

Renowned African group dances at UO

Les Ballets Africains is on tour around the world to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2002

By **Natasha Chilingierian**
Pulse Reporter

Les Ballets Africains productions are meant for big stages. Their larger-than-life costumes, diverse collection of African drums and theatrical storytelling call for a giant space, but the national dance ensemble of the West African country of Guinea is downsizing its show to fit the Dougherty Dance Theatre on Tuesday so the University can get a taste of Africa.

The dance department and the Hult Center are co-sponsoring the only Oregon performance of Les Ballets Africains during its Golden Jubilee world tour for its 50th anniversary. Through dance and drumbeats, the company will portray the history and societal changes of its country.

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Rita Honka
Director, Dance Africa

"Their job is to display their culture through dance," Les Ballets Africains North American representative Vincent Paul said. "Their shows erupt into a celebration and their music is infectious."

Since its formation in 1952, the dancers have acted as ambassadors for Guinea. The company's founder, Keita Fodeba, served as the minister of interior and the head of defense and security in Guinea, and his dancers toured world capitals in promotion of Guinea's harmonious culture. When Guinea received its independence in 1958, it became the country's official national dance ensemble.

The company's dance pieces often deal with universal topics such as education and the natural environment. All performances fit the form of a traditional two-act Western ballet.

"Their artistic director is able to manipulate traditional dances and



Courtesy

Les Ballets Africains travels from the West African nation Guinea to the Dougherty Dance Theatre on Tuesday for a theatrical show of drumbeats, culture and color.

ceremonies from Guinea into accessible programs," Paul said.

For their Eugene performance, Les Ballets Africains will depict the frustrated citizens of Guinea prior to its independence, who were ruled by French colonists. The production will touch on contemporary issues, including the nation's elimination of female genital mutilation. In one piece, modern Guinea is portrayed by a dancer in a jogging suit and carrying a cell phone.

Drums will serve a central role in

the performance, because choreography centers around the rhythms of djembes, doundouns, kenkenis, krins, koras and rattles.

"At some times during the show, the floor is filled with drums," Paul said, adding its performance can cause a rethinking of traditional Western lifestyles.

"In the end, their strongest message is the humanity of Africa," he said. "They're very humane people, and they don't have the same programming as the Western world of

systematically going to school, getting a job, getting married and having kids. It's beautiful there; there is a harmony with nature and your fellow man. They are very gentle and easy going. You'll think, 'Wow, I didn't look at life that way!'"

The appearance of Les Ballets Africains is an addition to the dance department's significant inclusion of African music and dance to its curriculum. The department currently offers two levels of African dance, frequent guest artists and master classes, the student dance ensemble Dance Africa and African drumming classes, which dance department chair Jenifer Craig said has had a large turnout from dancers.

"Some dancers who have had modern or African dance become fascinated with the integration of music in dance," Craig said. "There is an inclusion of rhythm in the body in African dance, and learning to drum helps to clarify that for dancers."

Dance instructor and Dance Africa Director Rita Honka said the department's interest in African dance and music stems from a need for community, accessibility and ceremony.

"African dance is based on natural movement," Honka said. "It's movement of work; we call it pedestrian movement. It's a technique that non-traditional dancers and non-dancers can do easily. It also builds a huge community — the interaction between the dancers and drummers is becoming. And it also gives us a ritual that we are missing in our culture. We can take a moment while we're dancing where we're not speeding to the next moment on our computers or on our cells."

Dougherty Dance Theatre is located on the third floor of the Gerlinger Annex. The sold-out show starts at 8 p.m.

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