

Faces in DanceAfrica

by David Hsieh



Janelle Hart-Brathwaite, 2nd from left, with Charles Moore Dance Theater. Photo courtesy of the artist

In February 1976, dancer/choreographer Charles Davis held three performances in the Lepercq Space in today's Peter Jay Sharp Building at BAM. He constructed an African village to honor the ancestry of African-Americans. From there, a tradition and institution grew steadily. This year the DanceAfrica Festival celebrates its 40th anniversary (May 26—29). It is not only BAM's longest running program, but also has wide-ranging elements for everyone—performances (including for students during schooltime), classes, a bazaar, films, community events, scholarships, and a Memorial Room. All contribute to spread Baba Chuck's, and current Artistic Director Abdel R. Salaam's, enduring central messages: love, respect, and tradition. Here are stories from a few people whose lives have been touched by DanceAfrica.

WILLIAM MATHEWS "BABA BILL"

Council of Elders

I met my future wife Mama Lynette [White] in 1981 and she invited me to an African dance class taught by Chuck. After a while sitting on the side, Chuck asked me to get up and dance with them. I was not a dancer and knew nothing

about African dance. But his presence was so illuminating and his personality so inviting that I did as he said. After that, he said I was to come back next week, which I did. Some time after that, Lynette told me I was going to be on this "Council of Elders." Since I was courting her, I did as told. That's how I became involved with DanceAfrica. I remember asking Chuck once why he wanted me to be a member. He said, "Anyone that can make my premier dancer smile and look so happy is part of my family." The Council of Elders is an important part of the festival. We instill the sense of respect for tradition, culture, and elders in all participants. I oversee arranging the Memorial Room and have set up two mentorship programs (Crowns and Seeds) at Bed-Stuy Restoration. Chuck really makes you want to participate. He makes you feel loved, like you're in a family. I call it the magic of Chuck.

KAREN THORNTON DANIELS

Artistic director of BAM/Restoration DanceAfrica Ensemble, 2002—2016

I was taking classes with Baba Chuck and his company in 1977 when he told us about this



African dance performance at BAM. The show was full of pageantry and became a tradition. We would take classes with him and see DanceAfrica every year. Even as a teen when my parents didn't want me to trek all the way to Harlem (we lived in Bed-Stuy), I kept going and had my friends cover for me! Chuck was a very rigorous teacher. He wouldn't allow any excuses. And he took a shining to me and was determined to push me ahead. I was in Abdel R. Salaam's [who succeeded Davis as the artistic director of DanceAfrica] company from 1985—95. Then I joined Baba Chuck's African American Dance Ensemble. Also in 1995, I was asked to teach at Restoration and later I served as artistic director of its dance company, from which the dancers were chosen to participate in the annual DanceAfrica Festival. Dance has given me a life I never dreamed of. It took me all over the world. I want to give it back to my students. I want to teach them to be global citizens.

KWAME OPARE

First recipient of the Chuck Davis Emerging Choreographer Fellowship

I was only 14 when I joined Kankouran West African Dance Company and we were invited to perform in DanceAfrica. I was in awe seeing so much great dance and diverse styles. As a young person, that really showed me a level to aspire to. DanceAfrica gives us an opportunity to display our craft on a stage with great visibility

and prestige. I have the utmost respect for Baba Chuck, BAM, and all the artists for keeping this tradition alive and urging us forward. So when I received this fellowship, I was so honored that I was recognized by a community that I have been looking up to since I was young.

JANICE HART-BRAITHWAITE

Dancer, Charles Moore Dance Company (1978)

I was still in college when I took a class with Charles Moore in 1975, and he invited me to join his company. Then in 1978, the company was invited to DanceAfrica. It was us, Arthur Hall Afro-American Dance Ensemble, Dinizulu and His Dancers, and the International Afrikan-American Ballet. I was ecstatic! I majored in modern dance, so before Charles took me on, I didn't have a lot of contact with African dance. For the first 10 years, we danced in the festival many times. After that I kept going as a viewer. We were also invited for the 35th anniversary reunion. I have seen how Chuck grew and expanded it to include the different styles of African dance. I was in tears when I saw the Peruvian company in 2006, Perú Negro—Who'd know! Last year Abdel incorporated an environmental message in a very artistic way. I loved the children's dance [Restoration]. It's good to have this tradition passed on.

David Hsieh is a publicity manager at BAM.