

# “It’s art, it’s ballet, it’s dance, and it’s for everyone.”<sup>1</sup>

— Lauren Anderson of the Houston Ballet

by Aimee L’Heureux

On December 27, 2006, Lauren Anderson, Houston Ballet’s first African American principal dancer, took her last bow as the Sugar Plum Fairy. She had first seen *The Nutcracker* at age six and immediately knew that she wanted to pursue a career as a ballerina. After begging her parents to let her dance, they enrolled Lauren in the Houston Ballet Academy under the direction of Ben Stevenson. The very next year, at age seven, her dream of performing in *The Nutcracker* came true when she warmed the hearts of audiences in her role as the mouse. For the next sixteen years she danced every female role in *The Nutcracker*, except for Clara, and even performed two male roles as a soldier and a Russian in the trepak.<sup>2</sup>

Anderson recalled that her father “worried about how I would cope with the expectations held in a world where, in most cases, white is the usual color for the heroine. And yet, I was never told that I couldn’t succeed—just keep working. He instilled in me a positive attitude . . .” Nearing the end of her training, her father warned her that if she did not find a job by the end of the year, she would have to enroll in college. Ben Stevenson offered her a job with the ballet company just six weeks later. Stevenson has said that, “Lauren works very hard . . . As for being black in a so-called white world, if dancers are good and have what it takes, you believe in them, not their color.”<sup>3</sup>

Stevenson’s colorblindness was not the only thing that made Anderson, a native Houstonian, a success in the Houston Ballet; she believes that the city’s diversity also enabled her to become Houston Ballet’s first African American principal dancer. “I have had a love affair with Houston audiences since I was seven years old. . . . I think Texans have big hearts.” Anderson danced the role of Alice in *Alice in*

*Wonderland*, her first lead role in the ballet. Surprised, since Alice is generally depicted as blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and fair complected, Lauren proclaimed, “Do I fit this mold? No. There is no mold in art. Ben says, ‘The only color is the paint on the canvas.’ I was like, go Ben! ‘But you had better get that ballet body together if you want to be a ballerina.’” Anderson worked hard to attain her goals by changing her diet and working out, intent on being a successful ballerina.<sup>4</sup>

Anderson, named Houston Ballet’s principal dancer in 1990, broke ground as the only African American principal dancer in any major American classical ballet company at the time.<sup>5</sup> When, in 1993, Cuban dancer Carlos Acosta joined the Houston Ballet, Anderson remarked that it meant “we had two black people at the center of a ballet stage. That was nice.”<sup>6</sup> Acosta became Anderson’s regular partner and the two sold out shows almost instantly. They toured the globe performing at Moscow’s Bolshoi Theatre, the Kremlin Palace, London’s Sadler’s Wells, The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., and theatres in Chicago, Manhattan, and Santiago, Chile.<sup>7</sup> Anderson hopes that her role as a principal ballerina, as well as her time touring, will stimulate change and that ballet around the world will continue to diversify. “I love being black,” Anderson proudly proclaimed. “It is great. I stand out for being different. I’m not just another nameless blonde in the back row. People remember me—and I like that. Being black is a great visual asset.”<sup>8</sup>

Discussing her retirement from Houston Ballet, Anderson stated that, “I’m forty-one and I want to go out on top. I don’t want to drag myself off the stage; I’ve got chapter two of my life to start.”<sup>9</sup> Chapter two of Anderson’s life began in January 2007 when she



Anderson in costume for *The Firebird*, choreographed by James Kudelka. She currently works for the Houston Ballet’s education department as an outreach associate where she inspires hope for children and encourages them to make their dreams come true.

Photo by Jim Donovan courtesy of the Houston Ballet.



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Houston Ballet's Lauren Anderson and her Cuban partner, Carlos Acosta, reflect the growing diversity of ballet in *Don Quixote* choreographed by Ben Stevenson.

Photo by Jim Caldwell courtesy of the Houston Ballet.



Lauren Anderson dances her legendary role as the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*, choreographed by Ben Stevenson.

Photo by Geoff Winningham courtesy of the Houston Ballet.

Lauren Anderson, "Houston's Hometown Superstar," was featured on the cover of *Dance Magazine* in April 1999.

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assumed her new role with the Houston Ballet's education department as an outreach associate. She teaches ballet classes at Houston Ballet's Ben Stevenson Academy, conducts master classes at area schools, and lectures to students about dance and her historic career—being one of America's most distinguished African American ballerinas.<sup>10</sup>

"There is nothing like going into schools and letting kids see how much there is out there and what there is out there. I say, 'I am not here to recruit dancers. . . . I am here to let you know I am you and you are me.'" She tells students, "Don't believe the hype that you are only as good as your last show, you are only as good as the last thing you have done." She impresses upon them that Houston offers a lot of opportunity, and whatever they want to accomplish, they can do it here. Anderson believes that her role as outreach associate for the Houston Ballet offers her the chance to contribute to society in a real way. "All I did was dance. I got on stage and did something I loved to do and got a check for it. And Houston let me do that."<sup>11</sup> Even though Lauren Anderson has retired from dancing, she remains a star in Houston by giving back to the city that helped make her dream a reality.

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