

# Collaborating Across Cultures

South African choreographer Theo Ndindwa teams up with New York's Steps Repertory Ensemble.



Marielis Garcia and Mbulelo Nhubombini rehearse "Find It Hard to Say," choreographed by Theo Ndindwa

BY LISA JO SAGOLLA  
ljsagolla@earthlink.net

On Dec. 16, South Africa celebrates its Day of Reconciliation, an annual public holiday established in 1994 to mark the end of apartheid and the fostering of national unity. South African choreographer Theo Ndindwa will be celebrating the day with a dance presentation in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The event will feature Ndindwa's Cape Town-based contemporary dance company, iKapa Dance Theatre, and the Steps Repertory Ensemble, a pre-professional training company affiliated with the New York City dance studio Steps on Broadway. While the show will include separate performances by each troupe, the centerpiece will be "Find It Hard to Say," a collaborative work choreographed by Ndindwa and performed by members of both companies.

## DANCE AS A SOCIAL TOOL

"I always try to produce work that is socially relevant and themed around social issues and uplifting ideas," says Ndindwa. "I like to create works that are meaningful and really say something. This piece I'm doing for my company and the dancers from Steps is all about healing."

Ndindwa was born and raised in Cape Town and danced professionally for six years in the U.K. with companies such as Ballet Central and Phoenix Dance Theatre. In 2005, he returned to his hometown to help develop its community dance group into a professional entity. In 2007, he and his partner, Tanya Arshamian, established their own company there, iKapa Dance Theatre, with the dual mission of presenting socially significant choreography while mentoring the youth of the community.

Ndindwa sees dance as a tool for social transition and is committed to using the art form to teach life skills. In addition to its performance work, his company provides community service by teaching dance to South Africa's underprivileged populations. It was at a community center in Cape Town offering free ballet lessons to the townships' black children that Ndindwa received his initial dance training. "I now operate the same kind of program as part of my company's educational outreach

work," he says. "We offer free dance classes—in ballet, contemporary, and African dance—to about 300 students in the townships, which are the poor communities of Cape Town and which is where I grew up. For me, it's about giving these kids the same opportunities that I was given."

As a nonprofit organization, Ndindwa's company receives some government funding for specific projects, but the bulk of its support comes from individual patrons, corporations, and private sponsorships. "In South Africa, the arts are not supported very much by the government, because there are a whole lot of other social issues that take priority," he explains. "Education, poverty, unemployment—those are the big conversations within the South African context. Most of our funding comes from private sources, from within South Africa and from the U.K. What I'd really like to do now is start establishing partnerships within the United States."



Sara Hoenes of Steps Repertory Ensemble teaching children in a South African township as part of iKAPA Dance Theatre's outreach program

## A THREE-PHASE PROCESS

The brainchild of South African Warren Adams, head of the online network Home4Dance, and administered by the Global Arts Initiative, a New York-based arts-education company focused on supporting cultural exchange, the collaboration between Ndindwa's company and the Steps Repertory Ensemble was designed to play out in three phases.

In May, two of the Steps dancers traveled to South Africa, where they

began learning the choreography for Ndindwa's dance and also had the opportunity to teach classes to South African children through iKapa's educational outreach program. In September, Ndindwa and two dancers from his company came to New York, where they continued to work on the piece and presented an excerpt in Steps' fall performance at the Riverside Theatre. In addition, while the South African dancers were in New York, they received scholarships to take dance classes at the Steps studio.

The final phase occurs in December, when the entire Steps Repertory Ensemble will travel to South Africa and perform Ndindwa's work in full with the iKapa dancers. "This collaboration has been a conversation back and forth, centering on peace and reconciliation, trying to find new ways of communicating and engaging with each other," says Ndindwa, who sees the challenges of collaboration in the arts as reflecting the larger issues of social and political reconciliation.

"Our two dancers who went to South Africa in May were profoundly changed by the experience," says Claire Livingstone, Steps Repertory Ensemble's artistic director. "After having taught in the educational outreach program over there, they came back wanting to establish a similar program for underprivileged children here. So it wasn't just about collaborating with other dancers and working choreographically with someone they didn't know, which is of course very important, but it actually inspired them to initiate a teaching program, which is not something they had talked about wanting to do before. They were really moved by the experience of teaching the South African kids, seeing their hunger and joy and eagerness to soak it all up."

Livingstone's goal for the collaboration was to give the Steps dancers the experience of being immersed in an entirely different culture. "The South African dancers are trained differently, their history is different, and the reason why they're dancing is different," she says. "I was very curious to see how our dancers would adapt to all of that and what they would take from the experience. They took even more away from it than I had ever imagined."

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