

Carmen de Lavallade (1931-)

by Irlanda Esteli Jacinto

Carmen de Lavallade's career spans sixty years and encompasses all aspects of the performing arts. She has appeared in films and television and on Broadway, but is best known for her work in the realm of dance. Considered one of the most beautiful dancers to ever grace the stage, de Lavallade has been described by critics with such terms as completely magical, a goddess, and a living treasure. She has been a muse to choreographers such as [Lester Horton](#), [Alvin Ailey](#), and [Donald McKayle](#), and she is a pioneer who began to change the aesthetics of ballet and who has helped establish a link between contemporary forms of dance and styles from the era of [Katherine Dunham](#) and Josephine Baker.

A Dancer is Born

Carmen Paula de Lavallade was on March 6, 1931, in New Orleans, Louisiana. She was raised in Los Angeles, California. Her father Leo, was bricklayer and a postman; her mother Grace passed away when de Lavallade was in her teens. De Lavallade was inspired to dance by her cousin Janet Collins, who was a professional dancer and choreographer and who eventually would become the first African American ballerina for the Metropolitan Opera. While attending Thomas Jefferson High School, de Lavallade studied dance with Melissa Blake. At the age of sixteen, she received a scholarship to study dance with Lester Horton. Horton's holistic style of teaching, with emphasis on all styles and forms of dance, prepared de Lavallade for her varied career. De Lavallade recalls "Lester told me, 'There's going to be a time.' And he could see the future, 'that you will not just be an actor, a dancer, a singer; you will have to do everything.' And it's come to pass" (*Notable Black American Women*, 2002). It was under Horton's tutelage that de Lavallade began studying ballet with Carmelita Maracci. During this time she also attended Los Angeles City College and studied dance with [Martha Graham](#) and Margaret Craske, acting with Stella Adler, voice with Gian Carlo Menotti, and was

protégée of Lena Horne. De Lavallade first rose to stardom during her time with Lester Horton Dance Theater, which she joined in 1949. She went on to be lead dancer from 1950-1954, replacing [Bella Lewitzky](#). Horton would go on to create several choreographic works on her, including the role of Salome in "The Face of Violence".

Her relationship with Alvin Ailey began during her high school years. Ailey states that the first time he ever saw de Lavallade was at an assembly at Thomas Jefferson High School. He writes in his autobiography, *Revelations*: "From the moment I first saw her I was just in a state of pure awe. Anybody who could move around on her toes like that was capable of performing miracles" (43). *The New York Times*, in 1993, credited de Lavallade with the discovery and development of the choreographer named Ailey, because it was de Lavallade who invited and pushed Ailey to attend classes with Lester Horton. De Lavallade and Ailey danced as part of the Lester Horton Dance Theater, and together they left Los Angeles for Broadway to star in *House of Flowers* in 1954.

It was during the time de Lavallade was in *House of Flowers* that dancer and choreographer Geoffrey Holder first laid eyes on her. According to Holder, he proposed to de Lavallade three days after they met. The couple married in 1955, and in 1957 their son Leo was born. Some of de Lavallade's most memorable performances were created for her by her husband: *Come Sunday*, accompanied by African American spirituals sung by Odetta, and *Three Songs for One*.

In 1955, *House of Flowers* closed and de Lavallade began to dance with the Metropolitan Opera Company. She would later follow in the steps of her cousin and dance as prima ballerina in 1956 and 1958. She also joined John Butler's dance company as principal dancer, and in 1956 made her television debut in Butler's *Flight*. With Butler's company she toured the United

States and the world, performing at venues including the Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto and [Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival](#). Butler created solo roles for de Lavallade including *Carmina Burana*, *Letter to a Beloved*, and *Portrait of Billie*.

In 1961, de Lavallade and eight other dancers, including Ailey, embarked on a 15 week tour of Southeast Asia. The tour was sponsored by the President's Cultural Exchange Program, the company was billed as the de Lavallade-Ailey American Dance Company. According to de Lavallade, Ailey was "a bit upset about the name because as we landed in different places we were the Alvin Ailey Company, then we turned around and it was the de Lavallade-Ailey Company. Finally I said to Alvin, 'Make up your mind about what you're going to call us. It doesn't make any difference to me what it is'" (*Notable Black American Women*, 2002). By the time the company returned from the tour the name was the Ailey Company, starring Carmen de Lavallade.

However, de Lavallade did not remain with Ailey's company. She states, "I had other responsibilities...I was working with Butler. I was working with a lot of people...My life took a different turn" (*Notable Black American Women*, 2002). She would, nonetheless, continue to periodically dance with the company and Ailey continued to be inspired by her. He choreographed *The Twelve Gates* (1964) and *Roots of the Blues* (1961), among others, on de Lavallade.

Upon leaving Ailey, de Lavallade worked with [Agnes de Mille](#) and performed *The Four Marys and The Frail Quarry* as guest artist with [American Ballet Theatre](#). She danced for [Dance Theatre of Harlem](#) and joined Glen Tetley's Dance Company as his muse and principal dancer. Tetley states, "Carmen is a great artist who has transformed everything she has touched. We danced every couple in the Bible, from Adam and Eve to Saul and the Witch of Endor. I held her, supported her, and lifted her and loved every minute because we were faster

than the speed of lighting and nobody could touch us" (*Celebrating Carmen de Lavallade's Fifty-year Career*, 1999).

Film and Television

As a protégée of singer and actress Lena Horne, de Lavallade was introduced to executives of Twentieth Century-Fox. She starred in movies including *The Golden Hawk* (1950), *Lydia Bailey* (1952), *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), *The Egyptian* (1954), and *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959). Her most revered role was in *Carmen Jones* (1954), a modern adaptation of Bizet's opera *Carmen* with an all-black cast; de Lavallade starred alongside Harry Belafonte, and danced with Ailey in sequences choreographed by Herbert Ross.

In 1956, she starred in Duke Ellington's CBS spectacular as Madame Zzaj in Talley Beatty's "A Drum is a Woman", and was the leading dancer in NBC-TV's "Amahl and the Night Visitors" (1957). She appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show, where she was asked to change partners and dance with an Ailey dancer, Claude Thompson, because on television at that time a black woman could not dance with a white man, Glen Tetley.

Academic Pursuits and Choreographic Works

De Lavallade joined the faculty of Yale University in 1970 as performer and choreographer in residence for the Yale School of Drama. She performed with the Yale Repertory Theater where she became an acclaimed performer, acting in over nineteen productions. She taught movement and acting to students. Her pupils included Meryl Streep, Henry Winkler, and Sigourney Weaver. After Yale, she continued at Adelphi University Dance Department where she directed the Dance Department for three years.

De Lavallade began to choreograph her own works in the early 1970s. Her works have been performed at Jacob's Pillow, and by notable companies such as the Dance Theatre of

Harlem, Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, and Joyce Trisler Danscompany. Some of her most notable works are Alvin Epstein's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1975), *Nightscape* (1974), and *Sensemaya* (1979), a dance that tells the stories of two Mayan gods. In 1993, she began to collaborate with [Bill T. Jones](#) and in 1999 she co-founded Paradigm Dance Company with Gus Solomons, Jr. and Dudley Williams.

Carmen de Lavallade displayed to a generation that dance transcends the social stigma of race. In the mid-20th century the concept of a black ballet dancer was widely perceived as physically unattractive and artistically invalid (Cosby and Pussaint, 2004). Carmen paid no attention, overturning this notion and pursuing her desire to move. As a dancer, teacher, choreographer, and actress, de Lavallade has astounded and inspired. She has been awarded countless honors including a Dance Magazine Award, Clarence Bayfield Award, and an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts from the Boston Conservatory. She is a master of the craft of dance, a teacher to new students of it, and an exemplar of the aesthetic and technical perfection that the art of dance can achieve.

Irlanda Jacinto holds bachelor degrees in History and Anthropology from the University of Texas at El Paso, and a MA from The University of Arizona School of Information Resources and Library Science. As an undergraduate she took ballet and became enamored with dance. She is a Knowledge River Scholar, an ARL CEP Fellow, and a 2012 Dance Heritage Coalition Archival Fellow. She has worked at the University of Arizona Special Collections, Center for Creative Photography, and the El Paso Museum of Art. As a Dance Heritage Coalition Fellow she worked at UCLA Special Collections and with Lula Washington Dance Theatre. She has a deep interest in photography, moving images, and the preservation of ephemeral arts.