

Fall 2018

# Ballet Review



From the Fall 2018  
issue of  
*Ballet Review*

A Conversation  
with  
Louis Johnson

**Ballet Review 46.3  
Fall 2018**

Editor and Designer:  
Marvin Hoshino

Managing Editor:  
Roberta Hellman

Senior Editor:  
Don Daniels

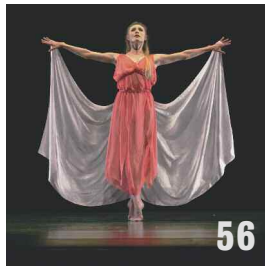
Associate Editors:  
Joel Lobenthal  
Larry Kaplan  
Alice Helpern

Webmaster:  
David S. Weiss

Copy Editor:  
Naomi Mindlin

Photographers:  
Tom Brazil  
Costas

Associates:  
Peter Anastos  
Robert Greskovic  
George Jackson  
Elizabeth Kendall  
Paul Parish  
Nancy Reynolds  
James Sutton  
Edward Willinger  
Sarah C. Woodcock



- 4 David Vaughan (1924-2017)
- 6 Boston – Jeffrey Gantz
- 8 Miami – Michael Langlois
- 9 Sergei Vikharev – Joel Lobenthal
- 10 Boston – Jeffrey Gantz
- 12 London – Gerald Dowler
- 15 San Francisco – Rachel Howard
- 17 New York – Karen Greenspan
- 19 Miami – Michael Langlois
- 20 New York – Nancy G. Heller
- 23 London – Gerald Dowler
- 25 Miami – Michael Langlois
- 26 New York – Susanna Sloat
- 28 Sarasota – Jay Rogoff
- 29 Paris – Vincent Le Baron

**Dawn Lille**

**32 A Conversation with Louis Johnson**

Gary Smith

- 39 A Conversation with  
Tamas Detrich

Joseph Houseal

- 42 A Conversation with  
Preeti Vasuvedan

Rachel Howard

- 46 The Future Unbound

Karen Greenspan

- 51 A Day in the Life of Nrityagram

Susanna Sloat

- 56 Taylor 2018

Joel Lobenthal

- 67 Robert Barnett Stages *Serenade*

Harris Green

- 70 *Romeo + Juliet*

Michael Langlois

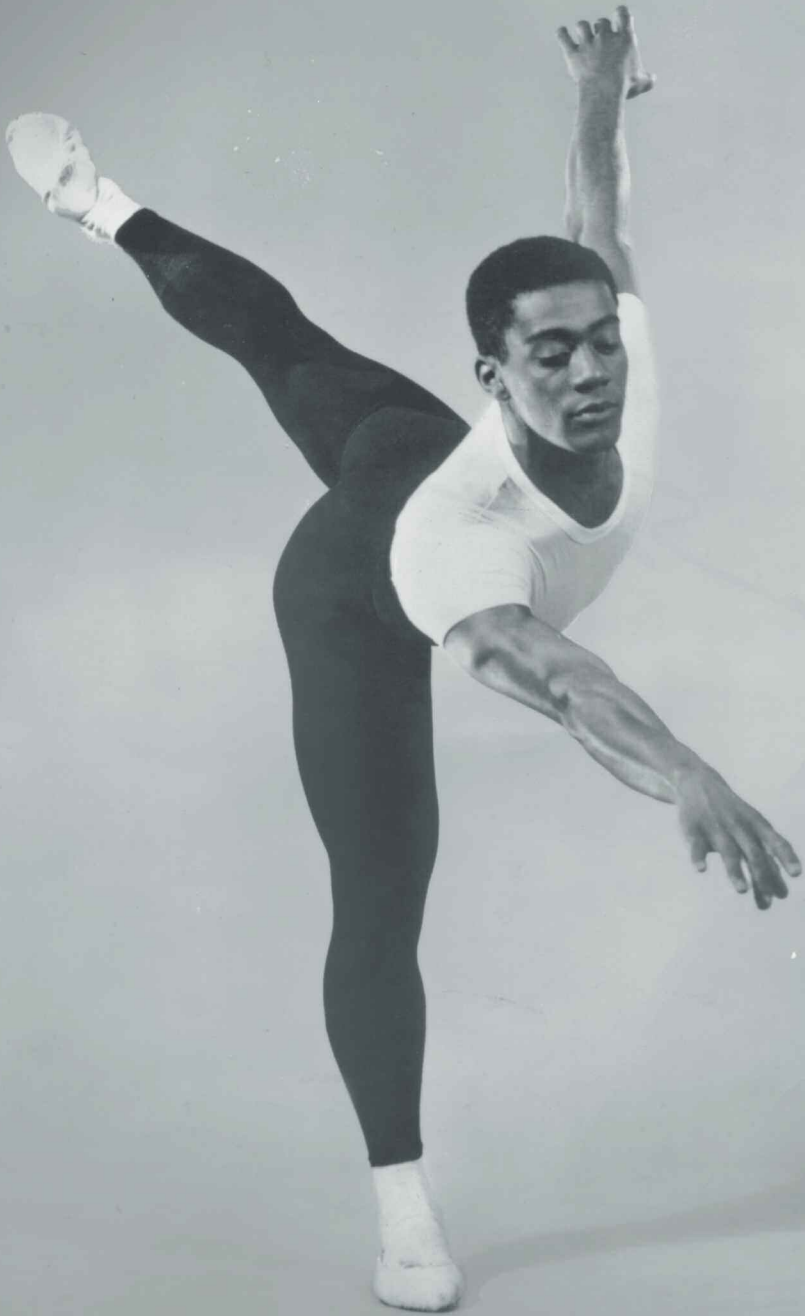
- 74 A Conversation with  
Simone Messmer

- 87 London Reporter – Louise Levene

- 94 Music on Disc – George Dorris

- 98 Check It Out

Cover photograph by Alexander Iziliaev, Miami City Ballet:  
Simone Messmer and Renan Cerdeiro in *Other Dances*.



Louis Johnson at the School of American Ballet. (Photo: courtesy of Louis Johnson)

# A Conversation with Louis Johnson

Dawn Lille

Louis Johnson: I was born in North Carolina. My family moved when I was around six and I was raised and studied in Washington, D.C. In the '40s, when I was in high school, I studied ballet with Doris Jones and Claire Haywood, two incredible ladies who started me in dance.

BR: Was there any background of dance, theater, or music in your family?

Johnson: None at all. My mother and grandmother raised me and then I sort of raised myself. I don't have any family now because they are both gone.

BR: Did you ever think when you started that it was odd for a boy or a black boy to be in ballet?

Johnson: I never had that kind of thought. I was always artistic. I grew up around a YMCA and I was an acrobat, I swam, and played a little ball. They had crafts there, like carpentry; they had art and they had groups come in and do tap dance and what you would call interpretive dance. I tapped with a young man named Miles Conti. We made up routines and tapped around the city.

BR: Is this before you went to Jones-Haywood?

Johnson: Yes. I was an acrobat and leaned into that heavily. I was with a group in acrobatics at the Y and we used to travel around to the army bases. One day, when the Y had to be renovated, Jones-Haywood let us use their facilities to rehearse. Ms. Haywood was teaching in the room we went into. They sort of stayed around and watched us and they saw

---

Louis Johnson (b. 1931) was interviewed in 1990 as part of the research for *Classic Black*, a 1996 exhibition at the New York Public Library. At the time he was director of the dance division of the Henry Street Settlement House. He currently lives in a retirement home in New York City.

me because I would always dance around, even as an acrobat. I couldn't stop. They invited me in and said, "Would you like to study dance?" I said I would but I couldn't afford it. So they offered to let me come in and take some classes and then they gave me a scholarship. I used to go and clean their studio and their house and that's how I paid for the classes.

BR: Was this an all-black ballet school?

Johnson: Yes. Washington was very segregated then. Everything was black and white. I was there about two years and they sent Chita [Rivera] and me to the School of American Ballet summer program.

BR: Were you on scholarship?

Johnson: Yes. Jones-Haywood had a scholarship and my mother was very supportive. In the beginning I received this and then I got a scholarship to SAB. They had contacted SAB and I guess Mr. Balanchine, too, because he auditioned us. It was about my last year or so in high school and I waited until I finished and then I came to NYC and began to study there.

BR: Were there any other black dancers at SAB then?

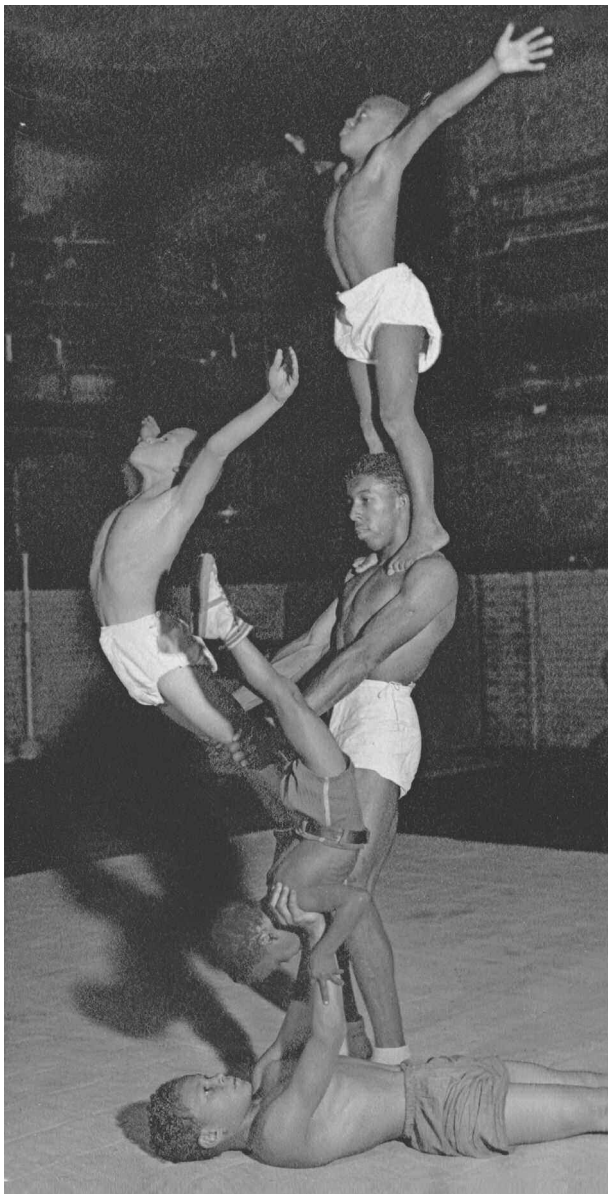
Johnson: Michaelyn Jackson was there for the summer but I think we were the first at that time to be black dancers who were there because they were going to be ballet dancers. Talley [Beatty] had been there earlier but he was not as concentrated on ballet as I was. I was there about four or five years. I would do shows and come back and take class.

BR: At the time did you think you would go on to join a classical company or did you just want to dance?

Johnson: I had no sort of guide. The teachers were behind me, but there was no real political pushing. There wasn't that kind of thing because there was no place for me. They would not think of black people in ballet. What would a black person be? So I was just sort of a free spirit artist, very good at what I did. I would have liked to be in the company, but I thought to myself, if I was good enough they would invite me. I didn't know how to play the game.

BR: So you started to dance on Broadway?

Johnson: Yes, but during those years there



Acrobatics Class. (Photo: courtesy of Louis Johnson)

was a ballet called *Ballade* choreographed by Jerry Robbins for the New York City Ballet [February, 1952]. In that ballet was Nora Kaye, Todd Bolender, Bobby Barnett, Roy Tobias, and me. It got rave reviews and I got good ones, too.

BR: Did they bring you into the company?

Johnson: No. I think Jerry wanted me to be in the company. I really don't know about Mr.

Balanchine. Arthur Mitchell showed up after that. It was a toss-up between Arthur and me. It was politics. They all liked my dancing and I don't know why I wasn't in the company. Jerry would have liked it. That's why I was in the ballet – to lead into the company. But it never quite materialized.

BR: Did you have a contract?

Johnson: Yes, I had a contract for that ballet for that season but was not in any other ballet. I had started out at the beginning and worked my way up the class levels and I was in advanced classes with Jacques d'Amboise, Eddie Villella, Melissa Hayden, Andre Eglevsky, Tanaquil Le Clercq, Maria Tallchief. They were my peers at the time. And all the companies that came to America – Sadler's Wells, Alicia Alonso – they took class with Danilova, too. It was a learning experience like no other.

Wilma Curley said, "If they took you they would have to deal with you." In other words they would have had to use me and make things for me. I don't think Balanchine wanted me because he wasn't interested in making things for men at that time.

BR: You couldn't fade into the corps?

Johnson: Not as far as color goes. So it was for a few months really. They did not take *Ballade* out of the repertory the next season, but they did take out a whole scene that I was in.

BR: How did you feel when they did not renew your contract?

Johnson: I just felt I wasn't ready for it. Today these kids would knock down walls, but I wasn't about to. I could have pressured and I guess something would have been done.



Arthur went in afterward. I don't think Balanchine really liked me too much. I'm older now, so I understand. But if I had been in the company at that time I would have wiped things out. If I thought about it a lot I'd be crazy.

I began to go to the Met and to Ballet Theatre to study. I took Tudor's class. I knew him because he would come to SAB because of Nora Kaye, Erik Bruhn, and Hugh Laing. The first time going to the Met I wanted to take Miss Craske's class and she really didn't think I could do ballet. Tudor got me in and she said I did very well.

BR: Had she never taught a black student?

Johnson: She had seen black dancers, but there was a whole controversy over whether I could do it until Tudor okayed it and then I took class all the time.

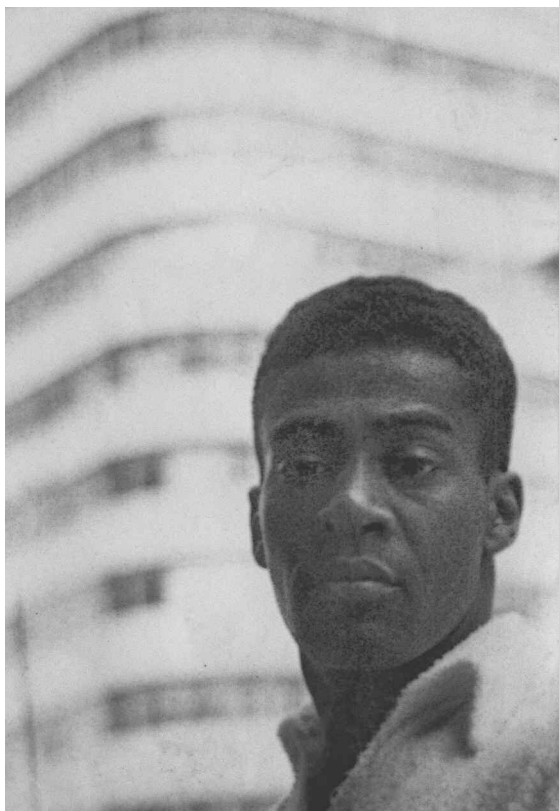
BR: How were you earning a living?

Johnson: I worked in an old paint place after class and I worked for Jerry Robbins. He gave me a scholarship.

On Broadway, *The House of Flowers* was a musical that Balanchine started choreographing but Herb Ross took over. I was noticed in it. There was also *My Darling Aida*. I was one of the people who was lucky to get into shows. There weren't many for black people, but I got jobs and I began to choreograph.

I did concerts at the Y every year and I used a lot of people. I began with Mr. Karr who was Nora Kaye's father. He had something called New York City Ballet Club and he would give a show every year. They rented a place like the Y or the Fashion Institute and he'd invite choreographers like Jimmy Waring, Paul Taylor, and David Vaughan to work. David was in the first ballet I ever did. Mr. Karr would say, "Louis come on and do work with me," because he'd seen me at SAB and he'd seen me dance *Ballade*. He also saw the solo *Harlequin*, which got a lot of notoriety.

*Lament* was my first ballet. In that I also



(Photo: courtesy of Louis Johnson)

used Dee Dee Wood, Arthur Mitchell, and Maggie Newman, who later danced with Paul Taylor. It got a lot of notice at the time.

BR: How did you meet Mr. Karr?

Johnson: He would come and watch class at SAB and the Met and he must have seen something I worked on after class. People would come and watch this black boy and he knew me from being in class with Nora. They were all wonderful and friendly and I was close to a lot of them.

He asked me to do pieces for four years and then I began on my own. I began to rent the Y, which was very reasonable then. You could rent it for \$100 and get everything for that. In my work I used a lot of kids – black and white – because they wanted to work and dance.

BR: Were you choreographing in the classical style?

Johnson: Yes. That's what gave the black kids, including Arthur, the opportunity to do

ballet. There were no opportunities for blacks to do classic things except for Jones-Haywood and in Philadelphia. I introduced Arthur to Jones and Haywood and that's how he began to dance classically. I would go to Washington every year and dance with them. I brought him down to dance in the ensemble.

Jones-Haywood had a good rapport with SAB. Balanchine trusted their technique, which was good, and I taught them additional material, which they taught very well. A lot of kids from different places came to SAB for summer school on scholarship from their own schools. I had a scholarship from SAB and I think Arthur did.

BR: How long did you include works in the classical style?

Johnson: I would always do a classical piece. But I did jazz and modern.

BR: Did you end up using mostly black dancers?

Johnson: No. Ours was mixed. A lot of white

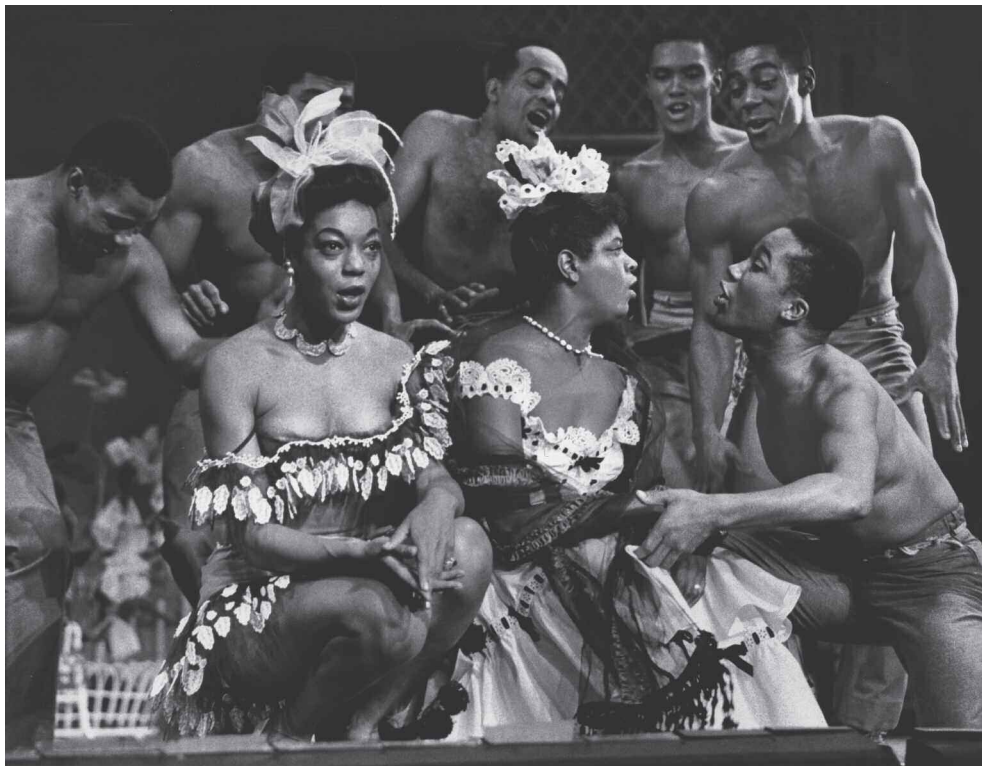
dancers danced with me because it was an opportunity for them to dance. There wasn't an opportunity in ballet unless you were in a company. My concerts were a combination of ballet and other dance.

BR: This was still the '50s. How were you earning a living?

Johnson: By hook or crook! But I was lucky. I had a room with someone who was with the Ballet Russe at the time. I worked in a drugstore and at an old paint place doing opaquing, which is when you have a film or negative with spots and you opaque them out. I also worked for a psychiatrist cleaning his apartment.

BR: I have a program from 1955 for Les Ballets Nègres, a group that Anthony Basse started and Ward Flemmyng took over, with a piece called *Rompthru* that you choreographed. This group became the New York Negro Ballet and toured Great Britain that year. Tell me about it.

Johnson: I was the one person around that



*House of Flowers*, 1954. (Photo: courtesy of Louis Johnson)



*Treemonisha*, 1975. (Photo: courtesy of Houston Grand Opera Archives)

was noted for choreographing ballet and I was friendly with all these people – especially Thelma Hill. I talked to Ward just before he died. He'd been in Europe for a long time. I knew Sylvester Campbell, who was in the company, when he was a little boy at Jones-Haywood. Karel Shook was artistic director of the Netherlands Ballet when Sylvester was there. Karel was in the New York City Ballet when I did *Ballade* and I got him a loft in the building I lived in on 23rd Street. David Wood, Mary Hinkson, and Matt Turney lived there, too.

I did two other ballets for Ward: *Waltz* and *Folk Impressions*. He always had the dream of having a Negro ballet because there were a lot of talented black dancers with no place to dance because of segregation. So he made the company, got a sponsor, and got money from a woman in Massachusetts who died when they were on tour in England. So the company died. People talk about Dance Theatre of Harlem today, but these people came first – dancers like Georgia Collins, Barbara Wright, Delores Browne, Bernard Johnson, Cleo Quit-

man. He fought to make these things happen, but his dream sort of fell apart.

BR: What about Anthony Basse?

Johnson: Tony choreographed a lot of wonderful ballets, always classical works. He started Trocadero. There's probably a lot you haven't heard about black dancers at that time.

Marie Tibbs was a dancer with Jones-Haywood. She came to SAB for two summer programs, but there were no outlets for her. I choreographed a ballet called *No Outlet* [1973], which is about that. There were no outlets, there were no shows. There was nothing for black dancers. That's why I made that ballet. But it's more pertinent now. It's just three people to Rachmaninov's music.

There's a ballerina, a prostitute, and a young man who represents someone coming into manhood. If he goes to college and gets a degree, he gets no job. He may as well be a dope addict. Could he go into the army and get killed? There is the ballet dancer, a black girl. She gets turned down. And then there is a sort of prostitute, and that's all she knows how to



do. It's a dramatic piece in dance, where the girls end up almost going insane from the frustration. No outlet.

BR: Do you have it on tape?

Johnson: Yes. But it's funny, that piece. I do it now and people really like it. But it's so relevant, it says so much about the world today – not just black people. There are no outlets. With all the money and technology and going to the moon, people can't deal one to one.

BR: Are you saying the situation has not gotten any better for the black performer and it's gotten worse for everyone else?

Johnson: I guess you could say that. People see the piece and they all say there are still no outlets. Joffrey has one black dancer – a token. In Atlanta they did have three or four at one time but there was only one when I went there.

When I auditioned dancers for *The Wiz*, Mabel Robinson was my assistant. We realized that there were thousands of dancers all over the country and we knew the twenty-five black ones who were working in ballet and those in modern dance like Mary Hinkson and Donald McKayle. When you are seen by thousands like in *The Wiz*, where I used about two or three hundred, you say, Where are these people going to go in dance?

BR: Who contacted you for *The Wiz*?

Johnson: I hadn't even pursued it – I'm not good at that. I wanted to choreograph it, but it was already signed. Lester Wilson was going to do it. Then I got a call from Sidney Lumet, who wanted to talk to me. So I went for an interview and he hired me.

BR: What else have you choreographed?

Johnson: I did *Treemonisha* for the Houston Grand Opera and *Purlie*, which was nominated for a Tony. I just did *Golden Boy* at Coconut Grove. I did *Aida*, which ran for seven years at the Met and also *Giaconda*. I did a TV production for Leontyne Price and several Ed Sullivan shows. When Radio City closed and then reopened I was one of those who choreographed for the Rockettes.

BR: Are you directing now?

Johnson: I try to because you have to break up the choreography. Most of my work is in that now, because you grow into all facets of theater. How long can you do steps? That's what Gwen Verdon has done and Shirley MacLaine, who was part of that whole group at SAB.

BR: Speaking of Verdon, were you the only black dancer in *Damn Yankees*?

Johnson: Yes, the only one for two years. That sort of broke the ice for blacks coming into Broadway shows. I'm in the movie, too. You see a little black spot jumping around – that's me. I was the lead dancer. The movie cut out a lot. I replaced Timmy Everett who was white. They told you they weren't taking any blacks, so you didn't go to audition but I finally went. Jimmy Hammerstein was the stage manager. He knew me from June Taylor. I think they were going to take me anyway because they wanted a black person at the time.

BR: What about Bob Fosse?

Johnson: I liked him very much. Great man, great artist. One day he said, "Now you have it all and what you do is take it over and learn to perform it." And I began to do that.

BR: Have you ever done summer stock?

Johnson: Yes. Before I did *Purlie*, my first Broadway show, I had done many for Lee Gruber. He came to my concert and then asked me to do summer stock in all his theaters. I choreographed *Kiss Me Kate*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Where's Charlie?*, *Pal Joey*, and *Damn Yankees*. I was lucky to have that sort of experience.

BR: What is your next project?

Johnson: It's called survival, as we're all doing. Things that make me survive as a black person more than trying to make it in ballet. I just did a video. Whatever comes. I still don't have an agent. I'm doing a thing at Lincoln Center with Zora Hurston.

It's sad there were no outlets for people to show what they could really do after training for so long. A lot of people lost out. They'll never be there again.