

DanceAfrica Festival 2017

Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, New York

May 26-29



DanceAfrica is the nation's largest African dance festival in the U.S. and the Brooklyn Academy of Music's longest-running program celebrates its 40th anniversary with a special program, including Guinean dance and a reunion of past favorites. The annual traditions include the Tribute to the Ancestors, Community Day, dance workshops, visual arts, *FilmAfrica*, and DanceAfrica Bazaar with Bloomberg Philanthropies as the Season Sponsor.

The celebration began May 19, 2017 with *The Healing Light of Rhythm: Tradition and Beyond*. Dancers, drummers, and musicians, some past favorites, some new to the Festival, take the stage together in a special program designed by Artistic Director Abdel R. Salaam to mark the occasion. Artistic Director Emeritus Chuck Davis first put an "African Village" in Brooklyn Academy of Music's Lepercq Space in 1977, thus launching a now 40-year-long program that has become an enduring tradition with performances by domestic and international companies, community events, education components, films, visual arts, and an all-out celebration of African and African-American dance culture.

More than 80 dance troupes from more than 15 nations have participated in this annual showcase, including companies from Ivory Coast, Congo, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Zaire, Benin, Uganda, Ghana, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Peru, Zambia, Madagascar, Senegal, and the U.S. BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music) has hosted this important festival for 40 years, an unparalleled part of BAM's history. It is now led by Abdel R. Salaam, who honors the tradition by curating a program that celebrates the past and the present. Asase Yaa, Forces of Nature, and Illstyle & Peace Productions, which have all performed in previous DanceAfricas, took the stage in the first half in a diverse style mash-up. For the second half, Wula Dance and Drum Ensemble, a company of Guinean dance and drum masters led by M'Bemba Bangoura, continues the exploration of the diverse African dance cultures. All will joined on stage by the BAM/Restoration Dance Youth Ensemble, which celebrates its own 20th anniversary. An integral component of the Festival, the Ensemble symbolizes DanceAfrica's commitment to education and community outreach.

Community Events

A Tribute to the Ancestors ceremony was held at 10am on May 20 at the Weeksville Heritage Center (1698 Bergen St, Brooklyn). This traditional ceremony, which includes dancing and music by participating artists, is an integral part of DanceAfrica that honors elders who have passed on. The event is free and open to the public. It will be followed by the DanceAfrica Community Day at Restoration Plaza (1368 Fulton St, Brooklyn) at 1pm to kick off the annual festival, it features performances by students from RestorationART who have participated in BAM Education's DanceAfrica program.

The Memorial Day weekend celebration included the popular DanceAfrica Bazaar which hosts more than 150 vendors selling crafts, food, and fashion; dance workshops. Each year, the free outdoor Bazaar delights the crowds with local and international vendors who transform the streets surrounding BAM into a marketplace of African, Caribbean, and African American food, fashion, artifacts, jewelry, and crafts. An estimated 40,000 people from all five boroughs of New York and the tri-state area sample these delights and bask in the communal atmosphere throughout the weekend. The *Village Voice* declared it "the boldest party in town" and The New York Times called it "a colorful kickoff for the summer street festival season." The bazaar also features entertainment for families. And notwithstanding, the *FilmAfrica*, a BAMcinématek film series at BAM Rose Cinemas was held.

The 2017 recipients of the Samuel H. Scripps BAM Scholarship for post-secondary education was awarded on the BAM Howard Gilman Opera House stage on May 26. Inspired by the spirit of DanceAfrica, BAM Trustee Richard Feldman launched the Samuel H. Scripps BAM Scholarship Fund in 2008, in memory of former BAM Trustee and arts patron Samuel Scripps. The scholarships exclusively benefit students who have participated in BAM's arts education programs, including the DanceAfrica Education initiative. The 2017 recipients included Nesrien Alnabulsi, Assy Barry, Nyasiah Colon, Toni Greenidge-Aigle, Naomi Johnson, Akiva Johnson, Sarujen Sivakumar, Taylor Thomas, Ky To, and Tyriese White.

Tamara Thomas, the second Chuck Davis Emerging Choreographer Fellow, was also feted at the May 26 performance. Created to honor Baba Chuck Davis, this unique opportunity offers dance practitioners the chance to travel to Africa and study with masters of African dance.

Thomas is an educator, performing artist, and choreographer. Her artistic vision involves the integration of arts and community development. This focus has been shared with organizations such as Dreams Wilmington, Upward Bound, and the Friends Neighborhood Guild and drove the creation of The Nkonsonkonson Afrikan Youth Ensemble in Kingston, Jamaica.

A memorial service was held May 29 on the Howard Gilman Opera House stage to honor the late Chuck Davis, who passed away on May 14. Various DanceAfrica constituents, past and present, participated in commemorating and celebrating his life and legacy.

Artist and Dance Ensembles Presence

Wula Drum and Dance Ensemble consists of 17 master drummers, dancers, and instrumentalists, all from their native country of Guinea. They bring with them the vast knowledge of the traditional music and dance from each region and represent more than 15 different Guinean ethnicities. Its Artistic Director *M'bemba Bangoura* has traveled the world as a performer and teacher of the Djembe drum and is revered for his high level of mastery. As a native of Guinea, Bangoura began playing the djembe at the young age of seven. By the age of 21, he was acclaimed as a master drummer and was invited to play for Ballet Djoliba, the national company of Guinea. Since moving to the US in 1992, Bangoura has become an integral part of the drum and dance scene. He has taught hundreds of students, many of who are now teachers themselves. In addition, he has personally created choreography and developed repertoire for dozens of dance companies worldwide.

Executive Artistic Director/Choreographer Abdel R. Salaam and Executive Managing Director Olabamidele Husbands co-founded the *Forces of Nature* in 1981. Along with founding company member Dyane Harvey, Forces of Nature has produced professional ballets, conducted dance classes, and presented concerts and educational programs in New York City, the US, and throughout the world for over 36 years, including annual appearances at Aaron Davis Hall, the Apollo Theater in Harlem, and the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Forces of Nature Dance has been presented by the Joyce Theater, the DanceAfrica Festival, the American Dance Festival, the International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD) conference, the First International Black Dance Festival (UK); and the International Dance Festival in Aruba, among others.

Artistic Director Yao Ababio founded *Asase Yaa* in 2001, featuring seasoned musicians, dancers, and vocalists. The array of artistic skill allows this company to create unique productions that portray the authentic richness of the African diaspora experience.

The company has appeared on *VHI*'s Hip Hop Honors Awards; the premiere of *Sing your Song*, a documentary on Harry Belafonte at the Apollo Theater; DanceAfrica New York and Chicago; Kente Arts Alliance in Pittsburgh; and at the first (2014) annual dance festival at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. In January 2013 Asase Yaa opened its own multi-cultural performing arts facility in Brooklyn.

Illstyle & Peace Productions is a multicultural Philadelphia-based dance company founded in 2000 by Brandon "Peace" Albright. The company creates work rooted in contemporary, West African, old-school, and new-school hip-hop blended with an eclectic mix of dance and performance disciplines, including, breaking, popping, locking, tap, hip-hop, and house dancing. It has toured to critical acclaim nationally and internationally, and is committed to delivering positive messages to all audiences. Illstyle & Peace Productions was a 2013 US Culture Ambassador, chosen by the State Department and BAM, and toured Russia, Belarus, and the Ukraine.

An annual favorite and symbol of youth involvement in the preservation of African heritage, the *BAM/Restoration Dance Youth Ensemble* returns to BAM for the 20th year. Under the artistic direction of Ronald K. Brown, Arcell Cabuag, and Karen Thornton-Daniels, the gifted young dancers of RestorationArt celebrate both ancestral roots and present-day community. *The Village Voice* has praised these young dancers as "exuberant and disciplined" and "a group worth following."

Abdel R. Salaam is the artistic director of DanceAfrica and the executive artistic director/co-founder and choreographer of Forces of Nature Dance Theatre (FONDT), established in 1981. He and his company led the historic procession for Nelson and Winnie Mandela on their visit to New York in 1990. He has directed and choreographed for theater and television to critical acclaim and has been active in the world of the performing and visual arts since 1955. Salaam has served on the faculties of Lehman College, the American Dance Festival in the US and Korea, Alvin Ailey American Dance Center, and the Chuck Davis Dance Academy. He is currently one of the directors of the Harlem Children's Zone/Forces of Nature Youth Academy of Dance and Wellness at St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Harlem. Some of the awards Salaam has received include the Monarch Merit Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dance from the National Council for Arts & Culture (1993); the Silver Anniversary Award for Outstanding Achievement in Choreography, Teaching and Performance from Lehman College (1994); and Better Family Life Lifetime Achievement Award in Arts (2000). Salaam is a 2004 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow and was selected as artist in residence at Tennessee Performing Art Center from 2003 to 2007. FONDT, along with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, received the 41st annual Audelco Award for Excellence in Black Theater Award as the 2013 Dance Company of the Year.