

The American Ballet Theatre: The Who's, The What's, The When's, The Where's, The Why's, & The How's

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The history of ballet is the closest I, as a dancer with medically weak ankles, will ever get to being on pointe. As a result, I enjoy learning the history of ballet, and the influence it has provided for the world of dance since its beginnings. Ballet, as a technique, started in the 15th century as a form of entertainment for nobility in Italian Renaissance courts. When inquiring upon the historical context of where ballet falls into place: what the reader desires to find are the “who’s” involved with shaping ballet as a form; “the what’s”, or important events in the form’s lengthy timeline; the “when’s”, meaning the shift that took place from the beginnings to modern day; the “where’s” that allowed for ballet to be seen in a different perception by different groups, cultures, or companies; the “why’s”, for the reasoning behind the influence of ballet as a style and as a community-networking-benefit, and the “how’s”, for *how* the shift from its beginnings to its standing in the dance world today, has taken all of the aforementioned inquiries and turned it into a conglomeration of historically-rich matter. In this paper, I will be deep-diving into the history behind the American Ballet Theatre, and tapping into the ways Misty Copeland, the first principal Black American woman in the 75-year-history of the American Ballet Theatre, paved her own way within the concert dance world through this company. I will also be walking the reader through the company’s beginnings, their timeline of events that put them on the map to stardom, and how they have been able to continuously secure a famous spot in the concert dance world even many decades later.

Starting with the history of the American Ballet Theatre, we will be walking through its beginnings to modern day. *Who assisted the American Ballet Theatre in getting its start? To*

answer that question, the beginning of the company got its start when dancer-philanthropist, Lucia Chase, worked with a manager named Richard Pleasant to put on their premiere show, which consisted of three different stories: Michel Fokin's "*Les Sylphides*", Eugene Loring's "*The Great American Goof*", and Mikhail Mordkin's "*Voices of Spring*" (<https://www.abt.org/explore/learn/repertory-archive/years/>).

The next questions to answer circulate around: *When did the company get started, and why were they successful?*

See, with the company originally coining the name: "Ballet Theatre", this performance made the mark for their first company members on January 11th, 1940, in New York City's Center Theatre, and put the Ballet Theatre onto the concert dance map. While the company debuted at the start of the new decade, it took a full season of preparation for the first members of the company to put on the triple bill production. 1939 was the official start-mark made for the new company. A few of the first company members of the American Ballet Theatre were Lucia Chase herself as principal dancer (*and financial backup*), Anton Dolin, John Kriza, and Annabelle Lyon. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Ballet_Theatre)

After finishing up their time with performing in the American Ballet Theatre: Lucia Chase went on to become the joint Director of the company in 1945, alongside her peer Oliver Smith. Anton Dolin, who stayed with the theatre until 1946, started numerous books from the span of 1931 ("*Divertissement*") to 1953 ("*Alicia Markova: Her Life and Art*"), and he was also featured as a subject of numerous documentaries within his later years.

Another member of the original group was John Kriza, who stayed with the American Ballet Theatre for a prolonged period of time (1939-1965), and was a significant contributor and maker to the history of the company. He served as an assistant to the directors of his former

company for another few years before, ultimately, hanging up his balletic career and living a more reserved lifestyle in the industry until his passing in 1975. Kriza is an interesting case, for research, because learning his official last public appearance was in 1975 for the American Ballet Theatre's 35th anniversary gala, is a bittersweet ending to a chapter of his life. Everything came full circle, it seemed.

Lastly is Annabelle Lyon, who performed as the company's first *Giselle*, alongside Anton Dolin in 1940. Lyon had a deep artistic connection with choreographer Michael Fokin in her dance career. Starting with him at his school of dance in New York within her earlier life, Lyon and Fokin would go on to work together later in the Ballet Theatre, where Ian Gibson (*her dance partner*) and her performed as the documented "Rose" and "Young Girl" of Fokin's "*La Spectre de la Rose*". She staged a rendition of the aforementioned piece with the American Ballet Theatre in 1975-76; another way of bringing a history with the American Ballet Theatre to an indicated full-circling.

The next question to answer is: *What pushed the American Ballet Theatre further into the spotlight?*

The answer to this question is enumerated in the company's original mission statement. When Pleasant and Chase debuted their Ballet Theatre into New York's limelight, their original mission statement was recorded as follows: "*With the intention of creating an American company of international stature, a museum of the dance, 'which would preserve the best of the classic tradition of Europe and at the same time lay the foundation for a new tradition, American in concept and spirit.'*" (*American Ballet Theater Records, (S)*MGZMD 49, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.*)

Honing in on this original mission statement, the Ballet Theatre had a rich history with emphasizing the pursuits of their choreographers and performers, especially considering the roles these stars played while the company was still finding its niche. A grand example of the Ballet Theatre attesting to this original statement throughout its development: is through the productions that they put on from their beginnings, up until their rebrand in 1965 when they renamed the Ballet Theatre to *The American Ballet Theatre*.

Many of the original casts and choreographers of the Ballet Theatre were a part of European lineage, whether nationally or in terms of their dance backgrounds. Additionally, of the choreographers and directors of the original big three's premiere nights of the Ballet Theatre, Fokin and Mordkin were both of Russian-European descent, and Loring (*though of American descent*) was heavily influenced by European ballet styles within his formative years—given that he also worked under the guidance of ballet hall-of-famer, George Balanchine *and* previously-mentioned Fokin.

The second reference to the *what's* in this context, are able to be enumerated within the American Ballet Theatre's rebrand in 1965. While the company's original mission statement remained intact until 2002, which we will be circling back to later on in this paper, the rebrand that the Ballet Theatre took on in 1965 helped transition the already popular company into an even *more* successful representation of ballet in America.

In terms of representation and rebranding, following the company's new era in the 1960s, they seemed to seek out for a shift in the way their productions were viewed. From the 1940s to the end of the 1950s, many of the productions the company produced were fairly Romantic, Central and Eastern European representative, and traditional. Evidence of these claims are reminiscent of *Giselle*, a romantic-era work where the titled character mourns the lost love she

once had, before becoming a vengeful ghost in the afterlife. The ballet *Giselle* was one of the first premieres of the formerly-named Ballet Theatre on January 12th, 1940. To be frank, previously mentioned examples such as *La Spectre de la Rose*, *Les Sylphides*, *The Great American Goof*, and *Voices of Spring* could also be argued as traditionally-standing ballets that were meant to be on the stage in order to get revenue. Especially because they were more renowned productions in the Western world, and starting off with the more traditionally-known ballets assisted in allowing for the Ballet Theatre to skyrocket into fame and respectability.

A second piece of evidence that alleviates this shift, are a few of the productions they put on in the 1960s. Examples of these are *The Lady From The Sea*, originally a Norwegian play by writer Henrik Ibsen, where a young woman (*previously married to a sailor*) falls in love with the idea of sailing away and finding freedom and solace in the sea, in order to get away from her haunted past; *The Wind in the Mountains*, a production where the sound score is heavily based off of American folk tunes and the characters represent different pioneering figures that move through a “mountainous landscape”; *Gayeneh*, an Armenian-based production where a young woman’s love for her homeland conflict with the personal feelings behind her husband’s treason; and *Points on Jazz*, a production from 1961 where the time signatures of the sound scores are noted to be more odd for a balletic production, and the musicians were meant to find rhythmic variations on a theme. (<https://www.davebrubeck.com/points-on-jazz>)

The reasoning behind these later examples, utilized as evidence for a push in change, is because once the American Ballet Theatre rebranded themselves as such, it proved an insight into the idea that they were ready to take a new direction forward. As the dance world was shifting from pre-modernism to post-modernism, and from classical ballet techniques to a more

“modernist” and experimental outlook, it seemed to reign true that the American Ballet Theatre was sure to take that theory and turn it true, too.

With the who’s, what’s, where’s, why’s, and when’s answered. The last question comes in the form of the “how’s”. *How did the American Ballet Theatre manage to keep themselves moving through an ever-shifting world of dance? How did they inform the New York dance community that it would be efficient to do so?*

The answer comes in the form of two perspectives: principle dancer Misty Copeland, and a new mission statement that was mentioned a few paragraphs ago. Starting with an insight into Copeland’s history with ballet: she started her interest in the style at thirteen years old. At fifteen, she won first place at the “Music Center Spotlight Awards”, where performing artists from all over California have the ability to earn scholarships for their influence in their mediums. Studying at San Francisco’s Ballet School in her late teen years, she *also* took on the task of American Ballet Theatre’s summer intensives with a full scholarship included. Copeland had joined the company’s studio group in late 2000, and soon earned her spot in the *corps de ballet* the year following.

Now, let’s get into the second mission statement of the American Ballet Theatre. Misty Copeland will be brought back into this paper following our analysis of the new mission statement, just to keep everything structured in the right timeline. In 2002, the American Ballet Theatre renovated their mission statement to the following:

“To create, to present, to preserve and to extend the great repertoire of classical dancing, through exciting performances and educational programming of the highest quality, presented to the widest possible audience.” (<https://www.abt.org/the-company/about/>)

With this new mission statement in place, there is a noticeable dichotomy within the two ambitions. The original Ballet Theatre statement desired to be seen in a light of tradition, European influence on the American takeaway of Ballet, and long-term goals for persevering the original magic. The new mission statement, however, highlights the emphasis on expanding the repertoire of what they originally put on, through a new lense of representation and educational opportunities. At the same time, while they are different forms of emphasis on the style of classical ballet, they share one main theme: *preservation*. Both mission statements desire to preserve the light and the love that flows from different balletic productions. With a through line of how much influence these productions and their masterminds behind the scenes have upon them, it is no surprise that in the past, former company members of the American Ballet Theatre would still sometimes produce, direct, or even star in their own productions onstage.

Going back to Copeland, she stayed involved in the corps de ballet from her 2001 start date, up until 2007, when she was announced the opportunity to become a soloist for the company. The big name in lights. She was the first African American female soloist in the last *two* decades of the American Ballet Theatre's run. In 2015, she earned her spot as the principal dancer of the company, and secured her name in the ballet hall of fame. This is also because she was the first African American woman to be promoted to this position in the entirety of The American Ballet Theatre's 75-year-run (at the time). Today, she is no longer the principal dancer of ABT, as she has since moved forward to new opportunities; however, she is listed on their website as being a part of the American Ballet Theatre Board of Trustees. So, as significant as the full-circling of Lucia Chase and John Kriza's stories for example, Copeland's solace in the American Ballet Theatre is one that allows for researchers to see that this company does, indeed, prioritize representation and moving with the times. And, they always have since their beginning.

How they kept their heads above water in a trying time was to find ways to build community through interpersonal connectivity between the audience and the performer. It is evident to see that today, having Misty Copeland being a principal dancer in the history of the American Ballet Theatre, has allowed for a shift in diversity and equality within the communities of ballet, and more specifically in the community of the ABT themselves.

In conclusion, we have narrowed down examples and reasonings behind the who's, the what's, the when's, the why's, the where's, and the hows of The American Ballet Theatre's history and success. With a company that aimed to garner an understanding of what their original ambitions were at the time, and continued to flourish with their new understanding once the art world started changing, the American Ballet Theatre has brought a crisp and clear picture of what they desire to promote for the future of ballet in this country. Now sitting at 85 years of high praise, well-earned success, and seasoned productions: this company has been a grand joy to research for this context assignment. And now, I wish to do more research on them as a result, because the American Ballet Theatre is a company I will be addicted to learning more about from now on.