

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Anne Raven Wilkinson (February 2, 1935 – December 17, 2018)

“First Black Ballerina to Dance for a Major Ballet Company”

Anne Raven Wilkerson was born February 2, 1935, in New York City. Her father was a dentist and her mother a homemaker. She grew up in a middle-class black neighborhood in Harlem. Raven, as she would later be known, became interested in ballet at the age of five. She fell in love with ballet while attending a performance of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo's *Coppélia*. At the age of nine, she began taking ballet lessons at the Swoboda School (later the Ballet Ruse School), where she studied under the direction of dancers from Russia's Bolshoi Theatre. She later transferred to the Professional Children's School in the Bronx where she remained through her last two years of high school. Madame Ludmilla Shollar, formerly associated with the St. Petersburg Imperial Russian Ballet, trained Raven in technique.

In 1954, Raven auditioned for a position with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. She was rejected twice but was not deterred. On her third audition, she was accepted into the company. Her addition to the company in 1955 marked the first time the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo hired a black dancer in the height of the Jim Crow era.

Ballet Russe was a touring company, which meant that traveling with the show through the segregated Southern states could create problems for Raven and the ballet company.

In the 1957 visit to Atlanta, Georgia, a hotel owner asked Raven if she was black. Raven refused to lie and the hotel owner barred her from staying with the rest of the company. He called a cab to take her to a “colored” hotel. The next day, she was sent back to New York and instructed to rejoin the company once the tour took them above the Mason Dixon Line. The company also began using makeup to lighten her complexion to avoid future issues.

During a trip to Montgomery, Alabama, Raven was eating in the hotel dining room with her fellow dancers when they noticed two white men with a pile of white laundry on a chair at the adjacent table. When the two men finished their meal, they donned their white robes and hoods and left. Although she was not immediately approached, two Klan members later stormed the theater and interrupted the performance, looking for the “negro” that they heard was there.

Raven left the Ballet Russe in 1962. For seven months in 1963, Raven, a devout Catholic, joined a convent in Font de Lac, Wisconsin. In 1967 she joined the Dutch National Ballet as a soloist, which at that time was far more diverse than American companies. Then, in 1974, Raven returned to the US and continued dancing with the New York City Opera as an extra.

After retiring from ballet in 1985, Raven taught ballet at the Harlem School of Arts. Her stage acting credits include the role of Bloody Mary's Assistant in Broadway's *South Pacific* 1987 and Malla in *A Little Night Music* 1990-1991.

Raven went on to mentor dancer Misty Copland, who herself made history as the first Black principal ballerina at the American Ballet Theater. Misty's book, *The Firebird*, was inspired by her relationship with Raven.

In 2014, Raven presented the 2014 Dance Magazine Award to Misty Copland. In June 2015, Raven received the 2015 Dance/USA Trustee Award.

Anne Raven Wilkinson died on December 18, 2018, at her home in Manhattan. She was 83.

