Young, **sophisticated**, and back

After an eight-year hiatus, a smaller Dance Theatre of Harlem returns to the stage at the Annenberg Center.

By Ellen Dunkel
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

After 44 years on — and more recently off — the stage, Dance Theatre of Harlem opened Thursday night at the Annenberg Center. It was a welcome return, and the company looked both young and sophisticated.

Led by founding member and longtime principal dancer Virginia Johnson, the troupe was on hiatus for eight years after facing a debt of more than $2 million. When the curtain went down in 2004, the company had 44 dancers. Now, it's performing with just 18.

This week's tour to Philadelphia brought two artists home. Resident choreographer Robert Garland grew up in Philadelphia and began his dance career at Philadanco. (His niece, Stephanie Bandura, danced Marie in Pennsylvania Ballet's *Nutcracker* and in its show on the Comcast wall.) And

dancer Michaela DePrince was born in Sierra Leone, adopted into a family in Cherry Hill, and studied at the Rock School for Dance Education.

The program opened with Garland's "Gloria," set to the music of Poulenc, as a tribute to Harlem's spiritual legacy. It was a soothing, large group piece danced in pretty formations of blues and greens, with a corps of children, and some interesting duets.

One section had a woman again and again promenading with one man who then turned her into the arms of another man and then back again.

But the piece sometimes looked under-rehearsed, with arms and legs not always synchronized, and couples moving at different times. The subject and the music also begged for far more emotional involvement and larger movements than the dancers delivered.

They did deliver, however, on the next piece, Balanchine's "Agon," set to Stravinsky, a leotard ballet that demands precision. The ensemble's founder, Arthur Mitchell, danced "Agon" with Diana Adams, a white dancer, in its world premiere with New York City Ballet in 1957, the year federal troops enforced the integration of Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas.

That duet was danced Thursday by Frederick Davis and Gabrielle Salvatto, who showed remarkable balance and control, relying on her partner more as part of the movement than for support.

Chrystyn Fentroy was nearly as impressive in her *pas de trois* that often gave her little support from either man.

DePrince had featured roles in "Gloria" and "Agon," dancing well but without special aplomb. She is just 18, though, and still finding her way. She dances the black swan *pas de deux* from *Swan Lake* in some performances.

Donald Byrd's "Contested Space" showed off the dancers particularly well. Set to electronic music by Amon Tobin, it is a modern, jazzy ballet that has the dancers in hyperextended positions, turned upside down and back again in quick lifts, with legs vibrating in place and in fast bourrées. Even a seemingly simple combination has three women booking it through fast chaine turns and fouettés across the stage.

With a smaller cast of dancers still finding their footing in the reborn company, the Dance Theatre of Harlem has an uphill climb to become the company Mitchell founded in 1969. But they're on their way, and welcome back.

Additional performances: 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, 3680 Walnut St. Tickets: $20-65. Information: 215-898-3900 or www.annenbergcenter.org

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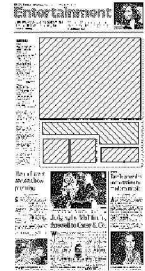
Review *Dance*

"Gloria,"
choreographed
by city native
Robert Garland.
MATTHEW MURPHY

Members of the Dance Theatre of Harlem perform "Gloria," set to the music of Poulenc, as a tribute to Harlem's spiritual legacy.