

After decades of being largely forgotten,
five Black ballerinas, members of the groundbreaking
Dance Theatre of Harlem, are being seen and heard.

At the peak of the civil rights movement, Lydia Abarca was the first ballerina in a Black ballet company to grace the cover of Dance magazine. Alongside founding members Shelia Rohan and Gayle McKinney-Griffith and first-generation dancers Karlya Shelton and Marcia Sells, Abarca invited a bright light to shine on Black professional classical dancers. Grit, determination, and exquisite artistry propelled these swans of Harlem to dizzying heights as they performed around the world for audiences that included celebrities, dignitaries, and royalty.

Now, decades later, these trailblazing ballerinas and longtime friends are giving voice to their stories on- and offstage, reclaiming their past so that it is finally recorded, acknowledged, and lauded, never to be lost again.

KAREN VALBY is the author of two books of nonfiction: *The Swans of Harlem* and *Welcome to Utopia: Notes from a Small Town*. A contributing editor for *Vanity Fair*, she also writes for the *New York Times*, *O Magazine*, *Glamour*, *Fast Company*, and *EW*, where she spent fifteen years writing about culture. She and her family live in Austin, Texas, where her daughters study dance at Ballet Afrique.

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