

The Umkhathi Theatre Works Company at Dance Africa 2013: A Dance Review

by

Doris Green

Doris Green (papapa70@aol.com) is a Fulbright Scholar, an ethnomusicologist, musician, dancer, certified teacher of Labanotation, and creator of Greenotation, a system for notating the percussion instruments of African ensembles.

The Umkhathi Theatre Works Company from Zimbabwe was a welcomed group as they appeared at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) in celebration of the 36th year of Dance Africa.

As we all know BAM hosted the Afro-Asian Festival in 1971. It was in 1971 that the National Dance Company of Senegal completely mesmerized the viewing public and changed the world of African dance forever. They introduced the audience to the music and dances of a number of different ethnic groups found in Senegal. There was a masked dancer, *Koumpo* and stilt dancer *Chakaba*, as well as the Peuhl acrobats who defied the laws of physics. From the beginning of the show the Djimbe drummers captured the audience with their rendition of Apelle a Tam-Tam, and the Djimbe drum usurped the Congo drum as the drum of instant African recognition. The music and dances of Senegal reigned supreme from 1971 to 1984 until their director, Maurice Sonar Senghor retired.

In 2013 much of the viewing public had grown tired and weary of hearing the same repertoire of Senegal, Guinea, and Mali. They were also fatigued by the insurgence of groups, particular African groups, playing the Djembe drum when it is not part of their traditional instruments. Thus Umkhathi provided a welcomed change with a different repertoire and instruments endemic to their ethnic group and region. But most prominent was the use of their voices in four-part harmony to accompany their dances. It was a different repertoire - classic, vintage and an elegantly represented show of the traditional music of the Ndebele and Shona people of Zimbabwe.

Essentially Zimbabwe belongs to the East Coast dance region of Africa, but stylization is close to the South African dance region. Therefore, it has characteristics of both the East Coast region and South African dance regions. As a person who began her studies of African dance in East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda) July 1 to August 31, 1970, I am privy to a number of dancing styles that are not commonly seen outside the traditional regions. In general, the East Coast of Africa has developed the melodics to the nth degree. The West Coast of Africa ranging from the Congo to Senegal has developed rhythm to a high prominence.

In fact when I was in East Africa (1970 and 1971) researching traditional African music, I was advised to go to West Africa, and I was told that the universities in West Africa were more advanced and organized than the schools in East Africa. And in fact, the universities in East Africa did not include the study of traditional music on a large scale, and at one time they were grouped as the University of East Africa. On July 1, 1970 they separated and became independent universities: the University of Nairobi in Kenya; the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania; and Makerere University in Uganda.

In 1970 traditional African music was not included in the schools of Tanzania or Uganda, but it was included in the University of Nairobi on a small scale. Thus, traditional African dances were not addressed in the colleges and universities at all. In all probability, the colonizers who used their knowledge of music as the foundation to establish a curriculum, based their knowledge in melody, and not the percussive elements of African music, and the melodic elements prevailed.

Although there are groups in East Africa from Uganda down to Zimbabwe who use drums, there are a large number of groups along the eastern coast of Africa who do not use instruments to accompany their dances, but instead, they use their voices as musical accompaniment. One of these groups is the Masai people who live in the plain lands and do not play drums, but use their voice as they dance. Likewise, Umkhathi used their voices, in four-part harmony, to accompany their dances.

The Company is relatively new as it was created in 1997. There is no doubt in my mind that by 1997 the Djembe drum had invaded the borders of Zimbabwe. I am thankful that the musicians did not play this drum as part of their Dance Africa presentation.

Characteristics of the dances of the Company were the hip movements (not the pelvic contractions) commonly seen in the dances of West Africa. Also characteristic is the quick foot movements (they wore ankle rattles/secondary rattles that are moved to the music of the ensemble). As a notator I was trying to figure out the time signature of the selection when I observed the Ingungu drummer on stage right, clap out the rhythm. Much to my chagrin, it was the “Kon-Ko-Lo” rhythm given the name by Nigerians. The “Kon-Ko-Lo” rhythm bears the 12/8 time signature and is one of the most popular rhythms used throughout Africa.

The Ingungu drummer was essentially playing the same rhythm that the Kagan drummer in the Ewe ensemble of Ghana plays. The rattle (Hosho rattle) plays the same pattern as the Ingungu drummer, which mainly keeps the time while the other Ingungu drummer executes rhythms with the player of the Tonga drums.

In my observations of traditional dance ensembles in East Africa, I see that they use fewer instruments in their ensembles than those of West African ensembles. I have not observed any iron bells in East African ensembles, although a silver whistle is used in a number of East African ensembles and countries.

One movement that characterizes dances from Zimbabwe and South Africa is the classic “stamping” of the foot against the floor. My first contact with dances of this type dates back to my early research of more than fifty years ago. The libraries here were absent of materials on traditional African dance, but I was able to connect to the International Library of African Music in South Africa. They published a book titled *African Dances of the Witwatersrand Gold Mines*, which is essentially about the dances that the men who worked in the mines performed to entertain themselves (there are also recordings that correspond to these dances). Also in this book, the dances were classified by the action seen so we could have categories such as “stepping”, “striding” and “stamping”.

And a similar way, the Shangaan people of South Africa call the classic striking of the foot against the ground ‘Kutshongolo’, and additionally, ‘Ndlamu’ is the name of another stamping dance performed in the mines which the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe call ‘Ukuganda’.

African Dances of the Witwatersrand Gold Mines was a useful resource for me, and in fact as a young choreographer who did not have a list of African names for my dance compositions, I borrowed names from the book, and when I was in college, I choreographed “*Makwaya*” as a senior dance project that became so popular that it became my signature choreography, and I later notated it and it is now in the library of the Dance Notation Bureau, Dance Notation Bureau Extension at Ohio State University and the Dance Department in Surrey England.

The cast of the Umkhathi featured six ladies (Faith Moyo, Ayanda Mpofo, Caroline Mangwiro, Qeqeshiwe Mntambo, Memory Muzondo, Nodumo "Nana" Sibanda) who danced and sang. I do not know if ladies play instruments in Zimbabwe. But these ladies did not play instruments in the performances. The males of the Company played instruments, sang and danced. They were: Maqawe Moyo, Hebson C. Ncube, Fidelis Tshuma, Linos Sibanda, Webson Zenda, Amos Kazembe, Martin B. Khumalo, Mehluli Dube, Nigel Mzingaye Ndlela

In Dance Africa (www.bam.org), Umkhathi Theatre Works performed different selections the first weekend of May 19th than they performed on the second weekend of May 24-27. On May 19th they performed Isitshikitsha, a dance of the Ndebele people performed at social gatherings. They graced the stage under lowered lighting that cast them as silhouettes. Some dancers straddled the back of another dancer as they paraded across the stage singing in four-part harmony. On May 24-27 they graced the stage under lowered lights that cast them as silhouettes. They performed Setapa a dance that originated in Botswana that was performed at weddings, dressed in brown leather shorts, sandals on their feet (which cushioned the impact of the stamping action). The striking of the foot against the floor was pivotal in this dance. As exciting as the stamping of the foot against the floor was the use of the hips to strike the floor in different poses. The men excelled in this dance with different hip poses.

They also performed Chinyamera, a hunting gathering dance wherein the ladies of the group show their fruit gathering skills and at one time you can see them take a substance (bitter herb) from their breast and spread it around. Each of their selections was interspersed with musical interludes of singing, clapping, ululation and whistling.

The Umkhathi Theatre Works Company was indeed a welcomed addition to the performing stage of BAM, as the dynamism seen in this group has not been seen since the National Ballet of Senegal who appeared in 1971 as part of the Afro-Asian Festival.

Welcome! Umkhathi Theatre Works Company – you made an indelible impression that will last in our minds forever. Congratulations to their director Matesu Dube for a job well done. A sample of their dance performance can be seen on *You Tube* at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YN1zKC1_5gA