



ROBERT GARLAND

The aspiring musical conductor studied music and violin and didn't start dancing until he was 13. Robert studied at the Pennsylvania Ballet and became the youngest member of the historic African American modern dance company Phildanco.

Robert later moved to New York to attend The Julliard School, where he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1983.

Since joining Abyssinian, Robert has used his talents to create two ballets in tribute to the church. One piece celebrated Abyssinian's 200th anniversary. But it was the ballet "Gloria", to celebrate DTH company's return to the stage in 2012 that would be seen around the world. Robert credits his decision to include children in the ballet to a Kennedy Center weekend program for children of color in the DC area. "When I first started the program, I was not happy because I wasn't accustomed to working with kids. But, it blew my mind that working with the kids became so near and dear to my heart. During that time, I was going deeper with my faith...so Gloria was born out of a combination of my passion for working with kids and my love for Abyssinian."

Robert recently received the Martha Hill Award, named for the founder of the Julliard Dance Division. He's thrilled that the school's new Director of Dance is Alicia Graf Mack, a black woman, friend and former DTH principal dancer.

And that is Robert Garland's story. He is an Abyssinian.



Paunika Jones, Ashley Murphy, and Cira Robinson in Robert Garland's "Return"

"I sometimes call myself a dance architect. I'm building houses for dancers to live in, structures for the dancers where they can go inside...and get comfortable."

-robert garland

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WELCOME TO THE PEOPLE OF ABYSSINIAN.

When Robert Garland joined Abyssinian in 1997, he had just retired as a principal dancer with Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH). Under the leadership of ballet icon and DTH co-founder Arthur Mitchell, Robert became Resident Choreographer and Director of the DTH School. "That's when I thought seriously about attending a church. My sister, Lana had begun attending Abyssinian and suggested I try it," Robert remembers. "I came to really love Abyssinian. Until that time, my spiritual space was fulfilled through dance. Once I stopped dancing, I felt like church began to fill that void."

The turning point for Robert was when Rev. Butts opened the doors to the church one rainy Sunday. Robert remembers Rev. Butts saying, "Beloved, you came all the way to church in the rain. You know you want Abyssinian Baptist Church as your church home." Robert recalls joining the church when we marched for everything. "It was very exciting! Having a pastor who cared so much for his community was a thrilling addition to my life as a non-performer," says Robert.

Robert was raised in Philadelphia where his mother instilled the importance of embracing his heritage. She taught him and his fellow summer campers the Negro National Anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing" when they were 8 to 10 year olds.