Dancing to the Beat of a New Drum

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From the savannas of Africa to the Flint Hills of Kansas, African dance has drummed up a couple of passionate practitioners at Kansas State University.

Behind this cultural choreography is Neil Dunn, instructor in the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance, and his wife, Julie Pentz, associate professor and director of the university’s dance program. Dunn and Pentz research rhythmic drumming and dancing.

Taught by Bernard Woma, a master of the Ghanaian xylophone and drumming and dancing instructor, Dunn and Pentz have made two trips to Woma’s Dagara Music Center in Accra, Ghana. Each time they visit, they spend several days intensively studying traditional dances such as Gota, a war dance.

Researching the movements that are foreign to most American dancers expands the couple’s repertoire and challenges the dancers they teach.

“It expands their vocabulary,” Dunn said. “It changes the way they move. If they are able to get the movements down, it loosens up their bodies and it gets them thinking in a different way, outside their usual dance structure.”

Dunn, who has a master’s degree in music with a percussion emphasis, became interested in African dancing and drumming after graduate school. The style, rhythm and use of the drums appealed to him.

“African dancing is not based on a certain number of counts,” Dunn said. “Dancers are guided by drumming calls and rhythmic cycles.”

For certain styles of dancing, the drummer beats differently to signal the dancers to change movements, Dunn said. An ending call signals the end of a movement. Then a pause and a starting call tell dancers to start moving again. A running call tells dancers to get ready for the next variation.

“Dancers have to learn to listen in different ways that go beyond counts,” Dunn said. “As lead drummer, I may intentionally extend the length of a call in order to give the dancers the experience of waiting for the call, listening to music and not relying on that kinesthetic rhythm we have in our culture.”

Dunn and Pentz’s trips to Africa are essential to understanding the dancing and music they are incorporating in Kansas. The dances and drumming are easier to learn with face-to-face instruction because of the cultural differences.

“In Westernized dance vocabulary there are words for everything,” Dunn said. “Our African dance teachers say, ‘move this way’ because they don’t have words for movements, they have gestures. They guide you phonetically by moving your body.”

Although the majority of Ghana has become Westernized, Ghanaians still revert back to their cultural roots for celebratory dancing. They mimic tribal dances once used to observe everything from war to a child’s coming of age. While ritual dances are rarely used today for the same purpose, the country’s youth enjoy the same dancing at parties.

“I was at a party where there was a DJ,” Dunn said. “But by the end of the night, the drums came out and everyone forgot about the DJ. While we in America learn ‘Hot Cross Buns’ as children, Ghanaians learn these dances.”

Pentz’s background is in jazz and tap dancing, while Dunn’s is in percussion. The dancers and the musicians work together in African dance, so Dunn and Pentz complement each other in teaching the art to Midwesterners.

“The cool thing about this pairing with Julie is that she’s the mover and dancer,” Dunn said. “She demonstrates and understands how physically the body does these movements, but I’m the one who knows the form and structure of the music.”

The university’s African dance class began in the spring 2011 semester. Dunn and Pentz are working on establishing an African dance ensemble and building a repertoire for performances before local audiences.

By Stephanie Jacques, Communications and Marketing

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