

# Arthur Mitchell



Arthur Mitchell in 1963. He was one of the most popular dancers with the New York City Ballet in the 1950s and '60s. Credit...Jack Mitchell/Getty Images

Arthur Mitchell (1934-2018) was a choreographer, an American ballet dancer and was also a founder and director of a few ballet companies, most notably the Dance Theatre of Harlem. He was born on March 27, 1934 in Harlem, NY and grew up in there with his parents and four other siblings. When he was young his mother enrolled him in tap dance lessons at a local school. As a teenager, a guidance counselor at his junior high school, encourage him to apply to the High School of Performing Arts in Manhattan. He was accepted. He began his education learning modern dance and he performed with the school's modern dance group. He would also perform in other parts of the US and in Europe. During this time Mitchell was also working on his own choreography. At the age of 18 he began training with ballet master Karel Shook in classical ballet. Upon graduation Arthur was offered two scholarships to two different schools, one in modern dance and the other in ballet. He accepted the dance award and scholarship to study at the School of American Ballet, the school affiliated with the New York City Ballet.

While still a student Mitchell received an invitation to join the New York City Ballet. In 1955 Arthur Mitchell became one of the first black dancers to dance with the New York City Ballet. He debuted in a lead male role for George Balanchine's ballet *Western Symphony*. Mitchell would go onto become a protégé of Balanchine's as well as the first black principal dancer for the New York City Ballet. Balanchine choreographed the pas de deux in the ballet *Agon* for Mitchell and he performed it with Diana Adams. In his 15 years at the New York City

Ballet, Arthur Mitchell would perform in all of their major ballets including *The Nutcracker*, as Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Arcade*.

In 1969 Mitchell had been deeply affected by the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the year prior. He wanted to create a dance haven for dancers and for the black children of Harlem to have a creative art outlet in their lives. A space where the children of Harlem would have the same artistic opportunities he had had and also for them to see that they have place in classical ballet. Mitchell opened the Dance Theatre of Harlem was opened and started out in a converted garage in Harlem. As the school grew Mitchell enlisted his former ballet master, Karel Shook, to help run the school. The school staged revivals of classical ballets as well as modern ballets. Dance Theatre of Harlem was then and is today a world renowned ballet school.

Arthur Mitchells Awards:

Kennedy Center Honor for lifetime contribution to the performing arts, 1993

American Academy of Arts and Letters, Award for Distinguished Service to the Arts, 1994

MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, 1994

National Medal of Arts, 1995

Inducted into Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney Dance Hall of Fame, 1999

Heinz Award, 2001

Dance/USA Honors, 2004

References:

Jennifer Dunning: [Arthur Mitchell Is Dead at 84; Showed the Way for Black Dancers](#) *The New York Times*

<https://www.dancetheatreofharlem.org/our-history/>