

En Pointe at the White House

With a Fete for Founder Arthur Mitchell, the Bushes Give a Lift to Dance Theatre of Harlem

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There were ballerinas and cavaliers, Broadway singers and a country crooner, but it took the Rev. Al Green to really get the party started at the White House on Monday night.

The soul man turned soul saver worked his magic on the East Room crowd, gathered to honor the Dance Theatre of Harlem and its famed founder, Arthur Mitchell.

"I-I-I-I, I'm so in love with you," Green rasped in his signature falsetto, arcing back like a bow about to launch its arrow.

Of course, there were many in the audience of 80 or so who could sing Green's enduring hit "Let's Stay Together" in their sleep. But was one of them President Bush? Green put him to the test.

"Ooh, loving you forever," Green purred, "is what I -- " Suddenly, he thrust the microphone right up to the lips of the surprised president, who recovered enough to mouth something back.

Whatever it was could not be heard, but Green was more than satisfied.

"He said 'Nee-eee-eeed!' " squealed the amazed hitmaster, hitting even higher notes than he'd been singing. "He did! He said 'Neeeee!' " After laughter and applause for the president's grace note, the set then became a singalong -- was that Karl Rove joining in? - - and then a dance-along, after Mitchell, a former star of the New York City Ballet, pulled Laura Bush up onstage.

President Bush, apparently pumped up after parrying to Green's thrust, followed suit, taking with him Shirley Massey, wife of Walter Massey, president of Morehouse College.

"We got the president up onstage!" exclaimed Mitchell afterward. Not a man who ordinarily likes to share the spotlight, Mitchell nevertheless gave Bush points for effort, if not for style. "He did really well," Mitchell said. "He was tapping his foot, and . . . moving. You know."

Mitchell is no stranger to the White House -- he says he has been invited there by every president since John F. Kennedy. He's been there so often he knew many of the waiters by name. But this night was different. The dinner and performance by members of the Dance Theatre of Harlem and others were the work of entrepreneur and philanthropist

Catherine Reynolds, chairwoman of the board of the predominantly black ballet company. The show will air this summer on PBS.

"What better place to showcase Dance Theatre of Harlem during Black History Month than the White House?" she said. "It's a ballet company in the midst of Harlem -- that in and of itself is so American."

The presidential affair, she said, sprang from a conversation she had a few months ago with Laura Bush about the ailing company, on hiatus for the past year and a half because of rising debt.

Reynolds said the first lady asked, "How can I help?" Reynolds had her answer ready, and the result was a cozy little black-tie dinner in Mitchell's honor, with the guests seated at intimate round tables mounded with roses. Among the invited: Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, undoubtedly relieved to be anywhere but in the Senate hot seat where he'd spent the day; donors and arts officials such as the Ford Foundation's Susan Berresford, Kennedy Center President Michael Kaiser and Lonnie Bunch, founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture; and a contingent of the black elite, such as "60 Minutes" correspondent Ed Bradley and Spelman College President Beverly Daniel Tatum.

The menu favored creamy comfort foods: puree of parsnip soup, cheesy grits and spinach alongside roast kobe beef, a yellow pepper and avocado terrine, and whipped-cream-dolloped lemon custard cakes with coconut ice cream and a blackberry-ginger sauce, thick as syrup. It was not fare for the calorie-conscious. But there weren't many of those to be seen, anyway; the dancers were off warming up for the performance that was to follow.

Filing into the East Room after dinner, we found ourselves chatting with Andrew Card, Bush's chief of staff, who seemed eager to show his own artsy side.

"I hit a crossroads when I was a senior in high school," Card said, describing a choice he faced between accepting a scholarship to the Hartt School of Music (on the strength of his trumpet playing) in West Hartford, Conn., or a Navy ROTC scholarship at the University of South Carolina.

Guess which one he chose.

Still, he said, "I believe in the arts very strongly. Every once in a while I get the trumpet out. Of course, my wife wants me to play it in the closet."

It being Monday night, and close to 9 by this time -- fans of Fox's "24" know how sacrosanct that hour is -- we pressed Card on another issue: Did he ever tune in to the Kiefer Sutherland thriller, which recently revealed that the chief of staff of the show's president is a murderous villain of presidency-destroying dimension?

Card's eyebrows shot up merrily. "I hear the chief of staff is kind of a bad guy. Didn't he drug the first lady?" Yep, and Card's TV counterpart also conspired to engineer a nerve gas leak to incriminate a terrorist organization to prove it had weapons of mass destruction.

Card backed up in mock horror. "I'm not him," he said emphatically, eyes wide, waving his arms in front of himself to ward off any notion of a link to reality. "I didn't do that." And then he was gone, spurred by a desperate need to catch up with his wife.

Addressing the audience, Mitchell pointed out his company's oft-reported origins, that it was the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 that inspired him to found a classical ballet company of African American dancers -- which is, all these years later, still a unique institution.

Left unsaid was what it would mean for black ballet dancers if such a company could not survive. In fact, none of the speeches mentioned Dance Theatre of Harlem's having come so close to financial ruin, or the fact that its laid-off dancers' unemployment claims ran out long ago.

Bush, seated with his wife in the front row and within a few feet of the small stage, smiled throughout the show, which included children as well as professionals. Hands clasped in his lap, he kept up a steady piston action with one knee -- an intriguing tic, yet what did it mean? Restlessness? Excitement? A dream of mashing the pedals on a mountain bike?

Harolyn Blackwell, Audra McDonald and LeAnn Rimes each sang solos as well as songs that accompanied more dancing. It was all very classy, very polite, if somewhat restrained.

Enter Al Green, the great uncorker, who got throats to open and hands to clap -- some on the beat, quite a few off -- and got the president to join in the dance.

"The whole evening was so relaxed," Mitchell enthused afterward. "That was a major miracle."

Speaking of miracles, Mitchell stated his favored outcome: "I hope this opens the door, that dance becomes a line item in the federal budget so we can take the arts all across America."

A different miracle may be a bit closer to actually coming to pass. When she became board chairman and vowed to get the troupe back on its feet, Reynolds told The Washington Post that "failure is not an option." So how close to success -- and public performances -- is the company now?

"We're close," she said. "We'll probably be making an announcement in the summer."

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