

WHICH WAS THE FIRST? - - a historical essay on the first Black Dance Company in the USA.

It is hard to say exactly which was the first professional Black dance company. The Hampton Creative Dance Group was founded in 1925 and traveled to New York City to perform in 1930 or thereabouts. But could you call this Virginia college company a professional dance company?

Eugene Von Grona arrived in New York City in 1928 with dance training from Germany with the great dance pioneer Mary Wigman. He became involved with the Roxy Theatre and the musical celebrity of the time, George Gershwin.

He formed the American Negro Ballet in 1934 after seeing the spontaneity and spirit of the artists working in clubs and theatres in Harlem. He noted that it was a new type of dance energy he saw in these artists that he had never seen in European dancers. He felt that all they lacked was the disciplined training that the European dancers possessed.

An ad in the Amsterdam News offering a course of free lessons in ballet dancing netted him 150 applicants. He chose 23 dancers and began rehearsing three nights a week.

Von Grona noted that: "The majority were acquainted with dance and dance activities in New York but very few had training (technique/ballet technique). They didn't have the opportunity. Such training as they had was mainly jazz, tap dancing and nightclub work. We always say that jazz is their medium, but if they have opportunity for education in music and the arts, they certainly take advantage of it."

The company was the first professional company to feature concert dance by Black performers on a scale that gained media acceptance and criticism.

Dance critic John Martin of the NY Times wrote of the company: "The company showed itself to much of its best advantage in 'Firebird.' No doubt the experience of working with material of this nature is of value in their development as a group. Some of the young dancers show indications of talent, and many of them have profited by their training thus far in movement."

St. Claire Bourne of the Amsterdam News said: "...breathtaking in its brilliancy of color, finish and execution. It dazzled a glittering audience at the Lafayette Theatre."

The company used the term "ballet" in use at the time loosely to depict a dance, any dance, company. It was not a classical ballet company in reality, but did works that were actually modern dance since Von Grona himself choreographed everything in the company's repertory. Members of the company in 1939 when the company performed along with the New York Negro Symphony Orchestra under the direction of conductor Wen Talbert were: Valerie Cavell, Marion Brown, Beryl Clarke, Viola Gibson, Dorothy Jones, Harriet Oliver, Evelyn Pilcher, Edith Ross, Pearl Spears, Hazel Spence, Ettie Stephens, Williard Taylor, Elizabeth Thompson, Lavinia Williams, Wahneta Talley, Teddy Allen, Alfred Bledger, Jon Edward, Anthony Fleming, Frank Green, Coleman Hill, James Smith and Harry Young.

The first ballet company was something completely different. The confusion surrounding the first Black ballet company can be cleared up by explaining semantical misunderstandings, and the fact that one company made a progression under several different names. This was the actual first company to dance classical ballet -- on pointes too, but this came after the Von Grona company broke the ice as the first professional dance company of Black concert dancers. The Von Grona American Negro Ballet Company of 1937 and 1939 was actually a modern dance company using the term ballet in their name simply because this was used at the time to denote any serious dance company. It was especially needed for a group of Black dancers since the public found it hard to accept Black dancers in anything but jazz, tap or comic vaudeville.

In 1949 Joseph Rickard a White ballet instructor founded and became choreographer of a company that made its debut July 11 and 12 at the Assistance League Playhouse (1367 N. St. Andrews Pl.) as the Hollywood Negro Ballet. In 1951 the group appeared again, to favorable reviews, under the name, the First Negro Classic Ballet, touring the West Coast cities and receiving acclaims.

The Los Angeles Sentinel critic George R. Garner noted: "Both Graham Johnson and Theodore Crum are among the premier exhibitionists of the Ballet. The evening gave them many opportunities to demonstrate their fine training and abilities. They are extremely versatile danseurs. They seem equally at home in purely classical, demi-character and character roles. Their movements are spontaneous and their dances are clearly defined. They dance with ease and style."

In a story in the Los Angeles Examiner of September 29, 1951 reporter Patterson Greene wrote: "What Joseph Rickard expected to be merely unusual turned out to be unique."

He got the idea that a Negro group doing classical ballet would be of interest to

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audiences and he inserted notices in the newspapers to the effect that he was interviewing candidates. Then he settled down and waited for a throng of aspiring dancers to descend upon him.

There was no descent. There wasn't even a telephone call.

Going into the matter, Rickard discovered, first, that there had never before been a classical ballet group composed of Negroes. Furthermore, search as he might, he could find no record of any public appearance of even a single Negro dancer of classical ballet.

Such artists as Kathrine Dunham, Janet Collins and Carmen DeLavallade have distinguished themselves in the modern school of dancing. But the classical technique and tradition held no interest for them.

It looked as though Rickard would have to think up another project. But one day in a phonograph store he saw a tall Negro youth buying an album of Swan Lake recordings.

Following up the hint, he learned that the young man was Theodore Crum, that he was a commercial artist; that he had experimented a bit with the modernistic ballet and that he might possibly -- just possibly -- be interested in Rickard's classical project.

Then Bernice Harrison brought her 7 year old girl to Rickard for lessons. Rickard talked fast, and wound up giving lessons to the mother instead of to the daughter.

Almost at the same time came the first response to the newspaper notices: Graham Johnson, a former Jefferson High football star whose muscles had won him employment as an artist's model, expressed a diffident interest in the dance.

Optimistically, Rickard started from scratch with the three. Johnson in particular showed phenomenal elevation. And presently, urged by the original trio, other dancers came in sufficient number to make-up a company.

They had no financial endowment. They all held down jobs in the daytime. Rickard taught. Johnson modeled. Mrs. Harrison was a seamstress. Crum played bit roles in pictures!

One of the instructors with the company at the time was Jimmy Truitte. Other company people were Ray Carrington, Bobby Rheinhardt, Jeanie Thompson, Portia Hollis and Ruth Ann Giles.

Writer Ben Hecht said of the group, "The Hollywood Negro Ballet has more art than a gallery of Rembrandts. I have never seen a group more dedicated to the expression of something beautiful. They not only dance, they live a dream life on the stage, and they believe their exultation is the talent of one of the most remarkable men in the dance world -- Joseph Rickard. He is more than a choreographer -- he is a philosopher. When these artists dance, an act of faith takes place -- faith in his genius -- for he created this ballet from the colored working folk of the city streets."

In 1955 (May 14) a group called "Les Ballets Negres" appeared in a program at Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York City. This group performed classical ballet with much of its choreography done by former Bolshoi dancer Maria Nevelska. Theodore Crum had come East and was dancing with this group. The other dancers included Betty Ann Thompson, Thelma Hill, Charles Neal, Anthony Basse, Cito Quitman, Ward Flemmyng and Michaelyn Jackson.

By 1957 the group under the direction of Ward Flemmyng appeared and toured Europe as the New York Negro Ballet with the new names on their roster being Theodore Duncan, Georgia Collins, Bernard Johnson, DeLores Brown, Yvonne McDowell and Patricia Griffith. Louis Johnson also choreographed works for the company.

A news story in the October 31, 1956 issue of Variety reads: "Latest to audition for backers is a ballet troupe. New York Negro Ballet, one of the first Negro terp groups in the classical tradition, did a run-through of its potentialities before an invited audience at the Palm Gardens Ballroom on west 52nd Street last Wednesday (24) with an eye to attracting bankrollers to finance the company's tours here and abroad.

This company has absorbed a smaller company, known as the First Negro Classical Ballet, which originated on the Coast and toured there. Californians moved eastward and have been working with easterners since July. Company has twin artistic directors, Ward Flemmyng and Theodore Hancock. The latter claims to have raised \$50,000 and is on the prowl for another similar sum to put the organization on firm basis."

In 1959 after the European tour the group was appearing in NYC as "Ballet Americana" with Thelma Hill as one of its artistic directors. Dancers at this time included Guy Allison, Helen Taitt, Theodore Duncan, Elizabeth Thompson, Eugene Sagan, Dan Dorsey, Candace Caldwell, Ronald Patts, Doris de Mendez, Robert Tadlock, and James Thurston.