

# Step Afrika!

MAR 9 / COBB GREAT HALL

## PROGRAM

Tribute

Choreographed by Jakari Sherman

Ndlamu

Choreographed by Jackie Semela

Isicathulo

Choreographed by Jackie Semela

Solo

Chicago

Choreographed by Jakari Sherman

## CREATIVE TEAM

C. Brian Williams

Founder/Executive Producer

Mfoniso Akpan

Artistic Director

Lamar Lovelace

Executive Director

Marianne Meadows

Production Manager/Lighting Supervisor

Melissa Brown

Production Manager

## **COMPANY**

Ariel Dykes

Keomi Givens

Kamala Hargrove

Terrence Johnson

Isaiah O'Connor

Na'imah Ray

Valencia Springer

Ericka Still

Brie Turner

Joseph Vasquez

Pelham Warner

Robert Warnsley

Run time is approximately 80 minutes, with no intermission.

Media partner: Michigan Public



View the digital program at  
[whartoncenter.com/program](http://whartoncenter.com/program)

## **ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE**

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.

### **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.

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.

## **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.

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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.

## **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/Lighting Supervisor

Melissa Brown, Production Manage

## **BIOS**

### **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 of 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.

## **COMPANY**

**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.

**TERRENCE JOHNSON** is a native of Broward County, FL with a BA in General Studies from the University of Central Florida. Terrence has previously stepped with the ADIMU: Men of Excellence Step Team, and served as a co-founder, president, and performer with the Hazard Step Team. He is also a 2015 inductee of the UCF Chapter of Progressive Black Men, Inc. This is Terrence's first season with the company as a full-time artist.

**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.

**NA'IMAH RAY** is a native of Brooklyn, NY with a BFA in Dance from Montclair State University. Na'imah

performed as a Centennial Stepper with her sorority, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated, at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. She has trained with Dwana Smallwood, Earl Mosley, Christian Von Howard, and Beatrice Capote, and participated in dance programs at The Ailey School and Earl Mosley Institute of the Arts. This is her 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.

**BRIE TURNER** is a native of Lithonia, GA with a BA in Strategic, Legal, and Management Communications from Howard University. Magna cum laude graduate, Brie was a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated's Quintessential Alpha chapter where she served as the Chapter President and stroll mistress, in addition to serving as the co-captain and captain of the Howard University Bisonettes Dance Ensemble. This is Brie'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 capella 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.