

CAMARA HOLLOWAY: [00:00:00] I'm Camara Holloway, and I'm the project manager for the Romare Bearden Catalogue Raisonné. I'm joined by Josie Naron, coordinator of the Wildenstein Plattner Institute's Oral History Project. It is February 27th, 2023, and we are interviewing Sheila Rohan. She's a noted dancer, the sister-in-law of Romare Bearden, and a board member of the Romare Bearden Foundation. Thank you, Ms. Rohan, for joining us. We're so happy that you could take some time to share some of your recollections with us.

SHEILA ROHAN: Yeah, I'm glad to be here, yes.

CH: Good, good. To get started, we want to start at the very beginning. So, where and when were you born?

SR: I was born and raised on Staten Island. Uh, New York.

CH: Okay. And who were your parents? They were immigrants to -- from St. Maarten. Is that correct?

SR: Both my mother and father were from St. Maartens.

CH: And why did they [00:01:00] come to America and end up in Staten Island?

SR: To make a better living. What most -- what most immigrants do, to just find a better -- a better living. And to -- my mother was very young. And she came by herself on the boat and stopped at Ellis Island and went through all of that. And from Ellis Island, they sent them to, um, Rosebank, Staten Island, because that's where the immigration center was. I don't know if they, uh, what vaccinations or whatever. So they ended up on Staten Island and we did have family members there, were already there on Staten Island. And so, from there, she just -- I guess she moved in with some relatives. My father didn't

come 'til later. He did -- he went into this army, the French army. [laughs] So he had to do, [00:02:00] uh, you know, I think maybe three years of that.

So he wasn't here. He didn't come to Staten Island until later. But, um, my mother moved around a bit. I know there was a stint that she -- a while that she was in Perth Amboy, New York [New Jersey]. And I think maybe Nanette was born in Perth Amboy, her and my older sister, Evelyn. But then she moved back to Staten Island.

CH: Okay. So how did your -- your parents met in Staten Island, or did they know each other already?

SR: No, no. From St. Maartens and the same area.

CH: Oh, okay.

SR: French quarter of St. Martin. Yes.

CH: Okay. And you have, um, eight sisters. Is that correct?¹

SR: Yes, eight sisters. No brothers.

CH: No brothers. So how was it growing up with that many together?

SR: Well, it was, um -- uh, interesting. [laughter] [00:03:00] Well, I guess we did fuss and carry on and, you know, wear each other's clothes and sneak their money or whatever, but we were really a close-knit family. Even to this day. We -- Nanette especially was a very nice young woman. She was always friendly. She had a lot of friends and she was very pretty.

¹ There were eight sisters total; Sheila was one of them.

Everybody loved her. And she was like, a peaceful kind of person. I don't remember her ever even raising her voice. And I was the youngest, so I was just a baby, you know, in this house of all these women. But we -- we all managed to get along.

And my mother, so my father died when I was about a year old. So she had me and my other sister, Dolores, who was just a toddler, and all these children. But [00:04:00] she managed to raise them on her own. When Nanette and Evelyn got old enough after school, after they graduated, they did go to work and they contributed to the household.

CH: And, um, was the household involved with the arts? Was it creative?

SR: No, not at all. But my mother had a sense of culture. Like, my sisters took piano lessons. And at the church, there was always some kind of cultural function going on. We were very close. It was a small AME church in the neighborhood. And, um, my sister sometimes would play the piano for different functions. She, my mother had an appreciation. She knew that art was a good thing and that we should, that we should know about it, but it wasn't like -- we weren't drawing or sketching [00:05:00] or, [laughs] you know, anything like that. Just the -- whatever the school gave us, as far as, you know, art classes and whatnot. And, uh -- but, um -- we were, my sisters always took me to museums and libraries. So that's what I mean that my mother knew that it had -- it was good for us. That it was something we had to -- a part of our education.

CH: Yeah. So how did you become interested in dance?

SR: Well, um, little -- I got caught up in one of the polio epidemics. I guess it was, say, the late '40s, '50, because I was born in '41. But I wasn't stricken too badly, and the doctor said I needed exercise. And so, in those days there weren't gyms that you could go to, or, and, or gymnastics or anything. So there [00:06:00] was -- a neighborhood school, dance school. You know, basic ballet, tap -- rhythm, they called it, and whatnot. So my mother enrolled me in that school. And I was there for a few years, maybe about four years or something. And I loved it. I took to it right away. And the director of the school told my mother that I should get more training, that I had talent for it. And that's when her and Nanette got together. Nanette was already living in Manhattan and working in Manhattan.

So, on Saturdays, she would meet me at the Staten Island Ferry on the, um, Manhattan side, and take me to dance classes. And, um, she paid for everything. She paid for my classes and my outfits and my shoes and whatnot. [00:07:00] So, she wanted me to take it seriously and I did.

CH: Yeah. So you became a professional dancer. When did that begin?

SR: When I joined the Dance Theatre of Harlem.

CH: Okay.

SR: Yes. In 1969, Arthur Mitchell decided to make a black ballet company. And I auditioned, and I got in. Also, it was Nanette's -- pushed me to do it. I never -- I didn't feel like I was good enough to go to a ballet audition. I had auditioned for other things, but, you know, classical ballet? [laughs] I held back a little, but she encouraged me to go. It was up in Harlem. And I went, and I passed the audition. And I was there

for about five years, dancing with the -- under Arthur Mitchell.

CH: Yeah. So what was it like to be an African-American ballerina and to work for the dance [00:08:00] company?

SR: It was, um, [pauses] -- it was maybe one of the highlights of my life. You know, it was very hard, very strenuous, you know, on the body. And then, there was -- I had children. That's another thing. I had, I had three children, and I was running back and forth from Staten Island all the way up to 152nd Street. [laughs] That was every day, sometimes on Saturdays. But, um, I learned a lot. I really learned all my craft there at Dance Theatre of Harlem. Because before that I had just done, you know, neighborhood functions, or I would dance with small companies around the city, down in the Village, like that. But Dance Theatre of Harlem really built me and molded me into a classical ballet dancer.

CH: And, um, what was the community's [00:09:00] response to the company?

SR: They loved it. They were really for us, you know. They would wait -- as we got off the train and we're walking up to 152nd, you know, people would be waving at us and -- "There go the ballet dancers," and make fun of the way we walked, you know, with our feet turned out and [laughs] -- always very cordial. Yes. We, Dance Theatre of Harlem started after a few years -- they had a street festival, where you blocked off the street. But it was sponsored by Dance Theatre of Harlem, and the people came, they loved it. It was wonderful. Yeah.

CH: Yeah. One of the things we read was that you were able to dye your tights and shoes to match your skin tone. Who came up with that idea, do you know?

SR: One of -- um, a dancer named Llanchie Stevenson. She started wearing brown tights over her other tights. Because she [00:10:00] liked it and because it made her thighs look thinner, and [laughs] -- so she preferred that. And so, Mr. Mitchell, I guess he was watching this and he says, "This is an idea, let's try it. Let's try the beige tights and also the shoes." So, at the very start of it, we would take the pink tights home and dye them in tea, you know, everyone trying to get their own skin colors. You see, there were some girls who were darker, and some were lighter.

And we did it. And then, from there, the wardrobe mistress, Zelda Wynn, she started mixing things and trying different dyes to get this color, these different colors. And that's how we started. For pointe shoes, we used makeup at first. Your base, whatever your makeup was, foundation, we did that. And then there were shoe sprays, like [00:11:00] beige. And stuff that we would, yeah, we would put on our shoes and the ribbons and everything. So, we were beige or brown for tights and shoes.

CH: And everyone --

SR: And they do it to this day, Dance Theatre of Harlem, has kept to that, yeah.

CH: And everybody liked the ability to do that?

SR: Yes, yeah. It wasn't an accepted change. Yeah.

CH: So you were able to work with major dancers and choreographers like Arthur Mitchell, like you mentioned, and I hear, uh, the name Louis Johnson?

SR: Oh, yes.

CH: Geoffrey Holder, Carmen de Lavallade.

SR: Exactly. But Geoffrey Holder came to Dance Theatre of Harlem to do -- he did two pieces on him, one of them *Douglas*, where I played the [00:12:00] bride in that piece. One of his ritual ballets -- and also *Banda*, he did for us. So we did get to work with him. What a wonderful, wonderful man, Geoffrey Holder. Later -- and then Louis Johnson came to Dance Theatre to do *Forces of Rhythm*. Which was a ballet that incorporated classical, contemporary, and African. So, *Forces of Rhythm*. And that became a signature piece for the company. You know, we closed with that sometimes. Piece, our *Revelations*, [laughs], so to speak.

CH: Okay.

SR: Yeah. I worked, after I left Dance Theatre of Harlem, I worked with Louis for a while. He was teaching at the Henry Street Settlement, down in the, I think, East Village. And he was teaching and running the dance program there. So [00:13:00] I, he had a small company called the Louis Johnson Ensemble, and I was part of that and I would go and also teach in the school. This, and this was after I had left, yes, and I was working with Nanette. Because her company -- 1976, she got incorporated. She was the Nanette Bearden Contemporary Dance Theatre.

CH: Right, right.

SR: And she met and, and brought in other great choreographers to work with us. Mainly the one was Talley Beatty. He came in and did a couple of ballets for us. Louis Johnson, again, he put some on her -- um, I don't know if you know John Jones and -- [UNCLEAR]. A lot of wonderful, wonderful choreographers worked with Nanette and that company, that early company.

CH: [00:14:00] Yeah. How did she get the idea to start the company?

SR: Well, she loved dance. She always did. Before she started the company, she had been working with, uh, other groups on dance, and even performing. So, she loved getting everyone together, all the dancers and performers together, and just being creative. So, this was an incentive. So, she had the chamber dance group. Uh, no, first it was the New World Dancers. Then later on, the Chamber Dance Group, and that evolved into Nanette Bearden Contemporary Dance Theatre. Yeah.

CH: So out of the choreographers, um, I'm sorry to cut you off, I just wanted to know, like, did you have a favorite choreographer?

SR: Louis Johnson.

CH: Really, yes.

SR: I will say also that he was the man who did the *Wiz* movie, the one with Michael Jackson and Diana Ross? All that dancing is Louis's. [00:15:00]

CH: Oh, wonderful. Yes, I love the scene where they dance.

SR: Yeah. Yeah. And there was - there were many dancers there from Dance Theatre of Harlem too, in it. I missed it. I-- [laughs] I wasn't able to be in it. But yeah, that's Louis.

CH: Okay. And what was your most memorable performance that you recall?

SR: Well, in the very beginning, um, Dance Theatre of Harlem, we went to Spoleto, Italy. And we had only been together maybe

two years or so. But it was my first trip out of the United States and then you're going to Europe. [laughs] So, it was like a really big deal, and then Spoleto was so beautiful. And there were companies there from all over the world, not just dance. There was opera. And drama, music, all on this [00:16:00] festival. So this was -- and, um, we danced and got a standing ovation, a long standing ovation. And that I believe was one of my favorable, um, memories -- that we had, in such a short amount of time, were able to perform and have so many people appreciate what we were doing.

CH: Wonderful, wonderful. So, the Nanette Bearden Contemporary Dance Theatre. How did that stand out for you from the other companies that you had worked with?

SR: Well, she was -- um, I don't know if stand out. Well, it was never what you would call a top company. We were more on, like, say, the B-list. Even though she had some really good dancers that would come by, people would -- and she was [00:17:00] known, the company was known, partly because of the good choreographers she had, and partly because it was a place where you could work and, um -- work on your craft. There were dancers and actresses and I know, to this day, you see them on television all over, who came through Nanette's company when they first came to New York to start their careers. You know, they would come to Nanette's for -- they were free classes for the dancers, anyway, not students. And, um, you know, you're working with good choreographers, you got free space, and it was just that type of atmosphere where you could grow. You were getting -- it was a good company to get experience.

So that was what she was known for. It was a performing company. She had a lot of performances. She managed to get bookings. And even though, of course, we didn't make a

[00:18:00] lot of money. We never did. But like I said, it was somewhere for you to go and learn and grow as a dancer.

CH: Yeah. So it sounds like Nanette was really instrumental with your development as a dancer, and maybe we can turn a little bit to her and her relationship with Bearden. Do you remember how they met?

SR: I believe it was at an NAACP affair. Yes, they met -- they met there. And, um, I know at home, she told my mother she had, you know, someone [laughs] she wanted us to meet. And I guess they were engaged maybe by then, and she brought him home. And, Romie and my mother, they got along right away. They just, you know, she [00:19:00] accepted him. She liked him. And then they --

CH: What do you remember about him? Like, what was your first impression?

SR: Well, at first I thought he was a white man. Because -- [laughs] a lot of people did, because he was so light and then he was, you know, soft spoken. But, um, yes, I was happy to meet him and I was happy for her.

CH: And how did the family take to him?

SR: Very well. Right away everyone -- like, he fit right in. There was no one, I think that, you know, had grudges against him or anything. They really -- and after a while, we came to love him. You know, and the children called him Uncle Romie, you know. [laughs] So, yeah.

CH: Yeah. So they had a loft together on Canal Street. Do you remember going there?

SR: Oh, of course. I would go there, like, after classes and before. And [00:20:00] then I helped Nanette with the dance company so there was always like, costumes and other things to do concerning that, so I was often there, the loft. The loft was crowded. He had a lot of his artwork there.

And of course, you know about the large library. And of course, he could talk about any book that you -- I don't know if he read every book, but any book that you happened to mention, he would say, Oh, yes, and so and so. You know? [laughs] So, uh, yeah. And they had dinners. Romie sometimes would cook, and Nanette, and there were dinners and always someone interesting about, coming to visit.

CH: Do you remember anybody that stands out, who came to visit?

SR: Oh, [pauses] no, not -- well, I've [00:21:00] heard of, but not when I was there.

CH: So, were you involved with any of Bearden's dance collaborations that he did when --

SR: Well, he -- the first one he did with um, Dianne McIntyre. Where they did, I think, Ancient Voices.

CH: Mm-hm.

SR: Yeah. He -- yes, I can remember being there when they were discussing costumes and, um, music -- and I wasn't a part of that then. I think I was maybe still at Dance Theatre of Harlem then. I wasn't in that production, but I did know the dancers who were performing. Yeah.

CH: Yeah. And how did Bearden get involved with the Nanette Bearden Contemporary Dance Theatre? He helped support the efforts, correct?

SR: [00:22:00] Yes, and that was with his prints. Of course he did that -- we've seen that beautiful print of the dancer with the dress flowing over. Yeah, he -- that's how he helped her. He did these -- he gave her signed prints for her to sell, the lithographs to sell. And also, I think he -- he did work on some brochures. Like playbills, he would do the front cover. And of course, money. Because Nanette wasn't working then, so I'm sure that Romare was supporting her efforts with the company, even though she was trying to get grants and funding from other sources, especially when she had projects going on. But I think Romie was more or less supporting her efforts with the dance company.

CH: You called him Romy. How -- how did he pronounce his full name? [00:23:00] Was it Romare or Romary?

SR: No, Romare.

CH: Romare.

SR: It definitely was -- I know, I hear some people say Romary, but no.

CH: No, no.

SR: Romare. [laughs]

CH: [laughs] Okay. Do you have a favorite story about Bearden that you can remember, something that strikes you particularly vividly about him?

SR: Well I know -- in their relationship, he would be -- well, you know, he was always busy creating something. So, he would, um, be fussing. Not yelling or anything, but just fussing.

"Where are my socks? Where are my pencils? Where are my --"
And Nanette would be calm and she'd say, "Okay Rome, they're over here. Okay, Rome, just a moment." [laughs] You know, it was that type of, [laughs] as I saw it, relationship. Yeah. He was demanding he could be [00:24:00] demanding, but she -- I think she understood him. She knew him. So, she didn't get rattled by his outbursts or anything. Yeah.

I don't know, I'm just thinking, in St. Maartens -- you know, they went every year. He loved it, St. Maartens. It was his quiet time. And, uh, but he still would have our family that lived there, the Rohans or what, he would still have people come in, family would come in and they would cook and whatever. And he would love -- and he talked. He loved to talk and be the center of attraction. [laughter] So, yes. And, um, and the people loved it. You know, our relatives over, they kind of doted on him. So, I remember that, sitting around the table at long dinners -- meaning a long time. You know, we would sit and he would talk, and we would [00:25:00] talk about a lot of things.

CH: Did you ever get a chance to watch him work?

SR: Yes, I -- well, one time when they were on the fifth floor -- that was the first apartment and he had his tools and things there. And he was cutting up papers, cutting out things, and um, I was picking them up, whatever, the scraps, and getting ready to throw them away, but Nanette said no. [laughs] She had a bin, it was like a special bin, where she put the scraps, whatever he wasn't using, you know, at that time. I do remember that, yeah.

CH: So, maybe you can tell us a little bit about what happens when -- so Bearden passes away in 1988, and Nanette decides [00:26:00] to fulfill his wish to have the Romare Bearden Foundation.

SR: Yes. Uh-huh. Yeah. So, my sisters, my sister Dorothy and Evelyn and Marie. They got together and said that they would help to get the Foundation started. Um, Nanette took care of all the logistics, the legal stuff of being incorporated and whatnot. And -- but in my sister's house, Evelyn, on Staten Island, we made space in the basement. And we started then working on the Foundation, and also -- trying to get some of his works together. Well, archives, trying to separate his works from other things, you know, non-works. So, um, yeah, and that's how we started. And then I guess the hardest part was when she was looking for funding [00:27:00] and writing those grants. And of course, we were -- none of us were really -- you know, we really didn't know what we were doing. I was much younger then, still dancing and performing, but I would help my sisters whenever I could. I would come over and -- uh, so we formed a board and -- I don't know if I was on the board at that time when it first started, but I did come on later. And I've been on and off the board for many years. . Yeah. But uh, yeah, that's how it started, in the basement of my sister's house on Staten Island, trying to get it together.

My sister Dorothy was quite good at it because she had experience -- because she worked in politics on Staten Island. And she worked in the library so she had more experience in how to move that paperwork around.[00:28:00] So her and Evelyn, you know, helped to get us started, bookkeeping and whatnot.

CH: Was the Nanette Bearden Gallery still open at this point?

SR: It didn't open until, I think, after the foundation was started. I forget the years. But yes, it was one thing that Romie wanted, also, for the -- for the artists that lived there on St. Maartens. And all the Caribbean, really, was that kind of gallery that he -- he said there should be something here. You know, for the people, for the local artists, and that's when they -- she opened the Nanette Bearden Fine Arts Gallery in St. Maartens.

CH: Yeah. So what do you see the Foundation [00:29:00] doing to really help preserve Bearden's legacy? Like, what accomplishments do you think that the Foundation has been able to achieve?

SR: Well, with the Cinque talks, the Cinque program that of course you know the background was -- Cinque was one of Romie's projects. To keep that going. To have scholarships for young artists, which we do have at the Harlem School of the Arts. And -- we had a huge event. I think it was at our 50th? Maybe it was our 50th anniversary, incorporating -- most of the galleries in New York -- everyone was going to do something Bearden.² Whatever it was, whatever they could do. [00:30:00] That was a great moment. Also, getting his book, getting him published. And, um, his children's story, *Little Dan*, getting that published. And, of course, to keeping his artwork moving around, the traveling exhibitions that -- that Diedra takes care of. Yeah, that also. Just trying to keep him, you know, out in the world. Projected out. And now, we're building the board. And we're expanding the Foundation. So, we're hoping now to be more international. Because, uh, the only ones we've touched, I think, is the Tate in London. But, that's our -- that's a priority, for us to get Bearden out

² This may refer to either the citywide celebration of Bearden in conjunction with the traveling retrospective *The Art of Romare Bearden* (2004), or to the celebration of the centennial of Bearden's birth (2011).

there more on the international level. Also, we have branding now, we started [00:31:00] focusing on branding and merchandising. So, we're hoping that would help also. Besides bringing in money. Yeah.

CH: Good. Josie, did you have any follow up questions?

JOSIE NARON: Sure, I can definitely, uh, [laughs] circle back to some things. I'm just curious. So I'm assuming that you, you met Romare before you knew that he was an artist. Or, or did you know his --

SR: He was introduced to me as an artist.

JN: Okay.

SR: She introduced him as an artist.

JN: But you knew him before seeing his work.

SR: Yes.

JN: Okay. Do you remember the first time you saw some of his work and like, what you thought of it?

SR: Yes, I thought it was [sighs, pauses] so inspired. I thought he was brilliant, because [laughs] -- I think I once saw the photo montages. [00:32:00] The street and the others and all of those people who he tried to put into the painting. The different characters. And you could feel the different faces. Of course, some were African masks and such, but you could feel that he knew them and understood them.

And he wanted to show them to the world. He wanted to show this -- oh, don't know, I guess Harlem. He just wanted to show

these black faces and the life that they had to live. So that made a big impression on me. And of course I love the watercolors, the St. Maarten watercolors, but I like -- but his collages. And especially those early collages.

CH: Did you go to the [00:33:00] exhibition at Cordier & Ekstrom when he first showed those works? It was 1964?

SR: Yeah, I don't think I was there. I don't remember that. No.

JN: Do you remember going to any other like, gallery shows around the city?

SR: Oh, sure. I just remember the -- well, MoMA, when they took *The Block*. Yeah, when they took *The Block*, MoMA. And of course exhibits that -- later on with DC Moore. I'm not really remembering the early ones when he was with, you know, the other galleries, ACA or whatever.

JN: Did you ever feel like, I don't know like his work inspired your dancing or kind of vice versa?

SR: Oh, of course. He always complimented me. Uh, he, you know, on -- saying was very [00:34:00] nice, very good, you're coming along, yeah. You know, he didn't come to many -- only maybe if Nanette was having a special showing of something, he would. He didn't always come to, uh, the concerts, but when he did, he was proud of her. You know? That she held it together. And I think he was proud of me, that I was keeping up with it and, you know, trying to make something of myself.

JN: Could you tell us, um, I don't know, anything else about kind of the dynamic between him and Nanette? I just, I feel like with everybody we've talked to, like, their relationship

is just so vivid. Like, I can imagine them, you know, yelling from room to room to each other.

SR: Yeah, because. I don't know, they got along. They got along, I think, very [00:35:00] well. Well, of course, because she gave him his way. But, um, I never saw him go like, overboard. Like, really disrespected her, you know. It was like, minor little silly things around the house or, um, Oh, I know. Nanette was always late. And he hated that. You know, he wanted everything ready to go at the time you were supposed to go, but she for some reason was all -- even with the dance company. You know, we'd be waiting to start the performance, and she wasn't there, so we'd be holding the curtain, you know? [laughs] After a while, we didn't wait for her, we just went on.

But for some reason -- because she had so many things on her mind, so many things scattered, you know, that she couldn't -- but I know that was one thing he didn't like at all. [00:36:00] He liked -- he liked things to be ready, ready to go.

JN: Fair enough. Um, [laughter] Now, I don't remember who it was, but I know that -- maybe it was Diedra -- who said that, um, she always felt like Nanette really understood his work and really could like talk about it in a way that

SR: She loved his work. She really did. I think this was probably -- besides loving him, the part of her respect for him and able to cope, you know, with his whatever [laughs] was because she really thought he was an amazing artist. She loved his work, and had such high respect and regard for him. And then, you know, like, she used to name -- he would ask her, "What should I call this?" And she would, you know, she would look and ponder on it and think [00:37:00] and come up with

beautiful -- Beautiful titles. Yeah. And that made her a part of the work also, yeah.

JN: Yeah, absolutely. Camara, is there anything --

CH: Yeah.

JN: We can just keep bouncing it back and forth and --
[laughter]

CH: No, I was wondering about -- did working with the Foundation, um, inspire you to organize your group of dance elders, the 152nd Street Black Ballet Legacy?

SR: Well, I wouldn't say being with the Foundation, you know, prompted that. I know it does help that I know, you know, what it is to set up an organization like that, the 501c3, and all those things that go with it. But, uh, I don't know if I would say it was because of my work with the Foundation [00:38:00] that -- yeah.

JN: Could you tell us a little bit about your group?

SR: Yes. We are five of the original ballerinas from Dance Theater of Harlem. We first got together. We were going to talk about our memories -- and not just us. We were going to reach out to all those dancers that went through the first ten years. We had to narrow it down. So we put it for the first 10 years. And we were going to reach out and we made a lot of phone calls and we had Zoom calls, trying to get people to talk about their experiences with Arthur Mitchell and the Dance Theatre of Harlem. And that's how it started. But that became -- that kind of petered out, um, maybe because we didn't have the help that we needed to get all of this done. So, um --

CH: Were you trying to [00:39:00] collect the memories as stories?

SR: Yes. Like you say, oral history. And then we thought -- and then we were thinking maybe a book. A coffee-table book with, um, the picture of the dancer and the bio next to it. And this and that. And then, of course, someone said, Well, that's very expensive. [laughs] You know. It's an expensive endeavor. So we put that on the back burner. And then we found out Dance Theatre of Harlem came out with a book themselves, uh, last year, called the Dance Theatre of Harlem. So, yeah, we wanted to become -- and we still do, want to become a resource for dancers. Not just Dance Theatre of Harlem, but for all the dancers, people of color. Be some, a resource for them, and help them in their careers, before and after. Because that "after" transition is really [00:40:00] important.

So, those just, and of course, as we grow and get funding, we want to have scholarships. For especially the smaller companies that --, you know, it's very expensive to have a dance career now. The pointe shoes are, I hear, they're almost a hundred dollars a pair. You know, so how can you afford -- if you're in a little school somewhere in, in New Jersey. How can your parents afford to keep -- to give you what you need to make a good career. So that's also -- and also the history of dance and black dance and dance by people of color. That we put an emphasis on that and try, you see, to get that -- to get that out.

I know there's been a [00:41:00] lot of work in this area lately with the diversity and inclusion and everything, but we would like to be a part of that. Do whatever we can. And there is a book coming out. It'll be coming out next year. It's

finished this year, but they told me it'll take about a year for it to get -- for it to get published. It's called *The Swans in Harlem*, and that's us. So it's a book on not just -- it's not a dance book. It's going to be about before, during, and after Dance Theatre of Harlem. Yeah, so, yeah. We're called The 152nd Street Black Ballet Legacy.

CH: Yeah. And what would you like people to know about Black dancers who pursue ballet?

SR: That we have every right to. [00:42:00] Because of restrictions, false restrictions. Your body's not right. Your color's not right. You see, those kind of restrictions. But I happen to know dancers who are -- just as good, if not better, than some of the dancers you see, you know, on the ballet stage. You see -- well, Ailey has proven that.

They're some of the best dancers in the world now, really. Uh, and it's not classical ballet, but it's certainly classical contemporary dance. You see? And that's what they're trying to do with Dance Theatre of Harlem, bring the -- Bring it out to the world so that they can be measured, along with the other great companies, ABT, New York City, to get them to a level [00:43:00] that they will be considered a part of the classical ballet legacy. But we Black dancers have not been able to get in that, to be a part of that, because there are -- there is this restriction. Against, um, you know, just who we are. But, um, it's happening. There is a lot of work being done on that now. We are finally opening some people's minds. Opening their minds to, to -- for us.

CH: Is there something that you think we should know about Romare that we didn't touch on?

SR: You know, there's been so much written about him and, and, already, it says that[00:44:00] he really was a nice person, a good person. It wasn't like he just put on an act when he walked in the room. You see, he was what he was. And he did care very much for his people. He understood it, he saw it, and he wanted, and he related to it.

See, and he wanted to, he wanted his art to reflect that, you see? The life we live here, especially in this country. So, um. I don't know.

I'm glad I knew him. I'm glad he was a part of my family. I have, I admire and respect him. You know, whether he was my brother-in-law or not. He's a man that I'm, I'm really feel fortunate that I, [00:45:00] I had the chance to meet and live with.

CH: And is there something that you think that we should know about you that we didn't cover?

SR: Well, if it wasn't for Nanette, I wouldn't be here today. I wouldn't be dancing. I'm sure of it. Because she -- you know, some people said, Well, she's living her life through you. You know, they would say. But I, I think she just loved the theater. She loved dance, and she did want the best for me, because, like, every time, say, I got pregnant. And then, I'd say, "Well, I guess that's the end. You know, why, why would I bother now?" She would call and say, "Well, it's time to get back into class." And I'm saying, "Well, is she crazy?" You know, but that's who she was. [00:46:00] She always supported me. Moral support and financial. She -- always put me out in the front. You know, in her company, I was the principal dancer. You know, so I wouldn't really have a career in dance if it wasn't for Nanette.

CH: That's wonderful. Josie, did you have any other questions?

JN: No, this has been so wonderful. Thank you so much for speaking with us.

CH: Yeah, thank you. We really appreciate your taking the time and, you know, being thoughtful about what you have gone through and sharing your memories about Nanette and Romare. Yeah.

SR: Thank you so much. I enjoyed it.

CH: Good.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]