

Reveling in Dance

African drums animate Rita Honka.

Rita Honka is yelling; she's really belting it out. Her head is thrown back on her six-foot tall, black-clad frame. Her bare feet slap the hardwood floor as she stomps to the beat of African drums. Her face is an amalgam of concentration and playful glee; spiky blond hair quivers on top of her head. A swirl of bodies flails in front of her, below her — a sweaty tangle of arms and legs fruitlessly trying to match pace.

And this is just the beginning of Honka's day.

"I'm old," the UO dance instructor pants, finally slowing to a halt. She puts a hand on her hip, straightens her spine and stares pointedly at the students crowding her studio. "Y'all should be able to do this better than I can."

But at 42, Honka could hardly be considered geriatric, and her schedule suggests she is a long way from retirement. She teaches six dance classes a day and runs her own performance company, Dance Africa. Her presence takes up more space than her athletic body alone ever could. Honka's bold movements and voice sweep the space up with every gesture. But somehow, she's found breathing room here at the UO, space for her artistic vision to expand and room for her body and mind to travel far and wide.

Honka's Dance Africa is also a force to be reckoned with. She started the group in

1993, and the company now consists of 12 to 20 student dancers and drummers selected by audition each year. The group, based at the UO, is directed and funded solely by Honka and local donors. The dancers rehearse at least four hours a week, with frequent concerts at the Frances Dougherty Dance Theatre. They also perform at different elementary schools in addition to teaching children about African culture.

Honka, however, is not African — not even African American. In fact, she has never even been to Africa. Born in Covington, Ky., and raised in Detroit with five sisters and four brothers, she says she learned about African culture through her black friends and the African students she met when she came to the UO as a graduate student.

Today, when African guest artists arrive to teach and perform alongside Dance Africa, they laugh and joke with Honka, and mutual respect passes back and forth — both a recognition of what each already knows and a transfer of new cultural information.

Honka studied modern dance technique at Wayne State College and began exploring African dance in depth as a UO graduate student. As an alumna, she remained at the UO and began teaching in 1990. "I think the best thing about teaching dance is watching a new dancer or a young dancer start to understand their body as an artistic instrument," she says. "It's amazing. I get

blessed everyday."

Honka lives alone, sans children or pets, which she says she enjoys after growing up in a large family. When she is not reveling in the blessings of dance, she can be found consuming literature and sweets. "I'm a voracious reader," she says later, putting her large feet up on the desk in her office. "And I live on chocolate."

However, Honka says, the most important thing in her life is her family. She says she inherited her artistic tendencies from her mother, who is a talented potter, photographer and painter. "My mom is really an artist," she says. "But she was a mom first."

Honka's siblings have been her strongest supporters in life — in dance and beyond. She even choreographed several dances with her brothers and sisters in mind. She remembers one in particular, a piece she created for her sister's wedding shower. "I was so into it that I wasn't working anymore," she says. "You transcend out of your body into the dance. That was pretty amazing."

Former UO Dance Professor Sherrie Barr, who taught Honka in grad school, says she notices this transcendence in Honka's work. "I think her modern choreography comes from a very emotional, expressive place," she says.

Honka takes the notion even further, noting that dance springs from spirituality.

Rita Honka



"Goodness, joy, truth, dance — it's my church," she says. Her spiritual role models are great humanitarians such as Nelson Mandela and Maya Angelou.

Honka's commanding presence and wealth of knowledge will continue to grow, and someday the instructor might find the UO is not large enough to contain these anymore. The world seems to beckon, and Honka hears its call from exotic yet familiar places. Her future goals include publishing research in dance education, as well as traveling the globe. "I want to go to Africa," she says with conviction. "God, where don't I want to go?"

For now, Honka says her classes and Dance Africa keep her more than happy, taking her to destinations far more important than the geographical ones. "I so love my life and my work," she says. "I'm so satisfied in my work that my joy comes from there."

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