

Africa's Soviet Ballet

Russia is world renown for its leadership in classical ballet training and performance. It has been the reliable producer of an impressive lineage of ballet dancers and instructors. Its codified Vaganova system is trusted and practiced in nearly every Western country today.

Guinea, a tiny nation of West Africa, is the producer of some of the most celebrated African dancers and drummers in the world. Les Ballets Africains de Republic of Guinea and Le Ballet de Matam are based in the nation's capital, Conakry. Hundreds of young children are trained daily by masters of African dance who are revered throughout the continent and celebrated around the world. In countries that are economically depressed and politically unstable, West Africans take pride in their position as a world leader in African dance.

After having the unique opportunity to study and teach dance in Russia and Guinea, I have perhaps an unusual and unique perspective into why I would give Guinea the title, "Africa's Soviet Ballet." If you take away the incredibly contrasting movement vocabularies, the Russians and the Guineans share many similar features in how they consistently train students to become some of the best dancers in the world.

When you go into a Russian ballet classroom, you immediately notice the students' unwavering respect for the ballet master. Once the ballet master enters, there is no talking between any of the students until he or she exits the studio after the class. The exact same type of respect and discipline is found in Guinea. While there is joyful playing and students challenging each other to jumping contests prior to the commencement of class, these giggles are silenced once the Head Master enters the space.

In Russia, the students quickly become attuned to the use of live piano music. If there is even the slightest error in rhythm, the dancers will immediately stop and stare at the piano player. Meanwhile, the ballet master will launch into a barrage of oral insults aimed at the accompanist. There is absolutely zero room for error in the musical accompaniment in the classroom.

The exact same thing is true in Guinea. The training is set to live drumming, and the male drummers themselves are highly accomplished musicians – the equivalent of Julliard graduates, perhaps. I remember one class where the dancers were rehearsing a transition from one movement section to the next and it required a complicated change in the drumming pattern. After multiple attempts, the drummers were still making mistakes and enduring shouted criticisms from the Head Master. It ended with one drummer getting a shoe thrown at him. (I do not recall ever seeing that drummer in our class again after that day.)

In addition to respect and musicality, there is a tremendous sense of history that pervades the rehearsal space. When the Russian dancers take their place at the ballet barre, they are standing in the same spots that have produced some of the greatest ballet



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stars of all time. The ballet master may deviate briefly from his lesson plan to share a story about Diana Vishneva or Askold Makarov. The students listen intently to each and every word that describes their idols. Then, they turn back to their own exercises with renewed enthusiasm and boundless energy, knowing that these steps are the same ones that will be performed by the Bolshoi principal dancers on the Russian stage that night.

In Guinea, the dancers work through their exercises in front of former African ballet stars and master instructors sitting along one entire wall. Following an unforgiving 45 minutes of continuous diagonal passes of increasingly difficult steps, the students will collapse on the floor while they receive notes from the various spectators. Like the Russians, these Guinean students are reminded that their diligence, precision and presentation of particular steps must reflect the respect and talent of the generations of African ballet stars that preceded them. The students carry the weight of a dance form and an entire country on their muscularly sculpted shoulders. The consequence of a tired performer or an error in execution is a collective failure of the troupe's history, jeopardizing its future reputation and prestige. The Guinean dancers spring up from the 15 minute lecture to continue their rehearsal for several more hours, knowing the



pursuit of perfection is their pre-determined destiny in life.

The competition is fierce. Russian students are admitted into the Vaganova school at the age of 8 years after passing various physical examinations. Each year, until they reach the age of 16 or 17, students will be eliminated from the program. Only the very best will graduate from the Bolshoi Academy or the Vaganova Ballet School and be offered a full-time position with a classical ballet company. Each day impacts whether they will realize their dreams or be left aimless in life.

In the context of Guinean training, many children may casually be exposed to traditional African dance movements, but only those who become truly committed to learning the craft will have the opportunity to dance professionally. In an environment where the unemployment rate is nearly 80%, the few coveted dance jobs are only issued to the most talented and dedicated professionals. Even then, their stipends will barely be enough to sustain themselves.

Yet, if you ask dancers in Russia or Guinea if they could imagine their lives without dance, surely they will say “no” (or “niyet” or “non”). There is nothing at all the same about Guineans or Russians...unless they are dancers.