

Artistry from the man who would have been a ballplayer

BY MARDELL GRIFFIN
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

At first glance, dressed in a loosely draped blue robe, he looks like the stereotypical point guard — lean, at least 6 feet tall, movements well coordinated.

And he should have been a basketball player, he says. That is what was expected of young African-American boys with athletic ability who grew up in his generation.

"Society has a way of shaping what a child does," Mel Tomlinson said. "I'm black, so I should play basketball."

But audiences around the world are grateful that Tomlinson did not do what he "should" have done.

Instead he became a premier ballet dancer who has worked with some of the country's best known dance companies — such as the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the New York City Ballet and Alvin Ailey. He has performed before kings, queens and presidents.

He was a member of the dance troupe that was "a gift" from the American people on the occasion of the marriage of Prince Charles and Princess Diana of England. He has danced twice at the White House, once during President Carter's administration and once during President Reagan's.

And last Friday and Saturday nights he wowed local audiences with two performances in the city where he first began training as a dancer at the N.C. School of the Arts. Tomlinson and Cydney Spohn danced in a revival of "Satto" by Salvatore Aiello, artistic director with the N.C. Dance Theatre. The event took place in the Stevens Center, which Tomlinson helped open in 1983.

Tomlinson, who is from Clayton, was not in Winston-Salem just to give local N.C. Dance Theatre patrons a treat. He moved to the city in July when he retired at age 33 from the New York City Ballet.

"It's home," he said of why he chose to come back to North Carolina. "It's the state that made me."

He bought a car and a condominium near Hanes Mall in the Twin City where he and his cats settled in. But settling in is not Tomlinson's style.

He soon agreed to be a guest performer with the N.C. Dance Theatre and began instructing fledgling dancers as a distinguished visiting faculty member at NCSA. Next year, he may become a permanent member of the well-known school's staff. "They are grooming me for something along those lines," he says.

Teaching at the School of the Arts is just an extension of Tomlinson's personal mission — to bring dance to people in the community, average folks who do not ordinarily hang out at the great dance halls of the world.

"There is a certain responsibility that comes with fame and fortune," he said. "You have to give it back."

For years Tomlinson has been "giving it back" with visits to schools and recreation centers and other community gathering places to expose people to dance. He wants to make art approachable. Unlike many who work in an industry notorious for its temperamental stars, he works hard to overcome the intimidating aura that surrounds ballet.

And he does a good job. He is patient with listeners, giving easy explanations and spellings of words that would be rudimentary to more sophisticated dance enthusiasts.

His energy and animation about dance are infectious. He draws you into his world of exotic movements with demonstrations of the intricate steps and tales of the performing industry.

"I think the audiences, through the dance, see art," he says. "...Art can transform the world in terms of peace... There is nothing like live theater. You can watch TV 24 hours a day and you'll never

receive what you get from live theater. The audience becomes a part of the dance itself."

It is a pleasure to listen to him give background information about the dancers and the dances being conducted on stage during a dress rehearsal before his Winston-Salem performances. Intensity and joy in his concentration on the figures at the front of the hall spill over to the listener as he shares his insight into the dancers' moves and lives.



Photo by James Parker

Dance master Mel Tomlinson studies, corrects and demonstrates to students at the N.C. School of the Arts.

where you're very relaxed and appreciate what he's doing and appreciate what you're doing. He doesn't work in a set way. He doesn't teach the class the same way all the time. He is always doing something new, which gives us a broader perspective of what we can do."

Students are not the only ones who think Tomlinson offers something different. One member of his Saturday night audience was overheard saying, "I've definitely never seen anything like this," following Tomlinson's performance.

He and Ms. Spohn entwined in erotic, sensual movements to the strains of oriental music punctuated with the sounds of wind chimes. The dance addressed primal feelings with both grace and drama.

The performance brought many members of the audience to their feet for a standing ovation at the close of the piece.

The "retired" dancer will not have much time to enjoy the aftereffects of the fanfare. Next week he will join the New York City Ballet as guest performer before audiences at Washington's Kennedy Center.

Then there will be two to three classes a day to be taught at the School of the Arts. And around Christmastime his latest movie, "Leonardo VI," made with Bill Cosby, will be released.

He is trying to enlist Cosby's help to promote arts in North Carolina. "I'm trying my best to get him to come down here," he says. "It's just a matter of time. The man is very busy."

All in all it is not a bad life for a man who "should" be playing basketball.

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Renowned dancer shares AIDS plight at conference

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BY CORTNEY L. HILL
THE CHRONICLE

The Women of Vision of New Jerusalem Missionary Baptist Church celebrated Black History Month with famous dancer and guest speaker Mel Tomlinson, who spoke last Friday on how the AIDS virus affected his life.

To begin the ceremony, Kevin Guy, Kashanna Brown and Brian Biggs, three students from the N.C. School of the Arts, began the ceremony by performing three African and

spiritual dance numbers. Following their performance was the Otesha Creative Arts Ensemble, which performed an African dance that included troupe members playing instruments to provide upbeat rhythmic tempos.

Tomlinson, born in Raleigh as one of six children, attended the N.C. School of the Arts at the age of 17. Since receipt of his bachelor of fine arts degree from NCSA, he has received

numerous awards and made many appearances in documentaries, cinema and television, but that night, Tomlinson did not speak on his many accomplishments. Instead, he informed the audience on how AIDS changes his life.

Once diagnosed with full-blown AIDS in July of 1995, he realized how precious life was. "Many tend to take for granted the simplicity of

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