

DANCE

Stepping off the wall



Jacob Lawrence's Great Migration paintings inspire the dancers of Step Afrika!



"This is our palette, this is our medium, this is our subject matter"

PHOTOS BY ASTRID RIECKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

BY DENEEN BROWN

The dancers flutter, imitating the wings of blackbirds painted by legendary artist Jacob Lawrence.

A dancer pirouettes, matching the pose in Lawrence's portrait of a woman all dressed up and waiting on a train platform.

The music fades and dancers "become" a train, making the sounds of a locomotive, moving across the stage as if they were indeed a train on which thousands

of African Americans rode from the South to the North in what is now known as the Great Migration.

In a collaboration between Step Afrika! and the Phillips Collection, two art forms meld, and then painted images seem to come to life — as if the dancers themselves were emerging directly from the panels that Jacob Lawrence painted for his famed "Migration Series."

Inspired by Lawrence's paintings, which are part of the permanent collection at the Phillips, Step Afrika! — an internationally acclaimed dance compa-

and this is what we use to paint a picture."

— Jakari Sherman, artistic director, Step Afrika!

ny that incorporates both rhythmic stepping and body percussion into its work — has created a dance performance that seeks to capture the mood, history and movement of the Great Migration. During the exodus that began in 1910, more than 7 million black people left the South to escape lives of sharecropping and poor employment, poverty and rampant discrimination. They headed to cities in the North in search of jobs and dignity.

Lawrence, who is often cited as one of the earliest researchers to document the Great Migration, meticulously laid out images, wrote captions, sketched panels,

Artist Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series," part of the Phillips Collection, was the source material for the new work by Step Afrika! Above, dancers rehearse at the Atlas Performing Arts Center, where the work will premiere June 15.

DANCE CONTINUED ON E6



Theater The Royal Danish Ballet's Nikolaj Hubbe steps boldly into the lead. **Page E2**

THEATER

In her work, a 'Gothic Finn' explores Soviet-era horrors

Playwright wants to show her generation that the scars of communism linger

BY RAYMOND M. LANE

Some of "Purge" is so disturbing that when Finnish playwright and novelist Sofi Oksanen read from it at the PEN festival in New York last year, she chose a love scene rather than risk a sleepless night for her audience.

The play, and the novel that came a year later, are set during the occupations of Estonia by Soviets, Nazis and again Soviets, the last ending with the fall of communism in 1991. The operatic plotline most fundamentally concerns sisters Alide and Ingel, and Ingel's 7-year-old daughter, Linda, who endured sexual terror at the hands of rural com-



Sofi Oksanen

munist thugs in a town hall basement and was left mute with shock. The story begins years later, when Linda's daughter Zara, a sex-trafficking victim from Russia, shows up unexpectedly at Alide's rundown farmhouse in backwoods Estonia.

The play unfolds through flashbacks. While Oksanen is hardly a household name in America, she's hot stuff in Europe. She has picked up a couple hundred thousand dollars in literary awards since 2003, including, for "Purge," the prestigious Finlandia and Runeberg prizes, the Nordic Council's Literature Prize and the 2010 French Prix Femina Etranger award. A French film version of "Purge" is in production, to be

OXSANEN CONTINUED ON E4

Bringing the Great Migration to artistic life

DANCE FROM EI

then used paint to render iconic portraits of men, women and children migrating, bent as if propelled to fly North.

"The Negro, who had been part of the soil for many years, was now going into and living a new life in the urban centers," Lawrence wrote in one caption.

Composed of 60 panels, the "Migration Series" was meant to be seen as one continuous piece of work. In 1941, the series was exhibited in a solo show in Manhattan and Lawrence became a sensation. That year, Duncan Phillips, founder of the Phillips Collection, acquired the odd-numbered panels from the series. (The even-numbered panels were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art.)

The collaboration between the Phillips and Step Afrika! began when the dance company's founder, C. Brian Williams, and the Phillips Collection's director, Dorothy Kosinski, met in August while judging a synchronized swimming contest sponsored by the Washington Projects for the Arts.

After that first encounter, Kosinski invited Step Afrika! to perform at the museum for one of its evening events. Williams agreed, but wanted to go deeper. He had seen the Jacob Lawrence exhibit as it toured a few years ago and thought the subject of the "Migration Series" would go well with pieces in Step Afrika!'s repertoire.

In January 2011, the pair sat down to discuss a more extensive collaboration. The Phillips would provide full access to the works of Jacob Lawrence, including digital images, as well as its archives, and Step Afrika! would translate the work into a dance performance. Soon after, Williams began extensive historical research, devouring information on the Great Migration at the Phillips and at the Schomburg in New York. He read letters from blacks who were hoping to migrate North and studied Lawrence's paintings and the sources Lawrence may have used during his own research.

The result is "Step Afrika! Home Performance Series 2011 — The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence," which opens June 15 and runs through June 26 at the Atlas Performing Arts Center.

I met with some of the principals during the final stages of the production this spring to talk about how the project evolved from the canvas onto the stage. Below is an edited transcript of the conversation.

C. Brian Williams, founder of Step Afrika!: Step Afrika! is in its 17th year of taking the tradition of stepping all around the world. When we started, we were celebrating something that is truly a folkloric art form and really had not been explored professionally in the country. It was new and innovative. But as we started to develop as artists and develop the company in general, we started to take the art form in different places. We started looking at mergers with other traditions and art forms, mergers with African American spirituals, mergers with jazz.

In the back of my mind I had always been intrigued by the visual arts world and wanted to do something with that particular medium. So when I met Dorothy at an event in D.C. . . .

Dorothy Kosinski, director of The Phillips Collection: Immediately we were sharing exactly the same institutional desires — to make a rich collaboration, inter-disciplinary work. It was the germ of the idea.

Williams: I started looking at our work over the last 17 years and particularly some of the new work that our artistic director Jakari Sherman started to create and I thought, "Wow!" So much of our existing work parallels the story of migration that Jacob Lawrence told. So we wanted to explore it and see what would happen.

Ironically, we had a piece called "Trane," [which is based on the Great Migration]. We spell "train" T-R-A-N-E. Of course, the train is a repeated image in Jacob Lawrence's work. The second work we had created was a piece called "Chicago." With more research, we recognized that a lot of the migrants went to Chicago.

Jacob Lawrence's artistic process started off with historical analysis and that informed his art. So we have all been reading extensively about the migration [since the collaboration]. The Phillips collection is such a great resource and the Schomburg [The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a research unit of The New York Public Library] has been huge for us.

Elsa Smithgall, curator of the Phillips Collection: What is the role of the word going to be in your performance? I am interested in that because for Jacob Lawrence, of course, there is the visual but, as you are saying, what also is a very important element is the written word, the captions he wrote to accompany his panels. Very deliberately, he writes those first before he begins the actual work.

Jakari Sherman, artistic director of Step Afrika!: I want to narrate those pieces in the same way that he narrated each one of his panels . . . whether it be a person speaking or a recording of music [from] the time.

Williams: We are looking at 14 different panels [of Lawrence's work] to project [on the stage] and that is a whole new process for our company. The dance community is very different from the theater world. In the dance world, you get a weekend. Well, this particular experience will be a two-week run. We are taking a theater approach to dance



PHOTOS BY ASTRID RIECKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

AT THE ATLAS THEATER: Anthony Jackson of Step Afrika! rehearses. The dances' goal is to bring the panels of Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series" to life, portraying the sights — and sounds — of African Americans riding trains north in search of opportunity. The backdrop will be projections of 14 of Lawrence's panels.



ONE STEP AT A TIME: The company developed the performance out of some of its previous works on similar topics.

"His palette and choice of color and rhythm and movement clearly translate into the dance. . . . There is an incredible sense of rhythm and music in [Jacob] Lawrence."

— Elsa Smithgall, curator of the Phillips Collection

production.

Sherman: We are looking at music and all different layers and textures. For me, creating this show is about approaching it almost as if it were a painting. I look at Jacob Lawrence's work as the palette by which we will use our tools of stepping to paint this picture upon stage, the canvas.

Kosinski: What astonishes me is the multi-layered thought process. It's amazing.

Williams: I hope it sparks a real interest in the migration. Because it is such an integral moment in African American history.

Smithgall: It resonates with the universality of that moment of the migration. Very deliberately, Lawrence thought of the series as something that would transcend the specifics of its time and place. It endures today because those themes of struggle in the face of diversity are very much with us all around the world. The migration is still very much present. . . .

I think this synergy between art forms — the way you are thinking about the dance, the music, the way you are trying to weave those elements together — is so beautiful and is also very much a part of that moment in Harlem that very much nourished Lawrence . . . that moment when he is at the Harlem workshops and he is soaking in this climate where people are talking about theater and dance and literature. They were thinking, as you are, about the language of art that crosses all of those lines.

Sherman: I really wanted to go in and research Jacob Lawrence's work. If we are going to try to bring the story of migration to life, there are a lot of ways to do it. I wanted to understand how Jacob Lawrence approached this work.

Smithgall: When you talk about the creative process, Lawrence wanted a sense of the whole. He was very systematic. The idea he would take one color and make sure he painted where he wanted green, for example, in every single panel simultaneously. That takes a certain focus, discipline and conceptualization of the whole. That you are sure you know what the whole will look like before you begin.

His palette and choice of color and

rhythm and movement clearly translate into the dance. . . . There is an incredible sense of rhythm and music in Lawrence. There are wonderful ways to tap into that.

Mfon Akpan, assistant artistic director and performer for Step Afrika!: It is definitely something of an eye-opening experience. The research, it helps to inform us as dancers on how to tell this story.

Smithgall: When Jacob Lawrence created "The Migration Series," a fellowship with [the] Julius Rosenthal Fund made it possible. Lawrence was not an artist, at that point, with a lot of means. It allowed him to rent a studio that was large enough to hold these 60 panels, so he could paint them simultaneously. His goal with that series was clearly educational. He said at that time so many people don't realize the importance of this chapter in American history.

Williams: The paintings give the history of the whole experience.

Smithgall: Very deliberately, Lawrence thought of that, of how he could see the greater good out of struggle. I think he could have presented a series that left you feeling really cold. I think he deliberately infuses it with a sense of hope.

Sherman: I think about Lawrence laying out these panels and the rhythm of what that looked like — just the size, the orientation, the shape. In some places, it will be very literal. The first half of our show is definitely about the experience in the South. The color palette in that part of the show is much more muted than the second half of the show. When you move to the second half of the show, it is more or less about the experience in the North. But as you see in the series, it is not strictly chronological. He jumps back and forth between time periods, and we will be doing a lot of the same.

There will be some places you will see an image on stage and it will directly reflect one of the images.

This one in particular with the lady. [Sherman points to Panel No. 57, which shows one woman dressed in white mopping a floor. Lawrence wrote in the caption: "The female workers were the last to arrive north."] As well as this one here. This one we really like.

[He points to Panel No. 45, which shows a family on a train looking out the window at smokestacks. Lawrence wrote: "The migrants arrived in Pittsburgh, one of the great industrial centers of the North."]

This one in particular, you look at the motifs, and the pyramid in this one. The blackbirds in this one. [He points to Panel No. 3, which shows a group of people headed north as blackbirds fly overhead.]

Williams: When we saw that panel [Panel No. 1, which shows a crowd at a train station heading into gates marked Chicago, New York, St. Louis] in particular and Chicago is mentioned, we had already choreographed a piece called "Chicago."

It's about movement and sound of the streets. Here, she is waiting. [He points to Panel No. 39, which shows a woman in purple waiting for a train. Lawrence writes: "Railroad platforms were piled high with luggage."] How do we pull this image off the page? The luggage, we will definitely be playing with that.

Smithgall: Some of the motifs in a sense are recurring: the luggage, the train.

Williams: What makes Step Afrika! unique in this particular story is the concept of the train, the importance of the train. The train image is so huge in different cultures.

In the Migration, it is essential to travel. In stepping, there is a movement called the Alpha Train. . . . That particular style of movement, that is specific to one fraternity. The step basically imitates the sound of the train. It is tied to the culture of migration. In South Africa, one of our main partners, historically, the train was critical in moving migrant workers into the big cities and Johannesburg, which led to the creation of the South African gumboot dance, which is a dance, a percussive dance style Step Afrika! performs as well.

Akpan: For the stepper, knowing the history of how stepping started really parallels with the story of the migration. So people coming from the South to the North, trying to get better educational opportunities. Stepping started through the fraternities and sororities, where people were going to colleges. These movements were translated into stepping. It started with early African American traditions, which you will see in our show.

Sherman: In most African forums, the drum is the beginning. And so we are opening our show with the drum and a drum will be a consistent theme throughout the whole show.

Inez K. Saki-Tay, Step Afrika! publicist: In your research about Jacob Lawrence, what was the one thing that said, "This is my a-ha moment" in this process?

Sherman: I struggled for a long time with how to make the connection and how to make it important. How to really bring a visual art form, bring a painting to life on stage in a meaningful way. I sort of like went into the shed to be quiet for a moment and figure out . . . what it is.

Stepping is the tool that we use. For me, stepping is like our paintbrush. Our paint is Lawrence's work. Our subject matter is "The Migration Series." Although that may seem simple, that linear thinking, for me to be able to put that in a sentence to say this is what we are doing: This is our palette, this is our medium, this is our subject matter and this is what we use to paint a picture. From then on, I could make the decisions about the show.

brwnld@washpost.com