Rita’s World

So it has come to this: Next year, 2013, will be our 20th year. What has 20 years wrought? 161 company members (everyone accounted for?); 13 week long residencies and performances with 24 guest artists—learning 24 new dances; and repertoire consisting of 54 dances from 16 nations and over 33 cultures. We have shared the Dougherty Dance Theatre stage with a Malawian Chief, Manden Griots, National Companies from Guinea and Cuba, elementary school children, internationally renowned peacekeepers, and numerous acclaimed professional dancers and musicians—last year with 18 glorious Ghanaian dancers and drummers.

We have hosted countless master classes in Gerlinger Annex. We have learned from members of Les Ballets Africains (The National Company of Guinea), Conjunto Folklorico Omo Oddara (Cuba), and Amazones—The Women Master Drummers of Guinea, as well as 36 additional master dancers and drummers—most multiple times.

Even with scant information (memory) from 1995-1997, our statistics for these 20 years are astounding—72 venues for 166 shows, a conservative estimate of reaching 31,000 K-12 students, and another 12,000 in the Dougherty Dance Theatre and other local theatres.

Our first school tour was at Crest Drive Elementary in Eugene in 1994. If the students were between 5 and 12 years of age they would now be 23-30 years old. Oh my. Guess we need to start on the next generation.

I hope some of you will have time to visit us next year, or if you are an alum, come perform with us. We hope to throw a well-deserved celebration.

Questions?...Comments?...Insults?

Brian West

Our drummers love it when we tell them that we have guests from Ghana coming. Ghanaian rhythms are sewn from a deeper, hidden texture that would be impossible to pick up from a book or a video. It takes live training and a great teacher to recreate these complex and fascinating rhythms. Because our guest, Habib Iddrisu, worked with us last year for the Stove Project fundraiser concert, we thankfully had a slight head start familiarizing ourselves with some of the characteristics of Ghanaian music. From the Stove Project show, we resurrected a wonderful piece entitled “Nagla,” re-shaped into a show-stopping version that we could use for our winter concert and in the schools. It consists of nearly twenty different beats and cues that must be memorized to coincide with the dance. It took some time, but I was able to learn the leads, and I was honored to double the lead with Habib for the Martin Luther King Jr. concert. Our eager drummers held down the accompaniment faithfully, and we pulled off the most difficult drum rhythm ever attempted in Dance Africa history! We give special thanks to our other Ghanaian guest, Nana Yaw Asumin, who flew in to accompany our MLK concert. Nana was such a joy to work with and his dancing and drumming was elegant and beautiful to witness.

During our week of training, Habib’s patient and always-thoughtful teaching style helped to keep our dancers and drummers in good spirits through the rigors of learning the intricate pieces. He would often end a training moment, asking, “Any questions, comments…insults?” He kept us giggling all the while, and before we knew it we had joyously learned two other deep works, “Anlo-Kete”, and our colorful finale, “Fumefume.”

Habib taught us a great trick, which he has performed in his native Ghana. One drummer starts a rhythm on the bell and other drummers start the same pattern successively one beat later than the previous person on their own African cowbells.

The rhythm we used is often named the “six” bell because it is the clave (bell rhythm) used throughout Africa in music that uses the 6/8 meter. If you have ever heard Morse code, which forms messages out of short and long tones, the longer being exactly twice as long as the short tone, then you can try it right here and now.

It goes: long, short, long, long, long, short, long, short, long, short, and immediately repeats. It becomes very difficult to keep your place in the round as you get swept in this bell whirlwind. Once you have 4 players playing it in a layered canon, you have a thrilling bell feature that is guaranteed to mesmerize the audience, as well as the drummers.

We said a temporary good-bye, halfway through the season, to drummer and new graduate, Michael O’Brien. We can’t wait to hear about his post graduation travels! Covering his parts, just in time, and in grand fashion, was Christina Jamerson. We thank Christina, a high school teacher and multitalented music and stage artist, who learned all her parts in a very short time to cover our elementary school shows. She also led our rhythm game with the kids, and we love that she sneaks away from her many projects to accompany our African dance classes. We were honored to have the talented Rhian Pyke back in the fold for the third year in a row, and who also doubled as a dancer on a few numbers. We thank another talented dancer and drummer, Tommy Schreiner, for joining us this year, and Glenn Bonney in his 18th year with the company, hitting those big Dun Dun’s with fervor and ace timing! As always, we thank Rita, and the Dance Africa Dancers for keeping us honest and keeping it fun!
We had the great pleasure to bring Habib Iddrisu, along with Nana Yaw Asumin, back as this season’s Artists in Residency. Last year, some may remember, Habib brought eighteen Ghanaian dancers and drummers from around the country to join him for two fundraising performances to help reverse the trends of desertification and smoke-related illness in northern Ghana with efficient cookstoves. DA was honored to perform alongside these artists in the Flame of Waa performance in the Dougherty Dance Theatre.

Habib Iddrisu is a traditionally trained dancer and musician from Tamale, in northern Ghana. He was born into the Dagomba/Dagomba Bizing family of court historians and musicians. At fourteen, Habib started one of the most prestigious traditional music and dance groups in Tamale, the Youth Home Cultural Group. In 1993, he won the Entertainment/Arts Critics & Reviewers Association of Ghana (ECRAG/ACRAG) award as Ghana's Best Dancer. In Ghana, he led the Novisi Dance Group; was the lead drummer and choreographer of Abibigromma (a company at the University of Ghana); and choreographed for many other groups and events, including President Bill Clinton's visit to Ghana in 1998. He has toured the world extensively with traditional singing and dancing groups.

Habib recently received his Ph. D. in Performance Studies from Northwestern University, where he founded the university's African Drum and Dance Ensemble. He served as a Presidential Fellow for SUNY Brockport in African Studies and Dance. Habib has his MA and BA degrees in African History and African Studies from Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

Nana Yaw Asumin’s passion for music and dance took off with the Novisi Dance Group in Ghana under the leadership of Habib Iddrisu. His talent and passion for music, dance, and acting led him to lead renowned groups like the Folkloric Dance Company (the resident theater company of the Center for National Culture), Kumasi, and the Adehyeman Dance Company. He graduated with distinction in Choreography and Dance Studies from the University of Ghana where he received several awards including the “Chancellor Excellence Award.” He is a choreographer, dancer, and musician. He has held several workshops for the corporate community in Ghana and several universities and colleges in the United States. He currently lives and attends college in Houston, Texas.

Amazing resumes, but those of you who have seen these artists know that the words do not and cannot do them justice, for they are superb. To learn from a great dancer, drummer, teacher, and scholar such as Habib is a gift. There is a great deal to be said for kindness, joy, and patience. These traits, espoused by Habib, allow for an environment where apprentices can accomplish feats that seemed out of reach. And the company rose to the occasion. Habib thought them talented enough to set two dances, Anlo-Kete and FumeFume. In addition, we performed Nagla, which Habib taught us last year for the Flame of Waa concert. The drummers also received a workout with exciting and exasperating rhythms typical of Ghanaian music. Extraordinary talent is impressive. But warmth and joyousness is unforgettable.

Exciting news: Habib is scheduled to teach a section of Dance in Traditional Cultures next year in the Department. We look forward to working and dancing with him!
TOUR PROGRAM

Sinte
Choreographer: Rita J. Honka
Arrangements: Glenn Bonney
From the Nalu people of Guinea, Sinte is a rite of passage danced mainly at weddings.

Soko (excerpt)
Choreographer: Abdoulaye Thioub
From the Djiakhanke people of Senegal, Soko is a dance about both romantic and platonic love.

Edenda
Choreographer: Rita J. Honka
From the Mbochi people of Congo, this dance is performed for, and by, women at parties.

Essokota and Arr Pionierre
Arrangement: Brian West
Brought to us by Messango Constant, Essokota is a healing rhythm from the Mongo people of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Arr Pionierre is a contemporary rhythm created in the 1960’s for young people.

Nagla
Choreographer: Habib Iddrisu
Traditionally performed by the Kasem-speaking ethnic group after a successful harvest. It is usually done during a moonlit night where people often find their life partners.

Muchongoyo
Choreographer: Julia Tsitsi Chigamba
Muchongoyo is a warrior dance from Zimbabwe. It is originally from the Zulu people of South Africa, but migrated northward with groups such as the Nadu, Kalanga, and Ndebele.

Fumefume
Choreographer: Habib Iddrisu
Created by Mustapha Tetteh Addy, Fumefume is a blend of movements from many Ghanaian dances and evolved to include movements from ethnic cultures throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

DA TOUR 2012

January
16-22  DDT with Mamadou and Abdoulaye Thioub

February
3  Howard Elementary
24  Edison Elementary

March
2  Edgewood Elementary
11  Hult Center with SOMD Chamber Choir

April
6  McCormack Elementary
13  In Reach- Dougherty Dance Theatre- UO

May
4  High Schools at UO EMU
UO’s 35th annual Foreign Language and International Studies Day

Dance Africa
1214 University of Oregon, Eugene OR, 97405
541-346-3379
rhonka@uoregon.edu
Visit our webpage at http://danceafrica.uoregon.edu
First dance: DA began with a simple intent. When Kouessan Abaglo and I met, I wanted to learn, help preserve, and share his traditional cultural dances from his native country of Togo. We needed dancers, and he decided ten would do, five men and five women, including him and me. I knew many great female dancers but I really didn’t think we would find four additional men. We did, although two left in the first year. We learned three dances early on: Atigna and Gbekon, both warrior dances from the Mina people, and Tchamba, a harvest dance from the Tchamba people. Gbekon, I believe, was the first—it was the first to be performed. Whichever dance it was, I remember working diligently at trying to figure out how to teach the dancers to move our backs like Kouessan did. To this day, I’ve never seen anyone with a spine like his, and we could never match it, but I like to think we came close.


First performance: We performed during the UO's International Festival April 25–May 2, 1993. Back then, it was a weeklong event with Africa Night falling on April 29th. We performed Gbekon and I remember our exit, improvising in pairs doing what became known as the “Kouessan back.” I was Kouessan’s partner and, needless to say, I felt a bit inadequate but had a great time!

First show at the Dougherty Dance Theatre: May 28, 1994. Dancer Carolyne Quinn and drummer Gregory Howard were two leaders in the Eugene African Dance scene when I moved to town in 1989. I invited them to join us for our first full evening performance at UO. We alternated performance pieces and joined together for two finales—Carolyne taught us Djoli, a celebratory dance from Guinea; and Kouessan gave us Tchamba, a harvest dance from Togo.

First school tour: Crest Drive Elementary. As an undergrad in Detroit, I toured extensively in the schools in a modern dance company. I have always had a desire for DA to do the same. So, early on, we performed at Crest Drive. Later, when Steven Chatfield secured the Arlene Wright Endowment for the Department of Dance, we offered to get on the road for a full season tour. I believe that was the 1996-1997 season.

First residency: November 2000 with Mabiba Baegne and Fred Simpson. I had known Mabiba and Fred for a couple of years, taking master classes with them when they came to Eugene. I was in Boulder, Colorado and read that they were teaching in town. I surprised them by showing up to class. That same trip I secured our first donation, from my friend Andrea Smith, which I was able to grow over the years. I remember asking Mabiba and Fred to be our first guest artists while having lunch at a diner. It was nerve-racking because it wasn’t much money. They agreed, though, and it was such a wonderful first residency. That show was in November—about five weeks into Fall term. Back then, we did our full evening performances a year—Africa Night was in April. What was I thinking?

First master class: Chata Addy. When I was moving to Eugene for grad school, I visited family in Seattle and went to a club to see a band. I couldn't see the percussionist, or as I believed at the time—percussionists—but it was amazing! The rhythms were rich, thick and fast. I fell in love with Ghanaian rhythms right there. When I saw that it was only one percussionist playing, Chata Addy, I had to introduce myself. We became friends and when I began teaching African Dance as a grad student, I invited him down. We learned Kpanlogo, to a Ghanaian bell rhythm we still call the Chata five. While DA had not yet begun, this event was the seed.

Longest dancer tenure: Julie Polhemus has been with us 13 years. She has done it all. She is an inspired performer, a knowledgeable teacher, a gentle rehearsal director, a creative writer, and—oh, thank the heavens—a brilliant editor. She shares her time, her joy, her children and her expertise. She is a mentor by example and, sometimes, necessity. She is a good friend and a smart advisor. And she can’t leave until I do.

2012 REUNION

I have been mulling over an idea. I want to invite all alumni back next year to help celebrate our twenty years. Come dance, drum, sing, or watch the show. What a treat it would be to see everyone and share the stage again. I know for many it has been a lifetime since you have been with us. New lives have been built, families made, and careers developed. But if you happen to be around the weekend after MLK day, or feel the pull of the great Northwest, come for the show in January. If you cannot make it, or even if you do, send a note. Tell me what you are up to or maybe pass along a DA memory or story for next year’s newsletter. So when you see this, drop me a note or an email. It’s so nice when I hear from you.
Dance Africa - The Early Years

Rita J Honka

I thought I would reprint this walk down memory lane as we look to our twentieth anniversary. Hope you enjoy it a second time.

Nothing like saggy sky blue diapers on Oregon men whose skin hadn't seen the sun in decades. That was one of the costumes Kouessan had the men of the first company wear at Beall Concert Hall in the early years. We joked and laughed, but they wore them. That was the kind of company they were.

For the past few weeks I have had the pleasure of reminiscing with some of the first DA company members. In large part we were trying to remember who exactly was the first company? What I discovered was that the first true company—the members who stuck around for years, helped to create our signature piece Gumboots, and have been life-long friends, even if we don’t see each other as often as we think of each other—took a couple of auditions to solidify. But when it did, it was magic! The photo above is (l-r) Michael, Julie, Gina, Elise, Emily, Dianna, and Bruce. Missing are Pollyanna, Alli, and drummers Charlie, Glenn, and Joe, occasionally Brian, and for a show or two, David. Of course, Kouessan and I were still dancing then.

What made the magic? I think the creation of Gumboots exemplifies the character of this company and the spirit of our time together. First, we didn’t know a thing—there were no videos of Gumboots at this time. I had an audio tape that I constantly listened to and I also had Matshabe, my dear friend from South Africa, who danced about trying to show us what he had grown up with. He wasn’t a choreographer but a Political Science student. But there is no single dance, each group creates their own. So there we were, a new company with no Gumboots experience, creating our own. And we did. We did by experimenting, improvising, rehearsing, laughing, rehearsing, swearing, eating french fries, rehearsing. Everyone added a little something. Even Kouessan, who, I believe, made it to one or two Gumboots rehearsals—we still shout out his name when we perform the short rhythmic phrase he created. I remember developing rhythms in my car, singing incessantly during my two hour, bi-weekly commute to Linfield College. I remember how Emily started dancing a 3 over 4 rhythm that became her signature phrase when she improvised. Or the look in Michael’s eyes when he finally understood the concepts and took off in his creative process. And Bruce, ever the trickster, entertaining us and audiences with his humorous, usually butt-oriented, rhythmically rich solos. Gina on Gumboots: “How honored I am to have been a part of that process! I remembered it for YEARS after wards since we performed it so often. I recall one performance in particular when Bruce had just started seeing Peg (his future wife) and she came to the show we did at a school. Bruce was the “rhythm leader” and he was so nervous that we literally FLEW through Gumboots since we performed it so often. I recall one performance in particular when Bruce had just started seeing Peg (his future wife) and she came to the show we did at a school. Bruce was the "rhythm leader" and he was so nervous that we literally FLEW through Gumboots like we were on fire.” That is the nature of the dance: every dancer, every movement, every sound is dependent and influenced by every other one.

That is the nature of Dance Africa, established so long ago. We fought for everything. Dancers decoded movement, trying to emulate Kouessan!! “You do this, you do this, you do this—then you dance.” Drummers deciphered rhythms found on scratchy tapes, or that were simply sung to them. Polly made costumes, Charlie made dunduns. Bruce even wrote the purpose statement we use today that is polished but a Political Science student. But there is no single dance, each group creates their own. So there we were, a new company with no Gumboots experience, creating our own. And we did. We did by experimenting, improvising, rehearsing, laughing, rehearsing, swearing, eating french fries, rehearsing. Everyone added a little something. Even Kouessan, who, I believe, made it to one or two Gumboots rehearsals—we still shout out his name when we perform the short rhythmic phrase he created. I remember developing rhythms in my car, singing incessantly during my two hour, bi-weekly commute to Linfield College. I remember how Emily started dancing a 3 over 4 rhythm that became her signature phrase when she improvised. Or the look in Michael’s eyes when he finally understood the concepts and took off in his creative process. And Bruce, ever the trickster, entertaining us and audiences with his humorous, usually butt-oriented, rhythmically rich solos. Gina on Gumboots: “How honored I am to have been a part of that process! I remembered it for YEARS afterwards since we performed it so often. I recall one performance in particular when Bruce had just started seeing Peg (his future wife) and she came to the show we did at a school. Bruce was the "rhythm leader" and he was so nervous that we literally FLEW through Gumboots like we were on fire.” That is the nature of the dance: every dancer, every movement, every sound is dependent and influenced by every other one.

That was one of the costumes Kouessan had the men of the first company wear at Beall Concert Hall in the early years. We joked and laughed, but they wore them. That was the kind of company they were.

Bruce says: All I can think of now is what FUN it was! I know it was educational and entertaining and all that, too, but working with all the great musicians and dancers (including our wonderful director!) was fun and enriched my life greatly. I looked forward to every rehearsal and performance. Learning from and frolicking with Kouessan during a rehearsal or two and learning Gumboots from the ground up with Matshabe certainly were a couple of highlights for me. Best wishes to you—and Dance Africa!

Gina says: Thinking back to 1993, when I took my first African Dance class from Rita, it was so different from anything I had ever done with dance before. I can’t remember exactly what possessed me—a ballerina through and through—to consider auditioning for the first Dance Africa company, but I am so fortunate that I did. I DO remember, during the audition, watching Dianna and thinking, “What on Earth am I doing here??!”...but, I guess Rita saw potential, and Pollyanna continually projected her "pelvis power” onto me, a concept which has stuck with me to this day! There was one dance that I think just Dianna, Polly and Julie performed....very beautiful. It was my son Cameron's (now almost 21!) favorite...he always wanted to "watch the dance with the ladies.” [Rita’s note—Fanga, brought to us by Jennifer Craig]—I remember working with incredible musicians/drummers and Matshabe and Kouessan. I can say that I don’t think I’ve ever been as enamored by talent and spirit since that time....Never being able to fully master the necessary gravity for African dance, or keeping the little shells in the coconut husks! Remember that one??
Laura Black (2013) MFA Candidate Dance. This is her first year performing with Dance Africa and she is thrilled to be joining the company. Laura’s deepest passions in life are practicing yoga and sharing her love for all forms of dance through teaching, choreographing, and performing.

Ida Danks (2001) Dance. Ida originally joined Dance Africa for the ‘98 through ‘00 seasons and returned to the company last year. Ida has also trained in modern, ballet, tap and jazz but the sense of community combined with the ability to express your individual self in African dance have brought her back to DA. She also spends her energy keeping up with her busy four year old daughter, Bella.

Christina Jamerson (2004) Theater. Christina earned her Masters in Teaching from Gonzaga University in 2007 and came back to Eugene to teach high school locally. She also teaches classes in Bellydance and performs with local theater company Roving Park Players. One of her favorite activities is drumming for Dance Africa and the African Dance classes at the university.

Emily Joyce (2012) Dance. This is Emily’s first year as a dancer for Dance Africa. She has studied and performed Modern, Ballet, Jazz and Salsa Dance. She is very excited to join Dance Africa and has enjoyed the strong sense of community among the entire UO African Dance Community.

Kelly Moon (2011) Economics, International Studies. This was Kelly’s second year in Dance Africa. She majored in economics and international studies. She was a dance minor and has been taking dance classes at Oregon for 5 years. Next year, Kelly heads to Naropa Institute in Boulder, CO.

Jessie Newell (2005) Dance, Human Physiology. Jessie is a Stott certified Pilates instructor, dance educator to the young and young-at-heart, as well as a meeting planner for regional and international events. In her free-time, one might find her reading children’s book, playing dress-up, kicking a football, digging holes or having tickle-wars with the three joys of her life.

Michael O’Brien (2012) English Literature. Michael is a drummer and a senior at the University of Oregon. He has been drumming since he was 13, and recently began learning the djembe.

Rachel Peterson (2011) Anthropology. Rachel currently spends most of her time in the lab, but when she can get away she enjoys Belly, Hula and African dance. She is also currently working toward grad school at NYU. She is very happy to spend her 2nd year with Dance Africa.

Julie Polhemus (2003) MS Environmental Studies. Julie has danced with Dance Africa for a third of her life. You can also find her learning to backcountry ski, dancing with her children in the living room, or trying to choose just one passion on which to focus.

Rhian Pyke (2008) Masters in Teaching and Learning with an emphasis in ESOL. Rhian is currently a substitute teacher in the 4J school district. This is her 4th year in Dance Africa, and she loves that she has continued to be able to learn from this wonderful community!

Laura Rank (2011) Anthropology, Dance minor. This is her third year with dance Africa and she lives in Eugene continuing her passion for dance and the environment.

Tommy Schreiner (2013) Dance, Theatre minor. Tommy is a first year Dance Africa drummer and third year student with (happily) no end in sight. He declared a dance major and theatre minor last Fall and loves his life.