

Brown legs, pink tights

What if all ballet students were taught about the history of pink tights and were not expected to reinforce an archaic standard? Could every dancer then chart a new way forward through their daily practice?

by Brandye Lee

I was an inquisitive and observant child, and I peppered those around me with plenty of questions. A lot of my questions centered around race, a result of attending private school where most of my classmates and teachers were white, while returning home at the end of each day to a predominantly Black neighborhood and my African American family. I distinctly remember asking my parents questions like, “Why doesn’t my hair grow down my back like Rachel’s?” and, “Why does Robert always say that I sound like a white girl?” Growing up, my favorite person to talk to was my mother. A lot of this had to do with some of the funny, yet puzzling answers she’d give me. For example:

Me: “What if I make really good grades *this* year; can I go to a school with more Black kids *next* year?”

Mom: “If ifs and ands were pots and pans, the whole world would be a kitchen.”

In other words, she didn’t have an answer to my question, and/or I was probably barking up the wrong tree with my question or request. This response often left me exasperated, but it left me to sit with my own questions, tossing about the what and the why.

Recently, at the faculty dance concert at the University of California, Irvine, I couldn’t help but feel like I was sitting in the proverbial kitchen my mother often evoked, with an equal amount of questions that left me frustrated and annoyed. I felt no closer to understanding the why, even though I fully grasped the what. The piece that brought me to this place of angst was an excerpt from *La Sylphide*, the August Bournonville classic, a forest scene full of identical white sylphs or forest creatures dancing in a wood.

When the curtain opened, I was immediately captivated and swept up by Jacob Brinkman’s gorgeous lighting design, with teal and purple hues diffused perfectly by misty fog. It created a dreamy forest setting for the lead Sylph (Morgan Rice) to captivate her suitor, James (Jehbreal Jackson). The corps was ethereal in form and costume, with effortless bourrées and fluffy romantic tutus. Rice and Jackson were brilliant in their technique and charmingly flirtatious. This ballet was beautiful!

And yet, as I sat writing notes in the dark, what struck me was how...white everything appeared, with the exception of James (as Jackson is African American). Oh, I know; it is what it is—a *ballet blanc*, so what more could I expect?

When James pursued the sylph he loved and was inevitably surrounded by the protective corps de ballet, the question that struck me was, “What if the sylphs were Black?” What if, when James looked right and left, he saw a sea of Black women staring back at him? Or, if not all Black women (let’s not get too ambitious here), James saw a range of skin tones from the richest ebony to creamy alabaster? How would that have made James feel, seeing beauty reflected to him in all skin shades, including his own? Moreover, would I have felt less alienated? Here I was, teaching ballet classes in this department while I was in graduate school, yet, the more I watched, the more I felt like a fish out of water.

What if ballet’s traditional tableau of sameness was solely processed through the lens of technique and performance, abandoning the long-held notion that brown skin distracts the onlooker’s eye? Specifically, what if the corps in *La Sylphide* each donned tights and pointe shoes that matched their skin colors? Would that be such a departure from the *ballet blanc* aesthetic? Different hair color is accepted among dancers, so why not various shades of legs? What if all ballet students were taught about the history of pink tights and expected to not reinforce an archaic standard, but instead chart a new way forward through their daily practice?

After all, pink tights were originally worn to match the skin tone of white European ballerinas, a practice that evolved into the standard for ballet. The acceptance of pink as the expected skin tone has surely contributed to the exclusion of dancers who have any other skin color. Dance Theatre of Harlem, founded in 1969, bravely disrupted this paradigm when its Black dancers began

wearing tights that matched their skin color. What if, when given the choice, Black ballerinas everywhere were unequivocal in their rejection of pink tights, demonstratively embracing their own natural beauty, and giving other dancers like them permission to do the same?

What if all Black ballerinas felt empowered to wear brown tights onstage, like Precious Adams of the English National Ballet? What if I didn’t experience an act of psychological violence when looking onstage and seeing a Black dancer made to wear pink tights? What if my heart didn’t cry out for her because she either (1) didn’t know the history of pink tights, (2) did not feel empowered to voice her concerns about wearing the pink tights, or (3) was ignored if she had? What if the dance department at this school valued diversity so much that it would ban pink tights and shoes for ballet classes, given the inherent discrimination wrapped up in them?

As Theresa Howard states in her 2018 *Dance Magazine* article, what if all dance departments reflected the understanding that in order to achieve true diversity, “you must ask people what would make them feel included, not assume you know. [Diversity] requires that you authentically, with empathy and compassion, examine the conditions that you have been operating out of and be willing to let go of some and redesign others.”



*Students from the Collage Ballet Conservatory
Photo by Raphael Baker
Courtesy of Collage Dance Collective*

What if actual flesh-tone tights and shoes became the default at this university, UC Irvine, because universities are places for higher learning and intellectual discourse, places where people dare to take risks that lead to a hopeful, inclusive future? Lest I forget that ballet is what dance scholar Brenda Dixon-Gottschild once called one of

“the last bastions of white supremacy in concert dance,” what if I was thinking—as a Black woman who loves ballet—that during the double-pandemic affecting Black lives, speaking out will actually affect change? What if this uniform, which visually reinforces the idea of white supremacy in ballet, is changed to one that reflects actual skin tone, and allows space for the inclusion of non-white dancers?

When my mother said, “If ifs and ands were pots and pans, the whole world would be a kitchen,” she was quoting a familiar saying that many mothers offered to their children, to get them to understand that change is not easy, that you can’t change things in this world just by wishing they were otherwise. And mostly, that’s true. But maybe the time has come to act on the wishes that are important. Maybe in the ballet world, finally, Black ballerinas can get out of the hypothetical kitchen and have a seat at the table. Not making pink tights the norm is a start.

Brandye Lee, currently pursuing her MFA in dance at University of California at Irvine, is a former dancer with Ailey II, The Lion King - Gazelle Tour, and Collage Dance Collective. She graduated cum laude from Smith College, where her undergraduate thesis, “Black Subjects and the Negotiation of the Ballet Aesthetic,” earned highest honors.

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