



Exclusive interview with Robert Garland, artistic director of the Dance Theatre of Harlem

After a 40-year absence, the iconic New York ballet Dance Theatre of Harlem announces its grand return to France with an exceptional tour that will take place in Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux and Roubaix from February 11 to March 7, 2026. We met with its director, Robert Garland, for an exclusive interview.

To celebrate this return to France, the Dance Theatre of Harlem and its 28 dancers will offer a repertoire representing the many facets that have confirmed its reputation: classical and neoclassical works, from Balanchine to Robert Garland, the current artistic director, as well as the mythical Firebird choreographed by John Taras to the music of Stravinsky, but also powerful contemporary pieces that use the language of ballet to defend the values of the company.



This company was founded by Arthur Mitchell, the first Black dancer to be named Principal Dancer (the equivalent of a star dancer) of the New York City Ballet, who revolutionized classical ballet in the 1960s. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., he and Karel Shook founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969 in his native neighborhood, with a simple yet revolutionary idea: to give young African Americans access to an art form that had been forbidden to them. Today, Robert Garland, a former dancer with the Dance Theatre of Harlem, is its artistic director. We interviewed him on the occasion of the Dance Theatre of Harlem's exceptional visit to France.



DDCH: Where does the Dance Theatre of Harlem stand today?

Robert Garland: The Dance Theatre of Harlem remains true to its original mission: to give Black children and artists the opportunity to practice an art form that, before Arthur Mitchell, was denied to them. We continue this work by honoring our classics—like Firebird and We'll Be Dancing — while also creating new works.

DCH: Is it easier today than it was when Arthur Mitchell founded it?

Robert Garland: It's a little better in some places, but large institutions are like ocean liners: difficult to change course. That's precisely why Arthur

Mitchell founded this company 57 years ago, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. He was a fast-paced man, impatient with the slowness of others. So, he created the Dance Theatre of Harlem to provide opportunities for his community, and by extension, for the world.

DCH: How has the company evolved?

Robert Garland: In many ways. From a practical standpoint, ballet is a predominantly female art form. One of the defining developments at the Dance Theatre of Harlem has been recognizing that not all women are "pink." So, we've established an aesthetic where the tights and shoes match each dancer's skin tone. By 2025, our young participants in the summer intensive—about a hundred of them—will all arrive with tights and shoes that match their skin tone. This didn't exist even thirty or thirty-five years ago. I remember a collaboration with the New York City Ballet, where we mixed our dancers with theirs. Someone asked me, "What do we do about the tights?" I replied, "Everyone wears their skin tone." He said, "But what will that look like?" And I replied, "Like a New York subway train." Everyone together, moving towards the same goal!



DCH: How do you perpetuate Arthur Mitchell's philosophy today that ballet should not be reserved for an elite?

Robert Garland: We work in the very heart of Harlem, and that means we live surrounded by a constant reminder: that we have always had to create our own spaces. Here in the United States, the experience of the Black church is now known throughout the world. The same is true of historically Black colleges and universities, as well as African American fraternities and sororities, born out of the need to build places where we could exist where we were not allowed elsewhere. The Dance Theater of Harlem is fully part of this historical American tradition.

DCH: And within the school, have you noticed any changes?

Robert Garland: The school is predominantly made up of children of color, but we welcome all kinds of dancers, just as we do in the company. We firmly believe that Black culture can be central without being exclusive.



DCH: You're returning to Paris after a long absence. How long has it been since you were last here?

Robert Garland: Yes, it's been a very long time. I remember dancing in Paris in the 1990s. And it's quite funny: in 2004, our company went on a very long hiatus because some things really weren't working anymore. But that same year, we were supposed to dance in Paris—in 2005, actually—and it never happened. That year, I created a piece set to music by James Brown and Aretha Franklin, called *Return*, which was meant to be presented in Paris. So, I feel like I'm completing a mission that Arthur Mitchell started in 2004. Finally, it will be done, with *Return* and several others, including *Firebird*.

DCH: You will also be presenting *Nyman String Quartet No. 2*, one of your creations set to the music of the American composer Michael Nyman.

Robert Garland: Yes, it's another one of my choreographies. It's a lively, fast-paced, energetic piece that blends ballet and social dance. Depending on your generation, you'll recognize some of the movements. It's very playful.



Photo gallery © Nir Arieli



DCH: And Firebird , why this choice? Why is this piece considered legendary?

Robert Garland: A long time ago, when Balanchine was still alive, the Dance Theatre of Harlem was performing in New York. After seeing our interpretation of The Four Temperaments, Arthur Mitchell told him, " My company is ready for something bigger." Balanchine replied, " You know what our first success was? The Firebird. " Choreographed by George Balanchine and danced by his wife, Maria Tallchief, a Native American ballerina, it was an immediate and phenomenal success. Balanchine then loaned us John Taras, a choreographer and rehearsal director with the New York City Ballet. But it was Jeffrey Holder's sets and costumes that truly captivated audiences. He transposed the story, traditionally set in a Russian forest, to a Caribbean world with Afrofuturist influences. But looking at the tutu, in its classic form, he realized it wouldn't suit a Black dancer. And, thinking of Josephine Baker, he redesigned it, removing the front of the tutu to reveal her entire leg. The next day, the newspapers were talking about a scandal—but it was perfect; the dancer looked more like a bird than ever.



DCH: In France, this version is little known. People are mostly familiar with Béjart's version...

Robert Garland: Yes, Béjart did a very different version. But the one we are presenting is a reinterpretation of the original version, created in Paris by the Ballets Russes.

DCH: How did you choose the other pieces in the Paris program?

Robert Garland: Since it had been a long time since we'd been here, anything was possible. I like to offer a work in the Balanchine style, another in the noir style, and a third that's more contemporary or reinvented—like Firebird. I try to create a program that speaks to everyone.



DCH: How would you describe the company's style today?

Robert Garland: The dancers I have now are able to embrace both classical and Black aesthetics simultaneously, which wasn't the case in my time. They grew up with a Black president, so their relationship to identity is very different. They are special, and I love them for it.

DCH: With the new president, is it more complicated for you?

Robert Garland: For the moment, things have remained quite similar.

DCH: Are you happy to be coming to France?



Robert Garland: I'm really looking forward to being in Paris. A lot of people are coming from the States to see us. It's also Valentine's month, so some husbands are taking their wives to Paris. We're very excited about dancing in Paris, but also in Lyon, Roubaix, and Bordeaux.

Interview by Agnès Izrine

Tour:

Paris – February 26-28, 2026 – Palais des Congrès

Roubaix – February 19-21, 2026 – Le Colisée

Bordeaux – February 11-15, 2026 – Opéra National

Lyon – March 5-7, 2026 – La Bourse du Travail