Our purpose is to learn about dance traditions from a variety of African cultural groups, to honor, celebrate, and work with those traditions, and to create educational and entertaining performances for children and adults.

Rita’s World

For weeks, I have contemplated what to write here. I could tell you about the great new friends we gained in our many guest artists this year, or the amazing experience we had with 18 dancers and drummers from Ghana. I could gush over the company and the spectacular job they did learning and performing new repertory, in record time, from our Senegalese and Ghanaian guests. Or, I could ponder the impact we had on the thousands of students we touched—the mini residency at Cottage Grove HS, or our expanded audience for the DDT in-reach performance for special audiences. But it came to me today while perusing photos taken over the year. There was a picture of our newest member Vivian (daughter of Emily and Tavis) and her mother warming up for the final show at Latham School. Here was this sweet little one-year-old, the latest in a long line of DA children I consider family. And Emily. She has been a member of the family for 11 years—the longest save Julie. I have always counted on Emily. I knew she would beautifully translate the repertory in her body, and be my memory when I forgot choreography. Over the years she has helped with so many aspects of this company—directing rehearsals, sewing costumes, writing letters and spending countless hours behind the scenes. She and I have had many relationships over the years—first as teacher and student, then as mentor and apprentice. When she had Vivian, I joked that I felt like her Eugene Mama. She agreed. Now we are friends and contemporaries. And now she is moving on. It seems odd she won’t be here next year. We will miss her and I will miss holding baby Vivian on stage. It’s normal for family to move on. And we will have new wonderful members join, others, leave. And I will handle it fine—as long as Julie doesn’t follow anytime soon.

Notes from the Drum Front: More is More

Brian West

There is a common phrase heard throughout the music industry, “less is more.” Music producers attempt to instill this ideal, especially during recording and performance, into the minds of musicians who tend to play too many notes. Often, the more musicians there are in a group, the more everyone is required to be very selective with the amount of notes, tricks, and flourishes that they elect to play. During our annual Martin Luther King Jr. concert week, we usually consider ourselves lucky to bring one or two guest artists from Africa. Over the years, it has actually worked very well to have a small number of guests give us a limited number of parts or notes that we can learn efficiently and with enough validity for our rapidly approaching concerts and school tours. We are presenting these arrangements, after all, to kids and audiences who may be unfamiliar with African music.

At the onset of our first rehearsal we were expecting to have our two guest artists from Senegal, Mamadou and Abdoulaye Thiob, walk in the door—and sure enough, they did. Suddenly, the door opened and another African gentleman walked in with several Djembe drums slung around his body. Then, another! I had to do a recount. Four guest artists? The new arrivals were introduced to us by Mamadou as “part of the family.” Whether or not Sylla Ibrahima Sory and Amara Ndiaya were actually blood relatives didn’t matter. People in Africa who play music and dance together nearly always refer to each other as “family.” As we dug into the new material and tried to get used to four teachers chiming in, usually in unison, I began to panic. It was too much information, and too many notes coming at once. Luckily Mamadou, the elder, saw the worry in our brows and in his loving way, announced to his young master drummers that he would need to take the lead role. He proceeded with the drum patterns step by step. His “family” of percussionists took a non-verbal role and sat in the drum line with us. They showed us with great animation and few words how to play the figures on our Djembe drums. Ibrahim and Amara were such a welcome and fun addition to our crew, and we couldn’t have done it without their help.

Surprisingly, having all of these guest artists and percussion parts did not result in the feared “too many notes” syndrome. African music has had hundreds if not thousands of years of practice in finding a perfect balance of notes. Most of it reminds me of building a house. You have a strong but simple foundation part, topped with solid walls, or supporting parts, and then finally the roof. The roof, in the music, may be the vocals and lead solo Djembe parts played by the master drummer. Once you add the beauty, grace, and power of dance to this structure, you give the world something truly remarkable. Our Dance Africa drummers thank our many guest artists for providing us with such a rich and balanced sound this season, and the D.A. Dancers for turning our little house into a beautiful home.
Mamadou and Abdoulaye Thioub

I have a friend, Katie, who occasionally calls to update me on the new Master teachers in town. When I am lucky, I can squeeze in a class on Sunday afternoon and, this past Fall, fortune was on my side. Taught by the brothers Thioub, class was, simply, lovely. We learned Toucouleur, a Fulani dance from Senegal, and, by the end of class, I knew I had found our 2011 guest artists.

The brothers Mamadou and Abdoulaye Thioub are the sons of Meissa Thioub, Master drummer and Director of the Ballet African Sangomar. Born in Dakar, Senegal, they now reside in Oregon and teach throughout the state and northern California. Raised in the tradition of the Griot, they are the storytellers of their people, responsible for preserving culture and passing history through the generations.

In addition to performing with Ballet African Sangomar, at age 12, Mamadou founded and directed the children’s group Maaj Daan, which won three consecutive trophies at cultural arts competitions. He participates in Artist in Residency programs throughout California and Oregon, and currently teaches in Oregon at the Corvallis Art Center, the American International School, and the WOW Hall. He continues to perform throughout the U.S.

Abdoulaye began performing with his father’s company and, at age 7, with Biennial De Daker. A versatile artist, he also performed in film and with Ballet Diallo in Senegal. As a teenager, Abdoulaye started teaching dance, drum, song, and theater arts to students for cultural festivals. He choreographed for the company Jabooot do Ouakam, winning third place in 1997 and second place in 2000 at the regional dance competition Oscar Des Vacance. Abdoulaye has been teaching and performing in the U.S. since his arrival in 2009.

My intention was to have the dance Toucouleur set on the company. This is a beautifully fluid, yet powerful dance that the Fulani women of Senegal dance to tease their pregnant friends that they can’t kick high! But as I have grown accustomed to doing, I kept an open mind and allowed our guests to surprise us. The first surprise was that the Thioubs brought their friends, and four amazing artists showed up! The week felt like the family reunions I attended as a child. Lots of excitement, a little mayhem, and the warmth and joy of families together—from the babies to the elders—dancing, singing, and celebrating. We learned Toucouleur. But only after our second surprise, learning the dance-drama Soko, a Djiakhanke dance of love. And the drummers learned Asiko, the father rhythm of Samba that the Mande people traditionally play to entertain the elite. It was an amazing week, fun, inspiring, exhausting. And, like family reunions, it was tough to have it end. The good news is, our newly found brothers live close by and we can visit anytime we want: in downtown Eugene, on a Sunday afternoon, in dance class.

Sylla Ibrahima Sory is a Griot from Konakry, Guinea, and has been playing music since his youth. He performed with Ballet Fareta for four years throughout West Africa, and tour Africa and Europe with Circus Boabob. He moved to the U.S. in 2009, and is currently a member of the performing company Daaraya Bayfall.

Amara Ndiaye is from Dakar, Senegal and began his studies with Master Drummer Meissa Thioub and continues with Abdoulaye, joining him in the U.S. in 2009 to pursue his art. Currently, he is a member of the performing company Daaraya Bayfall. He is also an electrician and a semi-professional soccer player.
Dancing for a Reason

Did you know that 85% of Ghana’s nearly 24 million people use wood and charcoal to cook? And did you know that, according to the World Health Organization, breathing the consequent indoor smoke leads to the premature deaths of approximately 1.6 million people, mostly women and children, worldwide? The collection of wood for cooking also leads to deforestation and then desertification.

With efficient cookstoves, Habib Idrissu and Jessica Sprick want to help reverse the trends of desertification and smoke-related illness in northern Ghana. They invited Dance Africa and eighteen Ghanaian dancers and drummers from around the country to join them for two fundraising performances in the Dougherty Dance Theatre on April 23. All proceeds from the powerful Flame of Waa shows will help construct factories in Ghana that will build efficient residential and commercial wood-burning stoves, stoves that will save wood, time, and lungs. Habib and Jessica are working with two organizations from the southern Willamette Valley, the Aprovecho Research Center in Cottage Grove and Stove Team International in Eugene, both of which have developed stove technology that’s ready to be exported to Ghana.

I walked in late to our first rehearsal—sick kid, twisted ankle, husband away—and I was met with kind smiles of understanding. Habib and his wife Jessica had already introduced themselves, and here are a few things they may have mentioned.

Jessica started learning Ghanaian dance at the University of Colorado Boulder, and she joined the West African Highlife Ensemble there. She taught in a village in Ghana a few years ago. Habib grew up in northern Ghana, in Tamale, where he started a traditional music and dance company at the age of 14. He won an award as Ghana’s Best Dancer; choreographed for the group welcoming Bill Clinton to Ghana in 1998; and his Gumboot dance was performed at the Kennedy Center for the American College Dance Festival. But, really, Habib and Jessica probably wouldn’t have mentioned any of those things, both of them being rather soft-spoken.

From that first morning’s rehearsal, I was hooked on Habib’s teaching style and the rhythms of Nagla, a dance traditionally performed by the Kasem-speaking ethnic group of northeastern Ghana on a moonlit night after a successful harvest. Habib built the dance slowly for us, knowing we’d internalize it more completely if we were given time to absorb and then reflect. Three rehearsals later, we performed it—to generous, glowing reviews from the visiting Ghanaians, a tribute to Habib’s instruction, our perseverance, and the strong foundation in western African dance that Rita’s developed within Dance Africa.

To donate to Habib and Jessica’s non-profit, post to The Tomodachi Foundation, 3917 NE 105th Ave., Portland, OR 97220.
- For more information about Aprovecho’s stoves: http://www.aprovecho.org/lab/home
- For more information about Stove Team International’s stoves: http://www.stoveteam.org/
- To read the WHO’s statement about indoor air pollution related to wood-fueled cooking:
Dance Africa and Its Importance to Public Education

Rhian Pyke

If you were to walk into my first grade classroom on any given day you would see a wide variety of things. You would see students working collaboratively, doing hands-on activities, and having discussions. You would see that we still schedule, periodically, music and PE. You would see art and poetry on our walls. You would also see 31 students crammed into a classroom and, most days, only one adult in the room. (If we were lucky there would be two—most likely a parent volunteer). You would notice that most of the day is focused on core curriculum—reading, math, writing—with the arts squeezed in here and there, typically in association with other curriculum. Rarely do we have the opportunity anymore to do art for art’s sake. And unfortunately, it’s only going to get worse before it gets better.

The Eugene 4J school district alone is facing $21.7 million in cuts next year, which is nearly 15% of the district’s current operating budget. Schools are closing and teachers are being cut. Class sizes will increase to around 32+ students per classroom, and support staff—those wonderful instructional assistants we teachers rely on—will be laid-off as well. Without local support, school days will be cut to 4 day school weeks, creating about 3 weeks less time in school than in most states (although we are still required to teach the same amount of material). You can say goodbye to music, PE, and many athletics programs in most schools. And many schools will no longer be able to afford artist-in-residence programs, which provide rich, cultural, artistic experiences for our children.

Kids need the opportunity to move and play, to laugh and create, to be exposed to art and culture. Every year, Dance Africa visits nearly 3000 students in Eugene and surrounding areas with our educational school tour. For many schools, it is the only time students are exposed to dance of any kind. For even more students, it is the first time they have been exposed to any information about African culture, its dance and music, and the wonderful way it ties into every day life. Not to mention the pure joy that it brings when they get to sit and fully enjoy art in this vibrant form.

Dance Africa’s work is crucial for today’s children, especially in our current economic climate. Schools can’t afford to bring cultural experiences in, and teachers have no time to teach it. Without programs like Dance Africa, students have very few opportunities to be immersed in music, dance, or other cultures. Please help us continue what we are doing: support your local schools. Our children are our future.

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**TOUR PROGRAM**

**Tamate**  
From the Bete people of Cote d’Ivoire, Tamate is a social dance performed during harvest.

**Gahu**  
From the Ewe of Ghana, Gahu is a social dance performed by couples for celebrations.

**Nzobi**  
From the Mbuli people of Congo, Nzobi is a very powerful, protective spirit called upon to heal an agitated person. The Nganga (spiritual healer) and religious initiates play, sing, and dance until the person calms down.

**Drum Solo-KouKou**  
Senegalese arrangement with a dedication song to the great dancer Mari Sadio.

**Koukou**  
Traditionally a harvest dance from the Baga people of Guinea, this dance is now used for any celebration.

**Yankadi**  
Yankadi is a women’s dance from the Mande people of West Africa. It is usually danced in conjunction with the men’s dance Makru, and is an opportunity for men and women of neighboring villages to meet.

**Toucouleur**  
The Fulani of Senegal dance Toucouleur to tease pregnant women that they ‘cannot dance’ due to this dance’s high energy and kicking movement.
Just A Few Memories

Emily Crocker

You don’t always realize in a moment that you’re never going to forget that moment. Sometimes they just sneak up on you, but other times you are lucky enough to step out of yourself and understand that this will become one of those memories. This happened for me during our last show of the season, my last show after eleven years with Dance Africa. Before our elementary school performance, we were warming up as usual. Rita came in to warm up our voices by singing Baba Yo, and the dance spontaneously began. This is a significant dance for me, as we learned it from Masanko Banda while I was pregnant with my daughter Vivian. I think the fact that I was dancing with her at the time is what got me thinking back:

I was in Dance Africa when I met and married my husband, then during my pregnancy. Throughout my final year with the company I brought Vivi to each rehearsal and performance. I also witnessed the pregnancies of many of my friends, as the Dance Africa family grew to include 8 children! Now they are growing up, and I get to see that too. Dance Africa is genuinely a community, complete with new lives taking shape.

I was in Dance Africa as a timid, newly declared Dance major, with little more going for me than my desire to be a dancer. I stuck with the company after I graduated with a B.S. in Dance, got a job teaching dance at Linfield College, and began teaching Colorguard at the U of O. I have taught African dance at more schools and events than I can remember, and it is through my association with Rita and the company that I have been able to do all of it.

In Dance Africa, I have learned roughly 40 dances from 15 countries. I have studied with 10 guest artists, and that’s just counting the dance teachers. I have performed in the Dougherty Dance Theater, Beall Hall, the EMU, Eugene Public Library, the Shedd, the Hult Center, and more elementary, middle and high schools than I can count. I have participated in benefit concerts for women’s rights, food banks, and in our annual in-reach show for ShelterCare and others.

I have created and sold Dance Africa calendars, organized skate parties, and stuffed thousands of envelopes. Rita hired me to help with the administrative side of the company and until you see what she does, there is no way to understand how much work it is. From contacting schools to create our tour, to arranging the guest artist residencies and keeping the website current, there is always something to do.

I have danced with roughly 76 members of the company through the years. I consider many of them family. As I mentioned, there have been weddings and babies and new jobs, and when you go through these events with people, it bonds you. There is also something about dancing together that creates this bond. Another moment I’ll never forget was during a performance of Gumboot. The dancers and I made mistakes and at a certain point the dance was about to fall apart. We all looked at each other and in a split second, with nothing said (nothing but what we communicated in that look) we all made the same correction at the same instant. It was by far one of the coolest performance moments of my life, and I believe that it shows how in-tune you can be with others when you dance.

I attended Rita’s 40th and 50th birthday parties, and celebrated her birthday many more times. I have gone from being intimidated of her to being able to sass her back, and sometimes I think I know what she’s going to say before she says it. Luckily I don’t always feel this way, because I know there is still so much I can learn from her. Her knowledge base, her passion and her integrity are things I aspire to. Everything I have just written about was possible because of her (and I’m just one person in her life, imagine how many lives she has touched!).

These were just a few of the memories going through my head as the company danced and sang, with our fantastic drummers playing during that moment I will never forget. I stretched out my arms from my heart, moved my daughter’s arms in the same way, and thought about how lucky I am to say I spent eleven years with Dance Africa.
Emily Crocker (2003) Dance. This is Emily's eleventh and final year with DA. She is currently teaching dance at Linfield College and coaching UO Colorguard. She is the proud mommy of 1-year-old Vivian.

Ida Danks (2001) Dance. Ida is a returning member, having danced with the company from '98-'00. She has a 3-year-old daughter, Bella, who shares her mother's love of dance. Ida is looking forward to being a part of the DA community for years to come.

Richard Griscom (2011) Linguistics. This was Richard's first year with Dance Africa, and also, sadly, his last. It was truly a great experience to be in the company and he hopes to continue drumming while he pursues a career in African linguistics.

Kelly Moon (2011) Economics, International Studies, Dance minor. This is Kelly's first year in Dance Africa. She is from Beaverton, Oregon where she grew up taking dance classes. She has been dancing at Oregon for 4 years and is excited to be with the company this year.

Jessie Newell (2005) Human Physiology and Dance Kinesiology. Jessie is Conference Director for the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science and teaches Pilates and dance in Eugene. Jessie's in-between hours are filled with laughter and joy thanks to Elizabeth (13), Alyssa (3) and Ryan (2).

Rachel Peterson (2012) Biological/Archeology, Anthropology and Human Physiology. Rachel spends most of her time in the lab, but when she's not there, she enjoys Hula, Belly, and African dance. She is very excited about her first year with DA.

Julie Polhemus (2003) MS Environmental Studies. This season marked Julie's 12th year with DA, and she was finally bitten this spring by the got-to-go-to-Ghana bug. While that trip's timing is uncertain, some certainties in Julie's life include making local, organic food into dinners that a 5- and 2-year-old will eat; climbing Oregon's volcanoes; and pondering the future of public education.

Rhian Pyke (2008) Masters in Teaching and Learning with an emphasis in ESOL. Rhian is currently teaching 1st grade in the Eugene Public School District. This is her second year in Dance Africa, and she appreciates the knowledge and experiences she has gained from this community.

Laura Rank (2011) Anthropology, Dance Minor. Laura has been a part of DA for two years and also has a strong interest in wellness and nutrition. She is currently living in Eugene pursuing her love for dance and hoping to become a licensed herbalist.

Sarah Sandri (2012) MFA Folklore. Sarah grew up dancing in southern New Hampshire and has studied West African dance for eleven years. Her graduate work in Folklore at the UO focuses on issues of performativity, ethnicity, gender, and transnational economies in West African dance communities in the United States. She teaches writing composition at UO. When not in dance or yoga class, she loves to travel, write, read, and cook.

Rebecca Stiehl (2011) Dance, Community Arts minor. In addition to two years with DA, Rebecca has toured with the Bluecoats Drum and Bugle corps (Ohio) for three summers, as well as with the UO Repertory Dance Company (2008, 2010). She has also performed in the Faculty Dance Concert (2006), as well as at the American College Dance Festival (2010). She is beginning to explore the work of arts administration, and is looking forward to exploring the greater dance world next year!

Juliana Urban (2011) Music. After graduation, Juliana is off to sing opera in Verona! Next year will be an interesting one: applying to graduate schools, drumming, and dancing in Dance Africa;), and hopefully working! I am so excited to come back next year to continue drumming and dancing with an incredibly talented group of people!