

**harlem is...**

# DANCE

as told by **Voza Rivers**

## The Harlem of my youth

is filled with fond memories of a mythic place with a complex—good and bad—reputation. Harlem is a piece of my history that gave me a strong sense of the importance of community, a place filled with vivid memories of good people, historical sights, political, social, cultural, and intellectual stimulation, and, above all, good music and dance.

As I reflect on my early experience with dance, I think of my sister, Carol. When I was ten years old, one of my assignments each Saturday was to escort my younger sister to dance classes held in the Loew's Victoria on West 125th Street. I sat for three hours while she attended dance classes, and afterward we would walk back to West 132nd Street. My sister was always full of energy and enthusiasm; once we got back to our block, she would start dancing in front of our building. Neighbors and passers-by would stop, applaud, and deposit coins on the sidewalk for her. I collected the money and decided to hold weekly performances so that we could put extra change in our pockets.

When I entered junior high school, social dancing was peer-required, so I learned the various dance styles. Those students who were well-behaved and mastered the techniques were invited to neighborhood schools, thus preparing the girls for their cotillions and debutante balls and the boys to be their escorts.

Living in a tenement building on 132nd Street, where there were parties every weekend, was another memorable experience. The sounds of music and the moving of feet in the apartments above and below made us tap our feet and sway our hips. Weekends on my block were filled with exuberant tenants, loud music, hot rhythms, and of course, much dancing.

My grandfather was a music promoter for his fraternal lodge and responsible for booking big bands and music talent. I traveled with him around Harlem to the Savoy Ballroom, the Golden Gate, the Rockland Palace, Club Barron, Connie's Ballroom, Small's Paradise and nightclubs where all the new dance steps were being displayed. Seeing folks doing the lindy hop, the black bottom, the Charleston, the Cake Walk, the Rumba, and the jitterbug was fascinating. Dance was everywhere.

I saw shows at the Apollo as often as I could and remember great orchestras, chorus girls, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and other groups too numerous to mention. However, my real fascination was with dancers like Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Peg Leg Bates, Honi Coles and Cholly Atkins, Fayard and Harold Nicholas, Jimmy Slyde, Sammy Davis, Jr., Hines, Hines and Dad, all performing different styles of tap with precision, grace, and coolness.

Today, I am proud to produce events at various Harlem venues. As chairman of the Harlem Arts Alliance I am fortunate to see the continuation of an art form that I admired in my youth, and that is still being practiced and taught to the highest degree in institutions like the Dance Theater of Harlem, Harlem School of the Arts, Barnard College, the Ruth Williams Dance Company, the Forces of Nature Dance Theatre Company, the Marie Brooks Pan-Caribbean Dance Theater, and by choreographers like Dele Husbands, Abdel Salaam, Obediah Wright, Jamel Gaines, Bill T. Jones, Savion Glover and others.

**harlem is... Dance** continues Harlem's rich legacy in the art of dance, and this marvelous exhibit will grow and grow and grow. "Dance Harlem dance!"

*Voza Rivers is the Chair of the Harlem Arts Alliance and the Executive Director of New Heritage Theatre, the oldest Black not-for-profit theater organization in New York City, established in 1964. He serves as Co-Chair of Community Works' Board of Directors and is the Chair of the **harlem is... Advisory Board.***