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It's time to bring dance to the White House, and Obama should take the lead

By [Sarah Kaufman](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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Anger, distrust, apprehension: America is caught up in an angry swirl of operatic passions it hasn't experienced in years. As a nation, we're becoming ever more fragmented. Which means there's never been a better time for the White House to showcase the performing arts -- especially dance, which demonstrates what unity, harmony and perfection look like.

Goodness knows we could use a little collective loosening up.

Art and power have a grand history together: Think of the Medicis and the Italian Renaissance, or the Kennedys and Pablo Casals. Franklin Roosevelt brought more than 300 concerts to the White House while grappling with an economic crisis and a war (sound familiar?). A leader through and through, he didn't play it safe in his arts programming: Among the performers was Martha Graham's pioneering modern-dance company.

Roosevelt might not have realized it at the time, but in giving Graham his seal of approval in those early years of her career, he was assisting at the birth of an original American art form. Like jazz and musical theater, modern dance is entirely homegrown, one of the purest expressions of American daring, independence and imagination.



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre's Glenn Allen and Linda Celeste Sims in "Revelations."
(Nan Melville)

I'm envisioning Michelle Obama, a dance fan in her Chicago years, as the White House impresario. She and [new White House social secretary Julianna Smoot](#) could start with the modern-dance classics: the Graham company performing "Appalachian Spring," with a live orchestra playing the shimmering Copland score. There's no better distillation of the radiant hope that sustained the frontier communities that built the nation. I'd also like to see the Paul Taylor Dance Company perform; a good choice would be his "Company B," with its portrayal of youthful exuberance forever changed by war. Include the rich musicality and luxurious poetry of the Mark Morris Dance Group. The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater could close with its perennial favorite "Revelations," performed to a live gospel choir.

Smoot and the Obamas could make a statement with a program devoted to female choreographers. (Dance may seem a largely female endeavor, but men dominate the creation side in woeful disproportion.) Such a program could feature Agnes de Mille's "Rodeo," her pre-"Oklahoma!" ranch romance with another Copland score; Twyla Tharp's ballroom-infused "Nine Sinatra Songs" -- with its cleverness, wit and stylishness, it's a world apart from the empty oversell of "Dancing With the Stars"; and perhaps a piece by former Taylor dancer Lila York.

A program dedicated to the important contributions of black artists to America's dance heritage could feature the Ailey company as well as Ronald K. Brown/Evidence, which weaves African influences into modern dance, and the beautifully warm, liquid style of Urban Bush Women.

As a classic marker of the finer things, ballet has been embraced by various administrations. The Carters brought Mikhail Baryshnikov into the East Room; he performed on a diagonal so he wouldn't run into the room's low-hanging chandelier. Of course, it would be lovely, in summer's long twilight, to have performances on an outdoor stage, as they were done in Lyndon Johnson's day. Premier troupes could be chosen from across the country: Considering the first couple's home town -- and Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel's balletic roots -- the Joffrey Ballet of Chicago ought to be spotlighted.

Finally, Mr. President, we'd love to see your own refreshing skills as dancer in chief (we've seen the ["Ellen" clips](#) and that very cool, very *hot* [salsa with Mexican singer Thalía](#)). After all, there's a proud tradition of social dancing at the White House: George Washington loved the minuet, Benjamin Harrison waltzed, and William McKinley took to a trendy step called Goo-Goo Eyes, which had a ragtime bounce. Margaret Truman fancied square dancing.

Washington can be a city of stiff shoulders, but you could prompt us to unbutton a little.