

Dehkontee Artists Theatre Wows the Philadelphia Crowd at the Ibrahim Theatre on July 28th!



King Konkai (Andre Minkins) laments the death of his daughter Princess Mymah.

Theatre goers were astounded to watch a classical traditional African production entitled “Love for Mymah” at The Ibrahim Theater in Philadelphia on Saturday, July 28th. The event was in celebration of the 41st Anniversary of the founding of Dehkontee Artists Theatre at the University of Liberia in 1977. The author and director of the play, Dr. Joe Gbaba, and the lead actor, Andre Minkins, both earned their MFA in Directing and Acting from the prestigious School of Theatre at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNC-G). Andre Minkins played the lead role as King Konkai of Jundoo and father of Princess Mymah, while Dr. Gbaba acted in dual roles: as Momoh, one of the elders of the village of Jundoo; and, as Sartiah, confidant of the Kru Prince Jebro of Seklaykpor.



Two UNC-G Alums, Dr. Joe Gbaba (Left) and Andre Minkins rocking the Ibrahim Theatre stage during DATI's 41st Gala in Philadelphia.

Both theatre icons met at UNC-G more than thirty-five years ago when Gbaba was a student UNC-Greensboro where he also established another branch of Dehkontee Artists Theatre. Andre Minkins and Keith Hill were two of Dr. Gbaba's African American early recruits

at UNC-Greensboro. Both were undergrad students. Keith was a music major while Andre majored in Mass Communications. However, they were thrilled to connect with their African roots, and it was their first time acting on a mainstage when they played lead roles in Gbaba's Master thesis production of his "Chains of Apartheid" as Vukani (Andre) and Themba (Keith) in the UNC-Greensboro Aycock Auditorium.

Keith graduated from the UNC-G School of Music and taught in the Charlotte School District for a couple of decades before he retired recently. Based on his exciting experience and motivation he received from his mentor, Andre later pursued his MFA in Directing and Acting, and currently is an Assistant Professor at Winston-Salem State University. So, it was a kind of reunion for the UNC-G Spartans after more than three decades off stage! When asked how he felt about their reunion after more than thirty-five years later, Keith Hill said: "It is awesome to see greatness at work, Prince Gbaba"!



Other members of the cast included Princess Ariminta Gbaba (Miatta, Queen of Jundoo), Prince Julian Gbaba (Prince Jebro of Kruland), Saigay Sheriff (Princess Mymah of Jundoo), Siane Jackson (Musu, confidante of Princess Mymah), Kormassah Bobo (Ma Jebbeh), Jacques Gbaba (Tweh), Jaeden Gbaba (Sarwon), Zeze Konie (Guard and Sengbe), Journee Gbaba, Jade Gbaba, and McKenzy Gbaba as children in the village of Jundoo, and Lars Tomo McCritty served as Stage Manager. Mrs. Felicia Gaye-Wright handled the box office and received guests at the door during the program.

The memorable 41st Gala of Dehkontee Artists Theatre began at 8:06 p.m. It consisted of two unique ceremonies: a traditional Liberian Jewish ritual ceremony devoted to peace and reconciliation in Liberia and a full-length mainstage production of "Love for Mymah", an African romance drama depicting strong love bond between two Liberian royals.

The traditional Liberian/African Jewish ceremony was performed to commemorate the death of over two hundred and fifty thousand Liberians and foreign nationals that were killed during the Liberian Civil War. The ritual ceremony started with a procession during which the thespians marched from back stage and gathered at a make-shift altar that was set in the center of the floor between the orchestra and the stage. Kola nuts, pepper and salt were offered as sacred

meal to promote peace and reconciliation among all Liberians. The audience was invited to participate in the sharing of kola nuts and pepper as a symbol that they would be advocates of peace and reconciliation in Liberia.



Many Liberians who supported the war and now support rebel activities in Liberia shied away from the event. However, there was a sizable crowd consisting of some patriotic Liberians including the President of the Alumni Association of the University of Liberia, Melvin Datu Howard and one of DATI's staunch patrons, Ansumana Sirleaf, some former students of Professor Gbaba, Irene Roberts Gulley and Nenie Peabody, graced the occasion. DATI's Hall of Famer Timothy Gardiner, Dr. Toni Shapiro-Phim, Director of the Philadelphia Folklore Project, Beth Feldman Brandt, Executive Director of the Stockton Rush Bartol Foundation, and Keith Hill, a UNC-G Alum, and a cross-section of international citizens were present in the hall to participate in this auspicious gala. Thereafter, the stage was set for the mind-blowing theatrical production that wowed the Philadelphia crowd from start to finish!



“Love for Mymah” is a fictional story about a Kru Prince named Jebro played by Prince Julian Gbaba and Vai Princess Mymah of Jundoo, co-starred by first-time actress Saigay Sheriff. Prince Julian Gbaba is the oldest of Dr. Gbaba’s five children. He began his acting career as

member of his dad's Dehkontee Artists Children's Peace Theatre when he was eleven years old. Saigay is the daughter of Liberia's leading traditional dance artist, Madam Kormassa Bobo, who is also daughter of one of Liberia's renowned magician named Kolubah Bobo of Malema, Loffa County, in Northern Liberia. Interestingly, Saigay was born in the United States of America and she has never visited Liberia before. However, as a child her mother Kormassa taught her how to dance and perform traditional Liberian dance steps and songs. Also, this is Saigay's first experience on stage, but she learned so fast that you would think she has been acting for decades.



In the beginning of the play Princess Mymah and her entourage enter the stage singing and dancing to a melodious Vai song as they head to the shores of Lake Piso, commonly known as "Fisherman's Lake". It is the largest lake and tourist attraction located in Southwestern Liberia. Princess Mymah comes to the waterfront to take her annual sacrificial bath, but Fyee the mysterious and oldest alligator in the world, is also expected to make its seventh-year appearance. So, it is not a good idea to be near the lake when Fyee is expected to appear at any moment. Over the centuries, Fyee preyed on the villagers of Jundoo whenever he appeared sept annually. Princess Mymah was advised not to go to the waterfront on this day but she insisted she would lose her charm if she did not.

While at the waterfront, Mymah and her maids discuss about womanhood, village life, and their concepts about marriage, motherhood, a peaceful society and how to live happy and self-fulfilled lives. Their conversation educates the audience about traditional African village life and this kept the sizable audience in the hall silent as they listened attentively to the actors' conversation. Suddenly, Fyee appears, there are loud drum beats as the fiend advances on shore and begins to devour some of the guards that protected the princess. Finally, Fyee captures Princess Mymah, and takes her beneath Lake Piso, as Musu and Ma Jebbeh and one of the wounded guards wail. In addition, they are afraid to inform King Konkai that Fyee captured the king's only daughter, for fear they may lose their lives!

In the play, Prince Jebro is in search of a beautiful and devoted wife when he hears Princess Mymah has been captured. As a brave Klao warrior from Southeastern Liberia, he sacrifices his life to challenge and defeat Fyee the alligator to redeem Princess Mymah from the

most feared fiend in the world. Through the spirits of his forefathers and the intervention of Younsuah (God) Prince Jebro defeats Fyee and rescues the love of his life. However, no sooner had he saved Princess Mymah from death than Musu (Siane Jackson), Princess Mymah's confidante, begins to envy the two royals. Musu is madly in love with Prince Jebro but he has no time for her. Consequently, Musu connives with Ma, Jebbeh, the chief suah-mon (witch) of Jundoo, to bewitch Princess Mymah. Hence, the plot of the story reverses as Mymah's life is endangered for the second time!



Saigay and Kormassa (daughter and mother) on stage in "Love for Mymah".

Here, African superstitious beliefs are prominently featured, thus educating the audience on some African cultural beliefs, norms, and mores that are prevalent in African folklores. Again, the audience in the hall became even more fascinated and one could hear a pin drop as Ma Jebbeh manipulated Musu to carry out evil deeds against the Princess. Eventually, their plot Princess Mymah's death. Once again, the spectators are held in suspense when Princess Mymah appears to her lover, Prince Jebro, as a ghost to inform Prince Jebro what he must do to hastily bring her back to life because Prince Jebro does not have enough time in his favor before Princess Mymah's burial. He must immediately go to consult with the Oracle at Garwoulah who has the power to bring Princess Mymah back to life.



Throughout the duration of the play, the audience fidgeted in their seats because of the unpredictability of the characters and the complex plot of the storyline. Hence, at certain intervals there was deafening silence in the hall as spectators underwent emotional catharsis from the back-and-forth trend and reversal of the plot. However, good prevails over evil at the end of the play. The antagonists, Musu and the wicked old witch Ma Jebbeh, suffocate to death by the spirits of their ancestors. Princess Mymah is revived from death, and she gets the blessings of her father to marry Prince Jebro. Consequently, the actors received a warm applause from the audience for their terrific performance! Below, the statement of one of the distinguished guests that attended the production sums up the event of the 41st Gala of Dehkontee Artists Theatre, Inc. (DATI):

“Hi, Dr. Gbaba,

“It was wonderful to have the opportunity to see the performance on Saturday. Clearly you and the cast put so much work into the performance. The cast members for whom it was their first time onstage did a terrific job and I look forward to seeing the next phase as you reach and train more community members to perform. Please invite us out to a rehearsal once you bring your group together...”

Beth

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