Rita’s World

Taking a year off did not slow us down a bit. In fact, we came back stronger and more vibrant than ever. Maybe it’s because I’m getting older and better. Of course it is. Okay, maybe it was the spectacular company. What a group! It was a lovely mix of undergraduates, graduates, community folks, majors, non-majors, and professionals. And then, of course, there were the babies! Sometimes as many as four at a time sitting on my lap at rehearsals. We are truly a family community, right down to me, the doting Auntie. Grandmamma?

What can I tell you that isn’t covered in the following pages? Well, we were incredibly fortunate to received UO Multicultural funds this year to support our guest residency. Without this support, offered by Dean Foley, Jenifer Craig and the School of Music and Dance, we couldn’t have pulled it off.

We helped to raise $2500 for Tariro, a nonprofit organization supporting education for Zimbabwean women and children suffering from HIV/AIDS. Considering the recent U.S. economy and the cost of living in Zimbabwe, I am very proud of our involvement.

Our in-reach performance at the Dougherty Dance Theatre for Shelter Care has expanded to so many other organizations that we practically filled the house: in part thanks to the work of Jana Meszaros, my TA this year. I was impressed with DA members who took the time to speak to our diverse audience after the performance. I spoke with a young man suffering from a head injury. The inspiration DA gave this teenager as he recuperates was spectacular. He showed me how he is regaining balance by performing a pirouette for me. He plans on taking African dance class after he “works on it a little more this summer.”

We have a new fundraising event that I hope to make a bi-annual event: a roller skating party! Fundraising can be so overwhelming and tedious that it’s great to have a fun event to organize. You know I love to skate!

WHERE’S THE “ONE”?  
Brian West

Our drummers were so excited to hear that we would be bringing back Salif and Mandjou Koné for our winter concert and residency. You could say we brought them back by popular demand. Their patience and excellent teaching skills made for a fluid learning experience. Salif and Mandjou have been teaching in the States for a few years now and they seem to have adapted their teaching styles to our way of learning. Not that the way we learn is a good thing; it’s just different.

Most Africans learn music entirely though oral traditions. When you have guest teachers who are not familiar with Western learners, the trouble starts in finding the “one.” This refers to the downbeat, or the first beat in a measure of music. African music generally does not have an emphasis on the downbeat, where our music does. When an African teaches you a rhythm, it doesn’t mean that it starts on the first beat. In Africa you may learn a rhythm and, over time, you can hear or articulate the beat in different places. However, we Westerners like to know where things start and stop so that things can quickly be categorized. We are trained from birth to look for the “one.” In the short window of time we had to learn our new complex rhythms, Salif was kind enough to show us where the “one” was, but only if we really needed it. This can be a real time saver in a pinch, as it gives you a way to jump back in if you get lost in the music.

Our way of returning the favor was trying not to ask for it. In other words, we needed to challenge ourselves to get through that first rehearsal or two and entertain the rhythm as a whole—perhaps see it as an emotion and not a statistic. Sooner or later it pays for itself twofold because you see a much broader picture of the rhythm you are learning and how it fits with the rest of the music and the dance. The Africans see our listening deficiency and rightly try to wean us off of a necessary downbeat.

Eventually, with practice, you do find the “one”, but by that point it doesn’t really matter. You look up and notice that the dance is emphasizing the upbeats, and your drumming part comes alive and interacts better when you accent a different beat altogether. The only power the “one” may have in the end is finding a place to finally stop the show.

I am sure I have missed a great deal here. How about the three amazing graduate students who are teaching in the program? Or the fact that we have added a fourth show in January to accommodate our increasing audience? Ah, our growth and work continues. It’s cool. Very cool. The break was good—a much needed rest. I thought I would think it too appealing—think of retirement. Are you kidding? I’m not slowing down. There are more students to teach, audiences to educate, and babies to raise.
Koné Family Returns

Rita Honka

There are so many wonderful African dancers and drummers living and touring in the U.S. I try to search them out to bring diverse people to the UO and Eugene community. It is a goal of ours to explore as many cultures as possible and develop a repertory that reflects the richness of the African continent. Because of this, we rarely bring back the same guests as our yearly artists in residence. But Mandjou and Salif Koné, and now baby Novie, are different. Not only are they skilled artists and mesmerizing performers, they have become members of our family.

Mandjou and Salif Koné were born into the well-known Koné Griot family of Mali and Burkina Faso. The Griots of West Africa are world renowned for their unique ability to record events carefully and accurately, and they are a highly respected caste of historians, musicians, and healers. One cannot learn to become a Griot; rather, one is born into it.

As a young girl, Mandjou performed with her Griot father’s band—singing, dancing and playing the Djembe, Bala, Dundun, Kora, and Tama. Mandjou also performed with the National Ballet of Burkina Faso and toured Europe as the lead singer with her brother’s group Surutukunu. She first came to the United States to help translate a documentary about the last twenty years of her family’s musical tradition and history. For the past nine years, Mandjou has taught and performed throughout the U.S. as a much sought after and popular educator. Currently, she is teaching at UC Santa Cruz.

Salif began studying traditional music when he was two years old. When he was eight, he joined the national group of young musicians in Burkina Faso, Maison des Jeunes du Burkina, traveling all over Africa. At 14, he became the youngest musician ever to join the National Ballet of Burkina Faso, and traveled throughout Europe and Africa as a soloist with the company. Salif visited the United States in 2000 to share his culture and returned to live here in 2002. He has performed all over the United States and taught workshops in universities throughout the country. Currently, he accompanies dance classes and teaches in the music department at UC Santa Cruz, while continuing to perform with his band Milima and working on his first album.

Mandjou and Salif make the grueling week that Dance Africa dancers and drummers put in less like work and more like a party. They bring the same feeling to the classes they teach and lectures they give. And the performance is a celebration: a celebration of cultures, dance, music, community, and, most significantly, one of family.

DANCE AFRICA WELCOMES NEW FRIENDS

“Dance Africa is an event that I hold near and dear to me. The opportunity to witness a performance of West African drum, music, and dance is a truly unique one in this part of the world. It is truly an educational experience...but it’s not the reason that Dance Africa is special to me. What makes it special is the incredibly generous spirit that Rita Honka and her students display when they interact with our clients….Reactions from clients have been amazing, and downright touching. Our clients have been visibly moved by a performance the likes of which they have never seen before….I would like to state that I cannot thank Dance Africa enough for their generosity, talent, and time. I certainly hope that this program is able to continue to bring joy and education to the community."

Gene Obersinner, MSW, Volunteer Training Coordinator, ShelterCare

After five years of performing for ShelterCare, moving from the tiny Amazon Community Center to the Dougherty Dance Theatre, we have been able to expand our In-Reach program this year to include Moss Street Children’s Center, Alternative Work Concepts (special needs workforce integration), Relief Nursery Inc., Looking Glass, Oregon Supported Living, and First Place Family Center: St. Vincent DePaul. Thank you to Jana Meszaros, my rockin’ assistant this year, for all of her spectacular work bringing our new friends to us. It was a grand success and we hope to continue to expand this wonderful offering to those unable to experience us elsewhere.
Dance Africa: The Next Generation

My son takes off his shoes, then flings himself into the studio, bouncing from one set of open arms to another smiling face. Sylvan stands at Rita’s feet, looking up, “Um, Rita, can I please get my drum?” Drum strapped around his neck, he sidles up next to Brian, waiting for the drum break; then he starts drumming and watches the dancers with the same wide-aperture gaze all drummers seem to cultivate. He pays attention to the other drummers, too, stopping when they do.

Or he runs around wildly, first lumbering like a bear and then hanging from the ballet barres. Typical 3-year-old behavior, but he is still surrounded by the sound, enveloped in the rhythm, part of our community of drummers and dancers. This next generation of Dance Africa soaks up polyrhythms through their skin; they feel the breath of Lamba while still in utero.

Our last rehearsal of the 2008-2009 season boasted five kids under the age of four, plus one still in a belly. Up to three children at a time have joined us backstage at school performances this year, collectively cared for as moms dance onstage and rush back to change costumes. And Novie, 2-year-old daughter of guest artist Mandjou Koné, enjoyed a ride on mom’s back while Mandjou performed in our January show in the Dougherty Dance Theatre. Jessie Newell, mom to Elizabeth, 11, Alyssa, nearly 2, and Ryan, nearly 3 months, appreciates that her kids are “always welcome by all the dancers, drummers and by Rita. Kids are also a very important part of the African dance community.”

A couple of us dancer-moms struggled against thinking that, as Eileen Walters, mother of 20-month-old Eva, puts it, “these types of engagements are no place for children.” In Eileen’s case, with no relatives nearby, she sometimes didn’t have a choice: Eva was coming. Eileen says, “I’ve been so grateful for the genuinely warm welcome we receive when we walk through the door. I have Rita to thank most of all for this, because she has not only allowed, but welcomed and encouraged the inclusion of children.”

Now, even when she can leave Eva home, Eileen sometimes brings her to rehearsal: “Aside from exposing Eva to other creative adults who treat her with genuine care and respect, I appreciate the opportunity she gets to be so close to music and dance…who wouldn’t want that kind of regular exposure for her children?”

Similarly, Jessie brings along Alyssa and Ryan to offer them the opportunity to “express themselves in a more artistic way.” Additionally, she says, “I want to share as much of me with them as I can. Dance Africa is a huge part of me and my passions in life, and it is important to share it with my kids so they learn through dance and movement as I have.”

My own decision to bring Sylvan and 10-month-old Elena to rehearsals came about in part because Sylvan doesn’t currently enjoy group activities meant for kids; he stands on the sidelines, watching his peers skip and hop. So, if I want him to participate in music and dance – and know that he’s enjoying it – right now it has to be as part of a multigenerational community.

And Dance Africa can offer that. It’s not sedentary and quiet, like adult activities that understandably bore children to fits of whining. And African dancing and drumming need not be simplified for the sake of children, unlike many “grown-up” pursuits, like baseball or board games. Adults and children can participate together in an African dancing and drumming community, everyone being nothing other than exactly who she is. Each person, even the smallest baby, truly has something to share, even if it’s as small as a smile.

Note: Eileen also says, “I have to admit that the timing of my current pregnancy was very much influenced by the Dance Africa season/schedule! I am expecting my second child on September 10th, right around when rehearsals will start for the 2009-2010 season!”

Eva Walters and Alyssa Newell in ‘performance’ at Awbrey Park Elementary
Passing the Dance Africa Legacy

We all know Dance Africa provides an incredible service to the community, and an education many audience members would not get any other way. As a long-time dancer with Dance Africa, I can say it also provides its members a life-changing education. Working with Dance Africa gives me an invaluable wealth of information about African dance, a strong community, and the opportunity to work with African guest artists and director Rita Honka. The legacy created by this experience is one that I as a dance teacher strive to continue with my own students. At Linfield College, where I offer an African dance class and set dances on a select group of students, you can find one more group whose lives are touched by Dance Africa. I spoke to two of these students about their experience with African dance.

“I can’t help smiling when I’m doing Sinte or Koukou or any of the dances we have learned” says Jade Severson, a Linfield sophomore who is new to dance. Like me, my students enjoy the dances themselves, and also their place in African culture. Student Stephanie Anderson has come to understand that African dance fits into life in a different way than the Ballet classes of her youth. “Work, celebration, and religion can all be reflected through dance. In other styles of dance, you can tell a story but in African you live it!” Dance Africa always provides me with an amazing wealth of information about African dance and culture. Our teachers bring new ways of looking at dance, new movements and whole new dances. Since I am always learning, I get to refine my understanding of the material. This means my students receive a better education all the time.

One of the things that African dance does best is represent community. The dances themselves and the way they are done reinforce a community’s sense of itself and how each member fits into the whole. This is also true for Dance Africa. We bring out the best in one another on stage and off. When I am teaching African dance, I want this sense of community and cooperation to be real for my students. For Jade, “African really cultivates that sense of camaraderie and the awareness of dancing with others.”

Dance Africa is dedicated to bringing amazing African guest teachers to Eugene to work with us and the community. This is such an opportunity for all dancers, but in the company we really have a chance to get to know our teachers. This year we worked with Mandjou and Salif Koné, and they are both brilliant teachers. For them to share even a little of what they know is truly a gift. Studying dance with Rita is also a joy. She gets right to the heart of movement; that is, she teaches us about movement and heart. I have learned a lot about integrity and professionalism from her. Working with teachers like these is very inspiring. At Linfield, I can feel that excitement transferring to my students. Stephanie agrees. “I’m so glad that I had the opportunity to study African dance with a teacher who is so passionate.” Jade felt that I “always exude energy and enthusiasm, and it’s contagious.” I get knowledge but also passion from Rita and the teachers Dance Africa brings to Eugene, and I know that, in turn, my students are inspired.

It is easy to feel the impact that African dance has made on my life, but it all comes full circle when I hear the long-term impact that it has on my students. Stephanie is preparing to leave Linfield but said that her experience studying African dance “has been something that I will carry with me as a dancer and choreographer.” And I have seen beginning dancers like Jade learn new things about themselves and try new things with dance. “African made me consider how exactly I move around—it made me appreciate all of the strange and awesome things that the body can do in dance.” She has even been inspired to explore other styles. “I think I can say that the whole African experience made me more open to trying out modern.” I was able to cast her in my African and modern pieces for our recent concert, and nothing means more to me than seeing a student discover her passion for dance, and her potential. For Jade and many students like her, African opens the door to that potential. And Dance Africa makes all of this possible. I am proud to be part of the legacy of Dance Africa, and honored to pass it on.

Emily Crocker
A New Era Has Begun

Twenty. Has it been twenty years?

In September of 1989, I packed by belongings, trekked across the U.S., moved to Eugene and started my graduate studies at UO. In January 1990, I assisted Jenifer Craig in my first African dance class. We were busting at the seams, at least 100 students. Since 1986, Jenifer had taught African Dance in the program. She was a UO student when Percival Borde taught in a summer program in the Dance Department in 1970. She was able to study with him again when he was in Binghamton and she at SUNY Brockport. Percival brought the legacy of Pearl Primus to the UO and to Jenifer. Pearl, of course, was a dancer, choreographer, dance anthropologist, and pioneer in African, Caribbean and African American Dance: the great mother.

Sometime in the late 70’s-early 80’s, Barbara Sellars taught African Dance here. Then, with her return in 1986, Jenifer became the instructor. When I got here, I was lucky enough to study with and, eventually, take over for Jenifer when I was a grad student. When I taught my first class I had only one traditional African dance in my repertoire. I taught what I described as an ‘African-inspired’ class. As a matter of fact, my second traditional dance was Fanga, given to me by Jenifer, directly from Percival and Pearl. What a legacy.

I knew then that something important was happening. I knew this was to be as special to me as modern dance was, as my Somatics studies were. I had no plan, little history, less in material. But hey—I was a Detroiter. I was a dancer. I could do this. I just did. And kept doing. I begged, borrowed, and traded. I studied when I could and asked millions of questions. I invited everyone and anyone and kept the door open to all. Who would have thought that one day Les Ballets Africains, the national dance company of Guinea, would call, asking if we wanted a show in the Dougherty Dance Theatre?!

Now, the legacy continues. A new era in African Dance at the UO has begun. For the first time, we have three graduate students teaching African Dance. And all three in DA! After I graduated there was, of course, Kouessan. Lowry and Eileen (Eileen is still dancing with the company) taught a bit. Carolyne Quinn was here for a term or two (her daughter, born soon after I moved here, is now taking my classes!). Of course Julie and Emily (both still with us—10 and 9 years!) teach master classes, and run the company when I need them. They have been my saviors many times.

Now there are three graduate students. As one moves on this year (we will miss you, Val) another enters her Graduate studies. She comes in with a history of African dance and teaching. She comes in, in part, to continue this tradition. It is a new era.

We have also established ourselves as a seasoned Department of Dance Repertory Company, with enough material to survive many years and generations to come. Over the years we have expanded our offerings, brought in dozens of guest artists, and hosted national companies. This year we added a fourth show. And next year we move into a Department ‘repertory’ spot in the class schedule.

There was a time when I believed that when I left the UO so would this program and this company. I hated that thought. It is not that I need to leave my own legacy, I just want others to experience the dance, learn the cultures, and enjoy the community. I’m ready to hand over more to the next generation of students and teachers. After all, I have other things in the program and life that I want to do. But I’m not done yet. I’ve got at least twenty more in me.
Dance Africa: A Teacher’s Perspective

Rhian Pyke

When you wear as many hats as I do, some days you lose track of which one you have on—educator, drummer, student, performer, admirer of the many African arts and cultures. These things keep me busy, but more than anything they bring me joy, especially when combined.

There are very few things that make me happier than seeing the joy and wonder on children’s faces as they learn and are fascinated at the same time. These moments seem so rare in an age of constant testing and demands. I feel honored to be a part of a company that not only performs and entertains, but also teaches about a continent and its cultures which is so often ignored in our schools. When my students tell me how much they loved our show, AND can repeat why a dance, rhythm or song is used, I glow with pride knowing we touched another child’s life with such a gift.

In addition to getting the chance to teach through performance, I feel incredibly lucky to have an ever-growing wealth of knowledge about Africa to share with current and future students. Providing times to drum and dance with kids, and teach about African cultures, has always been one of my favorite things to do. I feel it creates a sense of community and acceptance in my classroom that the arts so easily provide. It fosters my students’ creativity and opens their eyes to a world outside their own.

I look forward to continually learning more, because as my learning grows, so will my students’. I hope I always am known as “the drummer” in schools, and that I and Dance Africa can continue to touch the lives and dreams of children.

Ronald K. Brown Brings His African-American Aesthetic to Eugene

Ronald K. Brown: what an amazing way to start the year. If you don’t know him, Brown is an American choreographer who fuses traditional African forms and rhythms with contemporary modern dance. Brown and his dance company EVIDENCE (established in 1985) were in Eugene in October for a remarkable series of classes, lectures and performances brought to town by the Department of Dance and the Hult Center for the Performing Arts.

This was a city-wide event. In addition to teaching three technique classes at the UO, Brown gave a repertory workshop, a lecture on choreography, and worked with middle school students in a photography seminar. This was all in preparation for the performance of One Shot at the Hult center October 26th. One Shot is a work based on photographer Charles “Teenie” Harris, whose photos also hung for the month at the DIVA gallery downtown. The company also performed Grace, a work originally choreographed by Brown for the Alvin Ailey company.

While all of this was wonderful, the real joy came from the personal approach of Brown and his company. His belief in the importance of community showed in his interactions with all who approached him. He was unassuming, generous, and, simply put, kind. Clearly, more than his technique is influenced by African dance.

The joy for me was watching Brown seamlessly blend modern and African dance technique and aesthetic. Taking class, I was able to experience my two greatest loves simultaneously. And his rhythmic variations, performed to great R&B music from the 70’s and the present, kept Jenifer and me boogying in the corner all morning. We just couldn’t help ourselves.

Brown taught the Friday modern technique class twice, separated by two weeks. In the interim, I had the pleasure of teaching class and helping our students understand the physical basis of his technique. Needless to say, I had a ball. What fun it was to demonstrate to our students the influences Africa has on our contemporary American culture. And, as a scientist, I had great fun showing how the concepts we use and develop in modern training are true to African aesthetic as well. I was excited to watch our students embody these ideas, and I do believe they were better informed when Brown returned.

Fana Bangoura visits the UO. Fana Bangoura, a celebrated drummer from Guinea, most recently playing with Les Ballets Africains, visited May 26th. Fana taught the beginning and intermediate drumming classes, and sat in and played for two dance classes. The students, of course, were delighted to learn from this exciting and decorated percussionist, and the dancers couldn’t be happier as he played solos with each one during the always fiery Koukou dance during Rita’s African 2 dance class.
### DANCE AFRICA SCHOOL TOUR 2009

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### 2009 TOUR PROGRAM

**Djibo Waka**
From Liberia, a social dance used by married couples as a means of communicating and solving problems.

**Damba**
Damba is a dance of the Tamale people. It is found in Northern Ghana where many variations of the dance exist. It is performed at social and festive occasions.

**Muchongoyo Zingili**
From the Zingili people of Zimbabwe, the women demonstrate their work of planting and harvesting while the men present their work of hunting and protecting.

**Kassa**
From the Mandinko people of Guinea, Kassa is a dance used for the rice harvest.

**Essokota and Koukou**
Essokota is a healing rhythm from the Mongo people of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Koukou is a harvest rhythm from the Republic of Guinea.

**Sorsoner**
From the Baga in the coastal region of Guinea, Sorsoner is danced in full moonlight by young girls out of respect for their mothers.

**Gumboot**
Gumboot dancing evolved in the South African mines first as a form of communication and continued as a form of recreation. It arose from a mixture of cultural groups that worked and lived together in the mining camps.

**Djansa**
From the Mande, Djansa is used to publicly thank someone for their good deeds.
Brooke Boercherding (2010) BFA Painting. From Santa Monica, California, she was introduced to drumming in Venice Beach. Her paintings adorn the walls of Eugene’s Cafe Roma.

Emily Crocker (2003) Dance. Emily has been with Dance Africa for nine years. She is currently teaching dance at Linfield College and coaching UO Colorguard.

Valerie Ifill (2009) MFA Dance. After graduation, Valerie looks forward to moving to a new metropolitan area to continue to choreograph, research, teach, and perform. Valerie has deeply enjoyed her first year as a dancer in the Dance Africa community.


Reanna McCurdy (2010) Dance with a minor in Business. Reanna has been dancing for 18 years now and plans to make a career out of it after graduation. This was her first year in Dance Africa, and she loved every minute of it.

A.T. Moffet (2010) MFA Dance. As a UO Graduate Teaching Fellow, she teaches Modern, Ballet, Jazz, and African dance. She loves being a part of the UO African dance community.

Brenna Jeanine Mollerstrom (2009) Dance. From Northeast Oregon, she started dancing at the age of four and has been doing it ever since. In addition to dancing, she enjoys teaching, cooking, writing short stories, and learning how to play the guitar.

Jessie Newell (2005) Human Physiology and Dance, pursuing a career in dance medicine. She is the proud mom of Elizabeth, a gorgeous 11-year-old, Alyssa, a budding 21-month-old dancer, and a handsome “little man”, Ryan, born March 31st of this year.

Julie Polhemus (2003) MS Environmental Studies. Julie has been with the company since 1999. She currently hops, shimmies, and skips through her days with two lively children: Sylvan, 3 1/2, and Elena, 10 months. She occasionally climbs Oregon’s volcanoes by leaving the munchkins home with Daddy, Chris Jones.

Rhian Pyke (2008) Masters in Teaching and Learning with an emphasis in ESOL. Since graduating, she has been enjoying her time as a substitute teacher in grades K-12 all over Eugene and its surrounding areas.


Justin Simpson (2009) Sociology. Besides playing drums of all types, Justin loves racing cars (legally, of course). He looks forward to taking a trip to Africa next January.

Patrick Sponsler Community Ed in Conflict Management. West African drums and rhythms have opened Patrick’s heart to the intertwining relationship of music, dance, and community. This subtle, uplifting language of life is often overlooked in Western culture, and he appreciates that Dance Africa has given him the space to share these experiences with the youth of our community.

Rebecca Stiehl (2010) Dance. Rebecca’s interests and love for African people and culture flourished after a trip to Rwanda with Collegiate Christian Fellowship in 2008. Dance Africa has been a new and very rewarding experience for her this year.

Erinn Thompson–Ernst (2011) MFA Dance. Erinn is a certified Practitioner of the Rolf Method of Structural Integration and thoroughly loves her husband and dog.

Eileen Walters (2000) BS in Mass Communications, minor in Marketing from Miami University. Mother to Eva, Eileen and her husband have lived in Oregon for almost six years now, and are expecting their second child in September.