

# STEPPING UP TO A DANCE PHENOMENON



**DIANE  
DE BEER**

**E**VER heard of stepping? For those who haven't, it is a percussive dance form that has its origins among African-American college kids.

"It uses hands, feet, voices and bodies," says Brian Williams, the founder of Step Afrika!, the first company to professionalise this almost folkloric dance, taking it from campus to concert hall.

The dance form began at the turn of the last century when African-Americans were first allowed to go to college.

"It became a way to celebrate and was usually performed outside on the campus grounds on large grassy spaces," explains Williams, who will be returning with Step Afrika! to perform in Pretoria and give workshops in Durban and Pretoria from this weekend.

Their local link was established in 1994 when Step Afrika! was launched as a partnership with the Soweto Dance Theatre, the dance troupe founded by the late Mbuyiselwa Jacob (Jackie) Semela. The coming together was the result of Williams being struck by the similarities between stepping and gumboot dancing.

"It was striking," he says.

For 11 years, the US group travelled annually to South Africa to do workshops and performances with artists and children alike and some members of the Soweto Dance Theatre joined them for performances in the US. Step Afrika!'s last appearance here was in 2003 and they are eager and extremely excited to return.

"It feels like a homecoming," grins Williams, who explains that he knows this is not their home, but it is where their company was born.

Since the death of Semela, they haven't been back, but the time is now right. Their visit is in partnership with the US Mission to South Africa and the State Theatre.

The company is critically acclaimed for its efforts to promote an understanding of and dance tradition as an educational tool for young people the world over.

"It changes lives," says Williams, who both back home and in South Africa saw kids transform as they got into the stepping experience.

It espouses themes such as teamwork, academic achievement and cross-cultural understanding.

"Dance is simply used as the tool," he explains.

In the past few years, this Washington DC-based group has reached tens of thousands of Americans each year and performed on many stages mainly in the US, but now they're back to resurrect their local connections.

"We're part of this country. It's where the roots of the company are."

For those who attend a Step Afrika! performance, Williams describes it as one of the most popular US traditions and as an added bonus for local audiences, with South African connections.

"It's high-energy and extremely engaging," he concludes.

● **Performances: Pretoria:** Friday, September 18, Public Square in front of State Theatre, 4pm, free!; Saturday – at Pretoria's State Theatre. Limited free tickets are available for this event on a first-come, first-served basis; e-mail [PASpretoria@state.gov](mailto:PASpretoria@state.gov) with your name and telephone number to request tickets.  
**Durban:** Thursday, September 24, Ekhaya Multi Arts Centre, KwaMashu, 4pm, tickets at the door. Info: Xolani Majoji 031 504 6970; September 25, Red Eye Event Durban Art Gallery, 7pm, tickets at the door. Info: 031 311 1111. There will be a Durban performance on Saturday, September 26 ... details soon.

● For more info about Step Afrika! in South Africa, call the US Mission to South Africa Public Affairs Office at 012 431 4000 or e-mail [PASpretoria@state.gov](mailto:PASpretoria@state.gov)



**CARRYING THE  
BATON:** Step  
Afrika! performs  
the high-energy  
dance art called  
stepping.

PICTURE:  
SHARON FARMER

**L**EE DANIELS has an Oscar-winning film to his credit, but he still needed some big-time help to draw attention to his latest film about a girl who overcomes crushing abuse.

He got it from Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry. They are the executive producers of *Precious*, which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival over the weekend.

Winfrey (pictured) told Associated Press she was happy to help bring more attention to the film: "Everyone needs someone to help them navigate," she explained.

"I had Bill Cosby, Quincy Jones, Sidney Poitier and Maya Angelou. You can't do that on your own.

# Industry's big names get precious ...



Someone has to show it to you."

Daniels produced *Monster's Ball*, which won Halle Berry an Oscar for Best Actress in 2002. He adapted *Precious* from Sapphire's novel *Push*. It tells the story of an illiterate black girl who manages to rise above poverty and sexual and mental abuse.

The film, which stars Mo'Nique, Mariah Carey, Paula Patton and others, won the Grand Jury prize at the Sundance Film Festival this year and has generated Oscar buzz.

Still, Daniels believes the cachet of Oprah and hit filmmaker Perry will help the film, which comes out in the US on November 6, build a greater audience.

Perry's latest comedy *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, opened at the top of the box office at the weekend. Besides directing and writing the film, based on his stage play of the same name, Perry co-stars as his brash, cross-dressing alter ego, Madea. Perry's *Madea Goes to Jail* also opened at No 1 in February.

"My movies are art films. So many people don't see art films. People do see Oprah and Tyler's movies and they do hear Oprah's word, so it is really good," Daniels explained.

Carey, Patton and Gabourey Sidibe, who plays the title role, gathered for the movie's Toronto premiere and were later joined by Winfrey on the red carpet.

"I couldn't wait to get here and couldn't wait to see it again. I am excited," said Carey. - Reuters

SMELL TASTE DON'T JUST SEE MOVIES. HEAR FEEL

## THIS WEEK AT THE MOVIES

SHOWTIMES FRIDAY 11 SEPTEMBER – THURSDAY 17 SEPTEMBER

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