineteenth-century Viennese composer Johann Strauss in *Tales from the Vienna Woods*.³⁴ Each piece evoked a specific mood, which Rickard then choreographed to enable expressiveness by each dancer.

Building on this work, the artistic collaboration of Rickard and Wilson soon resulted in a series of ballets they referred to as “dance-dramas,” or dramatic scenarios that the dancers portrayed. One of the first of these collaborations was based on a poem by Oscar Wilde, called *The Harlot’s House* (see Figure 4). The dance reflected Rickard’s and Wilson’s insistence on creating new productions that characterized the troupe’s individuality.³⁵ Wilde’s poem has haunting, dreamlike imagery:

We caught the tread of dancing feet,
We loitered down the moonlit street,
And stopped beneath the harlot’s house.

Inside, above the din and fray,
We heard the loud musicians play
The “Treues Liebes Herz,” of Strauss.

Like strange mechanical grotesques,
Making fantastic arabesques,
The shadows raced across the blind.

We watched the ghostly dancers spin,
To sound of horn and violin,
Like black leaves wheeling in the wind.

Although the poem takes place in London, the dancers acted out their roles in front of a brothel in what could be almost any city. Emphasizing universal attributes of both mood and emotion, the troupe depicted the sudden break-up of a young couple:

34. Sheet music for these works is available at HM 69025, box 3; HM 69021, box 4; and HM 69026, box 6, all in Rickard Papers. With *Trois Etudes de Danse*, Rickard may have been thinking of Fokine’s work, *Chopiniana* (later called *Les Sylphides*) from 1908, a dance-suite based on several short works by Frederic Chopin (nocturne, waltz, and mazurka), orchestrated by Alexander Glazunov. Lincoln Kirstein, *Movement and Metaphor: Four Centuries of Ballet* (New York, 1970), 186.

35. The troupe gave it for the first time at the Lobero Theater in Santa Barbara in 1949. In performances in 1951 and again from August 1954 to 1956, this dance-drama was renamed *Streetlight*. Programs, HM 69016, box 3, in *ibid*.



Figure 4. One of the FNCB's most popular productions was *The Harlot's House*, set to a poem by Oscar Wilde about lost love in a brothel, with music by Claudius Wilson. The set design was by Robert Usher and Richard Kollorsz, who designed sets for Paramount Pictures; a seamstress and close friend of Joseph Rickard's, Nancy Cappola, designed and created the costumes. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Joseph Rickard Papers.

Then, turning to my love, I said,
 "The dead are dancing with the dead,
 The dust is whirling with the dust."

But she—she heard the violin,
 And left my side and entered in:
 Love passed into the house of lust.

Wilson's music expressed both elegance and pathos, and he used Romantic motifs in describing the delicate yet tragic scenario that unfolds on stage. The score was thus vitally important in setting the mood of the dance-drama, because it enabled Rickard far more flexibility to bring out the expressiveness of individual dancers. As Rickard stated in an interview, "my choreography flows to the echo of the music. I do what the music says."³⁶ This approach characterized

36. Rickard Memoirs, p. 24.

much of Wilson's work as well; his input as resident composer to create or arrange the music assured audiences that what they were watching—and hearing—was unique.³⁷

The company broke more new ground with another Wilson-Rickard ballet, *Cinderella*. Bernice Harrison starred as Cinderella, and Graham Johnson took the role of the prince. Joining them were the two “ugly sisters” and the wicked step-mother. The three-act *Cinderella* is significant in several ways. Not only did Wilson compose the score, but Rickard cast a man in the role of one of the women; Theodore Crum played the role of one of the so-called “ugly sisters.”³⁸ Properly outfitted by Cappola in an outlandish female costume to underline the humorous portrayal, Crum performed it tongue-in-cheek (see Figure 5). The music provided a further means of innovation. Wilson drew inspiration in part from jazz and boogie-woogie, which he blended with classical music. Cinderella at first dances to boogie-woogie to woo the prince, while the prince dances to music reminiscent of the Romantic era. Together the two eventually find a common groove. With this dance-drama, we encounter a black Cinderella and prince, a cross-dresser, and African American as well as European musical genres. In this alternative vision of the Cinderella story, such innovations were meant to turn ballet effectively on its head, not only to demonstrate the viability of African Americans performing classic white roles, but to affirm the role of jazz in classical ballet.³⁹

Taking innovation one step further, *Raisin' Cane* presented aspects of African American rural life. Wilson wrote a score that

37. Another dance-drama for which Wilson composed the music was the two-act *L'Harlequine* [*sic*], which the group premiered at the Lobero Theater. The original score is in HM 69024, box 5, in Rickard Papers. Based on an old European plot of a starving actor in a traveling company, it takes place in France. A two-act drama, it begins with Pietro, the harlequin, arriving at a town square with his wife, Maria, to announce the evening show. Later, a fellow actor, Tony, tells Maria that he loves her. She has eyes for a different lover (other than Pietro), named Jacques, who plans to leave with Maria after the show. Once Pietro discovers the tryst, he stabs both his wife and Jacques with a knife. For performances from 1951 onwards, this dance-drama was renamed *Pagliacci*, and, although it followed the plot of Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* quite closely, the music was not from the opera. Programs, HM 69016, box 3, in *ibid.* The inspiration for this dance may have come from Nijinsky, who danced the part of Harlequin in a ballet by Fokine, *Carnaval*. Acocella, “Vaslav Nijinsky,” 98.

38. The original score of *Cinderella* is in HM 69023, box 5, in Rickard Papers.

39. Similarly, Leonard Bernstein used jazz-based rhythms in his score for Jerome Robbins's *Fancy Free*, which premiered in April 1944 at the old Metropolitan House in New York.



Figure 5. The Cinderella story—a classic European tale—gets a new twist in this African American version, starring Yvonne Miller and Theodore Crum (on the right), who plays one of the “ugly sisters.” Jazz and boogie-woogie were integrated with classical, Romantic motifs in Claudius Wilson’s original score. The ballet thus crossed racial, sexual, and artistic borders. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Joseph Rickard Papers.

depicted an environment he knew well from his childhood.⁴⁰ Set in

40. The troupe first introduced *Raisin’ Cane* at the Sartu Theater in Hollywood on February 1, 1954. Program, First Negro Classic Ballet, Sartu Theater, HM 69016, box 3,

three acts, this dance-drama takes place in the Deep South among sugarcane croppers in Louisiana. When a group of croppers hears that a merchant in New Orleans bought their sugarcane crop, they send one of their own, Tom, to bring back the money from the sale. Tom bids farewell to his fellow croppers and his girlfriend, and sets off to collect the money. In a social comment on the dangers of the city, however, Tom is distracted by a pimp who invites him to a nearby bar with a prostitute. A group of men at the bar beat him up and steal his money. Poor Tom is forced to return home empty-handed. To the consternation of his friends, Tom sorrowfully relates his story, and, as they prepare to beat him up too, the prostitute arrives to explain what happened, evidently sorry for the way her pimp treated Tom. In a distinct plot twist, they discover that Tom's girlfriend is related to the prostitute, who dutifully returns the money, and the story ends happily.

This is hardly standard fare for classical ballet, and indeed it represents a step in a different direction. Significantly, the main choreographer of *Raisin' Cane* was not Rickard but the troupe's lead male dancer, Graham Johnson, who appears to have combined the movements of classical ballet with vernacular dance. Along with the input of Wilson, the troupe showed that it was moving away from the model of a white man directing a black ballet troupe to one in which black artistic agency defined the dancers' work. This made Johnson one of the very few black choreographers for classical ballet in the country. Interestingly, Arthur Mitchell adopted the same environment of a sugarcane plantation outside New Orleans in his production of *Giselle* in 1984, which balletmaster John Taras choreographed in re-creating the racial politics of the Creole world of nineteenth-century Louisiana.⁴¹ Whether Mitchell and Taras knew of the FNCB's *Raisin' Cane* is unclear, but the similarities are striking.

Raisin' Cane offered further opportunities for innovation. Given the ballet's theme, the dance-drama was ideally suited for African American music. One example was "Pas des Jitterbugs," a juba dance that represented Wilson's continued experimentation with ballet by integrating heavily syncopated rhythms. The dance engaged in social commentary by re-creating aspects of African

Rickard Papers. The original score of one of the songs from *Raisin' Cane*, called "Pas des Jitterbugs," is in HM 69025, box 6, in *ibid.*

41. Gaiser, "Caught Dancing," 269–289.

American life that few, if any, ballets were then addressing, namely confronting black stereotypes of the field worker and the pimp. In combining modern ballet with a contemporary score, the troupe continued to provide what no other ballet group could then offer; virtually the entire production was African American in both concept and performance.

In these ways, the FNCB sought to cross racial and class barriers through their ballets. Not only were they demonstrating that African Americans could effectively take part in a white-dominated art form, but a leading aspect of the FNCB was to define classical dance in terms of the African American experience. One ballet, titled *Landscape*, demonstrates this approach with particular urgency. It tells the story of a mother and her son in the South. The son is about to be lynched, which the anguished mother tries to prevent. After much suffering and resistance, the son is hanged, and his mother takes him up in her arms. At the end of the dance, a figure called the "Spirit of Hope" comes to assuage the mother's grief. Adapted to a score by Russian émigré composer Alexander Gretchaninov (1864–1956), at times the title of the ballet was slightly revised to *Southern Landscape*.⁴² Few ballet companies at the time were offering this kind of insight into African American life. By its very nature, the dance was a model of resistance to oppression.

Landscape further reminded viewers that violence against African Americans, such as lynching or mutilation, was definitively not a thing of the past but was very much in the present. At least twenty-four black men and women were known to have been lynched or killed between mid-1945 and mid-1947 alone.⁴³ Ironically, some of them were veterans, who returned from the war to face even greater dangers at home. *Landscape* was thus a serious critique of American race relations, and its stark portrayal struck audiences and critics alike.⁴⁴ The ballet distinguished the troupe by demonstrating the power of social commentary through art. Although almost none of

42. Alexander Gretchaninov, a student of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, immigrated to the United States in 1939 and became a U.S. citizen in 1946.

43. Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (New York, 2006), 232. On lynching in the South during the 1930s and 1940s more generally, see Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (1995; Berkeley, 2007), 7–15, 19–21.

44. See "Original Ballets Given by Negro Dance Group," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 26, 1949, Part I, p. 9, HM 69018, box 3, Rickard Papers, and "Lynch drama to be given dance form by Negro ballet," *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, Feb. 3, 1956, HM 69019, box 3, in *ibid*.

its ballets was overtly political, with this dance the FNCB, like other black dance companies in the postwar era, endeavored to express the contemporary black experience through dance.

Reception: Audiences, venues, and critics

In the context of race relations during the postwar era, it is important to consider not only the FNCB ballets themselves but also how the ballets were received. Because of its unique nature, the FNCB had to create a special kind of audience. The troupe stood for interethnic work in the arts as well as for the right of African Americans to perform in classical dance. That meant attracting both white and black audiences who would be progressive enough to appreciate what the troupe was trying to accomplish and winning the favorable response of critics. In other words, the troupe could not afford to be merely a “novelty act” but had to be taken seriously on its own terms at a wide variety of venues (see Appendix 3). Building loyalty across race was thus essential to the long-term success of the troupe.

Among the company’s first supporters was one of the main black newspapers in Los Angeles, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, which became the group’s first major sponsor. An article from May 1947 stated that, “[i]n keeping with its policy to sponsor and encourage cultural development in the community, the *Sentinel* is sponsoring this history making group.”⁴⁵ The first public appearances by the troupe, which began performing under the name “Ballet Americana,” were on Sunday evenings in a basement room in a largely African American neighborhood on 7th Street. In following the notion of community uplift, the troupe then began performing in small theaters in the city, such as the Danish Auditorium on West 24th Street near the West Adams district, a growth area for upwardly mobile blacks.⁴⁶ At this point most audiences consisted of African Americans and possibly some whites.

45. “Ballet Group in America Organized Here: Sentinel Sponsors New Dance Group,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 22, 1947, p. 21, HM 69018, box 3, Rickard Papers.

46. 7th Street and Chaunard formed part of what Rickard called “the Greenwich Village of Los Angeles,” where many artists used to assemble. Rickard Memoirs, p. 10. The Danish Auditorium was at 1359 West 24th Street; see “Sentinel Sponsored Ballet Recital Oct. 19,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Sept. 25, 1947, HM 69018, box 3, Rickard Papers. On the West Adams district, see Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 121–124.

By 1949, however, something had changed. Using the name First Negro Classic Ballet, the troupe began performing before predominantly white audiences and receiving more recognition from the white press. It appeared at the Assistance League Playhouse in Hollywood and continued at the historic Lobero Theater in Santa Barbara—its first major performance outside Los Angeles.⁴⁷ The choice of these venues demonstrates that the FNCB was seeking to reach out to both black and white audiences, which was rare for performers in the classical arts up to this time.⁴⁸ The Lobero Theater performance was especially significant; as one of the oldest continuously operating theaters in California, hosting performances since 1873, it had enormous historic significance, much as the FNCB had when it made its Santa Barbara premiere.⁴⁹ Critics raved about the performance, although the FNCB surely saw the irony in being happily received by an all-white audience when its own dancers could not stay at hotels in Santa Barbara that were restricted to whites.

After this encouraging reception, a highlight occurred two years later at the Philharmonic Auditorium, located at the corner of Olive and Fifth Streets in downtown Los Angeles. As the premier performance venue for classical music, opera, and dance in Los Angeles, the Philharmonic Auditorium had showcased few non-white performers.⁵⁰ That changed with the postwar era, however, and the FNCB's performance was a huge success, with a sold-out audience of 2,000. As the *Los Angeles Times* dance critic, Warren Hauger, wrote: "In the performance of the First Negro Classic

47. Program, First Negro Classic Ballet, Assistance League Playhouse, Nov. 25–26 [1949], HM 69016, box 3, Rickard Papers. The Assistance League Playhouse was located at 1367 N. St. Andrews Place, one block west of Western Avenue at Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood. "Ballet Recital," mimeograph sheet, HM 69001, box 2, in *ibid.* On the Lobero Theater performance, see "City to Open Homes to Negro Ballet," *Santa Barbara News-Press*, Nov. 18, 1949, p. B3; and Ronald D. Scofield, "Negro Dancers Score With Art, Showmanship," *Santa Barbara News-Press*, Nov. 20, 1949, p. B3, HM 69018, box 3, in *ibid.*

48. One of the few exceptions was contralto Marian Anderson, who performed widely in the United States and Europe during the 1930s and 1940s as well as in the postwar period. We can also point to the pioneering orchestra of James Reese Europe in New York prior to World War I; the orchestra included adaptations of classical pieces in its repertoire in addition to Reese's jazz-inspired numbers.

49. Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (New York, 1990), 283–284.

50. Program, First Negro Classic Ballet, Philharmonic Auditorium, Oct. 5–6 [1951], HM 69016, box 3, Rickard Papers. On the Philharmonic Auditorium, see Marcus, *Musical Metropolis*, 60–62.

Ballet . . . a refreshing and individual treatment of the classical dance showed how it may be tastefully balanced with some of the more realistic styles.”⁵¹ The troupe’s goal of receiving major recognition in Los Angeles was finally achieved at this performance.

Significantly, also in attendance that night was a cross-section of renowned composers, actors, and writers. Several of them were European exiles, since Los Angeles had become a magnet for cultural figures who had fled Nazi Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. The audience included composer Igor Stravinsky, conductor Bruno Walter, and actor Paul Henreid (from *Casablanca*). American playwright and screenwriter Ben Hecht also attended, and he was so taken with the FNCB that he wrote the company a glowing letter of praise. “When the corps de ballet dances,” he exclaimed, “not only beauty performs but an act of faith takes place.”⁵²

That connection to Hollywood proved valuable when some members began appearing in Hollywood films. Graham Johnson performed in *American in Paris*, and Bernice Harrison danced as a ballerina in *Show Boat*. Their fellow dancer, Theodore Crum (later Duncan), further appeared in the African American musical *Carmen Jones*, directed by exile director Otto Preminger; the latter work combined the music of Georges Bizet with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II and adapted the story to a U.S. military base for black soldiers.⁵³ With this interest in film roles, at one point the FNCB even billed itself briefly as the “Hollywood Negro Ballet” before returning to its original name.⁵⁴ Yet not all that glittered in Hollywood was gold. Some of the troupe’s dancers were asked to appear in a film calling for a voodoo scene or to take part in a celluloid version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In keeping with the early civil rights

51. Warren Hauger, “First All-Negro Classic Ballet Notably Original,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 26, 1951, p. B7.

52. Ben Hecht to Rickard [n.d., 1949?], HM 69014, box 3, Rickard Papers. Like Robert Usher, Hecht first saw the troupe at its first performance at the Assistance League Playhouse. Rickard Memoirs, p. 7.

53. It is not known which roles these dancers had. *American in Paris*, DVD, directed by Vincente Minelli (1951; Warner Home Video, 2000); *Show Boat*, DVD, directed by George Sidney (1951; Turner Entertainment, 2000); *Carmen Jones*, DVD, directed by Otto Preminger (1954; Twentieth Century-Fox, 2002). See also “Negro Ballet Will Perform at Playhouse,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 6, 1952, Part IV, p. 5.

54. Marie Mesmer, “Hollywood Negro Ballet,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, July 12, 1952, p. 19; “Beach Ballet: Hollywood troupe rehearses on sands of Laguna Beach,” *Ebony*, Nov. 1953, p. 128, HM 69019, box 3, Rickard Papers.

movement's demand to resist such racist portrayals, they firmly turned down both offers.⁵⁵

Other venues reflected the troupe's pioneering role. The FNCB appeared at two large open-air theaters during two different summer seasons: the Redlands Bowl in 1951 and the Ramona Bowl in 1954.⁵⁶ These performances would have reached quite different audiences than theaters in Hollywood and Santa Barbara or the more elite Philharmonic Auditorium, which remained the premier cultural venue in Los Angeles until the opening of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in 1964. The Redlands Bowl, founded by arts philanthropist Grace Stewart Mullen in 1923 about fifty miles east of downtown Los Angeles, was the main site for summer classical music concerts in Riverside County, adjacent to Los Angeles County. The Ramona Bowl, by contrast, was a far different venue from those where the troupe had appeared before. As of this writing, it remains the site of the annual Ramona Pageant, an outdoor musical play based on the novel by Helen Hunt Jackson; the Ramona Bowl opened with the pageant in 1923, which continued to be its primary event until the 1950s.⁵⁷ Until the FNCB arrived, there is no record that African Americans had ever performed at the Ramona Bowl, and few of these venues had a known prior connection to African American arts organizations.⁵⁸

Significantly, African Americans were thus performing in what were quite visibly white places. Although spatial restriction was the norm for non-white communities in Los Angeles through the 1950s, several locations for dance and the performing arts were evidently more fluid.⁵⁹ The major venues noted above—the Lobero Theater in Santa Barbara, Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles, and the

55. "Cinders in Sepia."

56. Programs, First Negro Classic Ballet, Redlands Bowl and Ramona Bowl, HM 69016, box 3, Rickard Papers.

57. On the Ramona Pageant, see Marcus, *Musical Metropolis*, 100–105.

58. It remains surprising, however, that the FNCB never performed at the Hollywood Bowl, either alone or with other dance companies, despite the fact that black performers had appeared at the Bowl since the 1920s. The troupe's ballets would have fit well with the Bowl's emphasis on classical music and dance, yet the Bowl management does not appear to have invited the troupe to perform at the venue. On African American performers at the Bowl, see *ibid.*, 72, 81–83.

59. Widener, *Black Arts West*; Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia, 2009), 72–73. On spatial restrictions in Los Angeles in general, see Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, 2004), chap. 2.

Redlands Bowl and the Ramona Bowl in Riverside County—had little prior history of featuring black performers, which changed with the appearance of the FNCRB. A case in point is Philharmonic Auditorium, where the FNCRB performed on four occasions in five years—an astounding achievement for the era. In February and March 1956 (five years after the FNCRB's first performance there), the auditorium also featured two African American soloists: contralto Marian Anderson and pianist Hazel Scott. To mark the occasion, Anderson gave Rickard an autographed picture.⁶⁰ At the troupe's last appearance at the Philharmonic Auditorium, both the Community Civic Music Association and the National Council of Negro Women co-sponsored the event, almost certainly assuring a mixed audience.⁶¹

By contrast, it is more difficult to explain why the FNCRB regularly received favorable reviews by the press in both Southern and Northern California. Perhaps the very act of crossing racial and class barriers, which took place in venues traditionally dominated by white audiences and performers, intrigued dance critics. We see this crossing of barriers in a playful photo shoot by *Ebony* in 1953 at Laguna Beach—a place where African Americans would scarcely have been welcome, yet on the stages of Los Angeles they were (see Figure 6). The sheer exuberance of its members is readily evident; they seem to be literally leaping for joy. One year before *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, and two years before the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, a group of young men and women were asserting their right to dance wherever they wished.⁶²

In the city's multiethnic neighborhoods or even at venues that began promoting more racial equality by admitting the troupe, we might expect some degree of acceptance. "Something new in dancing, the First Negro Classic Ballet," wrote a reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*, "opened a two-night run last evening before a full house at the Assistance League Playhouse." Special notice went to

60. Program, Philharmonic Auditorium, Feb. 4, 1956, HM 69016, box 3, Rickard Papers. The autographed photo of Marian Anderson (ca. 1955) is inscribed to Joseph Rickard. HM 69236, box 18, in *ibid.*

61. "Lynch drama to be given dance form by Negro ballet," p. 18, and "Congratulations to the First Negro Ballet Troupe," *Southwest News-Press*, Feb. 23, 1956, p. 2, both in HM 69019, box 3, in *ibid.*

62. "Beach Ballet: Hollywood troupe rehearses on sands of Laguna Beach." On the boycott, see Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, Ga., 1987), 258–260. On the *Brown* decision, see Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own*, 357–373.



Figure 6. (left to right) Kathleen Vargas (Valdez), Graham Johnson, Bernice Harrison, Ardie Allison, and Diane Gordon frolic at Laguna Beach in a photo spread on the FNCB that appeared in *Ebony* in November 1953. The troupe had evolved into a more diverse group; Vargas was a Latina and Gordon was Jewish. Gordon went on to become dance director of the New York Metropolitan Opera. Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Joseph Rickard Papers.

the dances *Landscape*, in which “colored lights heightened symbolic impressions, giving at once a feeling of naked realism in the form of a silhouette,” and *A Little China Figure*, which was based on a score by French composer Camille Saint-Saens. The latter ballet was “an excellent and unique portrayal of the life and loves of a statue. Graham Johnson as the China Figure was most convincing, being on the one hand an inanimate piece of sculpture, and on the other a wildly passionate lover.”⁶³ This review was also notable in emphasizing an African American male in a romantic portrayal, which was by no means common for the white press during this period. The *Baltimore Afro-American*, which occasionally covered events in Los Angeles, praised the troupe for the same appearance at the Assistance League Playhouse, noting that audiences were so pleased “with the opening performance of the colored ballet last week, that

63. “Original Ballets Given by Negro Dance Group,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 26, 1949, p. 9. The score to *A Little China Figure* by Camille Saint-Saens that Wilson used is in HM 69022, box 4, Rickard Papers.

it will be continued. Critics on all the Hollywood magazines and in the metropolitan dailies praised it to the highest.”⁶⁴

Similarly, the FNCB received positive reviews outside Los Angeles. The Redlands Bowl performance, in particular, brought critical acclaim. The local newspaper critic wrote that the “company is one of the most interesting and refreshing to emerge on the scene during the expanding popularity of the dance throughout the country. Their well deserved success is founded on a vibrant and unshackled approach to his subject by Joseph Rickard, founder of the company and choreographer.” The reviewer further quoted the director of drama at the University of Redlands, Albert Johnson, who stated that “Mr. Rickard impressed me particularly with the intelligent use of good sound theatre and direction in addition to his fine choreography.”⁶⁵ As with the appearances in Los Angeles, a significant aspect of this performance is that the audiences were almost certainly largely white yet still highly demonstrative in their approval of an African American ballet troupe.

Even further outside Los Angeles, the positive reviews continued. “The First Negro Classic Ballet company gave its premiere performance last night in Santa Barbara’s Lobero Theater,” one reviewer wrote, “and impressed an enthusiastic house with the excellent quality of its showmanship, pantomime, comedy, costuming, choreography, music and expressive dance.”⁶⁶ Similarly, a reviewer of a performance at the Marines’ Theater in San Francisco noted that “Parisian elegance and sensuosity [*sic*] . . . were in evidence last night before a capacity audience . . . [and] practically everything is executed with unpretentious polish of technique and brilliance of production.”⁶⁷ Neither audiences nor critics had seen anything like it, and they demonstrated their approval through positive reviews and word-of-mouth.

Despite this favorable critical response, the troupe still had to deal with racism and stereotypes. During the otherwise highly

64. “Coast Lauds Tan Ballet,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 22, 1952, p. 12, online at http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=2205&dat=19520722&id=2cYIAAAAIBAJ&sjid=b_UFAAAAIBA&pg=1166,8698441, accessed May 10, 2014.

65. “Distinctive Performance Given By First Negro Classic Ballet Company” [clipping from unknown newspaper], HM 69019, box 3, Rickard Papers.

66. Scofield, “Negro Dancers Score With Art, Showmanship.”

67. Arthur Bloomfield, “Negro Ballet Rewarding,” *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*, Aug. 16, 1952, HM 69019, box 3, Rickard Papers.

successful trip to Santa Barbara, members had to spend the night in private quarters, due to the racial restrictions of the city's hotels. After a performance in San Francisco, one critic claimed that "Negro dancers are famous for the exciting cleverness and energy of their taps and boogie-woogie," while another wrote that "[r]hythm is so inherent in the Negro race that it was not surprising to find even the less skilled members of the sextet right on the beat—with hands as well as feet."⁶⁸ Critics occasionally relied on other stereotypes, such as remarking on the "American Negro vitality and originality" of the troupe.⁶⁹ Despite these setbacks, racist comments and discrimination were relatively rare. Many audiences and critics, perhaps responding to the optimism of the early civil rights era, seemed relatively open to what the troupe was trying to achieve: African American interpretations of classical ballet.

Endings and beginnings

Although the FNCB experienced much critical and popular acceptance, several challenges remained for most of the troupe's existence. Its primary challenge was financial. The troupe's insistence on art for art's sake often resulted in financial hardship: It refused to perform Broadway or popular numbers, for example, although it could integrate jazz and boogie-woogie in its ballets. To give in to the marketplace would have betrayed its mission of focusing on classical dance. Adding to its financial difficulties was the lack of major patrons. The troupe had been unable to tour Europe in 1951, in part because a wealthy sponsor was lacking. By contrast, such groups as the New York City Ballet and later the Dance Theatre of Harlem were able to find reliable patrons, which made these groups financially viable in the long term, although they, too, went through serious growing pains. Despite all of its achievements, the FNCB was simply unable to find the wealthy sponsors usually necessary to the survival of performing arts companies in America.

It remains a curiosity that no member or organization in the Los Angeles African American community was willing to step

68. Alexander Fried, "Novel Ballet Makes Debut," *San Francisco Examiner*, Aug. 16, 1952, and Marjory M. Fisher, "Negro Ballet Wins Praise," *San Francisco News* [Aug. 16, 1952], both in *ibid.*

69. Bloomfield, "Negro Ballet Rewarding."

forward to save the troupe. Although the National Council of Negro Women co-sponsored at least one of the troupe's performances, there is no evidence that it sought to support the troupe in the long term.⁷⁰ Numerous wealthy African Americans lived in Los Angeles at the time who were presumably in a financial position to support the FNCB, such as actress Hattie McDaniels (from *Gone With the Wind* fame), architect Paul Williams, and the family of William Nickerson, Jr. (co-founder of the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company). Unfortunately, no such sponsor was forthcoming. The early support from the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, which first sponsored the FNCB, appears to have lessened as the troupe increasingly attracted white audiences. That there was little history of African Americans in ballet ironically may also have become a detriment to the troupe in terms of its connection to black audiences. Ultimately, the ties that the troupe made early on, such as with the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and the West Adams community, did not prove durable enough to keep the group afloat.

Even if a prominent individual or organization, white or black, had stepped in, there is no certainty that the troupe would have survived, because other opportunities beckoned. It seems clear that diverging interests arose among the troupe members, who had reached a point where many seemed ready to move on to other challenges, either in Hollywood or in New York. When Ward Fleming, a New York choreographer, offered Rickard the option in 1956 to merge his company with a newly founded group, the New York Negro Ballet, several members, including Rickard, jumped at the chance (see Appendix 1).⁷¹ The new troupe rehearsed with ballet teacher George Chaffee, and briefly with Janet Collins, performing at least twice in New York in spring 1957. It also received financial support from two patrons, Theodore Hancock and Lucy Thorndike—precisely the kind of support that the FNCB had lacked for so long.⁷²

70. See "Lynch drama to be given dance form by Negro ballet," and "Congratulations to the First Negro Ballet Troupe."

71. These members included Ardie (Guy) Allison, Theodore Duncan (Crum), Graham Johnson, and Carol Ann Wise. Photocopy of program, New York Negro Ballet [1957], HM 69019, box 3, Rickard Papers.

72. Theodore Hancock was listed as one of the artistic directors and appears to have had a substantial inheritance, whereas Lucy Thorndike "came from a wealthy Massachusetts family and was an old-fashioned kind of patron who paid for everything and

Filled with confidence, the New York Negro Ballet appeared poised for international recognition. Flemyng promptly prepared for a tour of Britain in summer 1957—the same year that Althea Gibson became the first African American tennis player to win the women's title at Wimbledon—and a top English impresario, Peter Daubeny, was hired to organize performances by the troupe in both England and Scotland.⁷³ This international tour has historical significance. The FNCB had planned a tour of Europe in 1951, organized with advanced publicity by Mary Bran, but the tour fell through at the last moment.⁷⁴ Now several of its former members could realize that dream. In what Penny Von Eschen calls the “expansive internationalism of the postwar period,” the New York Negro Ballet briefly became the unofficial American ambassador of African American ballet abroad, although the U.S. State Department admittedly never invited the troupe to perform. Perhaps, as Von Eschen explains, the State Department mainly supported jazz musicians as an essential aspect of “American modernism.”⁷⁵

The tour had several successes. Two of the ballets that Rickard, Wilson, and Johnson developed, *Harlot's House* and *Raisin' Cain*, finally received international exposure, with Wilson performing the music. British critics, in turn, recognized the unique aspect of an African American troupe dedicated to classical ballet, just as they recognized its creativity, enthusiasm, and skill, even if some of the reviews had racist overtones.⁷⁶ One of the few corollaries to this tour was the Katherine Dunham School of Dance in New York, which toured Europe, including Britain, in 1948 and then again in 1954. Critics praised both tours; one review from the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* exulted that Dunham “fascinates the audience in the western civilized world primarily through the natural power of

attended several studio rehearsals in New York.” Horwitz, “The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain,” 320.

73. *Ibid.*, 325–335; Program, New York Negro Ballet, King's Theatre, Glasgow, Sept. 9 [1957], HM 69010, box 3, Rickard Papers.

74. “Cinders in Sepia”; Horwitz, “The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain,” 321.

75. Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 19, 23.

76. “Beat out that jungle rhythm,” *Daily Record*, Sept. 10, 1957, p. 9; Albert Mackie, “This Negro Ballet Can Win Friends” [*Edinburgh Evening News?*] [n.d., Oct. 1957]; Program, Royal Court Theatre Liverpool, Oct. 7, 1957. The *Daily Record* review referred to “that old black magic,” whereas another review spoke of “the negro's traditional rhythm.” The British critics' reviews and program are in the author's possession; I would like to thank Carol Ann Wise for sending me copies of these materials.

ancient pagan rituals and folk dances from the Caribbean, which she translates into the stage form of modern ballet.”⁷⁷

Unfortunately, the tour by the New York Negro Ballet did not go as planned. Just prior to the tour, Rickard evidently became unhappy with the direction the troupe was taking, and he returned to California that summer; as a result, the group of twenty-one dancers departed for Europe without him. When some dancers ordered ballet slippers upon their arrival in Britain, ordinary dancing shoes arrived, since the English manufacturer apparently could not believe that African Americans were capable of ballet. Box office receipts were lower than expected, despite good reviews, and the tour ended without going on to the continent. Sadly, the need for a reliable sponsor became clear when the troupe’s main patron, Lucy Thorndike, suddenly died. As a result, the company simply collapsed, thereby suffering a fate similar to two black ballet companies that had preceded it: the Ballet Nègre and the American Negro Ballet. Equally unfortunate, although Rickard made an effort to relaunch the FNCB after his return to Los Angeles, he had lost most of his main dancers. He officially ended the company in 1958, thereby bringing to a close what had been at the time the longest-running African American ballet company in American history.

It is worth briefly commenting on the fate of some of the members of the FNCB, since their interest in dance did not necessarily end with the demise of the troupe. Most of those who continued their careers in dance did so in New York, and at least two dancers went on to greater fame: James Truitte and Diane Gordon. As noted, Truitte left the FNCB to work with the Lester Horton Company in Los Angeles before joining the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company. Curiously, he chose not to share his experience of performing with the FNCB when Arthur Mitchell claimed in an interview with journalist Peter Jennings to have created the first African American ballet company.⁷⁸ Diane Gordon (shown in Figure 6), one of the only white dancers with the troupe, danced with the Australian Ballet and American Ballet Theatre before joining the Metropolitan Opera in New York, debuting in 1964 (now as Diana

77. Cited in Dorothea Fisher-Hornung, “‘Jungle in the Spotlight’? Primitivism and Esteem: Katherine Dunham’s 1954 German Tour,” in Heike Raphael-Hernandez, ed., *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* (New York, 2004), 62.

78. Rickard to Peter Jennings, Aug. 2, 1991, HM 68984, box 1, Rickard Papers. Rickard sought to correct the omission in Jennings’s report.

Levy) and giving her final performance there in 1981. She eventually became the dance director of the Metropolitan Opera, a position she held until May 2008.⁷⁹

Other dancers fared less well. The highly talented Graham Johnson decided to remain in Europe after the New York Negro Ballet folded. "I get applauded for stepping onto the stage," Johnson told a reporter, "because I'm a Negro."⁸⁰ Claudius Wilson, who became music director of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Veterans Hospital in Montrose, New York, wrote to Rickard that Johnson toured Africa and Europe as a dancer with his own troupe.⁸¹ Ironically, the latter settled in Spain, then still under the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. His bitterness in recalling race relations in the United States, despite his experience with the FNCB, is clear in a letter to Rickard in 1970. He stated that, "like all countries [the United States] has its good points and its faults . . . but it is not the country for me . . . [because] America will not change for the likes of me . . . and I cannot change for the likes of it."⁸² Johnson soon opened a dance-yoga school in Asturias in northern Spain, but it is not clear how long the school lasted. Following that, he may have become a Buddhist monk, but his fate remains unknown.⁸³

79. Diana Levy, interview by phone with author, Los Angeles, April 14, 2008. See also Levy to Gretchen Berlew [n.d., 1994], HM 68965, and Rickard to Jennings, Aug. 2, 1991, HM 68984, both in box 1, Rickard Papers. Until her retirement in May 2008, Levy was listed as dance director on the Metropolitan Opera website, online at www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/auditions/ballet.aspx, accessed March 19, 2008. As of this writing, the list is no longer online, although her performances with the Metropolitan Opera are available at "Levy, Diana [Dancer]", *Metropolitan Opera Archives* (n.d.), online at <http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=BibSpeed/gisrch2.k.r?Term=Levy,%20Diana%20%5BDancer%5D&limit=500&vsrchtype=no&xBranch=ALL&xmtype=&Start=&End=&theterm=L%65v%79,%20Diana%20%5BDanc%65%72%5D&srt=&x=0&xHome=&xHomePath=>, accessed May 10, 2014.

80. Winfred Blevins, "All-Negro Company Will Present Ballet," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 2, 1968, Part IV, p. 9. See also HM 69020, box 3, Rickard Papers.

81. Wilson appears to have died in 1975 of unknown causes. In a letter to Rickard, Usher wrote that Wilson's death was "shocking. What a splendid person he was! I had a deep affection for him." Usher to Rickard, Christmas 1975, HM 68994, box 1, Rickard Papers.

82. Graham Johnson to Rickard, Nov. 17, 1970, HM 68961, in *ibid*.

83. Johnson opened the school in Llanes, Asturias, on the coast of northern Spain. He wrote Rickard that "I finally opened the dance-yoga school on the 9th [of April 1970] as you will see by the enclosed brochures. So far I have 8 regular students . . . not bad for a beginning. I need a lot of patience here as it is a small village . . . the first time anything of this sort has opened here . . . both the ballet and the yoga are things very misterious [*sic*] to the people here" (ellipses in original). Johnson to Rickard, Nov. 17, 1970, HM

Other dancers disappeared from sight altogether. Wilson wrote to Rickard in 1968 that Ardie Allison, who had joined the New York Negro Ballet with his fellow dancers, had gained weight and was considering becoming a nurse. Theodore Crum, who took the stage name of Theodore Duncan with the New York Negro Ballet, probably stayed in New York after the group ended, but no trace of him survives. Bernice Harrison's story, however, is perhaps the most tragic. She appears to have joined the troupe briefly in New York but returned to California and died young, possibly of diabetes, around 1960.⁸⁴

Regarding the three colleagues who worked in set and costume design, Usher went on to found his own company, Robert B. Usher & Associates, before joining a monastery in northern California, New Clairvaux Abbey, in the 1970s. Shortly before his death in 1990, he wrote to Rickard that he had donated a collection of his drawings, including sketches of the FNCB, to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, which had requested them, although this claim could not be verified.⁸⁵ Kollorsz continued his work in the scenic department at Paramount, painting privately (although he rarely exhibited his work) and died in 1983. Nancy Cappola designed costumes for various ballet companies, eventually becoming an advanced student and tutor (as Nancy Rueschenberg) at El Camino College in Los Angeles, dying in 1987.⁸⁶

Rickard proceeded to found or lead a series of multiethnic dance companies over the next thirty years in Southern California,

68961, in *ibid.* Kathy Spit (formerly Harmon Ho), who wrote her M.A. thesis on the FNCB (California State University, Los Angeles, 1994), contacted Johnson, who appears to have become a Buddhist monk in Asia. Kathy Spit, e-mail communication with author, Nov. 14, 2003.

84. Claudius Wilson to Rickard, May 24, 1968, HM 68997, box 1, Rickard Papers; "Program, New York Negro Ballet [1957], HM 69019, box 3, in *ibid.*; Carol Ann Wise, interview by phone with author, Los Angeles, May 23, 2003. A program of the second Negro Classic Ballet was dedicated "to the memory of Bernice Harrison, Premiere Danseuse of the First Negro Classic Ballet." Program, Wilshire-Ebell Theatre, Feb. 4 and 6, 1968, HM 69016, box 3, in *ibid.*

85. Usher to Rickard, May 5, 1989, HM 68994, in *ibid.*; Jennifer Tobias, Museum of Modern Art Library, New York, e-mail communication with author, July 12, 2013.

86. Steve Smythe, "'Work of love': Ballet costume designer creates traditional outfits," *The Warwhoop* (El Camino College newspaper), Dec. 12, 1969, p. 2. I would like to thank Kate McLaughlin, professor of journalism at El Camino College, for helping me locate the article through the newspaper's recently developed online database, "El Camino College Student Media Digital Archive Project," *El Camino College* (2009), online at <http://ptfs-asp.ptfs.com/camino/main.jsp>, accessed May 9, 2014.

finding a special niche in teaching ballet to children.⁸⁷ In the aftermath of the Watts Riots, he tried once more to launch another African American ballet troupe in Los Angeles in 1966, called simply the “Negro Classic Ballet,” yet with little success. Claudius Wilson encouraged him in this effort, urging Rickard to “keep the good work going,” and he noted the comparable effort of choreographer George Balanchine at the New York City Ballet, who created a ballet honoring the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Wilson wrote in 1968 that, “even Balanchine is making his contribution to the civil rights cause and making a masterpiece of it.”⁸⁸ Balanchine had been an early supporter of the civil rights movement, casting Arthur Mitchell in 1957 with a white female, Diana Adams, in the ballet *Agon*, for which Stravinsky wrote the score. Although the Negro Classic Ballet lasted less than two years, Rickard continued to teach and choreograph dance groups into the 1980s before his death in 1994.⁸⁹

We should note that one year after the Negro Classic Ballet ceased operations, the Dance Theatre of Harlem formed as a new ballet company on the East Coast and enjoyed substantially more success. Arthur Mitchell, who became a leading figure in the field of ballet over a decade after the FNCB had folded, was one of the only African American dancers, male or female, in the nation’s leading ballet company, the New York City Ballet. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Mitchell decided with white choreographer Karel Shook to co-found the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969, and the troupe has lasted into the present era.⁹⁰ Yet when Mitchell claimed in an interview with ABC journalist Peter Jennings in 1991 to have founded the first African American ballet company in America—a comment Gaiser accepted uncritically—he was evidently forgetting the precedents of the Ballet Nègre, the American

87. For example, Rickard formed the Southern California Ballet shortly after the FNCB folded, and in 1969 he became artistic director of the San Gabriel Civic Ballet. Harmon Ho, “The First Negro Classic Ballet.”

88. Wilson to Rickard, May 24, 1968, HM 68997, box 1, Rickard Papers.

89. Rickard, who suffered from rheumatoid arthritis, noted in a brief, hand-written memoir that “my illness forced me to discontinue [the company].” Autograph notes, HM 69004, box 2, in *ibid.* The sole dancer from the original troupe was Carol Ann Robinson, and Usher and Cappola also agreed to take part. Program, Wilshire-Ebell Theatre, Feb. 4 and 6, 1968, HM 69016, box 3, in *ibid.* Rickard donated all of his dance costumes to the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance at California State University, Los Angeles, in 1992.

90. “Legacy,” *Dance Theatre of Harlem* (2012), online at www.dancetheatreofharlem.org/legacy, accessed May 10, 2014.

Negro Ballet, the FNCB, and the New York Negro Ballet.⁹¹ Although Mitchell unquestionably made impressive strides in the field of dance, the lead male dancer of the FNCB, Graham Johnson, preceded Mitchell by almost a decade as an African American innovator in ballet.

Ballet among African Americans in Los Angeles decidedly did not end with the demise of Rickard's company. Similarly motivated to create an arts institution following the Watts Riots, playwright C. Bernard Jackson (1927–1996), founded the Inner City Cultural Center (ICCC) at a former Masonic lodge at the corner of Pico Boulevard and New Hampshire Avenue in a racially mixed neighborhood in 1966. With financial backing by UCLA neuropsychiatrist Dr. J. Alfred Cannon (1929–1988) and actor Gregory Peck, the ICCC had ambitious aims, seeking to provide an arts forum “among blacks, whites, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans.”⁹² It encouraged young writers and actors, including George C. Wolfe, Edward James Olmos, and Danny Glover, and over time attracted such luminaries as Gregory Hines, Ben Vereen, Denzel Washington, and Robert Ito to take part in its productions. Although its emphasis was to stage plays, there were also modern dance performances and occasionally ballet, although there is no evidence of founding a ballet school. Despite having financial problems soon after its founding, the ICCC received a grant from the Ford Foundation for \$300,000 in 1968, in one stroke receiving far more funds than the FNCB could have even imagined. In an era of few grants for arts organizations, this kind of financial support enabled the ICCC to host several dance companies during the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Universal Dance Experience and the Ballet Hispanico of New York.⁹³ The 1994 Northridge earthquake, however, rendered the arts center uninhabitable, and Jackson died two years later. Since that time, the ICCC struggled to find a new home as well as to find renewed funding in a very difficult financial climate for the arts

91. “From the Heart of Harlem,” ABC with Peter Jennings, aired July 25, 1991. Rickard to Jennings, Aug. 2, 1991.

92. Widener, *Black Arts West*, 106. See also Victor Leo Walker II, “The Politics of Art: History of the Inner City Cultural Center, 1965–1986” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1989).

93. Robert L. Jackson, “L.A. Inner City Cultural Center Accused of Mishandling Funds,” *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 18, 1968, p. 3; Cecil Smith, “\$300,000 Grant for Inner City Center,” in *ibid.*, May 29, 1968, p. C1; “Dance Companies to Star at Inner City Cultural Center,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 20, 1975, p. G10.

generally. The original ideals of the ICCC, however, continued in the twenty-first century under the aegis of the “ICCC2” with the leadership of executive producer and designer Tuesday Conner and other artists.⁹⁴

Two other local institutions, the Inner City Repertory Dance Company (ICRDC) and the Lula Washington Dance Theatre, held great hopes for furthering ballet among African Americans in Los Angeles. Prima ballerina Janet Collins and African American dancer and choreographer Donald McKayle co-founded the ICRDC in 1970 with money from the League of Allied Arts, a Los Angeles-based organization that supported cultural projects in minority communities. With an idealism similar to Rickard’s, Collins had been teaching ballet since 1955, when she began giving a class called “Dance Technique and Form” at the Young Men’s Hebrew Association on 92nd Street in New York. Collins wanted to foster ballet among African American youth through teaching and performance. She soon left the ICRDC, however, stating that “Inner City’s dancers did not have sufficient ballet background” to do what she evidently had in mind.⁹⁵ As a result, McKayle led the company almost alone, so it is unclear how much ballet took place in the program.

By contrast, the Lula Washington Dance Center focused on modern dance in addition to other dance forms. Founded in 1980 by Lula and Erwin Washington “to provide a creative outlet for minority dance artists in South Los Angeles,” it remains as of this writing an active arts organization.⁹⁶ Although the limitation of space here does not permit a wider analysis of its achievements, it encouraged ballet performance and was one of numerous arts institutions in postwar Los Angeles that reached out to black communities to advance general artistic expression and cultural empowerment. Such institutions support Sarah Schrank’s point that a growing number of African American artists since the 1950s, such as Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell, made strong “efforts to entrench the arts in local schools and

94. *Inner City Cultural Center II* (n.d.), online at <http://iccc2.org/>, accessed May 10, 2014.

95. Erwin Washington, “Dance: Inner City Troupe: A Company at the Crossroads,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 4, 1973, p. M44. On the Inner City Repertory Dance Company’s founding, see “Formation of Inner City Dance Unit Announced,” in *ibid.*, April 28, 1970, p. D10. On Collins’s early career, see Lewin, *Night’s Dancer*, 237.

96. “About the Foundation,” *Lula Washington Dance Theatre* (2014), online at www.lulawashington.org, accessed May 10, 2014.

community centers in black Los Angeles.”⁹⁷ The key, as always, rested with patrons as well as with students, and, despite the determined idealism of their founders, most of these programs, as non-profit cultural organizations, faced financial constraints of greater or lesser degree—something they surely held in common with the FNCB.

* * *

As a pioneering dance troupe during the early postwar period in Southern California, the FNCB upheld several ideals. One goal was multiethnic cooperation in the arts. The troupe proved that ballet could transcend race, in part because the obstacles that would have prevented such dancers in the past did not overwhelm them from the outset after World War II. The troupe thrived because there were no angry crowds outside the venues where they performed, and there is no record of vicious commentary by newspaper critics that savaged their work, although they did encounter some minor racist comments on their tours in San Francisco and Britain. Perhaps surprisingly, numerous venues with mainly white audiences opened their doors to the troupe in California: in Los Angeles, in Santa Barbara, in Bakersfield, in San Francisco. Well before the *Brown* decision, the Freedom Riders, or the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the FNCB provided an example of racial integration; its members even admitted some dancers who were not African American. As their fellow activists did in the realms of politics, education, and employment, the FNCB sought to prove that racism had no place in the world of classical dance and was unacceptable in American society as a whole.

The troupe also retained its ideal of creative artistic exploration. Contemporary ballet troupes in the United States often performed dances set to European classical music, and few had resident composers. The FNCB did have such a composer, and thus its members worked as an organic group, developing the music, costumes, and set design while creating the choreography. From the beginning, the company was open to comments and criticisms by its members, and it thrived on that democratic approach because it aided artistic expression. Once the choreographer and dancers had established a ballet, the set and costume designers Usher, Kollorsz,

97. Schrank, *Art and the City*, 169. On Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell, see *ibid.*, 134, 149–150, 153–157.

and Cappola then adapted their ideas for scenes to the goals of the other artists. This regular interaction between choreographer, composer, and costume and set designers enabled the FNCB to become a unique, modern voice in the rarefied world of classical ballet. How else to explain why its members remained with the troupe for so long, despite the lack of financial gain and the constant sacrifices it took to be true to their art?

Such challenges aside, the FNCB set out to become one of the first African American ballet companies in the country. For over a decade, it succeeded. As a result, the FNCB far outlasted earlier African American ballet companies to become a definitive pioneer in the field of classical dance and to help lay the foundation for other dance companies that followed. In an era that enabled the crossing of racial and class boundaries, a group of young women and men chose ballet as their primary means of cultural expression.

Appendix 1: Dancers of the First Negro Classic Ballet, 1946–1958

In alphabetical order

¹Ardie [Guy] Allison

Toni Ashford

Sylvia Bartlett

Ray Carrington

Verna Coleman

Jane Craddock

¹Theodore Crum [Duncan]

Jessie Denise

Charlene Dwyer

Pola Dukes

Ruth Ann Giles

²Diane Gordon [Levy]

Angela Harrison

Bernice Harrison

Portia Hollins

¹Graham Johnson

Julius Johnson

Gloria Jones

Francis King

Marcos Lorango

Patricia Miller

Yvonne Miller

Betyne Jon Milow
¹Roberta "Bobby" Rhinehart
 Stephanie Rhinehart
 Andre Robinson
¹Carol Ann Robinson [Wise]
 Tommy Robinson
 Dan Rochelle
 Marion Spencer
 Jean Thompson
³James Truitte
 Kathleen Valdez
 Shirley Valdez [Vargas]
 Jane Williams

Total no. of dancers: 35
 Women: 24
 Men: 11

¹ Joined the New York Negro Ballet in 1956.

² Joined the Metropolitan Opera in 1964.

³ Joined the Lester Horton Company in 1950 and Alvin Ailey American Dance Company in 1958.

Appendix 2: Ballets

In chronological order by year of premiere

Variations Classiques [1947], music by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Rondo Capriccioso [1947], music by Felix Mendelssohn.

Trois Etudes de Danse [1947], music by Frederic Chopin.

Landscape [1949, called *Southern Landscape* in 1951], music by Alexander Gretchaninov.

A Little China Figure [1949, called *The Bronze Figure* in 1956], music by Camille Saint-Saens.

Harlot's House [1949, called *Streetlight* after 1951], music by Claudius Wilson.

L'Harlequine [1949, called *Pagliacci* after 1951], music by Claudius Wilson.

Cinderella [1951], music by Claudius Wilson.

Symphonic Etudes [1951, called *Etudes Symphoniques* in 1954], music by Robert Schumann.

Tales from the Vienna Woods [1952], music by Johann Strauss.

Nutcracker Variations [1952, called *Black Swan* in 1954], music by Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Raisin' Cane [1954], music by Claudius Wilson.

Scherzo [1956], music by Frederic Chopin.

Appendix 3: Performances

In chronological order of appearance

1. Location unknown, 7th Street, Los Angeles, May 1947 [as "Ballet Americana"]
2. Danish Auditorium, Los Angeles, Oct. 19, 1947 [as "Ballet Americana"]
3. Sawtelle Veterans Hospital, Los Angeles, Nov. 26, 1947 [as "Ballet Americana"]
4. Lobero Theater, Santa Barbara, Nov. 19, 1949 [as "First Negro Classic Ballet"]
5. Assistance League Playhouse, Hollywood, Nov. 25–26, 1949
6. Philharmonic Auditorium, Los Angeles, Feb. 24, 1951
7. Lobero Theater, Santa Barbara, April 27, 1951
8. Redlands Bowl, Redlands, Aug. 21, 1951
9. Philharmonic Auditorium, Los Angeles, Oct. 5–6, 1951
10. Harvey Auditorium, Bakersfield, Oct. 9, 1951
11. Mission Playhouse, San Gabriel, Jan. 24–26, 1952
12. Assistance League Playhouse, Hollywood, July 6–7, 1952 [as "Hollywood Negro Ballet"]
13. Marines' Memorial Theater, San Francisco, Aug. 8, 1952
14. Sartu Theater, Hollywood, Jan. 31, Feb. 1–2, 1954
15. Ramona Bowl, Hemet, Aug. 26, 1954
16. Philharmonic Auditorium, Los Angeles, Feb. 4, 1956