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| Collins, Janet (1917-2003) |
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| Magical onstage, elusive offstage, Janet Collins was an enigmatic and complex presence in twentieth-century dance. As the first full-time African-American ballerina at the Metropolitan Opera in 1951, she broke the colour barrier and generated international headlines—no small feat in an era when racial tension and discrimination continued to prevail. This celebrated achievement placed her in the pantheon of pioneering African Americans and became the triumph for which she was most remembered. Yet Collins also succeeded as a unique concert dance soloist and choreographer, fusing disparate techniques and influences in her creations—an approach that was in keeping with modernist experimentations and set her apart from many of her dancing peers. As a result of these dual identities, she serves as a pivotal figure in the lineage of African-American cultural history, and as one of the distinguished women of her generation who helped propel the evolution of American dance. |
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Training and Early Career Inspired by Anna Pavlova, the young Janet Collins was determined to study ballet. She received much of her early classical training privately, since no ballet school in Los Angeles, where her family had moved around 1921, would accept her as a student because she was African American. An audition for the fabled Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo emphasized her plight in this prejudiced time; director Léonide Massine told her that while he admired her dancing, he could accept her into the troupe only if she painted her face white.  Meanwhile, popular culture was more welcoming. She appeared in an adagio act, ‘Three Shades of Brown’, and musical theatre productions of *Run, Little Chillun* (1938) and *Swing Mikado* (1939), both sponsored by the Federal Theatre Project. Performances with the companies of Lester Horton and Katherine Dunham followed, too, as well as in the films *Stormy Weather* (1943) and *The Thrill of Brazil* (1946); she also formed a brief partnership with acclaimed dancer Talley Beatty. In addition, Collins, a gifted artist, attended the noted Art Center School.  A turning point came in 1945: Collins received a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship of $1,800 that enabled her to focus on her own choreography. Her first solo concert in 1947 left critics hailing her as a unique performer and, encouraged by her success, she left about a year later for New York. There, her first audition, for a 92nd Street Y showcase, was an unexpected hit, and the ensuing concert stunned the hard-boiled critics. ‘It took no more (and probably less) than eight measures of movement in the opening dance to establish her claim to dance distinction’, wrote Walter Terry in the *New York Herald Tribune*. ‘She could, and probably will, stop a Broadway show in its tracks as easily as she could and will cause a concert-going audience to shout for encores’.  And she did. Cast next in a minor role in Cole Porter’s *Out of This World* (1950), Collins often earned more review space than the stars and was subsequently named ‘The Most Outstanding Debutante of the Season’ (*Dance Magazine*) and ‘Young Woman of the Year’ (*Mademoiselle*). Television and radio appearances followed; so did recognition by The Committee for the Negro in the Arts, which lauded her ‘for outstanding contributions as an artist to the cultural life of the United States and to the struggles of the Negro people and their artists for full equality and freedom’. She also won the Donaldson Award for the best Broadway dancer in 1951.  That year marked yet another turning point when Zachary Solov, the new choreographer and ballet master at the Metropolitan Opera, saw Collins perform: ‘The body just spoke’, he recalled. He instantly went to Rudolf Bing, the Met’s general manager, and told him that he wanted to hire her—and that she was black. Bing consented, andCollins became Solov’s muse for four new productions, *Aïda* (1951), *Carmen* (1952), *La Gioconda* (1952), and *Samson et Dalila* (1953), creating excitement in every part. Moreover, since it was the first time that an African American had been hired full time by the Met—and by any American ballet company—her presence there was considered doubly historic.  File: LaGioconda.tiff  Figure Janet Collins as the Queen of the Night in *La Gioconda*. Photo by Sedge LeBlang. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives. Date Unknown.  File: JanetWithZacharySolov.tiff  Figure Janet Collins and Zachary Solov. Photoby Sedge LeBlang. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives. Date unknown.  In 1954, Collins resigned from the Met—exhausted from its cross-country tours and from her own tours as a solo performer for Columbia Artists Management—and turned to teaching and painting, which became interwoven with her commitment to Catholicism. She returned to Los Angeles in 1969, subsequently relocated to Seattle, Washington, and spent her last few years in Fort Worth, Texas. Her achievements as a dance pioneer were honored in 1974 by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; in 1995 at the 8th International Conference of Blacks in Dance; and in 2000 by Ballet Arlington.  File: Aida.tiff  Figure Janet Collins, Socrates Birsky, and Loren Hightower in the Triumphal Scene of *Aïda*, 1951. Photo by Sedge LeBlang. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives. Legacy In the timeline of black dance history, Collins followed in the footsteps of Hemsley Winfield, a guest performer at the Met for the 1932–1933 production of *The Emperor Jones* and one of the earliest African-American concert dancers and choreographers. Her additional concert dance forebears and contemporaries included Edna Guy, Asadata Dafora, Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Talley Beatty. Yet Collins did not explore the black experience in her choreography to the extent that the others did; moreover, she utilized ‘white’ classical music (by Bach and Mozart, for example) in her recitals and fused ballet and modern technique. A similar meshing of styles could also be seen in the works of choreographers such as her teacher Carmelita Maracci (ballet and Spanish dance), Paul Draper (ballet and tap), and Daniel Nagrin (modern and jazz), and was an important part of how American dance developed in the twentieth century. Those who followed Collins on the modern dance front included her first cousin Carmen de Lavallade and Alvin Ailey, both of whom came out of the Lester Horton Dance Theater; on the ballet front, Arthur Mitchell and Raven Wilkinson were next in line to become full-time performers with classical companies (New York City Ballet and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, respectively). Subsequently, Mitchell co-founded Dance Theatre of Harlem, a special milestone in African-American dance history, and one that stemmed directly from Collins’s exceptional career.  File: LaCreole.tiff  Figure Janet Collins in *La Creole*. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives. List of Solo Concert Dance Repertory Premieres: *Apre le Mardi Gras* (1947)  *Bird of Paradise* (1955)  *Blackamoor* (1947)  *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (‘Rondo’ and ‘Romanza’; 1947)  *Genesis* (1965)  *Juba* (1947)  *La Creole* (1947)  *Mo l’Aime Toi, Chère* (1951)  *New Land* (later *Credo*; 1947)  *Protest* (1947)  *Spirituals* (1947)  *Three Psalms of David* (1951)  *The Young Fishwife* (1947) |
| Further reading:  (Lewin)  (Lewin, Janet Collins: A Spirit That Knows No Bounds) |