

Gwinyai dance displays Zimbabwe culture

by Robert Lothian

By the end of their performance at Portland State Saturday night, the African dance troupe Gwinyai had most of the audience up and dancing. It was the kind of performance that encouraged people to overcome their shyness about moving to the music of zongas and the "mbira," which is like a colimba and sometimes called a "thumb piano."

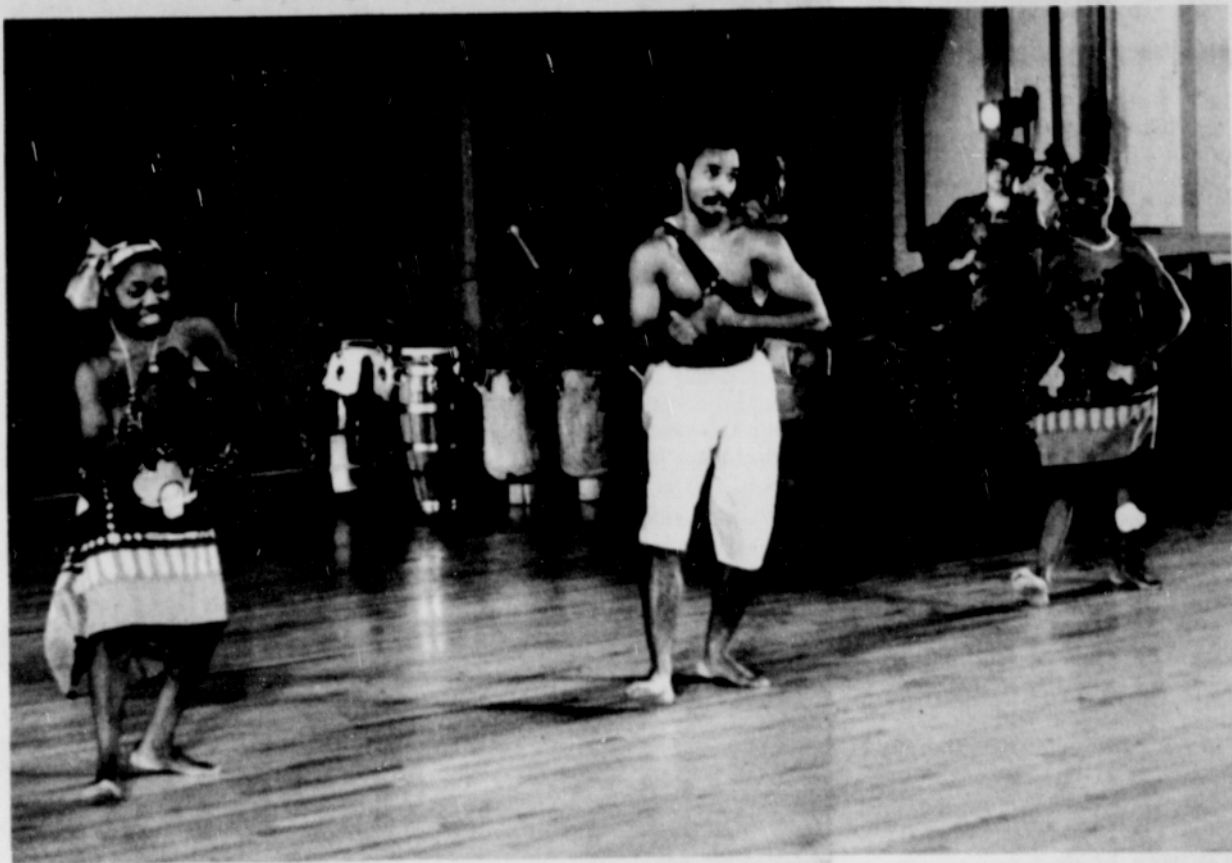
More than that, the group imparted some of the spirit of the new Zimbabwe, the country once known as Rhodesia which attained majority Black rule in 1980 after a bitter civil war.

Gwinyai means "to be strong" or "to keep on keeping on" in the Shona language of Zimbabwe. Five out of nine of Gwinyai's dancers and musicians are from Zimbabwe.

The group opened with a moving song in the Shona language. Then the colorfully dressed dancers, accompanied by drums, shakers, mbiras, whistles, singing and shouts of joy, moved onto the floor to demonstrate the high kicking, foot drumming style that characterizes Shona dance.

Taking a break from the dancing, the troupe sang the African national anthem in the Shona language. "We keep pushing for this for all the countries of Africa," said Sherree Sparks, conga player, dancer and one of the founders of the group. They also performed "gumbo dancing," dressed in rubber boots and hard hats, dedicated to Zimbabwe's many miners.

They pulled people from the audience out onto the floor, encouraging them with a saying from the Shona people — "If you can talk you can sing and if you can walk you can dance." Lora Lou Chiorah Dai, lead dancer and director of the troupe, moved to Seattle from Zimbabwe to go to school in 1973. She and Sparks, who is from Seattle, founded the group shortly after that. Gwinyai makes its home at the Langston Hughes Cultural Center in Seattle.



Members of the Gwinyai dance troupe entertain at PSU.

(Photo: Richard J. Brown)

Saturday, Chiorah-Dai and Sparks were joined by dancers August Drake and Kevin Howard and singers and percussionists Janet Taylor and Patty Peach. Four children also performed with the group — Michael Chiorah-Dai, 7, Christopher Sparks, 9, Danae Sparks, 11, and Ten Dai Maraire, 10. Maraire has been dancing since the age of 18 months, said Sparks.

Gwinyai conveys the traditional and contemporary culture of Zimbabwe, said Chiorah-Dai. "We try to dispose of all the bad stereotypes that people have of Africa, that it's all jungle and people have no culture," she said. Chiorah-Dai said she learned traditional music and dancing "as just part of growing up" in Zimbabwe. "It's much warmer and drier there," she said, and many houses don't even

have heaters. Needless to say, she has had difficulty adapting to the cold, wet Northwest climate.

Shona dance "has to do with the moment or the time, whether you are working in the fields or washing dishes. . . songs and dances to fit whatever you are doing," she said.

Chiorah-Dai originally came to Seattle to study home economics at the University of Washington and Seattle-Pacific University. She now works for the Seattle Parks Dept., as does Sparks, teaching dance to children, adults and senior citizens. Her children just returned after living with their grandparents for a year in Zimbabwe. "They had a great time and now it's my turn to go," she said.

Life has improved with majority rule, she said. In the field of educa-

tion, for instance, she said, "everybody can go to school now, which was never the case before. . . . there weren't enough schools for everybody. The main problem is building an economy in the country to support the people."

Chiorah-Dai said she would like to return and live in Zimbabwe, to teach and possibly start a company to make traditional clothing. "I don't like the British style. I would like to introduce my own traditional style where we have traditional materials."

"I would like to create a new spirit that it's O.K. to be African. . . . that was destroyed by the Europeans, you couldn't be African. But now it's all right to be African."

Gwinyai is closely associated and often performs with the Sukutai Marimba Ensemble, also based in Seattle, which performs traditional and contemporary music on the marimba.

Afro-American opera premiers

An opera is a musical play. Porgy and Bess was a play set to music. Because most of us have seen Porgy and Bess and much less frequently been exposed to opera, it is a fresh idea whose time has come.

The Portland Opera Association sponsors a season of opera that is currently running at the Civic Auditorium. African Americans don't frequent the Civic Auditorium in large numbers for general fare and certainly very little opera.

The opera *Sherman*, a tragic story of a great local saxophonist Sherman Thomas and the shipwreck of original American art forms, Jazz and specifically be-bop, will play Saturday night at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center. It is significant that it premieres in this area as a jazz landmark and carries with it the legacy of generations.

"Opera is a classic way of preserving one's culture," says composer Thara Memory, "even when it brings to light the great neglect of some of America's greatest art." When have

you seen an African American opera? When have you gotten this close to a composer?

Before the excerpts were performed on October 14 of this year, some people had intimated that opera was boring. What they were saying is that they did not understand the method of delivery. Thara Memory has made it relevant and combined a common story line with the creative processes that have made America marvel at the Black man.

"It's an old story line," reports Thara, "but that's exactly what I want to achieve. The commonality with operatic form makes it work." Work! That's exactly what's going on. This piece cooks.

The talents of Anise Hall, James Johnson, Julianne Johnson, Danny Osborne, Ken Berry, and Ron Steen all support this production. World Arts Foundation, Inc., with yet another product to enrich the community, again puts itself on the cutting edge of the arts with this premier of *Sherman*.

The libretto is written by Charles Deemer. The themes that he has captured and magnified are striking and compelling. People can be in any situation and relate to the drama and universality of this story. The score composed by Thara Memory deserves credit for its sophistication and style.

Such bold artistic endeavor is supported by the Metropolitan Arts Commission, the Oregon Arts Commission and the sweat and tears of joy from the volunteers at World Arts Foundation, Inc.

Saturday, December 8, at the IFCC, 5340 N. Interstate Ave., will be the location. The 8:30 p.m. curtain will be preceded by the exciting Youthsound Stageband under the direction of Greg McKelvey and his "big band" baton starting at 7:30. The \$6.00 seats are very limited so come early and enjoy. This intimate little event is the kind of thing that makes a difference; where our history takes place. Mark your calendar — make arrangements — don't miss it.

Portland Brass Society holiday concert

The Portland Brass Society presents an exciting concert of festive holiday music on Sunday, December 16, at 5 p.m. The concert will take place at Trinity Episcopal Church, whose rich and resonant acoustics provide the ideal setting for the more than thirty top brass players who will be on hand for this event. The church is located at NW 19th and Everett. Tickets are \$5 and \$3.50, and will be sold at the door.

Food contributions needed

According to executive director Tim Hornbecker, "The need for food this Christmas is expected to be even greater than last year, when St. Vincent de Paul delivered food to more than 15,000 people.

Scouts and other volunteers will pick up contributions of nonperishable food door to door in Portland neighborhoods Saturdays, December 8 and 15. In addition, food may be taken to any Wendy's restaurant or to any St. Vincent de Paul store.



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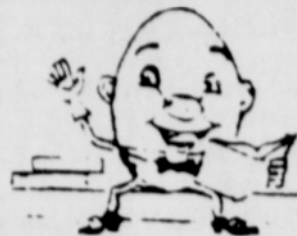
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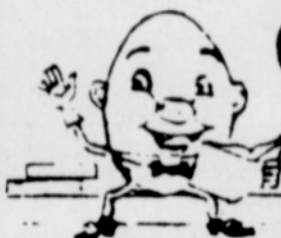
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