



STEP AFRIKA!

April 19, 2025

Edmonds Center for the Arts

Sponsored by Barclay Shelton Dance Centre, Matthew & Nicole Cox, and Steve & Leanne Shelton

ABOUT STEP AFRIKA!

ADMINISTRATIVE, CREATIVE TEAM

C. Brian Williams, Founder & Executive Producer

Lamar Lovelace, Executive Director

Mfoniso Akpan, Artistic Director

Conrad R. Kelly II, Assistant Artistic Director

Margo Cunningham, Senior Marketing Manager

Pascha Barnwell, Company Manager

Chrystal 'Chrys' Vaughan, Manager, Events and Special Projects

Melissa Brown, Production Manager

COMPANY

Conrad R. Kelly II

Ariel Dykes

Keomi Givens Jr.

Leander Gray

Kamala Hargrove

Isaiah O'Connor

Keanu Powell

Ericka Still

Brie Turner

Joseph Vasquez

Pelham Warner Jr.

ABOUT THE SHOW

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.

STEP AFRIKA! PROGRAM

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.

SPECIAL NOTE: 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 world’s leading authority on the art form 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.

STEP AFRIKA! 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.



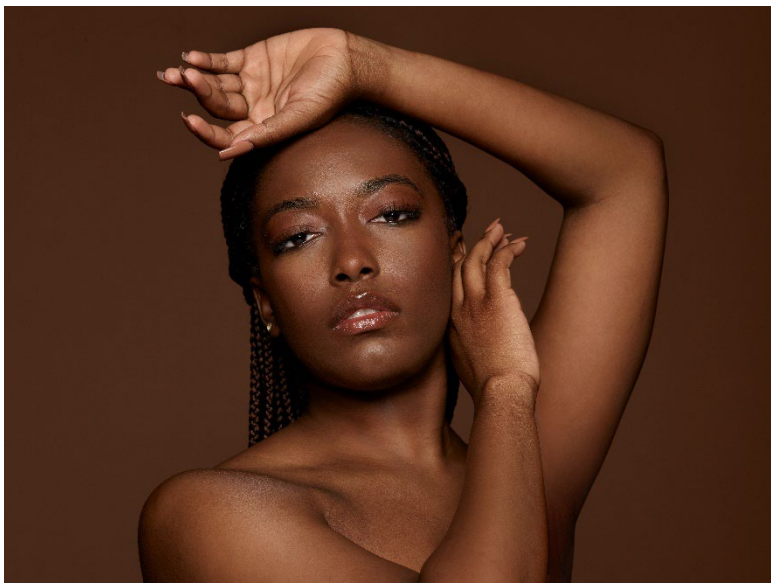
MFONISO AKPAN (Artistic Director)

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.

COMPANY BIOS



CONRAD R. KELLY II is a native of Fort Lauderdale, FL, who studied Criminal Justice at Florida A&M University. During his time at FAMU, he performed with the Marching 100 and The Strikers. Conrad later became a soloist for The Rolle Project in Las Vegas and a dance instructor at Studio 305, where he taught hip-hop, contemporary, and jazz. He has won numerous awards as a choreographer and dancer, including being a two-time recipient of the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities' prestigious Arts and Humanities Fellowship Program. A long-standing member of the Company, Conrad serves as Step Afrika!'s Assistant Artistic Director and recently choreographed *The Movement*, an epic tribute to Black Lives Matter and the wave of activism in 2020. This is Conrad's eighth season with the Company.



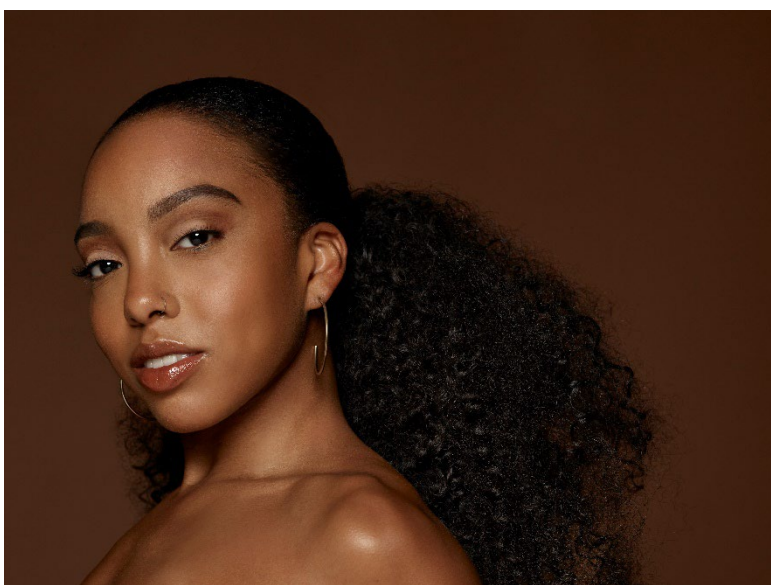
ARIEL DYKES is a native of Gainesville, FL, with an Associate of Arts in Musical Theatre from Santa Fe College and a BFA in Dance from the University of Florida. She is a member of the Iota Lambda Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., where she choreographed step routines for her chapter and UF's National Panhellenic Council. Ariel has trained in ballet, jazz, West African, and post-modern dance, as well as voice and acting. She has worked with notable artists such as Ailey Dancers Nathaniel Hunt and Samantha Barriento; Tony Award winner Scott Coulter; and Grammy Award-winning Gospel artist Smokey Norful. This is Ariel's third season with the Company.



KEOMI GIVENS JR. is a native of Miami, FL, where he trained with Ricardo Dume, Traci Young-Byron, 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 Rehearsal Director and choreographer. Keomi has danced with Gravity Dance Troupe and Young Contemporary Dance Theatre (YCDT). In addition to his work as a dancer, Keomi has choreographed for The Marching 100 of Florida A&M University, RickyDanco, and the Booker T. Washington Lady Twisters. This is Keomi's second season with the Company.



LEANDER GRAY is a native of Washington, D.C., and studied at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Leander has performed at the Black Leaves Project, CityDance Creating the Magic Concerts, Art All Night DC, the Elements Urban Arts Collective Annual Showcase, and the DC Youth Freestyle Battle. He has participated in the prestigious Monsters of Hip Hop Intensive and the Kennedy Center Dance Lab and was featured in a music video by Revolution Marz. This is Leander's first season with the Company.



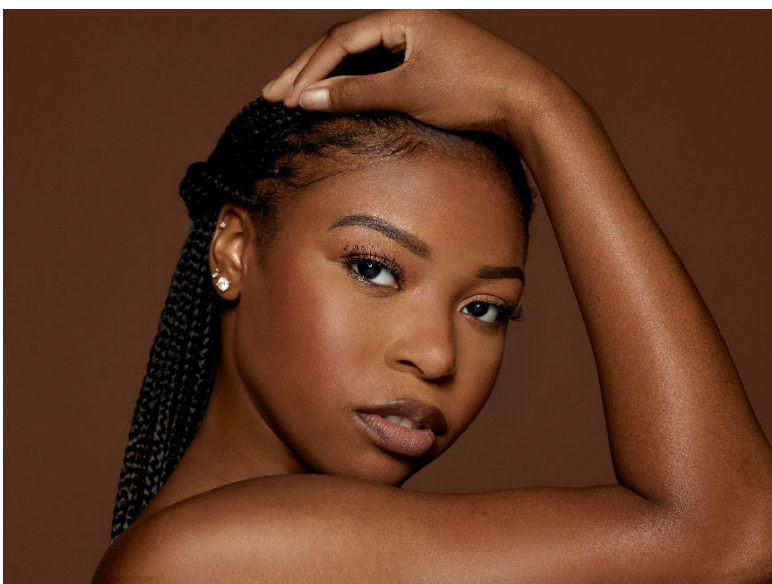
KAMALA HARGROVE is a native of the Bronx, NY, with a BA in Mathematics, Theater, and Dance from Trinity College, where she earned a BA in Mathematics, Theater, and Dance. Kamala studied at The Ailey School and Dance Theatre of Harlem and has appeared in various music videos and live performances. She has performed with artists including Estelle, Mr. Vegas, Wizkid, and French Montana. Kamala has also worked as a Teaching Artist in New York City, instructing elementary, middle, and high school students. This is Kamala's third season with the Company.



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 third season with the Company.



KEANU POWELL is a native of Decatur, GA, with a BBA in Management from Howard University. While at Howard, Keanu became an active member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., serving as 2nd Vice President and Step Master. He is also a member of Kappa Kappa Psi National Honorary Band Fraternity, Inc., through the Eta Omega Chapter, and served as Drum Major for the 2021-2023 seasons. Keanu was prominently featured on *Good Morning America* representing Howard University. He has also performed nationally with Howard's band at major events, including Nike Headquarters and the inaugural NBA HBCU Classic. This is Keanu's first season with the Company.



ERICKA STILL is a native of St. Petersburg, FL, with a BS in Health Science, Pre-Occupational Therapy, and a Minor in 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 third season with the Company.



BRIE TURNER is a native of Lithonia, GA, with a BA in Strategic, Legal, and Management Communications from Howard University, where she graduated magna cum laude. She is a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., serving as Chapter President, and she also pursued a minor in Theater Arts Administration. Brie served as both captain and co-captain of the Howard University Bisonettes Dance Ensemble and has dedicated over 10 years to technical dance training. This is Brie's third season with the Company.



JOSEPH VASQUEZ hails from Guttenberg, NJ, and has a BA in Exercise Science from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, NJ. In college, Joseph danced with the Rutgers Bachata Performance Team, where he choreographed and led the team for four years. He is a member of Lambda Sigma Upsilon Latino Fraternity, Incorporated—the first Latin fraternity to step and stroll—and The Revels Stroll Team, where he was led by former team captains Francisco Pozo and Carlos Zapata. This is Joseph's third season with the Company.



PELHAM WARNER JR. is a native of the Bronx, NY, and holds 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 he 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 cappella musical *The Movement* by Kathy D. Harrison at The National Black Theater Festival. This is Pelham's sixth year with the Company.

Headshots of the Company and Staff by Keith Major.

Learn more about Step Afrika!

www.stepafrika.org

Share your experience! #StepAfrika

