

ARTS AND FEATURES

# Dance rooted in Africa has universal appeal

## Opeyo! Dancers mix modern with traditional steps

By Melissa Mankowski  
Staff Writer

The Opeyo! Dancers performed Wednesday night as part of an African-American Culture Week program titled "African Americans in the Arts."

The Opeyo! Dancers, a group of student dancers who incorporate African-American music and influences into their dances, performed in the program sponsored by the Black Cultural Center's Special Projects Committee.

Two of the pieces mixed reggae music and traditional African-American dances with some modern dance and ballet steps. A third piece focused on the theme of freedom from oppression. The African-American heritage was emphasized in all of the pieces through the choice of music and style of dance.

Sonya McAuley, an Opeyo! dancer, said the music pieces were selected by the dancers, and the dance pieces were created from the music. All of the dancers contributed to the choreography. Dancers tried to focus on African-American culture and interests, McAuley said.

The music of Third World and Sounds of Blackness were used in Wednesday's performance.

Willie Jordan, a University alumnus and a teacher at Enloe High School in Raleigh, also spoke about how African Americans could use the performing arts to change and improve the image of blacks. He said African-American dancers such as Alvin Ailey and Arthur Mitchell of the Harlem Dance Theatre had a great influence in the dance world.

The Opeyo! Dancers will perform as part of a Big Buddy sign-up activity Oct. 24 and the Black Greek Step Show Oct. 31.

## Local ensembles perform dances transported from Africa

By Mara Lee  
Staff Writer

Choose the one that doesn't belong: hip-hop dance, jazz dance, Simon says, rock concerts.

Wrong. They all have legacies from African dance.

African dance integrates audience participation, storytelling and community festivals.

"African dance is not about some pretentious attitude like some forms of dance. We're very humble — we are entertainers. We're very open, every pore in the body is open, we are open to receiving," said Chuck Davis, leader of The African-American Dance Ensemble, a Durham-based group formed in 1983 that tours nationally.

The audience must be open to receiving as well, because Davis shouts movements to perform on cue. "Sometimes there might be some people who are shy, but if that be the case, it only lasts five seconds. (Audience participation) is the nature of my company's format.

"In traditional Africa, you have the communal aspect. We're talking about not an audience, but the community that comes to share in what we offer. We're coming from a point of truth, of sharing."

Donce Thomas, artistic director of a beginning dance class at the University, agreed that the emotional response from the audience was an integral part of African dance. "It's a very energizing kind of dance, and it's very easy to move people," she said.

Thomas founded Afro 2, which is sponsored by the Black Cultural Center, in the fall of 1989. The troupe of about 30 people choreographs its own African-American pieces, but its focus, African dance, is directly imported from Senegal and Kenya.

Thomas has trained with Afro 1, a regional touring group based in New Jersey, since she was 6 years old. Afro 1 has two parts, a training ensemble and

a traveling group. Thomas joined the traveling section at age 12, and in 1987 traveled to Senegal. Patricia Reed-Bookheart, the group's leader, visits Africa two or three times a year to research dances.

Davis also emphasized the importance of research. "I started out in 1959," he said. "I was going with teachers to the library. In 1977, I began going to Africa myself, and I've been going twice a year ever since." Davis' dances come from South Africa, Central Africa, West Africa and from the former Mali Empire, he said.

Both troupes spend a lot of time practicing. Davis' ensemble rehearses 12 to 18 hours weekly, and sometimes more. Nine performers work only in the group, and the other 15 dancers and musicians have outside jobs as well. Afro 2 meets four hours weekly.

African dance has universal appeal, something many don't realize, the directors said. Davis had a 10-day artist-in-residency at N.C. State University recently. "It's black, white, blue, orange and green, which is wonderful," he said. "We are about seeing the world through African eyes."

Similarly, Thomas said she welcomed all comers, no experience necessary, of all races. "I would like for African dance to be accepted and for all people to study it and appreciate it," she said.

African dances often relate stories and events. The Davis ensemble performs rites-of-passage pieces, wedding dances, war dances and others. The initiation dance strikes the audience best,

Davis said. "Each time you make a transition, whether from one age to another, one role to another or one level of consciousness to another, it's done with pomp and circumstance. It's really joyous," he said.

Some African dances Thomas has studied include death, pregnancy, virginity and welcoming dances, she said. "Funga — welcoming — is the first dance that any dancer would learn," she said, and added that funga was the most popular piece Afro 2 performs.

Dance is important on many levels, Thomas said. "It's important for any culture to hold onto the positive aspect. Dance for the black culture is very important in general," she said. "There are very, very significant similarities between contemporary dance and African dance."

Thomas said she danced for reasons other than cultural. "It's a very, very good form of exercise. It's very exciting to learn the dances and to be a part of a very close group. And it releases a lot of stress. It's a very beautiful art form," she said.

Davis suggested applying the spirit of African dance's warmth to life. He said, "I hope everyone will take the time to share a positive thought with somebody every day, and if they can, dance it."

A portion of Afro 2 will perform in the Cabaret at tonight's "A Night in Africa." Classes from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays are still open and can be joined through the BCC or Donce Thomas.

# A cappella groups gear up for 2-day jam session

By Susie Rickard  
Staff Writer

The University's female cappella group will host the first annual Loreleis Jam Session tonight and Saturday at 8 p.m. in Playmakers Theatre.

Singing groups from all over the East Coast will travel to Chapel Hill to represent their schools. The Loreleis organized this concert series to connect the long-standing tradition of a cappella singing in the North with the sparkling style and spirit of the South. This unification should prove to be exciting as well as entertaining.

The groups participating include the University of Virginia Hullahaboo, the Duke University Pitchforks, the University of Rochester Yellow Jackets, Tufts University's Beezebubs, the Princeton Tigressions and UNC's Tar Heel Voices, Clef Hangers and Loreleis.

Melanie Wade, president of the Loreleis, said these groups, which are some of the best singing groups from college campuses across the nation, "will expose our campus to a different style of a cappella." For example, many

of the Northern schools have recently been experimenting with vocal percussion sounds. This concert series will enable all the groups to exchange techniques and integrate their sounds; thus, the audience will hear a wide showcase of music.

The two-night jam session will prove to be a beneficial experience for all. This will be the first time multiple schools from the Northern states, where a cappella groups are more prevalent, come to play in a jam-session setting such as this. Many of these schools have 15 singing groups or more, making it difficult to find performance time. The jam session gives them a place to share their talents.

The Southern schools, on the other hand, will benefit from the exposure to different and innovative types of a cappella singing. Best of all, the audience will hear a fun and worthwhile concert with a wide variety of music ranging from barber shop quartet style to jazz to modern.

Tickets will be on sale for \$4 for each night or \$6 for both nights combined and are available at SchoolKids Records.

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