On Campus

Arthur Mitchell, a Dancer who Broke Down Barriers, Brings Archive to Columbia

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Arthur Mitchell with a photo of himself and Diana Adams. Photo by Eve Glasberg.

Columbia’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library recently acquired the archive of pioneering ballet dancer, artistic director, and choreographer Arthur Mitchell. The first black principal of the New York City Ballet, Mitchell rose to fame dancing a sensuous pas de deux with Diana Adams in *Agon* in 1957; over the next decade, he would perform in every one of the company’s major ballets. In 1969, Mitchell cofounded the Dance Theatre of Harlem, which became the first African-American classical-ballet company to achieve international acclaim.

The Mitchell archive contains photographs, posters, clippings, correspondence, and film footage from throughout the dancer’s career. It includes handwritten notes from when he was learning dance steps created for him by preeminent choreographer George Balanchine ’73HON; his correspondence with Igor Stravinsky, Josephine Baker, Alvin Ailey, Geoffrey Holder, Carmen de Lavallade, David Dinkins, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Nelson Mandela; and news clippings about Mitchell being barred from performing in some US cities because of his race.

The archive, which is now being sorted and catalogued with funding from the Ford Foundation, will open to the public in 2017. Mitchell, eighty-one, said he intends to work closely with Columbia to organize public events and programs that make the collection accessible to the local community.

“I believe that dance, and the arts more broadly, can be used as a catalyst for social change — this is why I started the Dance Theatre of Harlem,” he says. “With these materials now at Columbia, artifacts of American dance history and African-American history will be accessible to academics and the general public, furthering this change.”

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