

# Eulogy

'Ballet, you fall in love with it... Your body falls in love with it... It's like singing with your body.'

Raven Wilkinson

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Anne Raven Wilkinson was a ballerina, one who knew dancing was her calling from an early age. Born in Manhattan in 1935, she was just five years old when her mother took her to see the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo perform 'Coppélia', the tale of a seemingly living doll. Even as a child, something about the experience resonated deeply. 'I remember being so overwhelmed by the orchestra, the curtains, the lights, that I started crying,' she later told industry magazine *Pointe*. She would go on to become one of the most significant American ballet dancers of all time; that fateful visit ignited a passion in her for ballet that persisted until her death.

On the face of it, Wilkinson enjoyed a rapid ascent to an enviable position in her dream career. By the age of 20, she had joined the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo, that same ballet company she first saw as a five-year-old, becoming the first African-American woman to perform professionally with a major company. While appearing to be a charmed rise to the top, her achievements were all the more impressive for being blighted by consistent discrimination and racism.

Growing up and taking ballet classes in Harlem, New York, she had faced assumptions and misconceptions throughout her childhood. 'People were curious because they had a certain idea in their mind of what African American people were like: that they didn't speak well or weren't well-clothed or were poor,' she told *Pointe*. As a teenager, she was turned down multiple times before the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo finally offered her a place in their troupe. After one



failed audition, a friend told her: 'Raven, they can't afford to take you because of your race.' Her rocky path to joining the company would set the tone for the rest of her career. Despite obvious talent, being accepted into the rarefied, overwhelmingly white world of professional ballet would be her life's work.

In her early twenties, the company offered a touring role, which included stopovers in the Deep South. Her desire to make art and perform took place against the backdrop of the American civil rights movement, and Wilkinson was well aware of how rare—and risky—it was for a woman of colour to perform on stage in southern states. Some of her colleagues suggested she pretend she was Spanish, or at least not openly identify as African American. She refused. 'I didn't want to put the company in danger, but I also never wanted to deny what I was,' she said of that period.

So she took the offer and joined the tour. Dancing solos, she started to rise in prominence, but her fears of danger were not unfounded. In the south, she and her company began to encounter repeated racist attacks. In an interview with *TIME* magazine, Wilkinson recalled the company tour bus being ambushed by Ku Klux Klansmen as they arrived in Montgomery, Alabama. 'It looked like it was snowing out, but actually, the KKK were everywhere. There was a convention,' she said. Another time, the Klan stormed the stage while they were performing. Yet another time, a Georgia hotel owner refused to let her stay with the company in their hotel.

Raven found support among her own, her fellow dancers. 'The company boys would appear at the stage door to escort me back to the hotel. They were just elegant in their way of understanding and helping,' she remembered. Such experiences left a mark on

her understanding of the world. 'Experiences like that are revelatory. But I was lucky.'

While she did not come to physical harm, the struggles of trying to become accepted within the wider ballet world began to exhaust her. Even while winning soloist positions, the most prestigious roles were never given to her. Odette/Odile is perhaps the most coveted female role in modern ballet and the heart of 'Swan Lake'. It requires the dancer to perform two characters, both the beautiful, doomed swan queen Odette and her nemesis Odile—and it was a role that kept being denied to Raven. In an interview with *The Washington Post*, she said: 'I had been in the Ballet Russe all these years, having solos, and suddenly someone came to me and said, "You've gone as far as you can in the company. We can't have a black white swan."'

Outside of the Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo, other major US ballet companies would not accept her. A dispirited Wilkinson gave up dancing, working in a department store and even joining a convent for six months before leaving the US for Amsterdam, where she performed with The Dutch National Ballet for seven years. She returned to her home city at 38, convinced her career was finished. But a call from the New York City Opera led her to dance professionally into her fifties. She retired only when the company filed for bankruptcy in 2013.

Her dream of one day performing as Odette/Odile as a woman of colour never waned. Talking to *Pointe* in 2014, she said, 'My never-ending question is: When are we going to get a Swan Queen of a darker hue? How long can we deny people that position? Do we feel aesthetically we can't face it? Another woman would realise her dream.



Misty Copeland made history when she performed as the Swan Queen a year later, in 2015, with the American Ballet Theatre in New York. Taking her bow, Wilkinson stood on stage with her, presenting Copeland with armfuls of flowers. Raven was a close mentor to Misty, who wrote a children's storybook, *Firebird*, about their friendship.

Wilkinson's childhood love of the art of dance remained throughout the struggles of her adult life. Even after retiring at 50, she performed as an actress until 2005 and advocated for ballet until her death.

Wilkinson died at her home in New York City. She was 83. *by Olivia Gagan*