

Stepping into history with the three Cs

PHOTOGRAPHS: GARY BERNARD

ADRIENNE SIGHEL
TO THE POINT

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H Patten spun, anointing the Orlando East Communal Hall, which is reputed to be the birthplace of the Pan Africanist Congress. It has become the venue for Soweto Dance Theatre's groundbreaking summer and winter schools.

As Patten called up the ancestors in the Jamaican dance of Kumina – a fusion of native religion and African Christian religion and the roots of reggae – cultures and spirits of several continents intersected.

While Patten, a London-based Jamaican dancer, choreographer, researcher and his Soweto students sanctified the space with their revivalist song, dance and drumming they also deepened the reality of what contemporary African dance, and specifically South African dance, is and can be.

So many vital historic and aesthetic sources merged at the final presentation of the 1996 Step Afrika international dance workshop on December 20. Parents seated on yellow plastic chairs crammed in front of the stage to watch their children show the things they had learnt during two weeks with their teachers from England, Jamaica and the United States. Not forgetting the Soweto Dance Theatre faculty and gumbboot maestros Simon Nkosi and The Creators.

Jackie Mbuyiselwa Semela, the director of Soweto Dance Theatre, explained in the introduction that one of the objectives of this three-year-old initiative was "to make sure we don't lose the essence of who we are, the essence of soul, so we can become ourselves". That may sound like a conundrum, but the workshop process and the revelatory performance bore this out.

Step Afrika, which has a site on the Internet, was born when marketing man Brian Williams was living in Lesotho on a fellowship. He saw two men doing a dance – in gumbboots – which seemed very similar to the stepping which he learnt in the United States and practiced with his fraternity brothers at Howard University in Washington DC. There's no way to catch up on the complex socio-political

and cultural background of stepping in 10 minutes. The answer lay in a newly published book tucked under Williams's arm. *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythm of African American Dance* by Jacqui Malone.

This dance form is part of the African-American college fraternity tradition dating back to 1906. Black Americans were not admitted to white fraternities so they formed their own, Alpha Phi.

Stepping has flourished and even formed part of the opening ceremony of the Olympics in Atlanta last year.

The Soweto Connection was made in Johannesburg in 1994 when Williams attended the launch of the Rand Water Board's Manzi/Metsi cultural competition at the Johannesburg Civic theatre which featured the Soweto Dance Theatre.

The result was a partnership in search of common ground and gumbboot, between the Washington-based Steppers and the Sowelans.

Step Afrika was first held at the Ipelegeng Centre in White City Jabavu in December 1994. The Americans paid their own way. Last year, the 11-strong contingent, including a video maker and a writer, received funding from the AUS Artists at International Festivals and Exhibitions Fund.

The next strand of history was woven in with Izigi Dance Theatre from London.

Izigi was founded by Khadijatou Silcott-Fraser, who has a degree in dance and Spanish and who was part of the Ngoma project of British artists and exiles that toured South Africa in 1995. It was then that she met up with Soweto Dance Theatre. The result was Izigi's participation in Step Afrika '95 in Orlando East.

Khadija returned to South Africa last year solo (courtesy of the British Council) to teach UK Jungle, a mix of contemporary African street, jazz and physical theatre. The result was intensive teaching, culminating in a fast and creatively furious group work



Street action . . . Khadijatou Silcott-Fraser (above) teaching UK Jungle during the Step Afrika International Dance Workshop held in Soweto last month and Step Afrika '96 collaborators (right) H Patten (UK), Jackie Semela (South Africa) and Brian Williams (US) drumming up history in Orlando East

As we Are, and a networking visit which ends this week.

The 60 young Soweto Step Afrika participants, 40 of whom have participated in all three workshops, switched rhythms, styles and techniques with ease. That included stepping with Williams and fellow steppers, who include a graphic artist, a student lawyer and a computer specialist.

"We don't do warm-ups and we don't know how to spell plié," they say, but they do know how to perform and teach children.

Williams refers to stepping as an art form: "Like the gumbboot dancers on the mines who dance during their breaks, we dance in the yard when we get out of class."

Apart from the links with other African cultural traditions Step Afrika, with its organic beginnings, is also an attempt by Howard University students and graduates to raise the status of stepping as a national artform and a national treasure.

The community bonding spirit of

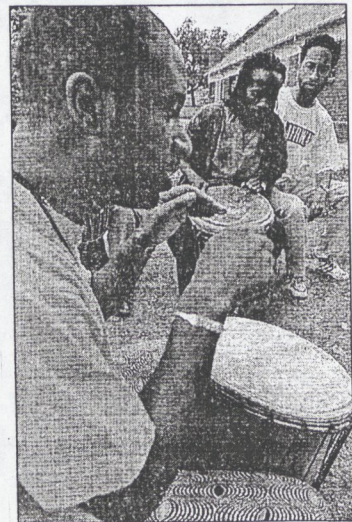
stepping is fused with galvanising ensemble work interspersed with selected individual energy fuelled by spontaneity. That's one of the qualities it has in common with gumbboots. It is also reminiscent of mapantsula.

To the uninitiated, stepping looks like hyper hip hop but it is more structured.

The performers stand in straight lines. A step freak facing the dancers sets off a chain reaction of human pistons rhythmically pumping arms and legs, clapping behind their knees, or the top of thighs, while their feet stamp and jump and twist while voices chant spasmodically.

This inter-continental project has also produced its own art work.

The large painting was created by dazzling stepper and "polyrhythmic" painter Charles Nelson and young Swazi artist Alexander Maphalala



with input from the workshop children. Half of the painting was left with the Soweto Dance Theatre while the other half went to the US.

Step Afrika has incredible potential grounded in the three Cs: cultural curiosity and commitment.

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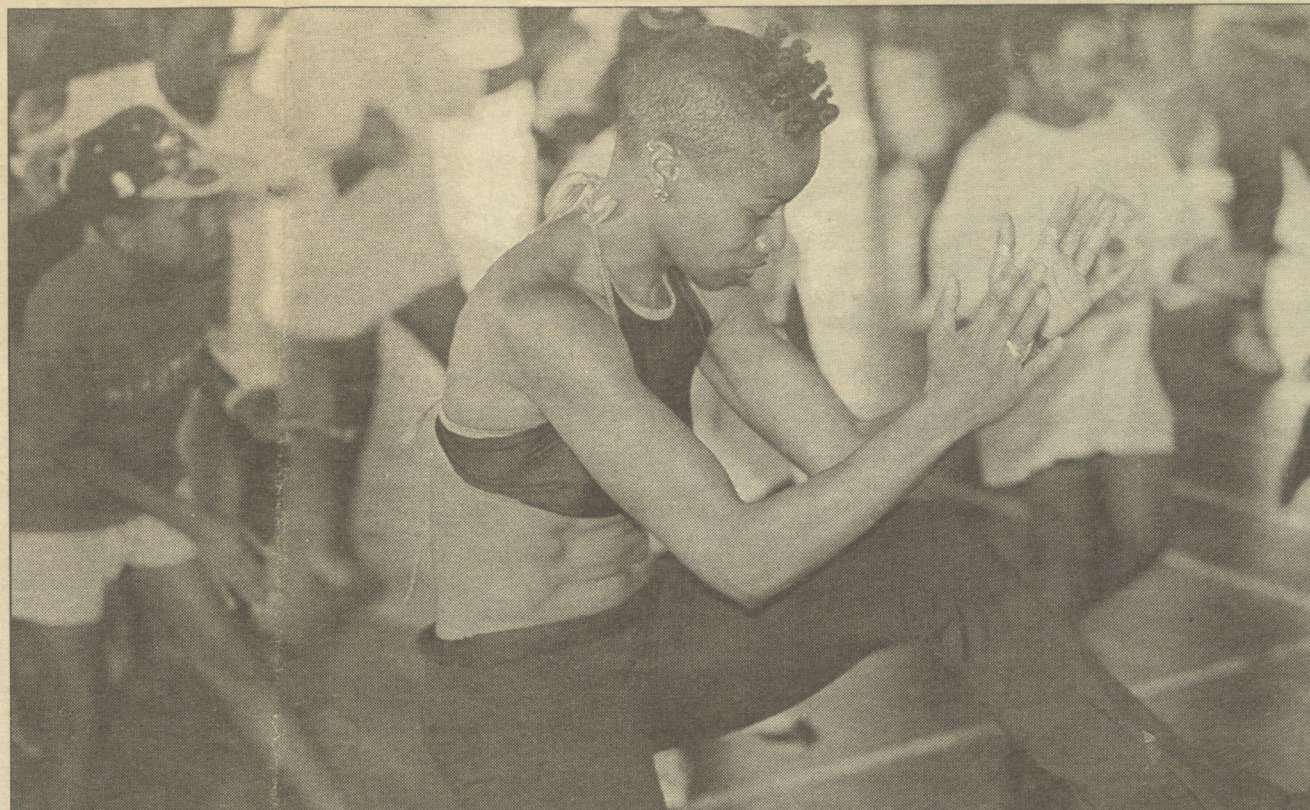
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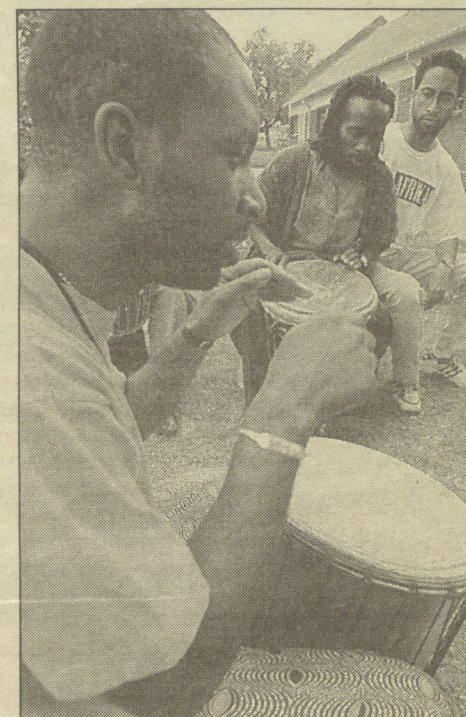
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LETTERS

Direct marketing a TV bore

What is the SABC up to now? I am a professional person in my mid-30s. In the mornings I used to listen to Radio South Africa (how I miss it). After it was bastardised to become Safm, I started to watch Sky TV (I miss that too). The contract was not renewed (as usual, the SABC doesn't know a good thing when it sees it), so I had to resort to watching CNN. Although CNN is oh-so-American, it still beats the drivel served up by locally produced TV and radio (including Radio 702).

All of a sudden, we are now expected to watch the most incredible garbage in the mornings. Instead of CNN, SABC3 has realms of direct-marketing advertising that is at best an insult to one's intelligence.

Thank you SABC, I am now motivated to listen to all the CDs that I have collected over the years.

VJ Langford
Midrand

'No more blasphemy'

Referring to Madonna's claim to divinity and her competing to be as famous as God (Tonight, January 6), we as subscribers can only express our total disgust at this blasphemy.

The further comment that "The father, the son and Madonna" have taken the place of God and Jesus creates a sinful and evil suggestion.

This piece of abhorrence will be circulated at our bible

Kirby sinks to petty sexism

We are very saddened to read and witness the progressive deterioration of copy put forward in Robert Kirby's columns. He has become petty.

It is very depressing to see him increasingly resort to disparaging sarcasm, as with his piece on Barbara Walters

(Tonight, January 9).

He may not like her style but her competence as an incisive reporter is self-evident.

We object to his sexist remarks. One doesn't see snide copy highlighting the shortcomings of facial and physical features of prominent men coming from female journalists,

does one?

Please, dear editor, do not let him continue in this vein. If he cannot fill his column with uplifting humour and observation, he should drop it.

Shirley Molyneux
For Women's Lobby
Addressing Trivial
Journalism
Montgomery Park

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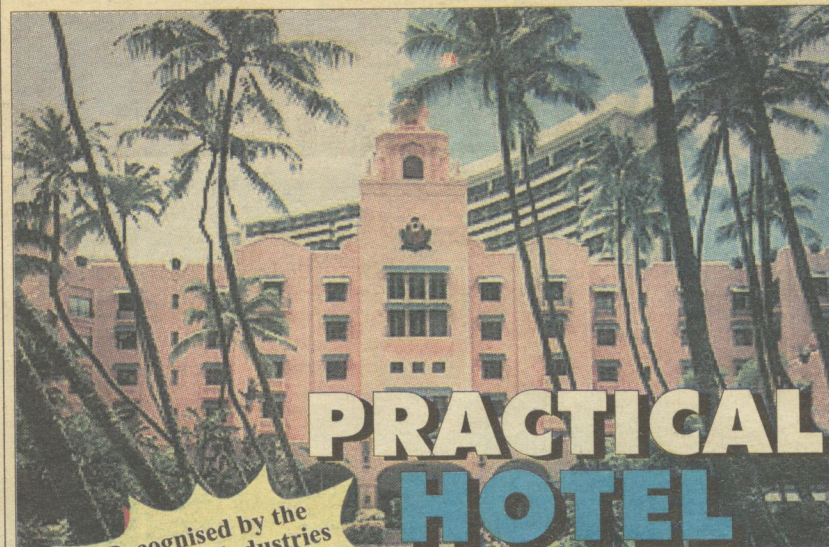
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