

Tomlinson, Mel A. ^[1]

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by Jeff Miles, North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, 2015; contributions by Kelly Agan, N.C. Government & Heritage Library, 2016.

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See also: [Mel A. Tomlinson: Rubber-Band Man](#) ^[3], from "[Listening to History](#)" ^[4]."

Born in Raleigh on January 3 1954, Tomlinson became interested in dance after participating in gymnastics in high school. He grew up in the public housing projects of Chavis Heights in Raleigh, one of six children, and attended Ligon High School in the 1960s. The school was segregated during that era.

He received a B.F.A. from what is now the University of North Carolina School of the Arts (UNCSA) after studying there for only two years. After graduation, Thomlinson began touring the country with the Agnes de Mille Heritage Theatre, which was founded at the school.

In 1974, Tomlinson switched his focus from modern dance to ballet and joined the Dance Theater of Harlem, where he quickly rose to the position of soloist, where he performed in "Manifestations," "Swan Lake" and "Scheherazade." He took leave for a time to join Alvin Ailey's American Dance Theater, which produced mostly modern pieces.

Tomlinson joined the New York City Ballet in 1981 and was at the time its only African American dancer. He became a soloist with the Ballet shortly thereafter. His November 27, 1981 debut in Balanchine's "Agon" earned him immediate notice by the audience and critics. A write-up in the *New York Times* a few days later called the performance "electrifying." Tomlinson stayed with the Ballet until 1987.

In 1983, he received the first annual North Carolina Prize, given to an artist in the field of visual or performing arts from a group of four North Carolina newspapers owned by the New York Times Company.

In 1987 he returned to his home state of North Carolina and joined the faculty at the UNCSA. After leaving UNCSA, Tomlinson continued to teach and perform with insitutions including the Boston Ballet's CITYDANCE program, Boston Conservatory of Music, Harvard University, UNC-Charlotte and what is now the Charlotte Ballet.

By the mid-1990s, Tomlinson was diagnosed with HIV and had developed AIDS. He became crippled with the disease, later making a dramatic recovery. Since his recovery, he has continued to teach dance, lecture, and appear as a motivational speaker. In January 2016, he visited Ligon High School, now a magnet school, to teach a dance class.

Additional Resources:

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