

**The Project in Interpreting the Texas Past
Dr. Martha Norkunas, Project Director**

**African American Texans
Oral History Project**

Interviewee: Lauren Anderson

Interviewer: Clare Croft

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Transcriber: Shannon Morris

Teacher Questions

1) An African American Ballet Dancer

How diverse was the Houston Ballet Company (directed at the time by Ben Stevenson) while Lauren attended? As she entered the Company what was the attitude towards dancers of different races? How does she challenge people who ask her questions about what it is like being African American and a ballet dancer?

Running Time: 4min 54 sec

CC: How diverse was the school when you were growing up?

LA: Well, there was me. Let's see, there was Joy Huckabee, let's see, the first person in the school was Debby Allen. So there was Debby Allen. Then there was Joy Huckabee and I. So Debby's gone. There's Joy Huckabee and I. I can give you the chronological order of the Black chicks in the school. And then there was, I'm always there, I'm a constant. Then there was Tonya LeStrap [?] and I. And there was, after Tonya LeStrap there's a gap. There's guys that come and go, Keith Crossman, there's guys coming up.

And then there's Sandra Organ. Now Sandra Organ was an issue because I wanted to be the first Black female in the Company, but she got in, but that's okay because, I mean, she deserved it. She was older, she was better, she deserved it. But then when we became soloists together, we got bios we could put in the program and she showed me her bio and I was, like, "Okay, well, where is it?" She said, "Where's what?" I'm like, "Where is you are the first Black female in the Company? You got to put that in." She was like, "Why?" I'm like, "Because I wanted it and I would have put it in and you've got to put it in for me." So she did which, it was a big thing, you know.

There was Adrien Vincent James was the first Black guy in the Company. And he was in the Company when I was a kid because one of the times he used my dad in the Nutcracker. And this was what was so great about Ben is that, like Janie Parker who was our prima ballerina was my mom and this, I can't think of

his name right now, this other White guy with blue eyes and dark hair was my dad. It didn't matter; we were all dancers. He didn't say, "Well, she has to have a Black mom or a Black dad." No. That she's just one of the kids in the party and we're all dancers, it doesn't, you know. Not that he's color blind, because he's not. He said, "I'm not color blind. I can see that you're brown, that you're a Black person, but you're a dancer," you know. Which is what, which is like the healthiest attitude to have.

I think that whole color blind thing is kind of stupid. Because that means that you, you're, well, maybe you just can't see. If you're blind then you are color blind, but if you can see, there's no way you're color blind. I mean, that's just retarded [laughs]. It's just crazy. And we're in the visual arts, so I always thought, you know, being brown is going to make a difference because I'm going to stick out. How can you not look at me; I'm different. One of these things is not like the other, but it's not that one of these things doesn't belong. It's just one of these things is not like the other. So it was kind of, it was cool. I took it as a big advantage, being Black. But I do, I was happy when more Black people came, I was really happy [laughs]. But I mean, so then there was Sandy and I. And then, of course, the Company that had up to six or seven Black people at one time. That was kind of cool.

CC: What other things do you think about having changed from when you, say, joined the company or —

LA: How people view me.

CC: What do you mean by that?

LA: Well, it's that Black issue thing. That's what, when I'm doing an interview, what am I thinking about the most? How am I going to address this Black issue thing when they come to it? Because it's not an issue with me, which is probably a good thing, but I'm thinking, but I have to, I started to think about how it's going to be an issue with them and what they're going to be comfortable with, and it was one time in my life where I was into making people as uncomfortable as possible, which is kind of silly, but just to show them that this is really a stupid question.

Like how, well, the question generally is: "How do you feel being a Black ballerina?" "Black, and I guess like a ballerina." I mean, but that's a stupid answer, but it's the only answer I can really give. I don't know how I feel; I feel just like normal, because I've never felt any other way or been anything else. So I try to make people think about what they're asking me when it comes to that so it can actually have some relevance in the piece, if that makes any sense.

CC: Have you ever gotten to a place where you just don't want to talk about the whole race thing?

LA: No. Because it's not an issue with me. I mean it's obvious that I am, one of these things is not like the other, but, no. Because it's part of the whole, it's part of my whole thing. Being a Black ballerina is kind of part of it. At first I was like, what's the difference? What's the point? I'm like, "Well duh Lauren! It's a visual art, there's a big difference," you know. So then I sort of got into the brown tight thing, had to wear brown tights. And I thought that was kind of cool. But it's, you know it's never, it's not a non-issue, it's just isn't a big issue. And it's never been a problem for me because I know it has been a problem for some people and an issue for some people. But I have been so blessed and so fortunate that Houston Ballet has never, like I said before, has either shielded me; sheltered me from it or it's not been an issue with them, even if it's an issue with someone coming in, I've never known about it until either later or I just never knew about it. But I'm almost positive there's no way in today's society that, I just know I must have missed something because it's been too good and too smooth. Do you know what I'm saying?

2) **Preparing for a role**

**During her response to the question "how do you get into a role?"
Lauren Anderson talks about how she prepared for her role in Firebird**

and The Nutcracker. What does Lauren try to bring to each role she dances? What steps does she go through to transform herself into her role completely?

Running Time: 3min 30sec

CC: So how does that work? What do you think about when you're really trying to get to the essence of a role?

LA: Oh, god, these are good questions. Um, let's see, when I'm really, okay, I'm thinking, actually it happens, it starts off here at the, when I'm putting on my makeup. I'm like getting all into it and looking at the picture again of how I do it and then getting to it and by the time I've got that, because I go from a dead sleep, because when I perform, I have to at least close my eyes and sleep for about fifteen or twenty minutes because I've rehearsed that day. The day you perform you take class, you rehearse, you have your regular daily crap that goes on in your life. I don't want to take that on stage. So I let that go when I'm sleeping and it's like a new day. (Singing) "It's a new day, I get up." I get up like, ahhh, you know like uhhh, and I slowly become whatever is that I'm making up and putting on and becoming.

So, by the end of it I'm like, you know I've got my headpiece on and I'm even kind of going, looking at things thinking how I'm going to. And I go over in my head and I'm singing and probably singing some show tune at the top of my

lungs because I'm nervous as all get-out. And then I'll go out there and I'll warm up and I'm still, you know, even though I'm warming up, I'm going to start circling like a bird but I'm thinking about that even with my regular just, plies, I'm still thinking about it and I'm thinking about it in my head. But I've done all that in rehearsal to where it just kind of becomes natural and I kind of get into it, into what I have to be as a firebird that day. I even try to kind of wake up thinking, (whispers) oh, you know, I have a little bit more of, because birds are proud animals, no matter how, because The Firebird is a little bitty bird, but she's a big bird. She's like a big bird trapped in a little bird's body. But she's not like a parakeet, but she's just a proud little thing.

So I think that way probably when I get up in the morning, and I know that sounds real, like weird, but I do. I mean just like with the Sugar Plum Fairy, I've done it for twenty-four years; this will be my twenty-fourth year. She's never the same. But like one year I remember thinking, I'm just going to think about cotton candy and whatever and that was that one year and I thought, well, that was stupid, you know. Every year I think, god, what was I thinking? But now I think of just, it's funny, I just started thinking about Lawrence for some reason, that was the way I started thinking, I was like hmmm. But just like, you know, because she's a very soft kind of, she's a piece of candy. She's a fairy that's gone to a piece of candy so it's kind of like saccharine, it's not even a real, she doesn't have any warm blood rushing through her body, she's just kind of floaty and

even though technically she's hard, the stuff was, but she'd kind of airy. Does that make sense?

CC: Mmmm, hmmm.

LA: Yeah, she doesn't have much depth to her. So I have to think of things like that. Like what, who is she to me? I can't be somebody else doing it, my version of. It's my version of and sometimes the Sugar Plum Fairy is kind of, she's a little more serious but I've kind of softened her up quite a bit lately, to where I'm almost, not marking it, because I'm never marking it, but doing it as softly as possible. Or, I'm doing it as parodies, I mean, it's different, every time I do it, every time. I can't even think of how many shows I've done, but so, but when I'm in the studio I think of all that so that makes when I get here and to go there it's already in me, it's already there. All I've got to do is find the way to open, unlock the door to let it out. That's what I'm supposed to do when I go on the stage.

3) Not playing Clara

How did skin color effect Lauren Anderson getting certain roles? How did she feel about this?

Running Time: 3min 46 sec

CC: You mentioned that first Nutcracker which, of course, Nutcracker it's just like a rite, such an annual rite of passage.

LA: Every year. Every year. The past twenty-four years I've been the Sugar Plum Fairy. But it has never, it has not been the same any year or any show, if you can imagine that. When I first started the Nutcracker, let's see, I can do it this way. I've done every role in the Nutcracker, every female role, except for Clara and Clara's mother, okay? I've been two male roles, the Gopack, which is the Russian dude and a soldier. Because when we were about twelve or thirteen the girls were taller than the guys so we were the soldiers. And the choreography is a lot different now. Also, I've been Tina Turner, Rue Paul [?] and somebody else. I can't think of who else I've been. But anyway, so I mean, you know, because he had nutty nutcrackers, too.

CC: Right. So never Clara, huh?

LA: Naa. Of course, at the time that I would have been Clara was the early 70s and it was just a little different then. And you know what's weird? I didn't even think about it.

CC: Really?

LA: Yeah. I mean, I didn't think about the fact that I was Black and I'd probably never be Clara, you know. Because I only had like a two or three year spread and there were other little blonde girls, you know. But I never thought about it until later. But it's no big deal anyway.

CC: Do you remember when you kind of put it together?

LA: Oh, god. I was in the Company already. Because I hadn't really thought of any of that crap while I was, you know, a student. That would have held me back. I thought of it when I first realized it, I was eighteen and we were doing a, I'd just gotten into the Company, I think it was the first year, my first year in the Corps, in the Corps de Ballet, we were doing a ballet called Theme and Variations by George Balanchine. Fabulous ballet. And Hoagy Thomason, I shouldn't mention his name, but oh, well. Hoagy Thomason came down to set the ballet, on the Houston Ballet. And I wasn't necessarily in the corps, we had people going in and out, there were like four soloist girls and eight corps girls and a principal couple. Well, other people were in other rehearsals. So, you know, some of corps girls slipped into the soloist' spots and some of the people that were understudying slipped into those spots.

Well, he used the four apprentice girls and I was left in the back and he was, like, "well, can we get people from the school?" I was like, and I didn't know this.

This was told to me later. And I realized that this dude is tripping because I'm a Black chick and it's not uniform. Hum. Well, with a guy it's not normally that big a deal because guys are lifters and it's not, but when girls are in the corps de ballet, I guess that was a big deal. Well, with Houston Ballet it's never been a big deal. I've been put wherever any other corps girl's been. Then in soloists roles and obviously, principal because here I am. But I didn't notice it until it was, until like the end of that rehearsal and I was like, "He would have much rather left those two spots empty, bring two students in than to have to put me in. That's kind of crappy."

Well, you know, karma has its way of doing its thing ever since put in that ballet since I was in the lead. So anyway, I thought that was weird, but it didn't, it didn't faze me, well, actually it hurt. It hurt, but it hurt for about five minutes. Because I knew that I had to be better anyway just to be where I was, but forget that, I was going to be, that just kind of made me like, okay, forget that. I'm going to be even better to where you can't not, you can't NOT put me in something. So that was kind of my attitude.

4) **Role Model**

How does Lauren Anderson think of herself in terms of being a role model for children? How did the director of the Houston Ballet, Ben Stevenson, think of Lauren as a role model? What is Lauren able to

teach children about her life and her career path? How is she able to do this?

Running Time: 2min 45sec

CC: Doing, I'm sure, a lot of school shows over the years, how do you know when the kids are getting into it? How are they a different audience than—

LA: You can feel the energy, you can feel the energy. You can feel, especially in the beginning because when we first started doing shows Ben was like, "Okay, I'm walking into the student matinee, because a lot of the kids are Black. They have never seen ballet, or people of color that have never seen dance." I said, "Okay, great." Then I became a principal. That's like, well, you know, you kind of have the new people doing those shows. Ben still said, "Do you mind doing these shows?" because and I said, "Absolutely no, no problem." And like, when you go to Miller Theater, most of the people are people of color, so he'd try to have me on just because when you see someone that you can relate to, you're more interested in it, period.

Like a bunch of Chinese people will come see the Chinese acrobats. You'll see a bunch of Chinese people in the audience. I mean there'll be Black people and White people, too, but you'll see a lot of Chinese people there. You might not see so many Chinese people at Peter Pan, do you know what I'm saying? Things like that. So, and that's true. It's not like a racist thing, it's just the truth. So actually

if there's going to be a bunch of Black people in the audience, Ben wants, like, "We want you to be on so that they can see you in, a Black person in a positive way. You're doing the lead in Sleeping Beauty," or this or that or the other. And who says Aurora's White? Okay. Now, I say, "Well, it does say that Alice is White. She has blonde hair, she's a White chick, you know, with a blue dress." "Yeah, but all those other Fairy Tales, they don't describe anybody, the color of their skin." I said, "Well you're right." You're right with that, so, you know, art is not a color. The only color in art is on canvas, an artist puts on a canvas.

Other than that it's just a bunch of emotion and music and stuff. It's a bunch of stuff. Lights and mirrors or whatever, smoke and mirrors or whatever, but it's stuff. And it's positive stuff and it's classic. So, that's how I think I can use my role modelness and that's how I accept it is if I can make anything positive in a kid's life in any way, then yeah, I accept this role model thing full on. And it's great to go to the green room and see this little kid going, (indicating) you know, when I'm in a tutu or whatever, or getting to see, to see it up close to where it's reachable. I want them to know that I am reachable; I'm touchable, I'm not make-believe. Then it's like, "Well, then I can do it, too!" Ta-dah! We've done it. Then we've gone somewhere, we've actually touched somebody. Because that's not like we're saving lives here, bringing a ballet dancer, but if I can kind of take a couple of wrinkles out of someone's face or just help someone chill or relax or

help someone to have a good feeling or just be something positive going on in this crazy world. I guess there's some, there's a purpose for what I'm doing.

5) Teaching

When did Lauren Anderson start performing ballet? What is the experience of being on stage like for her? How does this feeling relate to teaching? Why did the director, Ben Stevenson, think she could easily teach a class?

Running Time: 3min 8sec

CC: When did you start performing?

LA: Ever since I was seven. Let's see, we did the Nutcracker. I started in September, that December I was a ginger coming out, in the Nutcracker, from behind the skirt and I was the one that licked the lollypop and handed it to Clara. And I remember going on stage and not being nervous. Ever since that day I've been a wreck. I've been nervous. I mean, I can't imagine, if I'm not nervous before a show something's wrong, something's wrong. But it's a good nervous, it's not like (sound), it's like (sound), you know, the stomach is kind of quivering a little bit and the adrenalin is pumping. But I will never forget how that felt to perform, to go on stage and just (sound). There's nothing like it; there's nothing like it. Well, teaching is almost like it, for me.

CC: How so?

LA: Well when you really teach, not just give a class, but teach, like you put, teaching is what--putting an idea out there, the student grasping it and applying it. That's teaching. Now if you, you can give a class and if they don't get it, you just gave a class, you didn't teach. But seeing them grasp it and get it, and the, what feels so good is to see them realize that they get it and see the excitement. And getting it consistently, ah, there's nothing like that. There's nothing like that, that's just, especially when, you know you're giving them the right thing, the right tool to get them, like to how to do a turn consistently every time. Just (sound) or on the music (sound), you know to have someone feel that that didn't feel it before. And to try to transfer that feeling into them, that is just amazing when that happens. It's almost like performing for me.

CC: When did you start teaching?

LA: You know, Ben was really bad because he, he said, "Okay, why don't you teach in the school this summer?" And I was like, "How am I going to teach? I don't know how to teach." Ben goes, "How many classes have you taken? You've taken class. You can give a class." I'm like, "Okay." And it had to have been when I was around a soloist or something so it must have been easily mid-80s. So I don't know, I guess I've been teaching about 20 years, I don't know. I have no idea, a long time. Easily a decade and a half, easily. Well, actually I was

giving classes back then, now I teach, and I love it. I love it. Because, I mean, why hold all this knowledge? There's nothing I like, I'm not saying that I'm all knowledgeable and all-knowing, it's just nothing like experience and I've been dancing for twenty-three, twenty-four years. So I've got just plain old experience whether it's a good experience or a bad experience, I've got experience so I've gone through something to know halfway what I'm doing. So there's no reason to hoard it and that's how the classics have been passed down is through people who've done them. So it's like my duty. It's not my duty because a duty is like something you're asked to do but you don't really, necessarily want to do. It's my calling, to teach and to give it back. What am I going to save it for? I have no reason to save the fact that I can walk on stage and go like this. Why save that? Why not pass it on to someone to try to feel that? I have no reason to save that. What am I going to do? Give it to my son? He doesn't need that to live life, you know.