

HARRIMAN
JEWELL
S E R I E S

STEP AFRİKA!

This evening marks Step Afrika!'s Series and Kansas City debut.

The Muriel McBrien Kauffman Family Foundation
is the sponsor of our 59th Season.

7:00 P.M., FRIDAY, APRIL 5, 2024
FOLLY THEATER
KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

STEP AFRiKA!

ADMINISTRATIVE, CREATIVE TEAM

C. Brian Williams, Founder & Executive Producer
Lamar Lovelace, Executive Director
Mfoniso Akpan, Artistic Director
Conrad R. Kelly II, Assistant Artistic Director
Artis Olds, Director of Arts Education and Community Programs
Stacy Burwell, Director, Administration and Special Projects
Margo Cunningham, Marketing Manager
Vanessa Hall, Company Manager
Dana Weinstein, Manager, Institutional Relations and Research
Marianne Meadows, Production Manager/Lightning Supervisor
Melissa Brown, Production Manager

COMPANY

Ariel Dykes
Keomi Givens Jr.
Kamala Hargrove
Nepri James
Conrad Kelly II
Isaiah O'Connor
Valencia Springer
Ericka Still
Joseph Vasquez
Pelham Warner Jr.
Robert Warnsley

*Please join us after the concert for an informal conversation with the artists.
We invite you to move to open seats closer to the stage at that time.*

Step Afrikal! appears by arrangement with IMG Artists, LLC
7 West 54th Street, New York, NY 10019. 212-994-3500

SHOW DESCRIPTION

The company's self-titled work *Step Afrika!* introduces audiences to stepping through both a traditional and contemporary lens. *Step Afrika!* incorporates percussive dance styles practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities; traditional African dances; and an array of contemporary dance and art forms into a cohesive, compelling artistic experience. Performances are much more than dance shows; they integrate songs, storytelling, humor, and audience participation. The blend of technique, agility, and pure energy makes each performance unique and leaves the audience with their hearts pounding.

STEP AFRIKA! PROGRAM

TRIBUTE CHOREOGRAPHED BY JAKARI SHERMAN

Tribute pays homage to the African American step show. The work combines the distinct stepping styles from different fraternities and sororities and blends them to showcase the incredible variety of stepping. Tribute includes all the exciting elements of the step show—the use of props, ripples and floor work, creative formations, and audience participation.

NDLAMU CHOREOGRAPHED BY JACKIE SEMELA

Ndlamu is a traditional dance of the Zulu people and for more than 25 years, *Step Afrika!* has studied the dance form through the Company's long-standing partnership with the Soweto Dance Theater. *Step Afrika!* makes this Ndlamu uniquely its own featuring solos created by each dancer as well as the addition of contemporary movement.

ISICATHULO CHOREOGRAPHED BY JACKIE SEMELA

Isicathulo or “the gumboot dance” is a tradition created by South African workers who labored in the oppressive mining industry of then-apartheid South Africa. Isolated from their families for long periods, the miners transformed their rubber boots into percussive instruments to not only entertain but to share secret messages with each other. Isicathulo has become one of the most popular dance forms in South Africa and has striking similarities to the African American tradition of stepping.

SOLO

Traditionally, stepping is performed by groups, big and small. In this Solo, *Step Afrika!* investigates the form at its most intimate level.

CHICAGO CHOREOGRAPHED BY JAKARI SHERMAN

Chicago finds the rhythm in everyday situations. It is a percussive symphony using body percussion and up to 5 complex polyrhythms performed simultaneously in order to narrate a percussive dance “story.” Inspired by a summer spent in the Windy City, this ground-breaking work transforms the 100+ year old, folkloric tradition of stepping into contemporary performance art.

SPECIAL NOTE: Audience participation has been a part of the step tradition since its inception in the 1900s. Members of the audience are invited to clap, stomp, cheer, and participate in call and response with the Artists.

CREATIVE TEAM



■ **C. BRIAN WILLIAMS (Founder and Executive Producer)**

C. Brian Williams is a native of Houston, Texas, and a graduate of Howard University. Brian first learned to step as a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. – Beta Chapter, in the Spring of

1989. While living in Southern Africa, he began to research the percussive dance tradition of stepping, exploring the many sides of this exciting, yet under-recognized American art form, and founded Step Afrika! in 1994. Williams has performed, lectured, and taught in Europe, Central and South America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and throughout the United States. Through Williams' leadership, stepping has evolved into one of America's newest cultural exports and inspired the designation of Step Afrika! as Washington, DC's official "Cultural Ambassador."

In 2022, the National Endowment for the Arts designated Williams as a National Heritage Fellow, the nation's highest honor in folk and traditional arts. He is the recipient of numerous Artist Fellowships; the World Alive! Distinguished Artist Award by Arts Emerson; the Mayor's Arts Award for Visionary Leadership from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities; Distinguished Arts Award from the Coalition for African Americans in the Performing Arts; and the Pola Nirenska Award for Contemporary Achievement in Dance. He is also featured in *Soulstepping*, the first book to document the history of stepping. He also earned the Mayor's Art Award for Innovation in the Arts and has led the company to multiple Metro DC Dance Awards for "Outstanding New Work," "Excellence in Stage Design/Multimedia," and "Outstanding Group Performance." Williams has been cited as a "civic/community visionary" by *NV Magazine*, a "nation builder" by the National Black Caucus of State Legislators and a "minority business leader" by the *Washington Business Journal*. His work is featured prominently at the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.



■ **LAMAR LOVELACE (Executive Director)**

As Executive Director for Step Afrika!, Lamar Lovelace is responsible for the organization's strategy and operations, leading its staff, programs, and the execution of its mission. Working closely with

Step Afrika!'s board of directors, he spearheads fundraising, marketing, operations, and long-range planning for the organization. He brings deep expertise from academia and has managed the organization's humanities-based partnerships.

In July 2017, Lamar joined Step Afrika! as Deputy Executive Director, where he oversaw the dance company's communications and marketing strategy, fundraising efforts, and financial operations. Previously, Lamar spent 8 years at Columbia University as Assistant Director in the Office of Community Outreach and Education and Director of Public Programs and Events. At the New York City-based campus, he managed community-based partnerships and special events and produced large-scale, humanities-based programming opportunities to engage students, faculty, and staff.

At Broward College in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Lamar was Director of Cultural Affairs and Student Engagement, where he created arts-based social justice programs and exhibitions. He holds Master's degrees in Arts Management and Oral History from Carnegie Mellon and Columbia, respectively, and a BA in Speech and Hearing Science from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Lovelace is a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.



■ **MFONISO AKPAN (Artistic Director)**

Mfoniso Akpan has trained extensively in tap, ballet, jazz, modern, African dance, and step. While attending the State University of New York at Stony Brook, she majored

in biochemistry and cultivated her stepping skills as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Mfon began her training at the Bernice Johnson Cultural Arts Center and has performed at Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, the Apollo Theater, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Lincoln Center. Mfon toured with the off-Broadway show *Hoofin' 2 Hittin'*, where she was a featured stepper and dancer.

■ **MARIANNE MEADOWS** (Lighting Designer/Production Manager)

Marianne Meadows is a member of United Scenic Artists local 829 with a BA from Sarah Lawrence College, MFA from the University of Washington with additional training at Lester Polakovs' Studio and Forum of Stage Design, NYC.

THE STORY OF STEP AFRIKA!

Founded in 1994 by C. Brian Williams, Step Afrika! is the first professional company dedicated to the tradition of stepping. Under Mr. Williams' leadership, stepping has evolved into one of America's cultural exports, touring more than 60 countries across the globe and ranking as one of the top 10 African American Dance Companies in the US.

Step Afrika! blends percussive dance styles practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities; traditional African dances; and an array of contemporary dance and art forms into a cohesive, compelling artistic experience. Performances are much more than dance shows; they integrate songs, storytelling, humor, and

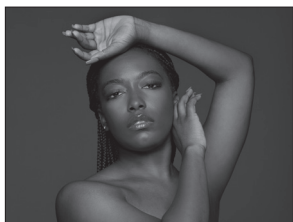
audience participation. The blend of technique, agility, and pure energy makes each performance unique and leaves the audience with their hearts pounding.

Step Afrika! promotes stepping as an educational tool for young people, focusing on teamwork, academic achievement and cross-cultural understanding. The Company reaches tens of thousands of Americans each year through a 50-city tour of colleges and theaters and performs globally as Washington, DC's one and only Cultural Ambassador.

Step Afrika! has earned Mayor's Arts Awards for *Outstanding Contribution to Arts Education, Innovation in the Arts, Excellence in an Artistic Discipline*, and was inducted into the National Association of Campus Activities (NACA) Hall of Fame, the first Dance Company to earn this honor. Step Afrika! headlined President Barack Obama's Black History Month Reception and performed at the first ever Juneteenth Celebration at the White House. The Company is featured prominently at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History & Culture with the world's first stepping interactive exhibit.



COMPANY BIOS



■ **ARIEL DYKES** is a native of Gainesville, FL with an Associate of Arts Degree in Musical Theatre from Santa Fe College and a BFA in Dance from the University of Florida. Ariel was introduced to stepping and strolling as a member of the Iota Lambda

Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., where she choreographed step routines for the chapter and UF's National Panhellenic Council. She has trained in traditional and post-modern dance, jazz, voice, and acting, and has worked with such artists as Ailey Dancers' Nathaniel Hunt and Samantha Barriento, Tony Award winner Scott Coulter, and Galen Hooks. This is Ariel's second season with the Company.



■ **KEOMI GIVENS JR.** is a native of Miami FL where he trained with Ricardo Dume, Traci Young-Byron, Jakari Sherman, Conrad Kelly II, Tanisha Cidel, Maribel Trujillo, and Robert Battle. He has studied at the New World School of the Arts and The Mahogany Dance

Theatre, where he served as a Rehearsal Director and choreographer. Keomi has danced with Gravity Dance Troupe and Young Contemporary Dance Theatre (YCDT) and has previously toured nationally with Step Afrika! as a guest artist. In addition to his exceptional work as a dancer, Keomi has choreographed for the legendary 100 Of Florida A&M University, RickyDanco, and Booker T Washington Lady Twisters. This is Keomi's first season with the Company as a full-time artist.



■ **KAMALA HARGROVE** is a native of the Bronx, NY, with a BA in Mathematics, Theater, and Dance from Trinity College. Kamala studied with the Alvin Ailey School and Dance Theater of Harlem, has appeared in various music videos and live

performances. She has performed with artists including Estelle, Mr. Vegas, Wizkid, and French Montana. Kamala

has also worked as a Teaching Artist in New York City, teaching elementary, middle, and high school students. This is Kamala's second season with the Company.



■ **NEPRI JAMES** is a native of Atlanta, GA with a BA from North Carolina A&T State University. Step Master for her Alpha Phi Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., she is known for bringing her step team to victory at the 2018 Homecoming Step

Show. Nepri has worked for the Thurgood Marshall College Fund Rise and Contra Tiempo and has previously toured nationally with Step Afrika! as a guest artist. This is Nepri's first season with the Company as a full-time artist.



■ **CONRAD R. KELLY II** is a native of Fort Lauderdale, FL who studied Criminal Justice at Florida A&M University. Following his time with A&M's Marching 100 and The Strikers, Conrad became a soloist for The Rolle Project in Las Vegas and a dance instructor

with Studio 305, where he regularly taught classes in hip-hop, contemporary, and jazz. Conrad has won numerous awards as a choreographer and dancer, and is namely a two-time recipient of the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' prestigious Arts and Humanities Fellowship Program. A long-standing member of the Company, Conrad serves as Step Afrika!'s Assistant Artistic Director and most recently choreographed *The Movement*, an epic tribute to Black Lives Matter and the domino effect of activism experienced in 2020. This Conrad's seventh season with the Company.



■ **ISAIAH O'CONNOR** is a native of Miami, FL with a BS in Biology from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University. A student of hip-hop, modern, and urban soul, Isaiah has previously stepped with the Strikers Dance Troupe under the direction of

Shepiro Hardemon. This is Isaiah's second season with the Company.



■ **VALENCIA ODEYKA EMONNI SPRINGER** is a native of Brooklyn, NY with a BA in Elementary Education from Virginia Union University. Valencia is a proud member of the Nu Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. and the Eta

Psi Chapter of Tau Beta Sigma National Honorary band sorority and served as the first "Stand Queen" (captain) with the Ambassadors of Sound Marching Band. Previously a student of Restoration Youth Arts Academy, Valencia has performed with Forces of Nature, Dance Africa (Brooklyn), and as part of a live installation entitled "A Primordial Place." She has also worked as a social studies and science teacher, dance teacher/coach, guest choreographer for local New York/ Virginia majorette teams, and as a model for New York and Richmond, Virginia, fashion weeks. This is Valencia's fifth season with the Company.



■ **ERICKA STILL** is a native of St. Petersburg, FL with a BA in Health Science, Pre-Occupational Therapy, and Rehabilitation Management from Florida A&M University. Ericka previously stepped with AKAdemy Exquisite

Gems and studied under the direction of Paulette W. Johnson and Shepiro Hardemon as a member and Co-Assistant Artistic Director of Mahogany Dance Theatre. This is Ericka's second season with the Company.



■ **JOSEPH VASQUEZ** is a native of Guttenberg, NJ with a BS in Exercise Science from Rutgers University in New Brunswick where he served as a member of Lambda Sigma Upsilon Latino Fraternity Incorporated. Joseph has led

and choreographed for the Bachata Performance Team, and previously performed with The Revels, a stroll team led by Francisco Pozo and Carlos Zapata. This is Joseph's second season with the Company.



■ **PELHAM WARNER JR.** is a native of The Bronx, NY and has a BA from Dutchess Community College. Pelham is a member of The Order of the Feather Fraternity where he served as the team's Step Master and captain for five

years, and has previously danced with The Players Club Steppers. Pelham has worked as a dance instructor in the greater New York City area, and recently performed in the a cappella musical *The Movement* by Kathy D. Harrison at The National Black Theater Festival. This is Pelham's fifth year with the Company.



■ **ROBERT WARNSLEY** is a native of Chicago, IL with a BS in Information Technology from Illinois State University. A member of the Eta Tau chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Robert served as the step and stroll master

and has organized, competed in, and placed first in numerous step shows. He has taught stepping to the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and actively participates in community service projects in the city of Chicago, teaching dancehall and various Afro styles in the DMV and NYC areas. This is Robert's fifth season with the Company.

Headshots of the Company and Staff by Keith Major.



Learn more about Step Afrika!

Share your experience!

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