



Brian Williams, (left foreground), founder of Step Afrika, rehearses with members of the Soweto Dance Theatre of South Africa for their upcoming performances at the Kennedy Center. Mr. Williams (below) watches some dancing with drummer Thembinkosi Hlatshwayo.

## In step with African dance

By Denise Barnes  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

**B**rian Williams founded Step Afrika, an international arts organization, after seeing familiar rhythmic foot-stomping movements on a street in Africa. The high-energy steps reminded Mr. Williams, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., of his school days on Howard University's campus in Northwest.

He joined the first intercollegiate Greek-letter fraternity there, where he first learned to step. The fraternity was established for men of African descent in December 1906. Stepping originated on college campuses by black fraternities and sororities nationwide, Mr. Williams says.

Step Afrika, Mr. Williams says, is a collaboration between young American artists and the South African-based Soweto Dance Theatre. This weekend, Step Afrika brings its high energy brand of precision stepping,

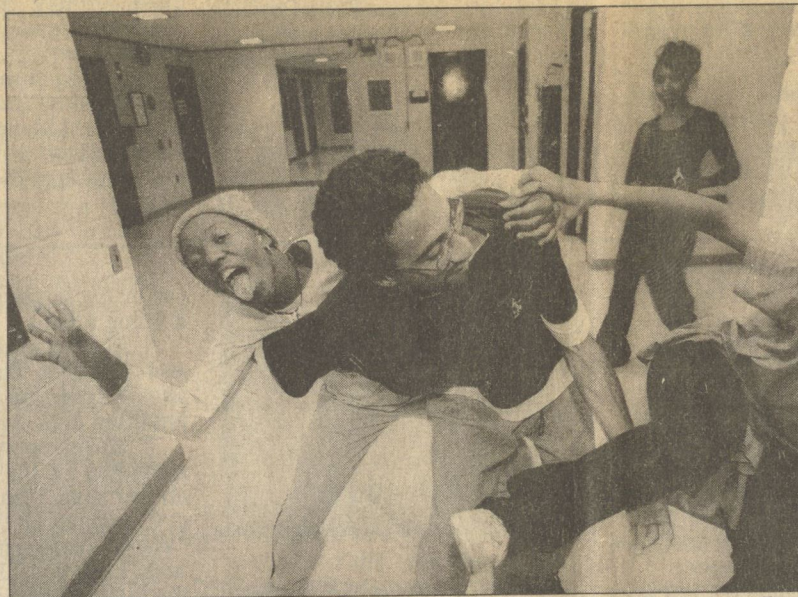
along with traditional and contemporary African dance, to the Kennedy Center's Theater Lab through Sunday, Jan. 23.

"People will see the results of a six-year exchange between young Americans and South Africans. We will represent our own American traditions and see what happens when the two cultures meet," Mr. Williams, 31, says. "Dance is Step Afrika's way of connecting people. We're friends, and dancing has brought us together. . . . When you dance, I think that you're able to put your mind, body and soul into it. When you share dance, people have an opportunity to learn a lot about you," he says.

For example, Mr. Williams—who lives in the Shaw neighborhood of Northwest—says one of the performance pieces, titled "Wade in the Water," will incorporate a variety of dance forms that include traditional South African dance, stepping and tap, featuring LeAnet Noble, an alumni of Tappers with Attitude, based in Silver Spring.

"In addition, you'll see Americans performing the Zulu dance, and South Africans stepping. It's all in the spirit of exchange," Mr. Williams says with a smile.

Mbuyiselwa Jackie Semela agrees. As the artistic director of the Soweto Dance Theatre, Mr. Semela,



Photos by Gerald Harbert/The Washington Times

Brian Williams (above) indulges in horseplay with members of the Soweto Dance Theatre outside a rehearsal hall at the Kennedy Center. He listens to ideas (below) during a talk about the Kennedy Center show.

37, says the dance exchange has helped to bring people together and countries together.

"We hope that this will open a channel for more traditions to be presented in the United States, and that people will have an interest in learning more about South Africa," Mr. Semela says.

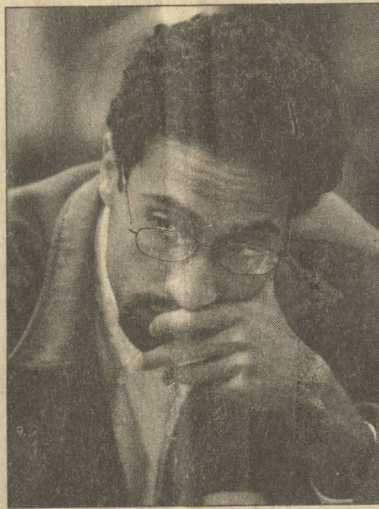
The dancer-turned-choreographer and director promises a dynamic hourlong show. He says 10 dancers from the Soweto Dance Theatre, attired in colorful garb, will perform the traditional South African gum boot dance—which centers around the gum boots (rubber boots worn by mine workers).

The gum boot dance looks a lot like stepping. Dancers move in unison, there's complex foot movement, hand clapping and foot-stomping. It's infused with lots of high South African energy, Mr. Semela says.

"The gum boot dance is about the harsh working conditions in South Africa's gold and diamond mines," says Mr. Semela, a native of Soweto. "However, today, [the gum boot] has become a popular township dance throughout the country—it is also incorporating new styles of presenting it," he says.

Later in the production, audiences will see Step Afrika's presentation of both male and female traditions of stepping.

Mr. Williams graduated from Howard University in 1990. A marketing major, he was awarded a fellowship to work in Lesotho, a small



country surrounded by South Africa. There, he taught classes on how to run small businesses for the Lesotho Opportunities and Industrialization Center.

Mr. Williams never imagined he would see stylized steps in Africa similar to those practiced by American fraternities and sororities, he says.

"I was driving down a road, and I saw a young boy performing dance

**WHAT:** Step Afrika  
**WHERE:** Howard University's Blackburn Center Ballroom  
**WHEN:** Jan. 20  
**TIME:** 7 p.m.  
**DONATION:** \$5



steps that looked a lot like [fraternity and sorority] stepping. I was shocked to see it there," Mr. Williams says.

His curiosity was piqued, so he asked some of his students about the dance steps and demonstrated what he had seen.

"They explained to me that it was the gum boot dance—a dance created by South African mine workers as a form of recreation after a hard day's work. [The mine workers] wore gum boots in the mines, and they danced in them," Mr. Williams says.

Mr. Williams says he then showed the students American stepping. They were wowed, he says.

"We had a mini-exchange. They taught me the gum boot, and I taught them some steps. It was awesome. What's really great is what happened to our relationships after we shared the dance form. It was as if we were able to communicate better cross-culturally," Mr. Williams says.

"The walls between us kind of

came down, and we were friends. We still maintained a teacher-student relationship, but we felt we knew each other better," he says.

Mr. Williams saw stepping as a medium to create connections between Americans and the continent of Africa. The exchange with his students in 1991 was his inspiration for establishing Step Afrika, he says.

His friendship with the Soweto Dance Theatre began in 1994, in Johannesburg, when Mr. Williams attended a performance which featured the dance group. They clicked immediately and found a common link with fraternity and sorority traditions and the gum boot dance.

"It shows our oneness as an African people all over the world. Without any doubt, we are one," Mr. Semela says.

As for Mr. Williams, Step Afrika represents a principle that Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc., was founded upon: scholarship, fellowship, good character and uplifting humanity.