



## ArtSmarts

2003-2004 Wells Fargo School Matinee Series

# Les Ballets Africains

April 16, 2004                      11:00am

Jackson Hall, Mondavi Center

Dear Teachers:

We hope you will find this CueSheet helpful in preparing your students for the school matinee presentation of Les Ballets Africains. This guide provides background information on the company, the performance, and the Republic of Guinea as well as study questions and a review of audience etiquette.

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## LES BALLETS AFRICAINS

Though the name is Les Ballets Africains (Lay Bal Lay Afri CAN), the performance you will see is not a traditional ballet, with toe shoes and tutus, as one might imagine. The ensemble's name refers instead to a more general definition of the word "ballet": "a theatrical work incorporating dancing, music and scenery to tell a story or convey a thematic atmosphere" (Webster's Dictionary).

The performers of Les Ballets Africains present music and dance that is based on the cultural traditions of The Republic of Guinea. The dancing includes acrobatics, comedy and drama. The dancers will be wearing traditional costumes and dancing to music played on such traditional instruments as kora, drums, flute and the balaphone, a precursor to the modern xylophone.



Les Ballets Africains is the National Dance Company of the Republic of Guinea. This famed ensemble, which has toured the four corners of the earth during an illustrious career, is universally recognized as Africa's most renowned and accomplished dance company. For 50 years, Les Ballets Africains has represented its country, continent and culture at some of the world's most prestigious international festivals and venues.

The company's rich and varied repertoire presents a living demonstration of Africa's prodigious cultural heritage, the vitality and authenticity of which is assured by a continuing connection with the daily life of all African peoples.

Created in 1952 by the distinguished Guinean choreographer Keita Fodeba, Les Ballets Africains was to become, after the country gained its independence in 1958, the national ensemble of the Republic of Guinea. Since that time and up until the present day, they have been recognized and encouraged in their role of "roving ambassadors," carrying with them on their travels the pride and aspirations of their people. The company's ultimate mission is to foster a greater understanding of Africa with a view to creating favorable conditions for a healthy and fruitful cooperation between Africa and the rest of the world.

Each of the ensemble's productions tours internationally for up to two years, presenting literally hundreds of performances across the globe. Since the company's inception in 1952, it has always been its artistic policy to produce works that deal with universal issues within the context of their cultural perspective. For example, in recent years, the company's productions have focused on faithfulness and trust, the protection of the environment and the importance of a good education for the youth of today confronted with the responsibilities of tomorrow.

Under the skilled guidance of Artistic Director Italo Zambo, ably assisted by Choreographer Hamidou Bangoura, the 35-member company once again presents its inimitable blend of traditional dance, music and storytelling in a joyous celebration, thrilling audiences everywhere they go.

The company consists of people from each of the principal groups to be found in Guinea with all of the problems of differing language and customs that this implies. Each member of the company is obliged to

take up the tremendous challenge of becoming proficient, not only in their own language and cultural traditions, but in that of many other tribes. Les Ballets Africains, in its role as the national dance company of its country, has mastered the art of presenting an accurate portrayal of many of these different cultural forms in a performance that is entirely satisfactory to and respectful of the peoples concerned.



# THE PERFORMANCE

For the school matinee at Mondavi Center, Les Ballets Africains will perform excerpts from their current production, *The 50 Years Golden 'Jubilee' Show*. The following program notes describe the excerpts that your students may see.

## **The Culture of Africa: History and Humanity As Art**

### ***Ferecoba* (Dance of Hospitality)**

In one village of Africa, it is the Market Day. The Market is a place of rejoicing and celebration even under the colonial regime whose corrupt administration has once again exploited Africa both economically and culturally. The curtain opens as the villagers are getting ready to receive their chief. The chief arrives at the celebration in the company of the Colonial Governor. The marketplace transforms into a carnival of color as a variety of African textiles and art are displayed by elegant women. This authentic scene is filled with life and energy and attracts an audience, seduced by the magical dance of the *Ferecoba* from the Manding. The performance is magnificent and the Colonial Governor notices a beautiful young girl named Sona. The Governor cannot remove his eyes from Sona.

### **Tragedy Of A Bad Decision**

As the chief and his party disperse, the Governor and two African security guards remain on stage, intimidating the villagers with their power. This ends the celebration. The Governor spots Sona and approaches her. He reaches to kiss her hand but Sona refuses and runs to the arms of her fiancé, Balake, begging for help. Balake is a strong young fisherman but since he is dealing with the powerful white governor, he is fearful. The Governor slaps a stunned Balake in the face and orders his guards to take Balake to prison. The villagers are angered by this action and Sona falls to the floor and crawls away crying. The villagers come together to assist Sona in dealing with the anger and hatred generated by yet another situation affecting the dignity and liberty of the African. The Governor decides to give the order to kill Balake at midnight and sends a messenger to the village to announce the death. Sona decides to leave the village and swallow poison so she can accompany her lover to his death.

### **Goroboro: The Revolution**

*Goroboro* is the African “call for revolution,” so great agitation overtakes the scene. As the fight progresses, the rhythm intensifies and transforms into the *Doundounba*, reconstructed here with new choreography. The talented young men, full of vitality, exhibit the glorious dance of the strong men of their Manding ancestry. This intense sequence showcases the beauty of their chests and skin which reflects the power of the sun, considered a source of liberation. The young girls then sing and dance the splendid *Tutu-Diara*, supported by the *balafones*, flute, and *bolons* and the majestic sound of the *kora*, which is the instrument played during the magical night of the *Mansas* (kings and queens) of Africa.

### **The Symphony Of The Grand Mask**

The traditional African mask is a symbol of divinity. The masks represent the four principal cultural regions of Guinea: *Nyamba* of the Coastal Region, *Cimier Koniagui* of the Lower Region, the *Koncoba Dyeli* of the Higher Region and the *Nyamou* of the Forest Region. The masks symbolize approval and support for the young men being initiated into adulthood. Considered apprentices, the young men must learn their role in the traditions and in society, symbolized by this rite of passage. The *bote*’ is a small *tambour* (drum) that is played during these grand festivities and announces the departure of the initiated. A powerful fresh rhythm of *sengbe* (double drum) shows homage to the Grand Mask Protector as he receives offerings from the families of the young apprentices.

### **Cultural Action Becomes A Factor of Social and Economic Ammunition Against Poverty**

#### **Community Action**

The sound of *bote*’ fills the atmosphere. The villagers anticipate the annual ceremony *Seno Semo*, announcing the beginning of the planting season. The chief of the field arrives, followed by the *Griot* (storyteller) and his companions, who will hoe and plant the field with assistance from the entire community. Since everyone benefits from a good harvest, everyone should help with the labor. This is a model for the entire fabric of society. The young men join together to work, supported by the drumming, singing, and dancing of the women. The entire community sustains them with food and drink supplied by the elders and cooked by the young women.

### **A Challenge for A Common Survival**

The sudden arrival in the village of young females from the city, wearing beautiful modern clothes, brings the festivities to an abrupt halt. The men are so excited about the females from the city, they forget about the food given to them by the village women. As a result, the angry, shocked village females take back the food they prepared for the laborers. The two groups of females then vie for the attention of the young men. The competition continues with joy and jealousy. *Sene Semo* turns into an opportunity to bring the young folks from the city together with their brothers and sisters from the village so that all may prosper. When their labor is finished, they once again begin the rhythm, dance, and acrobatics of celebration, indicating their common fight against poverty and hunger.

### **Cathedral of Rhythms: Optimism And Perseverance**

The variety of costumes for the finale represents the rich diversity of cultures indigenous to the continent of Africa. In one majestic poly-rhythmic concert of drums, the young females escalate the rhythm to the highest level of percussion, representing the courageous engagement of Guinea in its fight against poverty and injustice for all.

Credits for Program: Written by **Dr. Saidou Dioubate**, National Director of Culture

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# **AFRICAN MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**

## **BALAPHONE**

With its series of seventeen to twenty-one rectangular small wood blocks, the Balaphone is the precursor of the modern xylophone, and, like a xylophone, it is played by being struck with two rubbers-tipped sticks. The blocks are held in place by leather thongs. Underneath each block, serving as a resonator, is a suspended calabash gourd, whose size is determined by the required pitch. The Balaphone is one of the most popular instruments of Guinea and is often used to accompany traditional dances throughout the whole country.

## **DJEMBE**

This drum is carved from a solid block of red tropical wood with a head of goatskin, which is attached and tightened by an intricate system of laced cord. The Djembe is one of Africa's most-used percussion instruments and plays a vital role on ceremonial and festive occasions. It knows a great variety of rhythms and has a wide range of sonorities.

## **DOUNDOUN**

This drum used to be carved from wood, but nowadays consists of metal containers, covered on both sides by animal skin. This instrument is played while standing.

## **KENKENI**

Like the Doundoun, this drum is a lead instrument which has a piece of metal attached to it. This player holds a small stick in one hand and a small bell in the other. In this way he or she makes two different rhythms and sounds.

## **KRIN**

The Krin is made from one piece of hollowed wood with small openings. The player uses two wooden sticks to make a resonant sound, varied by the point of contact. This instrument is used to transmit messages through the forest, as well as to play sacred melodies.

## **KORA**

A hollow calabash gourd and the skin of a sheep, goat or gazelle are used to form the Kora-drum.

Attached to the calabash is a rounded piece of wood from which twenty-one strings are suspended across a bridge positioned on the skin resonator.

## **LATERAL FLUTE**

The Flute is generally made from a length of bamboo varying from forty to sixty centimeters and pieced with three or four holes. The Flute has an extremely wide musical range and possesses a versatile tonality applicable to the majority of musical ensembles in Guinea. One of the world's oldest musical instruments and traditionally the instruments of shepherds, the flute is widely appreciated in Guinea for its plaintive and melodic sound.

## **RATTLE**

A small gourd containing pebbles, which is attached to the end of a stick. When shaken, it produces a sharp clicking sound, rather like maracas, although popularly referred to in Guinea as "castanets." The small gourd is normally decorated with beads and palm leaves.

## THE REPUBLIC OF GUINEA

The Republic of Guinea is located on the west coast of Africa, on the Atlantic Ocean. The country goes far inland and is bordered by Guinea Bisseau, Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone. The country is about the size of the state of Oregon and is divided into four natural regions: The Highlands, The Coastal Region, The Forest Region and Foutah Djellon. These areas constitute some of the most fantastic and varied scenery in West Africa, ranging from humid coastal plains and swamps to the fertile and forested hills and plateaus of the interior. Each of these areas is in turn inhabited by a great diversity of peoples, each possessing their own distinct culture, language, perceptions and cultural practices.

Guinea has a population of over nine million people, most of whom are Muslim. The country contains a number of different ethnic groups, the three principal ones being the Sousou from the coast and the Mandinke and Fulani in the north and central regions. The main languages in the country are those of those three groups, although French is the official national language.

Guinea, a French colony until 1958, was for many years one of Africa's most reclusive countries. Until 1984, it was very difficult to obtain visas to enter the country. Guinea was virtually closed to tourists and journalists were not encouraged. The country has only recently begun to open up to the outside world and encourage visitors. The reasons for Guinea's isolation stem from the late President Sekou Toure's strong stand against French colonialism. Preferring total independence for the country, President Toure rejected the offer of membership in the French Commonwealth, delivering the now famous proclamation, "We would rather have poverty in liberty than riches in slavery."

The reaction of the French government was swift and harsh, as French forces removed or destroyed virtually everything the colonial government had constructed or brought into the country. The cost of this retaliation was heavy, but Guinea and her strong-spirited people survived that difficult time. Under the present leadership of President Lansana Conté, Guinea's situation has greatly improved and relations with the outside world have been normalized.

# FAST FACTS ABOUT THE REBULIC OF GUINEA

Population: 9.73 million people

Area: 245,860 square kilometers (slightly larger than Britain)

Capital: Conakry

Type of Government: Republic

Independence: 1958 (from France)

Head of State: President General Lansana Conté

Languages: French, Malinké, Fulah, Susu

Religions: Muslim (75%), Christian (1%), indigenous beliefs (24%)

Exports: Bauxite, aluminum, diamonds, gold, coffee, fish, agricultural products

Climate: Generally hot and humid; Rainy season (June – November), dry season (December – May)

## MAP OF GUINEA



map taken from <http://www.lonelyplanet.com>

## **THINK ABOUT IT!**

Talking with your teacher, friends, and family about a performance after attending the theater is part of the experience. When you share what you saw and felt, you learn more about the performance. You can now compare ideas and ask questions and find out how to learn even more. Here are some questions to think about:

- 1) How would you describe traditional West African dancing and music to a friend?
- 2) What feelings did you have while you watched the dancing?
- 3) What did you like best about the performance and why? Was the program different from what you expected? How?
- 4) Write a poem capturing your impressions of the performance: what you saw (colors, dance movements, instruments); what you heard (for instance, find words to describe the function of the drums and rattles); and the kinds of feelings and thoughts that you had during the time of the performance.

# ATTENDING THE THEATER

*What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:*

- Enter the auditorium quietly and take seats immediately (*note that all matinees now have reserved seating*);
- Show courtesy to the artist and other guests at all times;
- Demonstrate appreciation for the artist's work by applauding at the appropriate times;
- Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements;
- Please eat lunch before or after the performance to avoid disruption;
- Relate any information acquired from the pre-matinee discussion to the new information gained from the matinee;
- Please do not use flash photography.

*What you can expect of your experience in a performing arts theater:*

A theater is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theaters are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, rustling of papers, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these upset everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best work. The audience shows respect for the performers by watching attentively. Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. While the audience at a dance performance will sit quietly, other types of performance invite audience participation.