

ARTS

Dance legend Arthur Mitchell tours Miami's dance community

Master dancer Arthur Mitchell visits Miami-Dade high school

He was the New York City Ballet's first black principal dancer

Mitchell teaches a dances class with a stern hand

BY NADEGE GREEN
WLRN/Herald News

Dance icon Arthur Mitchell is sitting in the dance studio at Dr. Michael Krop Senior High School in Northeast Miami-Dade. He's 81 years old. And even seated, he has the presence of a dancer. Head high. Chest out. Back straight.

Ruth Wiesen, director of the Thomas Armour Youth Ballet, is reading excerpts of his lengthy biography to about two dozen students. Wiesen, who helped organize Mitchell's trip to Miami, tells the students that he was the first black principal dancer with the New York City Ballet in 1955.

"This was historic in pre-civil rights America, and he set the stage for many firsts," she tells them. "He actually went on to change the future of dance

in this country and globally forever."

Mitchell made stops in South Miami, downtown Miami and Miami Gardens as part of a national assessment he's doing of local dance communities. During the intro at Krop, one student whispers to another, "It's really him."

The Arthur Mitchell. A ballet superstar.

George Balanchine, co-founder and choreographer for New York City Ballet, created *Agon* for him. And after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., Mitchell formed the Dance Theatre of Harlem, an African-American classical ballet company, in a race-divided America.

After a few more minutes of introductions, Mitchell grabs his black cane and stands up. He's here to teach.

"Let's start by facing the barre in first position," he

Iconic dance figure Arthur Mitchell was recently in Miami to assess the local dance scene. He spent time at Dr. Michael Krop High School teaching a master class to students.

says. Like a true New Yorker, he's wearing all black. "Just do demi-plié and straight. Demi-plié and demi toe."

Former Dance Theatre of Harlem dancer Paunika Jones is demonstrating the movements.

Mitchell's style is nonsense, old-school and blunt. In the middle of a tendu exercise, he gets frustrated and pounds his black cane into the wood floor. The dancers are moving, he says, but they're not present.

"You're going into a catatonic state like you're not thinking. Think," he says. "You're just staring like this — zombies in Miami. Here we go! Five, six, seven, eight."

Bernadette Pierre, the dance teacher at Krop, is following Mitchell's every



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DON'T LET ANYONE DISCOURAGE YOU.

Arthur Mitchell

move from a corner where she's recording with her Ipad. She says she's constantly evoking Mitchell's name when she encourages her dancers to consider classical ballet as a profession.

"I have a couple of kids that really love to do ballet, but they always ask me that one question, 'Do you really think I'm going to make it?'"

She says many of her students are hesitant to consider ballet even though they excel at it, because

they don't see themselves represented in classical ballet companies. Many of the larger ballet companies still look as they did when Mitchell joined the New York City Ballet in 1955.

Pierre says her students quiz her, "How many black dancers or how many Hispanic dancers do you see in the classical world?" she says.

And while she can point to a few ballerinas with brown or dark brown skin like her students, she concedes there aren't many. Her students go for modern dance companies or commercial dance opportunities instead.

At the end of class, the dancers form a cluster around Mitchell, who opens up about his personal experience as a black man in ballet.

"I went to auditions," he says. "They wouldn't accept me because they weren't accepting any black dancers."

He tells the students not to let the color of their skin or anyone's shortsightedness stop them from pursuing their dream of dance.

"You're working to be the best," he says. "Well, I'm black. So what? Black is beautiful. They keep saying that over and over again."

He adds: "I'm black. I'm a pretty black."

The dancers are relaxed as they listen to Mitchell speak. Some are leaning or slightly slouched over. For a moment he stops talking and surveys the room. He bangs his cane several times on the floor.

"Sit up. Up more. More. From the base of the spine,"

Satisfied the dancers are present, he picks up where he left off.

"Don't let anyone discourage you," he says.

During his time as a dancer with the New York City Ballet, he says, some of the parents of the white female dancers objected to him joining the company. They didn't want their daughters dancing with a black man.

Balanchine told those parents that if they didn't like it, they were free to take their daughters out of the company.

Mitchell says he always shares his personal story with students to show that while there is still a color barrier to break through in classical ballet, they shouldn't let those barriers stop them.

He advised students trying to join an all-white troupe to internalize this mantra:

"I will be the first."