

1-1-1981

LaVerne Reed And Her Dancers

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Recommended Citation

Scarupa, Harriet Jackson (1981) "LaVerne Reed And Her Dancers," *New Directions*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 2. Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol8/iss2/2>

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LaVerne Reed And Her Dancers

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LaVerne Reed

4 **Dancer**

Dancer

Flow free,

Lithe and limber

Like the wind.

Emancipated from

The day to day

Restraints of life,

For fleeting seconds

Of passing moments.

It is not wrong

To let the music be master.

Maybe for a while,

Only a short time.

I know the light of dawn

Is right outside the door,

Where the vibrations of the

rhythm

Scatter and fade away

Where the lyrics of the music,

Become words in the back of

my mind.

But right now I have the time

To let the music move me,

And touch my soul.

If I want to,

I will even cry,

And I will dance

To forget the hurts

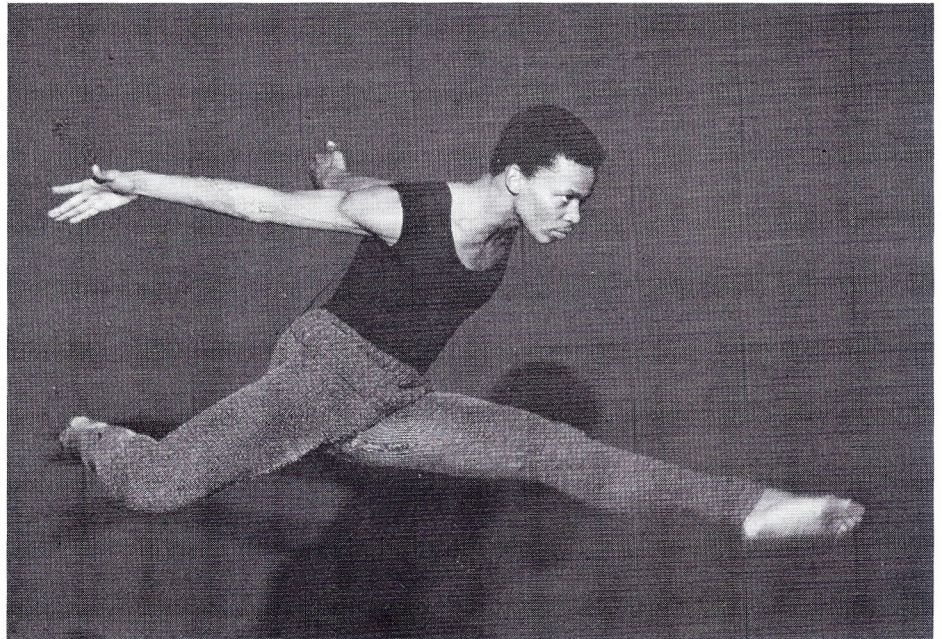
And fragments of heart

Broken time and again,

Because I am the Dancer.

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Howard University



Damon Pearce

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Release yourself,

Don't fight the feeling,

Release yourself,

Just let yourself go.

The insistent strains of the Graham Central Station musical group fill every nook and cranny of Howard's Cramton auditorium on this crisp fall evening.

Up on the stage, transmitting the message of the lyrics, are the LaVerne Reed Dancers. They're dressed as "ordinary people": fireman, schoolgirl, doctor, nurse, orderly, graduate, construction worker, schoolteacher, soldier, policeman, preacher, even two nuns.

As they enter the stage with rapid-fire precision, they are models of propriety, with hands clasped primly in front and heads held high with self-importance. But as the lyrics begin to penetrate their societal masks, things begin to happen. Hips start to shake, legs kick skyward, shoulders shimmy, feet tap, backs undulate, fingers snap, hands clap, bodies dip, turn, leap and jump. Choreographically, it adds up to a heady mesh of ballet,

modern, jazz, tap, African and Afro-Cuban all performed with good-natured showbiz verve.

Release yourself, the beat presses on. *Don't fight the feeling/Release yourself/Might not come no more*. By now the stage has been transformed into a veritable orgy of movement. Then, gradually, self-consciously, the participants in that orgy return to their established roles. But they've changed. There's a twinkle in their eyes. They've learned not to take themselves too seriously and the audience is challenged to do the same.

The name of the work is "We the People" and its message and style are typical of the artistic fare the LaVerne Reed Dancers have been serving up to enthusiastic Washington audiences for the past five years. The company is composed of 25 young (17-24) dancers, including 12 who are Howard students. Reed, 30, is instructor of dance and resident choreographer for the drama department of Howard's College of Fine Arts, and also serves as city-wide dance director and children's theater specialist for the D. C. Department of Recreation.

This evening the company performed "We the People" and other equally energetic works as prelude to a concert by Melba Moore. The company has also danced at concerts given by other top recording artists, among them Stephanie Mills, Stacy Lattisaw and Betty Carter. It performs regularly for Washington's Summer in the Parks Program, in schools, at local dance festivals, at numerous civic and Howard University occasions. Last summer, it offered a series of full-length concerts at The Rep, a Black theater company in Washington, D. C.

"None of my works has a very heavy message," explained Reed in an interview. "I like to make people happy and smile, to show a brighter side of life, a bit of fantasy. With the economy like it is and other things, I think people want to come to the theater to sit back, relax and basically enjoy themselves. They want to be entertained."

The message of "We the People," for instance, bears no resemblance to the tormented commentaries on the state of the human psyche so characteristic of some modern dance works. "What I was trying to convey to people," Reed says, "was to have fun with your life, to release your inhibitions and the 9-5 syndrome and just let yourself go. I wanted people in the audience to see themselves and chuckle."

Another Reed work, "Sweet Lucy," performed to the music of Raul De Souza, depicts a breakneck dance marathon in the 1950s, complete with theatricalized versions of the cha-cha, twist, jerk, swim, mashed potatoes, shaft and other popular dances. It ends in a collapse of bodies—except for that of Sweet Lucy, who emerges triumphant, the dancingest dancer of them all. Still another Reed work, "Jump," set to the music of Aretha Franklin, is a dance take-off of "Sparkle," the movie about an all-girl singing trio.

Reed says she got the ideas for "We the People" and "Sweet Lucy" when she heard the music and then "saw an image" in her mind. "Jump" evolved after she had

seen "Sparkle" and was struck by the close physical resemblance between the movie's protagonists and three members of her company.

Once Reed gets an overall concept for a work, she'll put on a record in her livingroom and work out a series of steps ("combinations" in the dancer's parlance) that seem to fit both concept and music. Many of these combinations have a firm ballet base, to which she adds bits from modern dance, jazz, tap, African, whatever. "I might take 16 counts and say 'O.k, these three people are going to do this, one person is going to do this, twelve will be doing this,'" she explains, rapidly moving her fingers to indicate different movements.

She will then introduce these combinations to her dancers, modifying them to take into account each dancer's individual style and technical level. Next comes hours of often-grueling practice until the company is able to execute the movements smoothly. But merely executing the movements isn't enough. Reed says her dancers have to "look like they enjoy what they're doing." "It's important that my dancers enjoy my choreography as much as the audience," she emphasizes. What this means is that you won't find a blank stare or a phony smile pasted to the face of a LaVerne Reed dancer. It also means her dancers have to *act* as well as dance. In fact, insists Reed, "I don't think you can dance without acting."

"I like to tell a story in my choreography," she adds. "I'm not particularly interested in dance for dance's sake—although I certainly see the validity of it. Usually, my dancers are portraying real people, not something abstract."

Nor is Reed interested in using dance to make any political statement about Black oppression. "There are people like Eleo Pomare and a couple of other choreographers who do make political statements in their works," she elaborates. "I'm not against more political choreography, but I tend to stay away from it. I think each

choreographer should find his or her niche."

Sometimes, to balance out a program, the LaVerne Reed Dancers will perform more emotionally intense works created by other choreographers. Foremost among these is "Can't Breathe," a tribute to Joann Little and other imprisoned Black women. Created by Linda Wharton, a graduate assistant professor in Howard's School of Communications and set to the music of Bernice Reagon, it is a stark work featuring six women in institutional-looking green dresses. The dancers are confined to a 4 x 4½ space and their movements communicate their physical and psychological imprisonment in almost hypnotic terms.

The work reflects Wharton's experience teaching in a prison, her reading about the celebrated Joann Little case and her belief that the arts *do* represent a way to change attitudes and values. "Can't Breathe," she says, "is a statement about the political injustice done to women in society" and its aim is consciousness-raising.

Another work by Wharton reflects the depth of the choreographer's religious feelings. Called "Stairway to Heaven," it is a gripping solo performed by one of the company's lead dancers, Kathy Merrick, a Howard junior. In it, Merrick utilizes a modern dance vocabulary featuring turns, leg extensions and a dramatically outstretched hand, as she slowly makes her way up a ladder. Her progression, explains Wharton, symbolizes "Black folks struggling to get to heaven and the glory of reaching it."

Wharton's belief that dance should educate and/or persuade as well as entertain seems far different from that of her friend and colleague, LaVerne Reed. Yet Wharton insists the two women's choreographic approaches are "complementary" and that their works "mesh well in concert." The contrast between the two choreographers, though, does seem to highlight the complexity underlying the whole concept of "Black dance."



There are some who insist—with passion—that there is something distinct, unique and easily identifiable that can be labeled “Black dance.” For others, such a notion is rubbish. Linda Small, a Black critic, writing in the October 1979 issue of *Dance Magazine*, presents a view that seems to hover somewhere between these two extremes. And her words seem especially relevant to the story of the LaVerne Reed Dancers.

“If there were such a thing as a homogeneous black race,” she writes, “there might be a monolithic black dance. As it is, black humanity is broad, rich, complex, unencompassed by generalizations. The only uncomplicated unity we know is our ultimate origin, Africa. The influence of our African beginnings threads through our lives. In some lives, the threads are sparse; in other lives the threads make a strong tapestry.”

“I think whites want to say ‘This is Black dance’ whenever Black dancers are performing,” Reed remarks. “Even though all my dancers are Black, I look at my company and the statements I make through my choreography as ‘universal.’”

Yet she has also studied African dance, once performed with an African dance

group and believes one of the most important elements in her choreography is its “heavy African rhythms.” White dancers have great difficulty learning and mastering these rhythms, she’s found, leading her to believe that that old stereotype about Blacks having “more rhythm” might not be such a stereotype after all.

Alongside the conscious infusion of African rhythms in her choreography is her conscious decision to choreograph solely to Black music, usually Black popular music. Explaining this choice, she says, “I feel a special commitment to promote Black musical artists. Also, I think people like to see a visual overlap of the music they hear every day on the radio. That way they can identify more with what they see on the stage.”

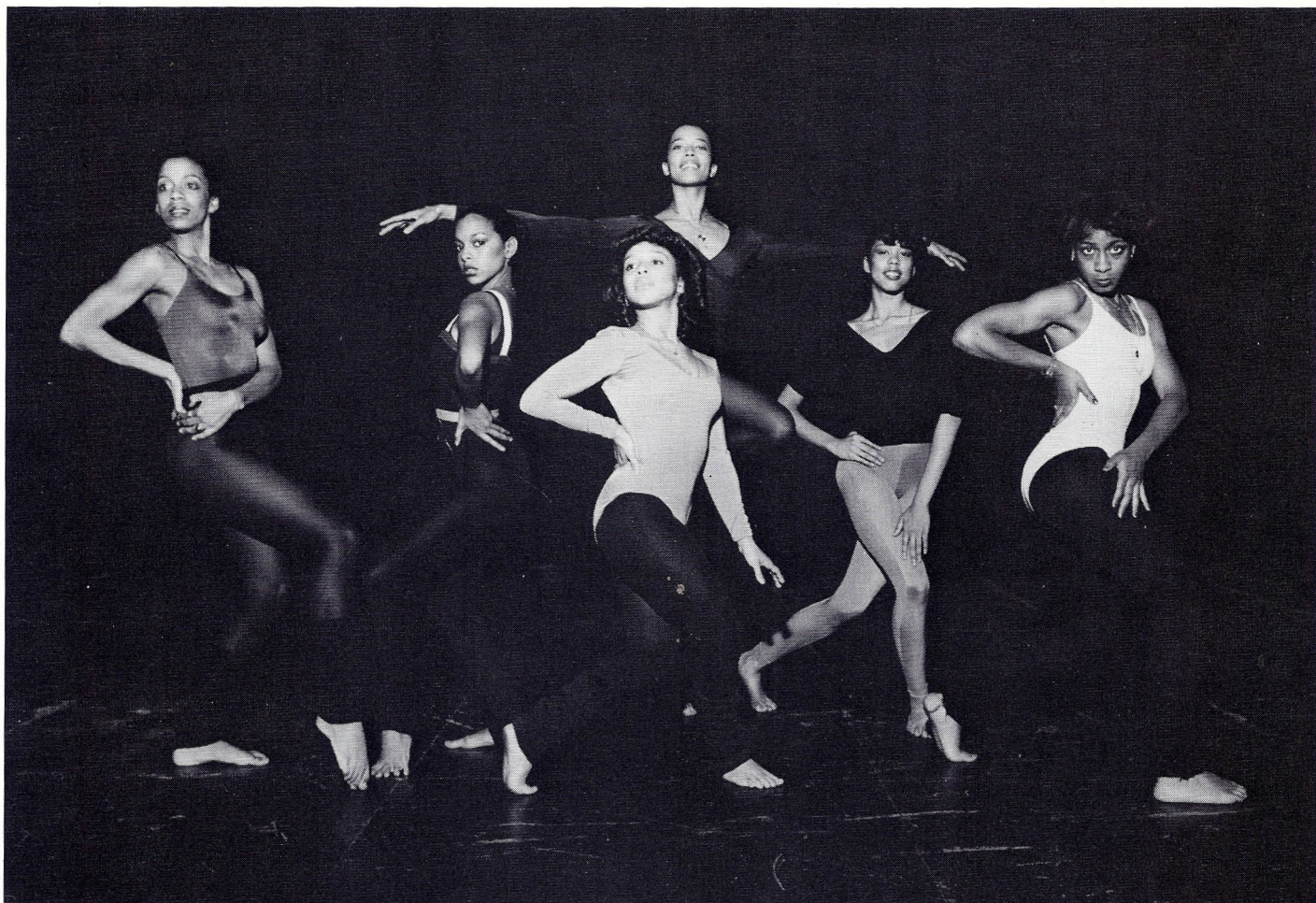
Some people, though, look down their noses at setting ballet-infused choreography to popular music. It’s almost as if they’re saying “If it doesn’t use classical music, it can’t possibly be Art.” The cultural snobbishness displayed in such an attitude irritates the Howard choreographer no end.

“Who says dance isn’t valid unless you use Beethoven or Bach or Stravinsky,?” she asks. “Who says only this [kind of

music] is ballet music? Who says you can’t do a *pointe* piece to the music of the Howard University Choir or the Gospel Choir or to Duke Ellington or to Aretha Franklin? Why can’t that be valid? *What is more beautiful than to see Black dancers trained technically in the ballet overlapping Black music with their heritage of African dance and combining all these elements into a theater piece?*

In general, Reed’s dance theater pieces have been enthusiastically greeted by audiences. Ditto, for the critics—with some reservations. When “We the People” was first performed in 1975, Alan M. Kriegsman, *The Washington Post*’s Pulitzer-prize-winning dance critic, called it “a vivacious cartoon of a ballet, one that seems to be telling us that Americans of every calling and station all have a bit of jive under the skin.”

When recently asked to assess the company, Kriegsman said he was “tremendously impressed by the energy and facility of the dancers” as well as by “the spectrum of choreographic approaches to music that often gets treated in a clichéd way.” “There is a certain kind of choreography of popular song material that can be fun to watch but is not very durable,” he



observes. "There are instances of that in LaVerne's works, but generally her approach is very fresh. In choreographing to popular songs one has to guard against superficial tagging along with the lyrics. My impression is that she has a good sense of discernment about that."

Kriegsman and just about anyone else who has watched the LaVerne Reed Dancers cites the company's high energy level. But one critic, Anne Marie Welsh of *The Washington Star*, wonders if the company isn't *too* energetic. Reviewing one of the group's concerts at The Rep last June, she wrote, "There's nothing raw about these 12 performers who have commanding techniques, theatricality and a steady stream of ideas, but the intensity of the dancing, the high-speed pacing of the program of 14 works somehow burned up the material."

Still, by the end of her review, she was surmising that the company "may become one of the city's most polished and representative dance troupes." Lyn Dyson, executive director of The Rep, *already* calls the group "the premiere Black dance company in the city."

From the outset, the LaVerne Reed Dancers have served as a showcase for

young Black talent. The company grew out of dance classes Reed had been teaching since 1969 for the D.C. Department of Recreation. In 1971, she formed the D.C. Dance Youth Ensemble [which still exists] to enable some of her more talented students to have a performing outlet. By 1975, a core of these dancers proved themselves ready for a more professional vehicle. And so she launched a full-fledged dance company, the LaVerne Reed Dancers.

Many of the group's leading dancers had first met Reed when they were children taking their first dance lessons at a city recreation center. Kathy Merrick, for instance, started taking classes from Reed at the Banneker Recreation Center across from the main Howard University campus "just for fun." She's now been dancing with Reed for 12 years. Why so long? "It's like a family," remarks the vivacious Howard student. "LaVerne is like our mother. In fact, we used to call her 'Mom.' If she sees something in you, she'll help you all she can."

Others in the "family" have gone elsewhere—to study at the Juilliard School of Music, the State University of New York at Purchase, the California Institute for the

Arts, U.S. International University, the Philadelphia School of Performing Arts; to try to make it as professional dancers and/or choreographers in New York, Miami, even Switzerland. But the ties remain strong. Company principal Robin Ford, for instance, is a Juilliard student but she always keeps a suitcase ready so she can head for Washington when Reed beckons with a performance date. "I don't believe in holding onto my dancers," Reed says. "I look at my company as a stepping-stone. I like for my dancers to go out and do other things and then come back."

Some of Reed's longtime students have been joined in the company by more recent additions. People like George Fauntleroy, a reed-thin dynamo, who is a graduate of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts and now supports himself as a waiter while hoping to make it big in show biz. Or newcomer Rozlyn Thalley, also a Duke Ellington alumna, who has 16 years of ballet training behind her.

Financially, the LaVerne Reed Dancers are a semi-professional company; i.e., the dancers are paid for individual performances but are not salaried on a week-to-week basis. Thus, members of the company who are not high school or college

8 students tend to hold "any old job," as Reed puts it, while they take classes, rehearse, perform and dream of that proverbial big break.

Dance, of course, is a notoriously uncertain and demanding profession. Yet when you ask members of the LaVerne Reed Dancers *why* they dance, they look at you as if you must surely be daft not to understand.

"Why dance?" repeats Phyllis Reid, a Howard senior who is the company's dance captain. "I love it. I love theater. I love expressing myself through dance."

"I was born to dance," exclaims George Fauntleroy. "Dancing's like a high. I'm not into getting high [off drugs] but I get naturally high off dance."

If dance is a high, it's a high that comes from hard work. And that work, in a very real sense, begins and ends in the studio.

A visit to the advanced dance class Reed teaches at Howard offers a glimpse of just how hard that work is. Some in the class are members of the company. Others are not. But all glisten with sweat as they go through their paces in the dance studio in the College of Fine Arts basement, a low-ceilinged space with mirrors lining the walls and portable *barres* pushed towards the center.

Reed, her usually luxuriant hair tied back in a ponytail, a denim jumper atop black tights and leotard, sits on a chair, back straight, chin uplifted, eyes darting from one dancer to another as she directs their movements. The dancers themselves look far removed from their glamorous stage images, dressed as they are in thick, awkward-looking leg warmers, floppy rubber sweat pants, leotards and tights well-adorned with holes and pulls.

As they work on *plies* (knee bends), head rotations, *tendus* (leg brushes), *ronds de jambe* (leg circles), *battements* (high kicks), stretches and numerous other exercises designed to forge strong, flexible bodies, Reed interrupts her rhythmic counting to send forth a steady stream of commands: "Lift up your stomach. Establish your lines. Keep the knee quiet.

Articulate the feet. Fly the legs."

Later she demonstrates a combination featuring a soaring, bird-like turn and quick high kicks, as "I want to live forever" from the movie "Fame" blasts from a record player in the front of the room. At first, the dancers hesitate as they try out the steps, traveling in pairs across the room. But as the class comes to a close you can palpably see the discipline of all those exercises at the *barre* meshing with the exuberance of performing. And when George Fauntleroy and Phyllis Reid streak across the floor in a flourish of movement, their fellow classmates burst into applause.

When you ask the mentor of all those sweating, energetic dancers what it is about dance that means so much to *her*, you'll get a string of exclamations: "It's beautiful! It's overwhelming! It's positive! It's like second nature! It's all I've ever done!"

Well, not quite *all* that LaVerne Reed has ever done. But something she's been doing since she was five when she started taking dance classes in Philadelphia with her godmother, Libby Spencer, a former dance captain at the Apollo Theater in New York. Then, in high school, Reed earned a scholarship to study at the Pennsylvania School of Ballet and she combined that strict ballet training with dancing with the Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Company and teaching dance at the local Y.

After high school, she spent a semester studying dance at Juilliard but was forced to drop out because of the high tuition.

Reed's Catholic high school had boasted an excellent drama department and her concentration had been in acting, so she decided to apply to Howard to study drama. "I auditioned in acting," she recalls, "because Howard didn't have a separate dance department." She was accepted at Howard and awarded a special talent scholarship. The drama training she received at Howard, combined with the show biz background and approach of her first mentor, Libby Spencer, laid the

groundwork for Reed's interest in creating dance theater pieces instead of "dance for dance's sake."

It was while a sophomore at Howard that she began teaching dance for the city's recreation department. Today, as city-wide dance director, she recruits and supervises the department's dance teachers, supervises the D.C. Youth Dance Ensemble and sets up and assists dance programs in centers. As children's theater specialist, she is responsible for conceiving, writing, directing, choreographing and casting an annual Christmas production performed by children from all over the city. This past Christmas, for instance, the successful "Santa's Starflight" was repeated. In 1977, to take another example, Reed directed "Santa and the Haunted House," which *The Washington Post's* Jacqueline Trescott described as "a wild technicolor, hour-long party that never pauses."

Alongside Reed's work with the recreation department has been her work at Howard University. For the past five years she has taught classes in dance and choreography for the drama department of the College of Fine Arts, choreographed for such musicals as "Tambourines to Glory," "God's Trombones" and "The Me Nobody Knows" and directed an annual dance concert, "Extensions."

Reed has also choreographed for a variety of other groups through the years. "We the People," for instance, was originally done for the Capitol Ballet. "When the Bell Rings," a jazz ballet that set out "to recapture the youthful, exuberant spirit of a New York City public high school in the late 1950s, early 1960s," was choreographed for and performed by the Washington Ballet in 1978. She also did the choreography for "The Bicentennial: Black American Reflections," a 1976 National Parks Service presentation featuring Cicely Tyson, Roscoe Lee Browne, Brock Peters and Esther Rolle.

Heading the list of Reed's future ambitions are creating a full-length ballet, choreographing for films, television and

Kathy Merrick in "Stairway to Heaven"



Phyllis Reid

9





"We the People"

the Broadway stage and "putting the company on the map." She also says she'd like to stay at Howard, adding half in jest, "I'd like there to be a dance major in the drama department before I'm too old to walk." [Thomas J. Flagg, dean of the college, acknowledges there has been talk from time to time about setting up a full-fledged dance department but that these discussions have never been "on a serious level." "There are a lot of programs we would like to add," he says, "but the reality of finances prevents us from doing so."]

Again, half in jest, Reed adds another item to her wish list: "I'd like to make my daughter a dancer—if she'd like to be one," she says, cuddling three-month-old Erica. "I'd like her to be a prima [ballerina]."

Reed herself has never been a prima. But she has performed. And here her credits include dancing with the Capitol Ballet, the D.C. Black Repertory Company, the Pennsylvania Ballet, the Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Company, the

Joyce Trisler Dance Company and the Louis Johnson Dance Theatre. As featured soloist with the Louis Johnson Dance Theatre from 1973 to 1978, she was perhaps best known for her depiction of Lena Horne in "When Malindy Sings," a dance tribute to five celebrated Black women singers.

Johnson, who preceded Reed as a dance instructor in the Howard drama department, is known for his choreography of the musical "Purlie," the movie version of "The Wiz," the opera "Treemonisha," the Dance Theatre of Harlem's ballet "Forces of Rhythm" and many other works and productions. He has been an inspiration to many in the dance world and Reed counts herself among them. "When I was dancing with him, Louis would say, 'LaVerne what does it mean?' Not necessarily what does dance mean, but what does each individual step, each individual combination, each individual gesture mean. He wanted you to understand what kind of statement you were making by each thing you did. And you had to act in

his company. All that has really influenced me."

In recent years, Reed has hung up her dancing shoes as a performer. Partly it's because she finds the living-out-of-a-suitcase type of existence of the performer incompatible with the kind of family life that is important to her. Then, too, especially after Erica's birth, she no longer has the professional dancer's super-streamlined silhouette. But most important is the fact that teaching and choreographing are what LaVerne Reed finds most fulfilling at this point in her life.

"I like sitting back in the audience watching my dancers perform and being able to say, 'That is what I created' or 'I remember her when she was 12 and look at her now' or 'Look how far he or she has come in a year' and 'I did that, I had something to do with that.'"

She is talking, of course, about the joy of creativity—a joy that pulses through all the arts whether expressed on the stage of a Cramton auditorium, a basement dance studio at Howard or anywhere else. □