



STEP AFRIKA!

The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence

Founder & Executive Director

C. Brian Williams

Featuring

Mfoniso Akpan, Makeda Abraham, Christopher Brient, Dionne Eleby,
Delance Jackson, Joe Murchison, Charise Pinkston, Anesia Sandifer,
Jakari Sherman, Brittny Smith, Jordan Spry, Ta'quez Whitted

Special Guests

Abdou Muhammad, Baakari Wilder

Harlan Penn Scenic Design

Kenaan Quander Costume Design

Patrick Calhoun Sound Design

John D. Alexander Lighting/Projection Design, Production/Company Manager

Cory Raynor Sound Engineer/Assistant Production Manager

PROGRAM

There will be an intermission.

Thursday, November 3 @ 7:30 PM

Friday, November 4 @ 8 PM

Saturday, November 5 @ 2 PM

Saturday, November 5 @ 8 PM

Zellerbach Theatre



This engagement of Step Afrika! is made possible through the ArtsCONNECT program of Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation with support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

AFRICAN ROOTS, AMERICAN VOICES

Part of the African Roots, American Voices series.

PROGRAM NOTES

"Must we remain in the South or go elsewhere? Where can we go to feel that security which other people feel?" - *A Colored Woman in Alabama*, 1902

Drum Call

Choreographed/Composed by: Jakari Sherman and W. E. Smith

Original Recording of "African Villages" by: W.E. Smith

The drum has always been essential to African culture everywhere and is critical to the rhythm of Migration. *Drum Call* depicts an African village, the arrival of foreign ships, and the ensuing turmoil.

Go West: circa 1890

Choreographed by: Makeda Abraham, Mfoniso Akpan and Delaunce Jackson

When Africans arrived in America, their music and dance traditions were ingrained in the culture. *Go West* explores how West African dance and drum traditions spread and maintained their vitality in the New World.

Drumfolk

Choreographed by: David Pleasant

Drumfolk is a celebration of the early development of African American percussive traditions including patting juba, hambone and ring shout – giving way to art forms like tap dance and stepping. While exploring this heritage, *Drumfolk* reflects on the harsh conditions in the South that coincided with the practice of these transcendent musical forms. The work shows how the progression of such hardships preempted escape and migration, and how the fortitude of the enslaved led to the creation of new traditions like spirituals, field hollers and shouts.

Wade Suite

Choreographed by: Kirsten Ledford, LeeAnet Noble and Paul Woodruff

Wade shows the continuity in African and African-American percussive dance traditions by blending the South African Gumboot Dance, tap and stepping with the African-American spiritual.

Movement One: The Deacon's Dance

The African American spiritual played a significant role in lifting the spirit in troubled times. In *The Deacon's Dance*, two deacons prepare for Sunday services.

Movement Two: Wade

After the abolition of slavery, the church remained a center of refuge and community building amidst the harsh conditions, and served as a primary means of communication for industries recruiting labor during World War I. *Wade* highlights the importance of the church in helping African Americans survive the South, and its critical role in helping vulnerable migrants resettle in the North.

Intermission

"I was leaving the South to fling myself into the unknown. I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns, and, perhaps, to bloom." - *Richard Wright*

Trane Suite

Original Recording of “Trane” by: W. E. Smith

Throughout the Great Migration, the train was an important means of transporting people to the North. The entire railroad industry recruited heavily in the South and thus, economically, became a primary means of African American’s “one-way ticket” to a new life. Named in reference to John Coltrane and paying homage to Duke Ellington’s *Take the A Train*, *Trane* is a journey in three parts, following the story of the Great Migration.

Movement One: Trane

Choreographed by: Jakari Sherman
Creation of *Trane* made possible by the DC Jazz Festival.

The opening movement, *Trane*, establishes the connection between past and present, the rhythm of the train north, Ellington’s classic score and the Alpha “train”, a traditional element of stepping practiced by brothers of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Movement Two: Off The Train

Choreographed by: Jakari Sherman

Three men arrive in the North, luggage in hand...thrilled about the possibilities.

Movement Three: My Man’s Gone Now

Choreographed by: Mfoniso Akpan, Aseelah Allen, Dionne Eleby, Kevin Marr and Jakari Sherman
Recording of “My Man’s Gone Now” by Nina Simone

During the migration, it was common for men to journey north without their wives or children because of the high cost of travel. This left many women at home in the south caring for children and struggling to find work. *My Man’s Gone Now* is the story of three women, each in a different phase of their transition to the North and ready to be reunited with their loved one.

Chicago

Choreographed by: Jakari Sherman

Between 1910 and 1920, more than 400,000 African American migrants left the South for many Northern and Western cities, including Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Seattle, Los Angeles and Chicago. By the end of the 1920s, that number exceeded 1.2 million. *Chicago* finds the migrant’s new rhythm in everyday situations; it is a percussive symphony using body percussion and vocals to highlight their collective self-transformation once these brave men and women arrived “Up North.”

The Migration is made possible through commissioning support from Washington Performing Arts; Hancher Auditorium at University of Iowa; the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts at Illinois; Ordway Center for the Performing Arts; and Meany Hall for Performing Arts at University of Washington.

Images from Jacob Lawrence’s “The Migration Series” generously provided by The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC and the Jacob and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

About The Migration Series

The Migration Series, by painter Jacob Lawrence, is jointly owned by The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C. and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. This epic 60-panel tempera painting series depicts the migration of thousands of African Americans from the rural southern to the industrial cities of the north between 1910 and 1930. Prior to 1910, 90% of African Americans lived in the south. Between 1910 and 1920, the African American population in the North increased 65%. It was a movement on an epic scale with an impact

similar to the migration from southern and eastern Europe into northern U.S. cities decades earlier. Both migratory historical events are universal and shaped the cultural landscape of America.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

STEP AFRIKA!

Founded in 1994 by C. Brian Williams, Step Afrika! is the first professional company dedicated to the tradition of stepping. It now ranks as one of the top ten African American dance companies in the United States.

The Company blends percussive dance styles practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities, African traditional dance and influences from a variety of other dance and art forms. 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 theatres, and performs globally as Washington, D.C.'s one and only Cultural Ambassador. Step Afrika! has earned Mayor's Arts Awards for Outstanding Contribution to Arts Education (2005); Innovation in the Arts (2008); and Excellence in an Artistic Discipline (2012); and most recently performed at the White House for President Barack Obama and the First Lady.

C. Brian Williams (Founder & Executive Director)

Williams is a native of Houston, Texas and graduate of Howard University. He 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 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 & South America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean and throughout the United States.

Williams is co-founder of the historic Step Afrika! International Cultural Festival in Johannesburg, South Africa. He has been cited as a "Civic/Community Visionary" by *NV Magazine*; a "Nation Builder" by the National Black Caucus of State Legislators; and one of D.C.'s leading "Arts Innovators" by *Washington Life Magazine*. He is the recipient of numerous Artist Fellowships; the Distinguished Arts Award from the Coalition for African-Americans in the Performing Arts; the Pola Nirenska Award for Contemporary Achievement in Dance and is featured in *Soulstepping*, the first book to document the history of stepping. Williams also earned the 2008 Mayor's Art Award for Innovation in the Arts and has led the company to multiple Metro D.C. Dance Awards for "Outstanding New Work", "Excellence in Stage Design/Multimedia" and "Outstanding Group Performance".

Williams currently serves as a Commissioner for the D.C. Commission on the Arts & Humanities. Through his leadership, stepping has evolved into one of America's greatest cultural exports and inspired the designation of Step Afrika! as Washington, D.C.'s official "Cultural Ambassador."

Mfoniso Akpan (Artistic Director)

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. Akpan 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. Akpan toured with the off-Broadway show *Hoopin' 2 Hittin'*, where she was a featured stepper and dancer.

Jakari Sherman (Co-Artistic Director)

Sherman is an intense performer, percussionist and choreographer whose stepping experience extends over 20 years. Sherman served as the company's Artistic Director for eight years and brought new life to the folkloric tradition of stepping locally and across the globe. As a choreographer, he seeks to create a body of work that is experimental and challenging for both the dancer and the audience. Sherman studied management information systems at the University of Houston and is a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.

Christopher Brient (Assistant Artistic Director)

Brient is a native of Houston, Texas who performed in his first step show in the ninth grade, and has been addicted to the stage ever since. His love of dance began while attending Texas A&M University, where he taught hip hop classes, served as Step Master for the Potent Pi Omicron Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., and earned a Bachelor of Science in agricultural journalism. He joined Step Afrika! in 2009.

Makeda Abraham is an actress and dancer from Brooklyn, NY. She is a proud graduate of Howard University, where she received a BFA in theatre arts with a concentration in acting. For Step Afrika!'s 15th Anniversary, Abraham choreographed *Umngane*, with Mfoniso Akpan and Aseelah Shareef, for which she earned a 2010 Metro D.C. Dance Awards nomination for Outstanding New Work. Abraham is currently based in New York, living life to the fullest as a professional artist and entrepreneur. She is a proud member of D.I.V.A. Incorporated and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Dionne Eleby is a graduate of Elon University where she majored in musical theater and minored in African-American studies and business administration. A native of Atlanta, GA, Eleby has performed with the African American Dance Ensemble, ArtPark Regional Theatre and Rotterdam's Lef in Holland. She is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Delance Jackson is a native of Cincinnati, Ohio. He studied dance and theatre with local artist mentors Terri Brown and Jack Louiso. Jackson went on to train and perform with Kankouran West African Dance Company, Step Afrika!, and tour both nationally and internationally with the off-Broadway percussive production *STOMP!* From Lincoln Center to the National Mall and Madagascar, he continues to discover the unbridled diversity and universal significance of percussive art in cultural communication and relations. Jackson is a graduate of Howard University. He thanks the Creator for ordering his steps and his family for their undying love and support.

Joe Murchison comes to Step Afrika! from Lawton, Oklahoma. He began stepping in junior high school and continued performing at the University of Central Oklahoma, where he received a Bachelor of Science in kinesiology. As President and Step Master of the Zeta Sigma chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Murchison led his chapter to numerous step show competitions, earning both district and regional awards. He has also trained at the official school of the Dallas Black Dance Theatre.

Charise Pinkston works as a freelance dancer, choreographer, model and visual artist in D.C. She obtained her BFA in dance arts from Howard University and has trained with dance companies such as Lula Washington Dance Theatre, Deeply Rooted Dance Theater

and Debbie Allen Dance Academy. She has performed the works of many talented choreographers including Hope Boykin, Assane Konte and Ronald K. Brown. Pinkston continues to choreograph, provide technical dance training and produce commissioned works for public and private events.

Anesia Sandifer is a native of Augusta, Georgia. She attended the University of Georgia where she received a BBA in finance and a minor in dance. She is also a member of the Zeta Psi chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc, where she served as Step Master. Sandifer was a full scholarship recipient for the 2015 Debbie Allen Summer Intensive in Los Angeles, CA. She has performed on ESPN for the Special Olympics 2015 World Games and as a dancer for O.A.R. and Siedah Garrett.

Brittney Smith is a native of Houston, Texas. She attended Southern University in Baton Rouge, LA where she was a "Dancing Doll" before graduating from Texas Southern University. Smith obtained a BA in radio, TV and film; a MA in education, and also became a member of the Gamma Psi Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. Smith appeared in *Stomp The Yard 2* and has opened for musical acts including Miguel and The Dream.

Jordan Spry graduated from Howard University with a Bachelor of business administration in marketing. While at Howard, he stepped with the Drew Hall Step Team and served as a head coach as well.

Ta'quez Whitted is a proud alumnus of Elizabeth City State University where he captained the step team and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in criminal justice. Whitted started stepping in high school where he founded Mu Omega Psi Fraternity Step Team during his junior year to develop leadership and promote brotherhood and academic excellence.

Abdou Muhammad (Percussionist)

Muhammad began drumming at the age of three. He has studied extensively under Abdou Kunta, Sanga (drummer for Baba Olatunji), Dom Gaye, David Rock and Melvin Deal. Muhammad has served as lead drummer for African Heritage, Ezibu Muntu and Coyaba Dance Theater.

John D. Alexander (Lighting/Projection Designer)

Alexander's recent designs include *Yellowman* by Dael Orlandersmith, directed by Thambi Duncan; *Riches* by Lee Blessing, directed by Paul Douglas Michnewicz; *Darius and Twig* by Calette Jennings, directed by Eleanor Holdridge; the national tour of *Anne and Emmett* by Janet Langhart Cohen, directed by Tom Jones II; and *Other Reasons to Die* by Bob Bartlett, directed by Gregg Henry. He also designed for Eugene O'Neill Theatre Festival, Source Theater Festival, George Mason University, Georgetown University and Bowie State University. Alexander is a graduate of the University of North Carolina School of the Arts.