

Mentors

by
Tree Turtle
www.treeturtle.com

If you want to know who I am, you must learn about my mentors. Here are short portraits of some of the now-deceased mentors that molded me during my tumultuous adolescent years. Three other mentors are still alive, and their stories are private. I have also profited from several teachers at studios, schools, colleges, and universities who are still alive today. These teachers' stories are also private.

“Mentor” comes from the ancient Greek word *mentōr* by way of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Homer is the 8th century (BCE) Greek poet who was said to have composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two of the oldest epic narratives of the world. The *Odyssey* is about a king named Odysseus who after ten years of war in a city called Troy, and ten years of traveling across the sea, returns to his native kingdom of Ithaca. Telemachus is the son that Odysseus left behind. *Mentōr* is the name of young Telemachus’ most trusted counselor and tutor, the man who molded Telemachus in his father’s absence.

I had a challenging adolescence. Within a span of six years I moved from living in a foster home, to living with my biological father, to a two-year stint at a former military boarding school, to a spell in New York City. Then there was intermittent homelessness, and short stays with friends and acquaintances in Washington DC, Baltimore, and Virginia. During this time I also toured off and on with several seasonal theatrical productions for a few weeks at a time to make money.

Constant upheaval was not new for me. For reasons that need not be rehearsed here, I spent many of my earliest years with my mother and brother moving from

homeless shelter to homeless shelter. Eventually, my brother and I were removed from my mother's care and placed in foster homes.

The scattershot nature of my earliest years left me craving permanence and guidance. The mentors whose stories I share here gave me the permanence and guidance that I needed when my traditional family was not present. They also opened up a world of artistic exploration, humanistic study, and socio-political advocacy that still drives me today.

Guy C. McElroy (1946-1990)

Off and on, from 1986 to 1988, I worked as the curatorial assistant to the late Dr. Guy C. McElroy (1946-1990) at the Bethune Museum and Archives in Washington DC. He had not formally completed his PhD studies in Art History from the University of Maryland when I first met him. But I always called him Dr. Guy.

Forgive me if I do not tell you how we met. Suffice to say that Dr. Guy intervened at a crucial time in my life and gave me a legitimate part-time job at the precise moment when it seemed that illegitimate influences surrounded me.

As Dr. Guy's occasional assistant, I researched and checked the provenance of many of the exhibits that appear within Mr. McElroy's landmark publication *Facing History: The Black Image in American Art, 1710-1940*. My assistantship involved countless hours of locating, fact checking, collating, and cross-referencing sources at the Library of Congress. On his behalf, I also made short trips to museums and libraries in the Northeast to verify sources.

I so revered Dr. Guy that I always approached the work with unfailing accuracy. I applied my mother's old maxim: check, double-check, and check again. I taught myself

bibliographic controls and research skills in ways that far exceeded his initial direction. It was from him that I gained my pedagogical insistence on examining firsthand, primary sources—of “going to the source,” as Dr. Guy would say.

Dr. Guy talked with me about my earnestness. He told me to stop being a perfectionist and to stop doing the work to impress him. He admonished me for not discovering the extent to which the work was its own reward. Guard against exaggerated reverence for those who you think are your superiors, he would suggest to me, and focus on the integrity of what you do, rather than for whom you do it. I am still learning how to heed his advice even today.

I will never forget the time when Dr. Guy said to me that, “Our work must have broad relevance, even if it is unpopular.” He believed that artistic and scholarly investigations should break intellectual ground. There was a brinkmanship about his explorations that still astounds me.

Dr. Guy was an integrationist. He believed that much of the problems of the world were due to cultural divisions. He insisted that the key to understanding cultural diversity was to unearth the ways in which different kinds of people have *always* intermingled throughout history. Sometimes the intermingling is tragic, or the result of disparities of power, the theft of property, or the distortion of a minority’s ideas. At other times the intermingling is ebullient, or the result of enlightened sharing and the innovative blending of seemingly disparate cultures. It was from Dr. Guy that I learned the words “interpenetration” and “syncretism.” I also recall the astounding moment when he said to me that, “No culture is pure. All culture is the interpenetration of shifting influences.”

Under Dr. Guy's direction, I also researched the provenance of the textiles in an extraordinary exhibition on African-American quilting at the Bethune Museum and Archives. Dr. Guy asked me to help him with the quilting exhibition because he knew that I sewed and he would often listen to me speak about fashion and fiber art.

(It is also important to recognize the influence of another great historian who was the Executive Director of the Bethune Museum and Archives at the time, Dr. Bettye Collier-Thomas. Dr. Thomas was Dr. Guy's boss during the 1980s. Dr. Thomas was and is an especially nurturing and vastly intelligent scholar and activist. At the time of my writing, she is a Professor of History at Temple University.)

Dr. Guy taught me *visual literacy*, or how to interpret the composition of a work of art. He often spoke of the "visual rhetoric" of a beautiful painting or a textile. By "visual rhetoric," he meant the ways that the elements of the composition persuade viewers of the work's artistic power and cultural significance.

By a trick of fate, I also came to know Dr. Guy's last partner. My father often took in boarders from Howard University to make extra money. One day when I was working at the Library of Congress, Dr. Guy came in with his new lover. This led to an awkward moment when I told Dr. Guy that I had just seen his new lover the prior evening because his lover was living in my father's house! Soon, Dr. Guy's life became even more intimately woven into my own. Dr. Guy felt more like an uncle than my research supervisor.

Dr. Guy's lover was driving the car when a tragic accident left Dr. Guy paralyzed from the neck down. A tall, athletic, immaculately groomed man, Dr. Guy would often drift into depression after the accident. Yet, his lover was an extraordinarily loving and

attentive partner until the end. Despite his limited mobility, Dr. Guy went on to complete the *Facing History* project, mounting a successful exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

Dr. Guy was very interested in Buddhism and he often flocked to various meditation groups in the nation's capitol. He was the first person who I met who was not Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, and he wove his Buddhist ideals into his commitment to anti-violence and healthy eating. His conception of mindfulness and contemplation continue to have a profound effect on me.

Dr. Guy had already published one book in 1972 called *Robert S. Duncanson: A Centennial Exhibition* (1972), produced in conjunction with a retrospective exhibition of Duncanson's work at the Cincinnati Art Museum. Before his death, in addition to his work on *Facing History*, Dr. Guy also coauthored, *African-American Artists 1880-1987: Selections from the Evans-Tibbs Collection* (1989).

Dr. Guy was a giant in his field. I miss him mightily.

Heywood "Woody" McGriff, Jr. (1958-1994)

I was depressed for weeks when I found out that Woody died in 1994 after struggling with complications related to AIDS in a hospice in Austin, Texas. Woody was a tall, lean, flexible, thoughtful, and nuanced professional modern dancer best known for his performances with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company in the middle-to-late 1980s. I will never forget the time a year before he died when Woody showed me a videotape of him performing a 1985 duet by Bill T. Jones called "Black Room," an eloquent examination of black machismo and competition that made liberal use of Woody's supple leg extensions and his tensile upper body strength.

Woody was the third person who I knew and loved who died of AIDS and in many ways his death epitomized for me the iceberg of losses that seemed to crush everyone that I knew in the arts during the late 1980s and early 1990s as we struggled with the gravity of our nation's epidemic of HIV infections. That I was so young surrounded by slightly older people who were dying frightened me. Woody was only 36 when he died.

I met Woody in Washington DC around 1987 at a nightclub called Nob Hill where he was doing a weekend stint as a burlesque dancer. It takes nothing away from Woody's high skill as a concert dancer to mention that he made money from time to time as a commercial burlesque dancer. Woody had a deep authenticity and nobility as a dancer that shone through in any form within which he performed. He stripped like he was dancing in a performance of *Scheherazade* at Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: he was a marvel of pantherine grace.

Woody later introduced me to the Show Palace in New York City, another old vaudeville-esque burlesque house at which he worked for extra money off and on while performing with several modern dance companies before landing a professorship in the dance program at the University of Texas at Austin. Like Woody, I do not regret taking burlesque dancing gigs across the nation and in Montreal in Canada. (The Show Palace was but one of the many nightclubs with which he acquainted me.) The money gained from a performer's life is quite low, especially a dancer's, and every opportunity to supplement one's income is a golden one. Woody taught me to maintain a sense of professional integrity regardless of the venue and regardless of the form.

Woody wanted me to go to the Ohio State University for college, the institution where he took his Bachelors of Arts in Dance. But, I did not take his advice at the time. When he found out that I was admitted to the Writing Seminars Master of Arts program at Johns Hopkins University in 1993, he applauded me. But still he pushed me to enroll in the Master of Fine Arts program at the Ohio State University, saying that the education there would revolutionize my understanding of modern dancing. Almost two years after his death, I finally listened to his advice and applied for admission to the Master of Fine Arts program at the Ohio State University, and of course, he was correct: the program inspired me greatly and from 1995 to 1997 I laid the roots for an understanding of dance as a thoughtful, generative practice, and not just a mindless, imitative, commercial pursuit.

One of the first things that Woody did after I met him was to take me to see the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. He was shocked that I had not seen this dance company even though I had seen the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the New York City Ballet, and many other dance theaters. Woody wanted me to study how the men and women performed in the Ailey Company. I remember him saying to me, “Do you see how they *eat* the movement—they are hungry for dancing!” His words strike me as an apt description of his own prowess when he performed. He danced with amplitude, with an enormous interpretative sophistication.

Woody was also the only person who I remember (besides my high school drama teacher) who called me “Jack.” I loved him so much that I never asked him why.

Kenneth Warren Daugherty (1942-2004)

I was the youth outreach assistant to the late actor, director, and teacher Kenneth Warren Daugherty (1942-2004) at the Black Repertory Company (BRC) in Washington, DC. On Mr. Kenny's behalf I visited some of the poorest middle schools in the nation's capitol and recruited youth for his theatrical workshops.

(Let me pause to say some words about the BRC and its founder: the pioneering film and television actor Robert Hooks founded The BRC. It was one of the finest training grounds for actors-of-color in the nation's capitol. I don't know where I would be without it. Robert Hooks also founded the Negro Ensemble Company and the Group Theatre Workshop in New York City. He was in the original Broadway cast of *A Raisin in the Sun*, a performance that won him a New York Drama Critics Award. Older television audiences might best remember Mr Hooks as Det. Jeff Ward in the original telecast of *NYPD* in the 1960s. Most would instantly recognize Mr. Hooks face even one did not know his name and at the time of this writing he is still alive today and going strong.)

In the 1980s, the BRC's youth workshops were chronically under-funded. It is a testament to the ingenuity of its directors that the BRC kept going against strenuous fiscal odds. The BRC profited from the assistance of Mayor Marion Barry's *Summer and Winter Youth Employment Program*. Say what you will about the drug-addicted Mayor Barry, but his arts funding and youth advocacy were first-rate. I also remember accompanying Mr. Kenny as the youth representative to a fund-raising presentation at the offices of an organization called *ARE*, or Associates for the Renewal of Education. A few weeks after Mr. Kenny's presentation, he was notified that the BRC got the grant.

Mr. Kenny's most famous student is the comedian Dave Chappelle. Mr. Kenny taught Dave Chappelle at the Duke Ellington School for the Arts. At Duke Ellington, Mr. Kenny was once the chairman of the Theater Department there.

In 2000, Mr. Kenny directed "Buffalo Hair," a play about black soldiers fighting American Indians after the Civil War. I traveled from Illinois to attend the last week of performances. If memory serves, the show was held at the Kennedy Center's American Film Institute Theater. That year I also traveled to Virginia to the Rosslyn Spectrum Theatre to see another play that Mr. Kenny directed called "The Seventh Son" about Tupac Shakur.

Mr. Kenny was a classical stage actor with an extensive portfolio of performances in revivals of ancient Greek plays and Shakespearean drama. He was also a frequent interpreter of African-American-authored plays. I adored his avuncular performance as the poet Sterling Brown in a 1995 play called "Where Eagles Fly" at the Lincoln Theater.

Mr. Kenny frequently told stories of his performance at the White House before President Lyndon B. Johnson as the Scarecrow in a much-fabled production of *The Wizard of Oz* that predates Charlie Smalls and William F. Brown's pioneering, all-black Broadway production of *The Wiz*. But, each time Mr. Kenny told the story of his White House performance, the dates changed. Sometimes it was 1965 and sometimes it was 1967. I still don't know the exact year of his White House gig.

I first met Mr. Kenny when I was a child when he was the rehearsal coach for children at the Ford Theatre's Christmas shows. Then around 1981 I worked with him again when my mother took me to an audition for child choristers for the original run of David Woolcombe's musical about nuclear disarmament called *Peace Child*. After

playing a critically praised run at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. that year, *Peace Child* toured nationally and around the world. Mr. Kenny was one of the local actors hired to coach the children for rehearsals during *Peace Child*'s original run. These (and my performing with the Smithsonian Institution's Discovery Theater) were my earliest gigs as a child performer. I still remember the satisfied look in my mother's eyes when the stage assistant handed all the mothers of the choristers modest honoraria checks for each child's performance. After all, money was the reason why my mother made me perform professionally before I began kindergarten. I realized early in my life that I could perform to survive, but performing to survive—or doing anything just to make money—is never ideal.

When I was around twelve I met Kenny again. I was busking on the street in Anacostia with a teen pop, lock, and breakdance crew called The Market Five Gallery. (The name of this troupe was taken from the open-air market in Anacostia on the corner where we performed). Mr. Vantile Whitfield was in the car with Mr. Kenny that day. Mr. Whitfield was one of the driving forces behind the BRC and a legendary director, designer, and theater administrator in his own right. He also had a big, winsome smile and the heartiest laugh that I have ever heard in my life.

Soon these men were teaching me principles of acting, theatrical movement, elocution, and life-skills in their youth workshops. The high point of this education came when Kenny cast me in a production of Lorraine Hansberry's short dystopian play "What Use Are Flowers?" The play is about the bond formed between a group of diseased children and an old man after a nuclear holocaust renders them the last survivors on earth. It is pure serendipity that, under Mr. Kenny's guidance, I have appeared in two theatrical

productions dealing with nuclear disarmament. The pacifist humanism implicit in these productions still influences me enormously.

Mr. Whitfield (for some reason, I never called him Mr. Vantile) always called me a “solitudinarian.” By this, he meant that, while I looked like a child, I had what he called “a peculiarly elderly acting demeanor” and an already evident penchant for introversion. As a child performer I also appeared in Mr. Whitfield and Mr. Kenny’s production of James Baldwin’s *The Amen Corner* and Langston Hughes’ *Black Nativity*. Moreover, Mr. Kenny cast me in bit roles in several plays that he directed by Horton Foote and Jean Genet. Some of these productions toured to Baltimore’s Arena Players or Philadelphia’s Freedom Theatre for very brief runs.

Mr. Kenny noticed that, while my training in classical ballet was weak, I had an innate grasp of theatrical movement. He introduced me to the pioneering ballet dancer, Mr. Sylvester Campbell with whom I continued my ballet training well into the 1990s.

Mr. Kenny was alarmed when I described my experiences in foster care and homeless shelters. From twelve until I turned twenty-one (when he finally told me that I could call him by his first name), Mr. Kenny “worked on me,” as he put it. He took me to see classic films at the Kennedy Center’s American Film Institute. He bought books for me. He took me by bus or car to New York City or Philadelphia to see plays, or the ballet, or musicals. He let me sleep at his duplex when I had no place to stay, peppering me with questions about what I was reading well into the night.

He suggested that I write a review every month and mail it to him. He said I should write about books, performances, gallery showings, any art that interested me to develop my critical eye. And indeed I did write a review every month, faithfully, from the

age of seventeen until I turned twenty-one. Some of those reviews I published in alternative weeklies in the mid-Atlantic region. Mr. Kenny made me into a cultural critic.

Mr. Kenny's mentorship involved seemingly endless conversations about theater, literature, philosophy and film. He said that I should read "good" translations of plays by the four great ancient Greek dramatists: Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Aristophanes. For him, a good translation approximated the high formal style and the rhythmic meter of the original ancient Greek. Mr. Kenny also told me to read translations of Aristotle's *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, the dialogues of Plato, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, and Cicero's speeches.

I suspect that Mr. Kenny's insistence on a classical humanistic education came from the teachings of his mentor, the legendary Harlem Renaissance African-American playwright and drama teacher, Owen Dodson (1914-1983). Mr. Kenny apprenticed under the Yale-educated Mr. Dodson while he taught at Howard University. Along with writers like Hilton Als, I am the product of Owen Dodson's tremendous legacy. One of the hallmarks of the people who are touched by Mr. Dodson's legacy is our simultaneous passion for black urban arts and classical humanistic studies.

A connoisseur of the European Enlightenment and 19th century Americana, Mr. Kenny was the first person to tell me about the essays of Michel de Montaigne, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He also advised that I read all of the available autobiographical narratives written by enslaved Africans in America and England beginning with *The Interesting Narrative and the life of 'Olaudah Equiano' or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789).

(My knowledge of some African-American writing was inspired by others: after a 1989 reading at The 14Karat Cabaret in Baltimore for which I arranged some choreography, the poet Essex Hemphill, one of the performers with a few members of his spoken word performance group called *Cinque*, encouraged me to read the essays and speeches of James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. I originally met Essex at a bookstore off G Street in Washington DC in the middle 1980s where he worked and where I bought comic books from the spiral racks.)

Mr. Kenny also said that I should read all of Shakespeare's works by the age of twenty-one and write one page about the meaning of each one—a *précis*. (This was a lesson that came back to haunt me years later in my private studies with Dr. Drid Williams.) I finally completed this daunting task on New Year's Eve in my twenty-second year. I'm sorry to say that time did not permit me to write a page on each play, despite Mr. Kenny's insistence (and my face is smiling at the absurdity of it all as I write this).

Furthermore, Mr. Kenny thought that I should read what he called "the classics of American theater": the major plays of Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller, Lorraine Hansberry, Tennessee Williams, Horton Foote, William Inge, Sam Shepard, Eugene O'Neill, Lillian Hellman, Edward Albee, David Mamet, Alice Childress, and August Wilson. I read these playwrights' work too. After reading them, it was a joy to perform in William Inge's plays and to tour them to the Inge Festival in Independence Kansas, under the direction of Mr. John Van Meter when I was a student at boarding school.

Mr. Kenny was habitually disappointed in me. I was never reading enough, writing enough, performing enough, or being social enough. Kenny seemed to hate me

almost as much as he loved me, speaking roughly even as he offered sage advice. He admonished me for not being conscious of the clothes that I wore, or the appearance of my hair and nails. (I've never paid for a haircut in all my life; rarely buy clothes; and, while I am extremely tidy and neat in my housekeeping, I never place anything on the walls or involve myself in any kind of decoration; I'm an awful, disinterested cook; I detest eating; while I've owned a television I do not watch it; my only weakness is books—thousands of them all around me and more waiting to be bought and devoured).

I recall being stung one day when I arrived at Mr. Kenny's duplex when he shouted at me, "Why do you insist on being unattractive? Ugliness gets you nowhere in the world." Sometimes, he was so brutal in his criticism that I found it necessary to take breaks from him. Some breaks lasted years.

One of his chief complaints was that I was too shy and self-effacing. He railed against me for not attending the gym enough to "bulk up." It often seemed that I could never measure up to Mr. Kenny's ideals. I longed for him to be proud of me. I cannot adequately convey the mixture of hurt, gratitude, love, and fascination that Mr. Kenny bred within me.

Avis Pendavis

Miss Avis and I shared a love for sewing, costume artistry, and tap dance. She would not wish for me to reveal her given name or her date of birth and death, so I will abide by her wishes.

I first met Miss Avis through one of her "DC children," or her protégés in the nation's capitol, a beautiful half-Chinese, half-African-American teenage female impersonator named Tiny. Tiny grew up one block from where I did, the daughter of an

alcoholic, seamstress mother and a mysterious man who worked at a nearby Chinese carryout.

By the time Tiny formally introduced me to Miss Avis in the 1980s at Ziegfield's nightclub, Miss Avis was already a resident of New York City. But she maintained ties in her native Washington DC. Miss Avis would return every now and then to perform (under a different alias) as a female illusionist at The Club House Disco or the Nob Hill nightclub. These legendary African-American-owned Washington DC nightclubs were not the first places where I saw Miss Avis. I first saw her decked out from head to toe in a canary leather jacket-and-pants ensemble (no lie) exiting a dive bar called Jimmy Jives that was four blocks from where I lived in my earliest neighborhood (and yes, again: the bar was really called Jimmy Jives).

Some of Miss Avis' New York City friends did not know that she was a fine tap dancer as well as a female impersonator and a seamstress. I remember that she would breeze into Dr. James "Buster" Brown's master classes at a tap studio whose name escapes me on Upshur Street in the Northwest DC.

(Let me digress to tell you about the tap dancer James "Buster" Brown (1913-2002), my first tap dance teacher. Dr. Brown received an honorary doctorate from Oklahoma City University and he is not to be confused with another great tap dancer, Ernie "Brownie" Brown. Dr. Buster Brown was a native of Baltimore Maryland. While he was based in New York City, he would visit the Baltimore-Washington area to lead master classes and jam sessions. His master classes were always packed. A cross-section of the area's performers came together for the inimitable chance to study with him.

Seeing the voluptuous Miss Avis swiveling and flapping in Dr. Brown's tap classes is one of my fondest memories.)

Miss Avis would say that she was my "mother bird." By this she meant that at key moments she would always be there to swoop down and help me. She did not teach me to sew (I learned from my mother). Nor did I emulate her profession as a female illusionist. Yet, she was consistently gentle and encouraging to me. Most of all we shared a love for Tiny, even as Tiny's drug addiction spiraled out of control.

When I moved for a brief period to New York City in 1989 it was Miss Avis who told me about nightclubs like Sally's Hideaway. While she did not house me, she did help me pay for the fees for my college applications and she covered the transportation costs for my trips in and out of New York City.

In 1993 she mailed me \$300, thanking me for paying for Tiny's funeral arrangements. Her most important advice to me was, "Never be afraid of being sweet." She believed that sweetness and gentleness are forms of power in a world full of aggression.

Alfred "Pepsi" Bethel (1918-2002)

I studied with the great jazz dancer Mr. Bethel during my late adolescent stay in New York City. During my childhood I heard his name mentioned many times. I can never remember where I studied with him in New York City. Was it at the Alvin Ailey Studios? Was it at the 92 Street Y? Was it at the Bernice Johnson Cultural Arts Center? Was it at Lynn Simonson's old studio (I doubt it because I am not sure if Mr. Bethel was booked to teach at Ms. Simonson's)? Some memories are so clear and others fade.

At any rate, Mr. Bethel's boisterous demonstrations of plantation-era steps, cakewalking, boogie woogie-ing, shim shamming, and a host of other moves were revelatory to me. His approach to jazz dancing fit my body like a glove and reinforced years of movement that had already been drilled into my body during professional gigs.

One of the things that most impressed me about Mr. Bethel was his differentiation between African-American jazz dance and ballet-based jazz dance (the latter being arguably the dominant movement of the commercial musical theater). When he said "traditional jazz dance," he was referring to the many forms of vernacular movement (or social dancing) that was developed by African-Americans from the plantation-era until today.

One of the best classes that I had while I was a MFA student at the Ohio State University was the guest teacher Karen W. Hubbard's jazz dance workshop. Ms. Hubbard had also studied with Mr. Bethel. From his influence she developed a way of teaching jazz dance that connected it to African-American culture.

Mr. Bethel and Ms. Hubbard helped me understand that I was a traditional jazz dancer at heart. I learned to locate cultural history *within my body*.

"Stylin' out," or improvisation, was very important to Mr. Bethel. During his classes I began to think about the vital role that improvisation plays in traditional jazz dancing. My reflection eventually led to an article that I wrote, researched, and published in *Dance Research Journal* called "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing."

Sylvester Campbell (1938-1997)

Mr. Campbell was the only ballet teacher that I had who did not ridicule me as I struggled to bring my intelligence into union with my physical actions.

Early in my life, at the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet (where, in fact, Mr. Campbell received early training) I was told that my hips were too wide for an apparently male child, a condition that nonetheless gave me high extensions. I did not have a permanent living situation or money so I showed up to class without ballet slippers in gray clown tights that I found at a downtown magic shop. I wore underwear under the tights, not a dance belt.

(You will forgive me if I mix up Doris Jones and Claire Haywood. My memory does fail when I try to remember who threw up her hands at the sight of me. I think it was Doris Jones so I will use her name henceforth. I was not at the studio long.)

Ms. Jones said that I would benefit greatly from studies with a male ballet teacher. She felt that, in my case in particular, the influence of a man would work wonders on my deportment. She recommended that I take ballet classes with a Dance Theatre of Harlem performer named Fabian Barnes who was starting a youth outreach initiative that would later become the Washington Dance Institute.

But, Mr. Barnes turned out to be a terror. He would (literally) curse at me while I danced at the bar, belittling me for what he insisted was my misshapen body and stooped, hoofer's posture. He said I used my feet like a tap dancer, which was the truth. Tap and jazz were what I knew. Instead of helping me buy a dance belt, he yelled at me for wearing white briefs underneath my solitary pair of gray, ribbed tights. I was miserable in

his classes. The only levity came when Dean Anderson, a sweet former Dance Theatre of Harlem dancer (and a terrific jazz and R&B vocalist), substituted for him.

I would have given up on classical ballet if Mr. Kenny, my drama teacher, had not recommended that I study with Sylvester Campbell at the Maryland Ballet. When he became the Head of Dance at the Baltimore School for the Arts, I became a regular, drop-in student in Sylvester Campbell's ballet classes.

Mr. Campbell often remarked that I was methodological, deliberative thinker who responded well to kindness and constructive criticism. To him I was an "academic dancer" who understood the mechanics of the material far more than my demonstrations conveyed. My skills grew quickly under his tutelage in the early 1990s. But, most of all, he gave me self-confidence by combining challenge with compassion. This is a teaching approach that I still use today.

Sylvester Campbell knew what it was like to be undervalued. Before he left the USA to become a principal dancer in Europe with the Dutch National Ballet and other companies in the 1960s and early 1970s, he struggled against a vicious colorline that prohibited even the most accomplished African-American ballet dancers from attaining leading American positions in ballet companies. He was shockingly accomplished, with a clear, robust technique that stood out amongst his peers. He would often tell me that he understood my hunger to learn ballet because he hungered for recognition against odds. He would nod his head and say that he respected me for taking class with teenagers who were far younger than me at the Baltimore School for the Arts. When a new kid pointed and said, "Who is he and why is he in our class?" Mr. Campbell would say, "That's a professional." On those occasions I would cry silently on the bus on my way back home,

struck by the regard that Mr. Campbell had for me even at my weakest and most vulnerable moments.

“Ballet,” he would say to me over and over again, “is a practice that does not have to lead to the stage. It began as a language of French royalty and its greatest benefit is that it teaches us to be proud people. Ballet poses a contradiction: its rigor demands humility; yet, its style demands the attitude of a king.”

Eloquence was his forte, in body and in voice. During the eight years that I studied with him, I took my place at the back of the studio or in a corner at the ballet bar and humbled myself, fascinated by the possibility that I could ever attain the self-confidence of a king. To me, Mr. Campbell was a king.

These were some of my mentors—a few of the people who made me who I am today.