

THE SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

Johannesburg, South Africa

US Dance Consortium is Looking for Partners in Africa

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Published by Sunday Independent on March 19, 2006

African, and notably South African, film and dance are getting invaluable exposure.

In dance, this is thanks to the Africa Consortium, an initiative formed in 2004, as United States arts funding was drying up, by presenters, producers and universities across the US.

The prominent bodies included the Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts, Washington; the Walker Arts Centre, Minneapolis; the Centre for World Arts, University of Florida; and the Bates Dance Festival, Maine. Other members are in San Francisco, Pittsburgh, New Jersey, Seattle and New Mexico.

The consortium's aim is to: "Promote and facilitate exchange among performing artists and public communities in the US and the continent of Africa."

This is achieved by hosting and presenting multi-disciplinary projects and residencies from Africa but also initiating them. Because working with African artists and companies can be expensive and full of nasty political surprises, such as visa issues, partnerships are the core of this strategy.

The consortium first visited the 2004 Dance Umbrella in Johannesburg to scout. Delegates have also attended other theatre dance events such as Senegal's Kaay Fecc Festival and the Le Cargo festival in Paris last year.

Conditions for foreigners in the post-September 11 US have been so difficult that several African artists have been reluctant to tour there. Aware of these sensitivities, the consortium is finding ways of holistically introducing African dancers and choreographers to what could be a hostile environment.

Visiting Johannesburg, Jordana Phokompe, the consortium's general manager, an associate producer from New York's MultiArts Projects and Productions (MAPP), explained the consortium's thinking. "It's important to do this because our borders are closing mentally and physically. It's about giving our audiences a deeper education in how artists and their communities are connected in Africa. "And showing where Americans are coming from. It's about dialogue and keeping the borders open."

Last year, South African dancer-choreographers Vincent Mantsoe and Greg Maqoma, as well as the Democratic Republic of Congo's Faustin Linyekula, did a residency at the Bates Dance Festival. Linyekula's company was also hosted around the country and will return to tour in 2007/8. This year his Les Studios Kabako, in Kinshasa, will also be running residencies with American artists.

"The issues Faustin was dealing with in *Triptyque san Titre* may be different to American experience," said Phokompe, "but they got it immediately and could connect [what they saw] to their personal histories. Painful art is coming out of Africa. We don't want an importing/touring/presenting relationship. We're trying to find partners in Africa. We have no separate infrastructure. We're doing it no matter what."

Mantsoe's *Men-Jaro* has been the most ambitious venture to date. Co-produced with South Africa's FNB Dance Umbrella, this collaboration, which culminated in a premiere at the Umbrella this month, spanned three continents - France (where the South African choreographer is resident), South Africa (home of the composer Anthony Caplan) and the US.

Phokompe oversaw the final stages of this co-production between Company Vincent Mantsoe, Dance Umbrella and MAPP.

"We had the network and believed in the project. We also know how to share the risk. The Dance Umbrella played a key role in making it happen. Mantsoe insisted that *Men-Jaro* premiere in South Africa."

To pave the way last year, MAPP backed a North American tour of Mantsoe's acclaimed solo work. When visiting 13 American cities, in 2007, in addition to performing, Mantsoe's company of international dancers will have access to local communities.

The five participating South African musicians of Caplan's African Music Workshop Ensemble will also give workshops about the traditional instruments, such as the uhadi (gourd bow), they play.

Next month *Men-Jaro* will be showcased at the 6th African and Indian Ocean Choreographic Encounters in Paris, and heads for London's Dance Umbrella in September.

Later this year, Ivory Coast's potent all-female Compagnie TchéTché will confront a wide American audience on stage in *Dimi* and will also be involved in open rehearsals, post-performance discussions and public interviews.

This is in keeping with the Africa Consortium's aim to expose art and artists from contemporary Africa. The exchange programme may not match winning an Oscar but in the long term it could reach minds, change hearts and create employment.

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