

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Farafina Kan

DanceAfrica Comes to Philadelphia

by Patricia Graham

The Community Education Center in West Philly, under the leadership of Executive Director Theresa Shockley has long been an important hub of culture and a resource for Philadelphia with ongoing dance classes and innovative performances. This week, partnering with Drexel University, they bring an exciting event to the city, *DanceAfrica Philadelphia*, running November 6-9.

DanceAfrica, a well-respected national festival of dance, music and culture founded by Baba Chuck Davis in 1977, has been produced in five different cities, each one creating its own version around a framework of elements: performances, classes, an altar to honor the ancestors, a marketplace, community involvement and a council of elders. The theme for this first outing in Philadelphia is Our African Legacy – Treasured Reflections. Davis will be acting as Master of Ceremonies for the performance, teaching class and speaking as part of the council of elders.

Angela Watson, CEC's Program Coordinator for the festival, contextualized the area's African dance scene for me, explaining that Philadelphia has had several festivals produced by local individuals and also significant support for African arts through the Philadelphia Folklore Project. *DanceAfrica Philadelphia* is an opportunity to celebrate African traditions and share with a broader audience. It is also an opportunity to see both traditional and evolving dance forms, guided by an Afro-centric aesthetic. The companies Kariamuu and Company: Traditions and Illstyle & Peace, both expand the palette of African forms, putting their own spin on the legacy. The Traditions group integrates contemporary movement, music and poetry with the Umfundalai technique, developed by Dr. Kariamuu Welsh while Illstyle grounds itself in the movement and spirit of old school hip-hop, fusing with other dance styles. The other companies performing, Kulu Mele African Dance and Farafina Kan bring years of work dedicated to preserving the culture and integrity of traditional African dance and drumming. It will be interesting to see these approaches bumping up next to each other.

As Watson's background includes years of scholarship and study of African arts both here and in Africa, I questioned her about the commonalities of African dance, and whether it is valid to put the movement practices of so many countries under one banner. She said,

"The commonality is that every aspect of life--birth, death, marriage--is celebrated with dance and music. It is a prayer – the songs talk about God and the forces of nature. The dance is not just movement. It is a spiritual activity, how we engage as a community."

I look forward to the festival and all of the CEC's projects with gratitude and anticipation.

DanceAfrica Philadelphia, Main Building Auditorium, Drexel University, 3141 Chestnut Street and various locations, November 6-9,
<http://www.cecarts.org/wp/danceafrica/>

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November 5, 2013