

Into the Eye of the Storm



Night's Dancer:

The Life of Janet Collins, With Her Unfinished Autobiography

By Yaël Tamar Lewin

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Reviewed by Debra Cash

Some barrier-breakers are battering rams. Others are butterflies. When the ballerina Janet Collins was thrown into the air by two dark-painted “Watusi warriors” in the Triumphal Scene of *Aida* at the Metropolitan Opera’s 1951 opening-night gala, she was the first African American to be working under a full-time contract at the Met. She was also the first African American to have a full-time contract with any American ballet company.

Lewin originally wrote about this nearly forgotten pioneer in her Barnard College thesis. Her interest in Collins subsequently generated a *Dance Magazine* article, a promise to collaborate on Collins’s alternately

chatty and mystically inclined autobiography-in-progress, and eventually a friendship—and the close relationship between biographer and subject makes *Night’s Dancer* problematic. Lewin is tempted to downplay or airbrush abrasive bits. Collins was not always easy to get along with, especially later in her life, and many of Lewin’s interviewees say as much. Nonetheless, Lewin’s research in clipping files and costume sketches, oral histories and reminiscences by the men and women who shared the stage with her, as well as unpublished writings by Collins herself, make the spotlight, if not rosy, certainly less empty.

In the Foreword to her unfinished autobiography, Collins recounts a fable about a “courageous cap-

tain” overwhelmed by a storm, who eventually discovers that “to oppose the storm meant preminent destruction. So he took the opposite course and headed the vessel right into the storm and finally reached the center where it was still and peaceful.” Collins equates this tranquil center with what she calls the “Eye of God”—but it serves just as well as a symbol of her intuitive professional strategy.

In an interview in the *Seattle Times* not included in this book, Collins said of her family, “We didn’t consider ourselves black. . . . We were well-aware of how black people were treated, but we didn’t bow to that treatment. We didn’t have to overcome inferiority. We had to overcome arrogance.” Desirous of education and stability, committed to excellence in every pursuit, the extended Collins-de Lavallade family paired a remarkable self-confidence with a conviction that dates back at least as far as Anna Julia Cooper’s assertion in 1892 that a woman’s “quiet undisputed dignity...without suing or special patronage” could, by dint of example, elevate the “Negro race.”

Janet Collins was born in New Orleans in 1917 and brought up in southern California in a close-knit extended family in which, she writes, “We were all encouraged to follow our natural endowments.” Her first ballet teacher was a neighbor, Louise Beverly, who seems to have had some association with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn’s Denishawn modern dance company, indicated in part by the fact that the young Collins was taught a version of the company’s “exotic” East Indian “nautch” dance. Collins’s seamstress mother agreed to sew costumes in exchange for the lessons. (Collins’s father, known for his intellect and perfectionism, also worked as a tailor.) In one of her early “toe-dancing” recitals, Collins was costumed as a golden butterfly.

At around age fifteen, Collins joined an older vaudevillian, Al Dixon, and his partner, Graham Fain, in an “adagio” act, in which she was thrown and twirled through the air for five shows a day, each performance chaperoned by at least one watchful female relative. The act, whose name is now wince-worthy, was called Three Shades of Brown. All that vaudeville aerial experience would serve her well when it came time to be hoisted aloft in *Aida*.

Already a professional, the young dancer tried to take ballet classes in Los Angeles, but learned “if they accepted me in the midst of all the white dancers, they were afraid they would have no classes. I was a threat to their livelihood!” A kind teacher, Charlotte Tamon, agreed to take Collins on privately, once a week, at a discount. These were the conditions a young African American dancer faced in the mid-1930s.

At the time, the opportunity to see classical ballet was still rare, but Collins was able to catch the best dance companies of her era performing at the Los Angeles Philharmonic auditorium, including the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. At sixteen, she auditioned for its director, Leonid Massine, who told her that she was, indeed, a very fine dancer. Then, she reports, in “both a kindly and realistic manner,” he told her that if he took her into the company, he would have to put her in whiteface, and asked “You wouldn’t want that would you?” She said no, then went outside and cried her heart out.

What is amazing—at least from today’s vantage

point—is that Collins’s beloved Auntie Adele, who had encouraged her to take the audition, heard only the positive in that ghastly scene. “You see, the best recognized your gift!” she said. The wonder, Lewin comments, is that Collins persisted.

The anecdote is all the more fascinating when compared to the experience of Raven Wilkinson (b. 1935), an African American dancer even lighter-skinned than Collins, who joined the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1954. Wilkinson was given the same stipulation and agreed to whiten up on certain tours. She fled the company, though, after a frightening incident in Montgomery, Alabama, where members of the Ku Klux Klan heard that one of the dancers was black and tried to identify her among the members of the *corps de ballet*.

At the same time that Collins was taking the first steps in her dance career, she showed other talents. A gifted painter, she entered Los Angeles’s Art Center School on scholarship soon after leaving high school. With the thoroughness that seems to have characterized every project she undertook, she talked herself into the University of Southern California Medical School anatomy lab and taught herself to draw from unclaimed cadavers that had been donated to the school by the city morgue.

Lewin traces the story of Collins’s dance training and professional development, from the multicultural troupe of Lester Horton (who would become the mentor of her ten-years younger cousin and lookalike, the great American modern dancer Carmen de Lavallade), to her studies with the famed West Coast teacher Carmelita Maracci, to dancing with Katherine Dunham. While Dunham, who died at age 97 in 2006, has been much studied, Lewin provides insights “from the inside” about the dancers and companies that will enhance the still-emerging discipline of American modern dance history.

As broader social history, the big revelation of *Night’s Dancer* is that at 22, Collins eloped with an inappropriate partner—a widowed tenor. He quickly strayed, and when the marriage collapsed after less than a year, Collins sank into a depression. Hospitalized in 1940, she was sterilized without her knowledge, although with her parents’ permission—one of the victims of California’s disastrous eugenics policy for the mentally ill. Collins recovered her health, but the forced sterilization would shape her later imaginative life.

The solo concert she put together by herself and presented in New York in 1949 was three years in development. She based it on her “3-Bs”—black, ballet, and Bible. Lewin makes claims for the vividness and versatility of Collins’ choreography, carefully explaining that its lack of so-called “primitive” and “jazz” influences may have made her work seem more “refined” to white critics and audiences than that of her near-contemporaries, Pearl Primus and Talley Beatty. Nevertheless, it seems clear from the accounts of those who saw her that it was as a performer, not as a choreographer, that Collins excelled. In the lavish series of photos that illustrate *Night’s Dancer*, the petite Collins has a lean elegance, a clear taste for whimsy, and a compelling romanticism. It’s fascinating to realize that the critics of the day were as intrigued that a dancer of her polished, classical technique could come from the West Coast as they were by her African American identity. (Lewin has a bad habit



Janet Collins in *La Gioconda* Metropolitan Opera House, 1952.

of using critic’s words as authoritative when the comments are positive and denigrating them when they’re not.) The “Creole beauty” with the fabulous long legs was named “most outstanding debutante of the season” by *Dance Magazine*.

In New York, Collins wasn’t marginalized; she was celebrated. Cast in a minor role in Cole Porter’s *Out of This World* on Broadway, she won prizes and glossy spreads in *Ebony* and in women’s magazines. Most significantly, she came to the attention of Zachary Solov, the newly hired, 28-year-old ballet master of the Metropolitan Opera.

Why did Solov and his boss, Rudolf Bing, decide to break the color barrier at the Met by hiring Collins? Why her, and why then? Lewin does a wonderful job of untangling the variables, citing published and unpublished materials, juxtaposing contemporary interviews with later conversations, and describing the cultural milieu of the day. There were the Met’s competition with the New York City

Opera; the Austrian-born Bing’s unspoken need to make an “American” point by integrating the company; Bing’s determination not to discriminate on any terms, even against a singer like Kirsten Flagstad, who was suspected of having Nazi sympathies; the idea that it would be easier to integrate the Met’s regular season with a classically trained dancer than with a singer (and indeed, soprano Marian Anderson wasn’t to make her Met debut until four years later); and not at all the least, *Aida*’s Egyptian theme, which made the presence of an “Ethiopian slave” narratively plausible.

In 1966, Bing was quoted as saying that his proudest moments at the Met were breaking the color barrier by hiring Collins and then Anderson. Collins’s talent got management’s attention, but once on stage, notoriety and plaudits from audiences and the press didn’t hurt.

Collins liked to play that she didn’t know what all the fuss was about. Clearly, she wanted the