

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Arthur Mitchell

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Mitchell, Arthur, 1934-2018
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell,
<b>Dates:</b>	October 5, 2016
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2016
<b>Physical Description:</b>	9 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:21:20).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Dancer, choreographer, and artistic director Arthur Mitchell (1934 - 2018 ) was a principal dancer for the New York City Ballet for fifteen years. In 1969, he co-founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the first African American classical ballet company and school. Mitchell was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 5, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2016_034
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Dancer, choreographer and artistic director Arthur Mitchell was born on March 27, 1934 in Harlem, New York to Arthur Mitchell, Sr. and Willie Hearn Mitchell. He attended the High School of Performing Arts in Manhattan. In addition to academics, Mitchell was a member of the New Dance Group, the Choreographers Workshop, Donald McKayle and Company, and High School of Performing Arts' Repertory Dance Company. After graduating from high school in 1952, Mitchell received scholarships to attend the Dunham School and the School of American

Ballet.

In 1954, Mitchell danced on Broadway in *House of Flowers* with Geoffrey Holder, Louis Johnson, Donald McKayle, Alvin Ailey and Pearl Bailey. He joined John Butler's dance company in Europe before Lincoln Kirstein, general director of the New York City Ballet (NYCB), invited him to join NYCB's corps de ballet. Mitchell became the first African American permanent member of a major American ballet company in 1955, when he performed with Tanaquil Le Clercq in *Western Symphony*. Then, in 1957, famed ballet choreographer George Balanchine choreographed *Agon pas de deux*, considered to be the first interracial duet in American ballet, for Mitchell and Diana Adams. Balanchine choreographed the role of Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Mitchell, as Mitchell performed in a succession of NYCB productions, including *Bugaku* and *Arcade*, throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In 1966, Mitchell organized the American Negro Dance Company, which represented the U.S. at the first World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. Mitchell then founded the National Ballet Company of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro in 1968. Mitchell, with mentor and friend Karel Shook, co-founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969, the first black classical ballet company, which debuted at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 1971. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Dance Theatre of Harlem produced ballets, including *Douglas*, *Troy Game*, *The Firebird* and *Creole Giselle*. When the Dance Theatre of Harlem performed in South Africa in 1992, it launched its international outreach program, Dancing Through Barriers, designed to educate children in dance through master classes and open rehearsals.

Mitchell received numerous awards. In 1993, he was recognized by the Kennedy Center Honors, and was named a MacArthur Genius Fellow in 1994. President Bill Clinton presented Mitchell with a U.S. National Medal of Arts in 1995. Then, in 1999, Mitchell was inducted into the National Museum of Dance and Hall of Fame, the only U.S. museum dedicated exclusively to dance. He received the Heinz Award in Art and Humanities in 2001, and was featured in a PBS *American Masters* documentary, *Balanchine* in 2004. Between 2009 and 2010, the exhibit "Dance Theatre of Harlem: 40 Years of Firsts" premiered in New York City and Los Angeles. Columbia University's Rare Book & Manuscript Library acquired Mitchell's archives, its first major dance collection, in 2015.

Mitchell passed away on September 19, 2018.

Arthur Mitchell was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on October 6, 2016.

This life oral history interview with Arthur Mitchell was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on October 5, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 9 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Dancer, choreographer, and artistic director Arthur Mitchell (1934 - 2018 ) was a principal dancer for the New York City Ballet for fifteen years. In 1969, he co-founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the first African American classical ballet company and school.

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## **Restrictions**

### **Restrictions on Access**

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### **Restrictions on Use**

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## **Related Material**

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## **Controlled Access Terms**

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### **Persons:**

Mitchell, Arthur, 1934-2018

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## **Subjects:**

African Americans--Interviews

Mitchell, Arthur, 1934-2018--Interviews

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## **Occupations:**

Dancer

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Choreographer

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Artistic Director

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## **HistoryMakers® Category:**

ArtMakers

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## **Administrative Information**

### **Custodial History**

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

## Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, October 5, 2016. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

## Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 2/5/2020 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, Section  
A2016\_034\_001\_001, TRT: 1:29:56 2016/10/05

Arthur Mitchell was born on March 27, 1934 in New York City to Willie Hearn Mitchell and Arthur Mitchell, Sr. Mitchell's mother was born into an established middle-class family in Savannah, Georgia. She met Mitchell's father, who was born in Atlanta, Georgia, at a dance. They eloped against their parents' wishes, and moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, Mitchell's father became a bootlegger during Prohibition. He hid his distillery underground, and was never caught by the police. Later, the couple moved to New York City's Harlem neighborhood, where Mitchell grew up with his four siblings. During Mitchell's childhood, his father was

incarcerated. To help provide for his family, Mitchell served as an errand boy; delivered newspapers; and, from the age of fifteen years old, performed in local bars like Lucky's. Mitchell also attended Harlem's P.S. 186 and Junior High School 43. He remembers his early days in school; his love of reading; and his neighborhood gang, the Rebels.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, Section  
A2016\_034\_001\_002, TRT: 2:31:04 2016/10/05

Arthur Mitchell's first learned to dance from his older sister, Frances Mitchell, who taught him social dances like the jitterbug. He was a natural performer, and his guidance teacher suggested that he audition for New York City's High School of Performing Arts. There, he studied tap dance under the tutelage of Tom Nip. Mitchell also studied with ballet dancer Robert Joffrey and famed dancer Katherine Dunham to broaden his repertoire. At fifteen years old, Mitchell booked his first professional role in Virgil Thomson's 'Four Saints in Three Acts' with Leontyne Price and Louis Johnson. After its success on Broadway, the production ran in Paris, France. At the Katherine Dunham School of Dance and Theater, Mitchell met dance instructor Karel Shook, with whom he later cofounded his company. After graduating from high school, Mitchell attended New York City's School of American Ballet on a scholarship. He later worked on productions like 'Shinbone Alley' with Eartha Kitt.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, Section  
A2016\_034\_001\_003, TRT: 3:32:37 2016/10/05

Arthur Mitchell met Karel Shook, a dancer with the New York City Ballet, at the Katherine Dunham School of Dance and Theatre. Upon graduating from the High School of Performing Arts in New York City, Mitchell lived with Shook as well as ballet dancers Mary Hinkson and Louis Johnson in a loft in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. During this time, Mitchell realized that he had to study ballet to be considered for professional roles. He began dancing with companies such as Donald McKayle and Dancers; at nightclubs; and in Guy Lombardo's 'Arabian Nights.' Mitchell was also cast in 'House of Flowers' with Carmen De Lavallade, and then

joined John Butler's dance company. While the company was touring Europe, Shook invited Mitchell to join the New York City Ballet. Mitchell was the first African American man to be a permanent member. He worked closely with its founder, George Balanchine, and performed in 'Western Symphony' with principal dancer Tanaquil Le Clercq.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, Section  
A2016\_034\_001\_004, TRT: 4:35:03 2016/10/05

Arthur Mitchell performed with several dance companies, including Donald McKayle and Dancers, and in multiple Broadway productions, such as 'House of Flowers.' After he joined the New York City Ballet, Mitchell worked closely with founders George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein. He was the company's first permanent male African American member, and faced discrimination from other members of the company, like dancer William Weslow. Some critics wrote that an African American man like Mitchell could become a professional dancer, but never a ballet dancer. However, Balanchine was a strong supporter of Mitchell, and the African American dance community, and the two became very close. Mitchell was touring with the New York City Ballet's 'Western Symphony' when principal dancer Tanaquil Le Clercq was diagnosed with polio. Mitchell describes the tight-knit dance community of New York City in the 1940s, including dancers Frederic Franklin, Aubrey Hitchens, Louis Johnson, William Dollar and Karel Shook.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, Section  
A2016\_034\_001\_005, TRT: 5:29:58 2016/10/05

Arthur Mitchell performed in George Balanchine's 'Agon' with the New York City Ballet. The music was written by Igor Stravinsky, who was living in California at the time. He and Balanchine worked closely with Mitchell, who was a quick learner. In one of the numbers, Balanchine wanted to emphasize the contrast of Mitchell's skin against the fairness of his partner, dancer Diana Adams. Even so, Mitchell hoped to be seen as a dancer first and an African American second. After 'Agon,' Mitchell became more prominent in the dance community, and began performing with ballerinas Violette Verdy, Patricia Wilde

and Melissa Hayden. Mitchell choreographed many of his own dances for the role of Puck in Balanchine's production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream.' In 1962, Mitchell travelled with the New York City Ballet to Russia, where audiences had never before seen an African American ballet dancer. Then, Mitchell founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem, and invited Tanaquil Le Clercq to teach despite her disability from polio.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, Section  
A2016\_034\_001\_006, TRT: 6:33:56 2016/10/05

Arthur Mitchell worked with a number of African American dance companies, including those of Katherine Dunham, George W. Faison and Doris Jones. In the 1960s, Mitchell was asked by the U.S. government to establish the National Ballet Company of Brazil. Although he faced discrimination in Brazil because of his race, the company was a success. While there, Mitchell created 'Rhythmetron,' which combined African rhythms with classical ballet techniques. After returning from Brazil, Mitchell performed in Noel Coward's 'Sweet Potato' on Broadway in 1968. He decided to leave the New York City Ballet in 1969; and, with Karel Shook, founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem to provide ballet training to children in Harlem, and to form his own company. In 1984, Mitchell choreographed the film 'The Cotton Club' with director Francis Ford Coppola. His mentor, George Balanchine, died in 1985, and Katherine Dunham asked Mitchell to complete Balanchine's ballet about the quadroon balls of New Orleans, Louisiana.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, Section  
A2016\_034\_001\_007, TRT: 7:33:16 2016/10/05

Arthur Mitchell founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem with his mentor, Karel Shook, in 1969. As teachers, Shook followed the classical technique, while Mitchell emulated the more modern ballet style of his mentor, George Balanchine, who gave Mitchell the rights to his ballets and costumes. The company's diverse repertoire included both classical productions, such as Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake' and 'Nutcracker,' and new pieces choreographed by Mitchell, like 'Ode to Otis.' They also performed Geoffrey Holder's ballets, 'Dougla' and



‘Banda.’ The Dance Theatre of Harlem made its debut performance at New York City’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Mitchell later took dancers to Spoleto, Italy and Russia, where they were well received. In Russia, Mitchell negotiated with the KGB so that he could visit Georgia, Balanchine’s home country. Mitchell was strict with his dancers while travelling, as the Dance Theatre of Harlem was perceived as a symbol of the neighborhood to the world.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, Section  
A2016\_034\_001\_008, TRT: 8:29:24 2016/10/05

Arthur Mitchell moved the Dance Theatre of Harlem from the basement of New York City’s Church of the Master to a studio on 152nd Street after receiving a grant from the Ford Foundation. To maintain his grants, Mitchell operated the Dance Theatre of Harlem with a precise budget. The company toured internationally with great success, and were invited to take part in a special on the ‘60 Minutes’ television program. During his time with the company, Mitchell formed close relationships with the Harlem community and the neighborhood gangs, although the studio was once vandalized. Mitchell created several ballets for the company that portrayed the African American community. One such production was ‘Creole Giselle,’ an adaptation of ‘Giselle’ set in the quadroon balls of New Orleans, Louisiana, which was televised on NBC. Mitchell remembers his students and principal dancers, including Virginia Johnson and Lydia Abarca, who went on to illustrious professional careers.

Video Oral History Interview with Arthur Mitchell, Section  
A2016\_034\_001\_009, TRT: 10:06:06 2016/10/05

Arthur Mitchell’s Dance Theatre of Harlem was supported by patrons like Judith Peabody and Alva B. Gimbel, and minimized costs by hiring students and doing work in-house. The company gained prominence in the dance community through their international tours to China, Russia and Europe, and their work in New York City, such as the Harlem Homecoming with performers Leontyne Price and Lena Horne. He also worked with singers Marian Anderson and Aretha Franklin. In 1993, Mitchell became one of the youngest individuals to be recognized

by the Kennedy Center Honors. In 1997, the company's dancers went on strike for better wages; and, following financial difficulties in 2010, Mitchell was asked to leave the company. Mitchell reflects upon his life, and the impact of his ballets and the Dance Theatre of Harlem on the African American dance community. At the time of the interview, he hoped to create an internationally diverse company called Noah's Art.