



**STEP AFRIKA!:**  
***DRUMFOLK***

Thursday-Friday, February 6-7, 2020, at 7:30pm  
Colwell Playhouse

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# PROGRAM

## STEP AFRIKA! DRUMFOLK

### CAST

Kofi Agyei  
Jeeda Barrington  
Jamaal Collier  
Dionne Eleby  
Matthew Evans

Conrad Kelly  
Misha Michel  
Vincent Montgomery  
Joe Murchison  
Ronique Murray

Dustin Praylow  
Anesia Sandifer  
Brittney Smith  
Jordan Spry  
Nicolas Stewart

### CREATIVE AND PRODUCTION TEAM

C. Brian Williams, Founder & Executive Director, Step Afrika!  
Jakari Sherman, Director, *Drumfolk*  
Mfoniso Akpan, Artistic Director, Step Afrika!  
Simone Baskerville, M. A., Production Manager & Touring Stage Manager  
Kenaan M. Quander, Costume Designer  
Erik Teague, Mask Designer  
Mary Rathell, Wardrobe Assistant  
Marianne Meadows, Lighting Designer  
Yannick Godts, Lighting Supervisor  
Steven M. Allen, Composer  
Kevin Alexander, Sound Designer  
Jeremiah L. Davison, Sound Engineer

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*Drumfolk is made possible by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.*

*Production Residency funded by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project, with funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.*

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*Step Afrika! appears by arrangement with:  
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“They took the drums away...but they could not stop the beat.” -Dr. David Pleasant

## **DRUMFOLK20**

Choreography by David Pleasant, Jakari Sherman, Jeeda Barrington, Mfoniso Akpan

When Africans lost the right to use their drums, the drum found its way into the body of the people. Acclaimed Folk Artist Bessie Jones called them the “Drumfolk:” a people who created rhythm with their bodies, giving rise to new American movement practices like ring shout, tap, hambone, and stepping.

## **STONO**

Choreography by Ronnique Murray, Jakari Sherman, Jordan Spry, Mfoniso Akpan, and Júlio Leitão

The Stono Rebellion, an uprising initiated by 20 enslaved Africans, is one of many large-scale confrontations where tyrannized communities challenged their persecutors. The Rebellion began near the Edisto River in South Carolina on September 9, 1739. About 20 Africans raided a store near Wallace Creek, a branch of the Stono River. Seizing guns and other weapons, the rebels headed south towards a promised freedom in Spanish Florida, waving flags, beating drums, and shouting “Liberty!”

As they marched, many colonists were killed, and the rebellion numbers grew from 20 to approximately 100. Once the rebels reached the Edisto River, even more colonists descended upon them and the revolt was defeated. After Stono, South Carolina authorities moved to greatly restrict the lives and culture of Africans in the colonies, leading to the Negro Act of 1740.

*20-minute intermission*

## **UN/AFRAID**

Choreography by Jakari Sherman with contributions from Jeeda Barrington, Conrad Kelly, and Dustin Praylow.

The Negro Act of 1740 prohibited enslaved African people from growing their own food, learning to read, moving freely, assembling in groups, or earning money. Africans also lost the right to use and play their drums.

This dance responds to this historically impactful code of law through the lens of 21st-century American culture. While the drum was physically taken away hundreds of years ago, art forms like beatboxing, hip hop, and stepping demonstrate how the instrument retained a significant space in the lives of African-Americans.

**THANK YOU FOR SPONSORING THIS PERFORMANCE**

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The presentation of Step Afrika: *Drumfolk* was made possible by the New England Foundation for the Arts' National Dance Project with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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## FOUNDER'S NOTE

On the heels of Step Afrika!'s critically acclaimed work, *The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence*, I am extremely excited to introduce *Drumfolk*, the second work by Step Afrika! that chronicles and celebrates the African-American experience in America. Grounded in extensive research and over 25 years of percussive practice, *Drumfolk* reveals hidden historical events that greatly impacted American life, and the work explores the drum as an instrument of community, resilience, and determination.

The Stono Rebellion of 1739, a revolt initiated by 20 enslaved Africans in the then-British colony of South Carolina, is one of the largest rebellions organized by Africans in the "New World." Africans—20 Angolans in fact—used their drums as a call for action, leading a fight for freedom that would spark fear throughout the colonies.

The subsequent Negro Act of 1740, a legislative response to the rebellion, singled out the drum as an illegal weapon and greatly restricted Africans' rights to read; to gather in groups; to wear clothing "above their stature;" and to use their drums.

Who were these 20 Angolans? Are they the first examples of American activism, speaking out against tyranny and oppression? Why haven't we learned more about their fight against injustice years before American colonists revolted against Imperialist England at the Boston Tea Party?

*Drumfolk* is Step Afrika!'s intention to reclaim the history of these unsung American activists who so bravely fought for freedom. There is still so much of American history to explore and uncover . . . and we welcome you on this journey.

Thank you so much for coming!

C. Brian Williams  
December 2019

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# PROFILES

Founded in 1994 by C. Brian Williams, **STEP AFRIKA!** is the world's first professional company dedicated to the tradition of stepping—a polyrhythmic, percussive dance form that uses the body as an instrument. Step Afrika! promotes stepping as a contemporary dance genre through critically acclaimed performances and arts education programs. Creatively engaging audiences in this nascent art form, the Company creates new, full-length productions that expand on stepping's unique American history.

With 14 full-time dancers and an administrative team of six, Step Afrika! is one of the top 10 African American dance companies in the world. The company reaches thousands each year through a 50-city tour of American colleges and theatres and performs globally as an official United States Cultural Ambassador. New works, such as *The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence* and *Drumfolk*, tour to major US cities. Step Afrika! is featured at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History & Culture with the world's first interactive stepping exhibit.

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## THE COMPANY

**KOFI AGYEI** began drumming at the age of six, starting out with Ghanaian traditional drums. At 13 years old, he was introduced to the djembe, and traditional styles of drumming from Guinea. His mentors include Nana Yao Opare Dinizulu I, and Agyei has performed with the Dinizulu Drummers & Dancers, the Asase Yaa Dance Company, Devore Dance School, and many other ensembles. Agyei has also appeared at the North Charleston Arts Festival, Dance Africa DC, and off-Broadway with Step Afrika!'s critically acclaimed production of *The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence*.

**JEEDA BARRINGTON** is a native of Glenarden, Maryland, and graduate of Bowie State University, earning his bachelor's in music technology and a master's degree in human resources. A member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc, Barrington has served as the choreographer for various traveling step and "partywalk" teams. He continues his love for rhythms through disc jockeying at events across the United States.

**JAMAAL COLLIER** (aka "Black Root") is a full-time artist. His performance art is channeled through vocal percussion (beatboxing), theatre, rapping, spoken word, and didgeridoo playing. Collier is also a master teaching artist, and has performed high quality residencies, assemblies, and workshops in over 150 schools across the Mid-Atlantic and internationally. Collier is committed to engaging actively in all aspects of life, using art as the vehicle to further us all along with him.

**DIONNE ELEBY** is a graduate of Elon University where she majored in musical theatre and minored in African-American studies and business administration. A native of Atlanta, Georgia, Eleby has performed with the African American Dance Ensemble, ArtPark Regional Theatre, and Rotterdam's Lef in Holland. She is a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

**MATTHEW EVANS** was born in Newark, New Jersey, but raised in Clinton, North Carolina. He attended Elizabeth City State University where he pursued a degree in music with a concentration in vocal performance and a minor in mass communications. In college, Evans became a member of the Lambda Gamma chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated. He took on the position of hop master for his chapter and lead them to a number of victories in step competitions throughout the East Coast.

**CONRAD R. KELLY II** is a native of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where he attended Dillard High School of the Visual and Performing Arts. While attending Florida A & M University, he became a member of the Marching 100 and the Strikers. After college, Kelly became a soloist for The Rolle Project in Las Vegas, Nevada, as well as a dance instructor with Studio 305, where he regularly taught classes in hip-hop, contemporary, and jazz dance. Kelly plans to use his performing and teaching experiences to open a mentoring program for young male dancers.

**MISHA MICHEL** is a native of Miami, Florida. She holds a BFA in dance from Florida State University and is a member of the Kappa Epsilon Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Michel trained under the direction of Maribel Fruitstone and Traci Young-Byron as a member of the Young Contemporary Dance Theatre (YCDT). As the YCDT SUPAStarz captain, Michel was featured on two Lifetime series, *Step It Up* and *Bring It!*. This is Misha's first season with Step Afrika!

**VINCENT MONTGOMERY, JR.** is an actor and entertainer hailing from Orlando, Florida. While attending Florida A & M University, he was an active member in the world-renowned Marching 100 Band, Attack Dance Crew, and Rampage Step Team. Montgomery's performance highlights include *Dreamgirls*, *Shuffle Along*, *Why Mosquitoes Buzz*, and *Once on This Island!* Montgomery has recurring roles on web-based projects such as *The Undergrad Chronicles* and *College Boyfriends*. He is a proud member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and continues to advocate for holistic living as well as men's mental health awareness.

**JOE MURCHISON** comes to Step Afrika! from Lawton, Oklahoma. He has trained at the Dallas Black Dance Academy, the official school of the Dallas Black Dance Theatre. Murchison was a scholarship recipient at the Debbie Allen Hip Hop Intensive led by Hip Hop great, Dave Scott. Murchison began stepping in junior high school, but it was not until he attended the University of Central Oklahoma, where he received a Bachelor of Science in kinesiology, that he bloomed as a performing artist. As president and step master of the Zeta Sigma chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Murchison led his chapter to numerous step show competitions, earning both district and regional awards.

**RONNIQUE MURRAY** is a native of Washington, DC. She received a BFA in dance and choreography from Virginia Commonwealth University and began her professional teaching career as dance educator at Fairmont High School in Fairmont, North Carolina, and Columbia Heights Education Center in Washington, DC. In 2010, Murray was featured in a reconstruction of Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's work, *Shelter*, in a featured PBS documentary about The Urban Bush Women. She is extremely proud to be a member of the Epsilon Zeta Chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.

**DUSTIN PRAYLOW** is a South Carolina native. He began his dance training at Dancin' On Main Studios in Lake City, South Carolina, under the instruction of Karl Singletary and direction of Paige Strickland. Praylow furthered his training in modern, contemporary, and ballet at the University of South Carolina where he received his BS in biology with a minor in dance. Praylow began his professional dance career in 2016 with Norwegian Creative Studios, performing in the Broadway show *After Midnight* on the Pride of America, RSSC Mariner, and the Norwegian Escape. This is Praylow's first season with Step Afrika!

**ANESIA SANDIFER** is a native of Augusta, Georgia. She attended the University of Georgia where she received a BBA in finance and a minor in dance. She also became a member of the Zeta Psi chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc, where she served as step master. Sandifer was a full scholarship recipient at the 2015 Debbie Allen Summer Intensive in Los Angeles, California. She has performed on ESPN for the Special Olympics 2015 World Games as a dancer for O.A.R. and Siedah Garrett.

**BRITTNY SMITH** is a native of Houston, Texas, a two-time graduate of Texas Southern University and a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. Beginning her professional career at age seven, she has been featured in national commercials (Shell, Kraft, Hi-C) and signed her first major label recording contract by age 16. In addition, Smith has been a Southern University Dancing Doll and Houston Rockets Power Dancer, was featured in the film *Stomp The Yard 2*, and has performed on stage alongside artists such as Miguel, Floetry, and Solange. Her most recent credits include *The Color Purple* and the international tour of *Dreamgirls*.

**JORDAN SPRY** is from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and joined Step Afrika! in 2012. He was first introduced to stepping in high school when he joined the Progressive African American Cultural Society. Spry attended Howard University and graduated with a BBA in marketing. While at Howard, he stepped with Drew Hall Step Team. Spry served as a head coach for Drew, where he choreographed many first-place winning pieces for the HU Homecoming Step Show. Spry is also a freelance photographer, capturing moments from Step Afrika!'s tours around the world and personal work at home in the DC area, as well as an aspiring model.

**NICOLAS STEWART** is a native of Buffalo, New York, who has been stepping competitively for 17 years. He is a graduate of Hobart and William Smith Colleges with a BA in architecture and recently earned an MFA in acting at the University of South Carolina. Stewart's step experience as a captain and coach has led him to want to utilize the performing arts as a way of engaging and inspiring young artists around the world. He is extremely blessed to be an artist for Step Afrika!



## THE CREATIVE TEAM

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**JAKARI SHERMAN** is a passionate choreographer, ethnochoreologist, and performer whose experience extends over 20 years. Rooted in the African American tradition of stepping, his work pushes the boundaries of percussive dance using technology, storytelling, and diverse musical scores. Sherman served as Step Afrika!'s Artistic Director for seven years. He directed *The Migration: Reflections of Jacob Lawrence*, *Green is the New Black*, and *Symphony in Step*, among others. He is the Founder of Ordered Steps, a nonprofit that teaches stepping as a tool for youth outreach. Sherman received an MA in ethnochoreology from the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance and is undertaking groundbreaking ethnographic work related to structural analysis, teaching methodologies, and historical archiving of stepping in the United States. Sherman has lectured on stepping throughout the world, including Greece, Kazakhstan, the United Kingdom, and Belgium.

**MFONISO AKPAN** has trained extensively in tap, ballet, jazz, modern, African dance, and step. While attending the State University of New York at Stony Brook, she majored in biochemistry and cultivated her stepping skills as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. Akpan began her training at the Bernice Johnson Cultural Arts Center and has performed at Carnegie Hall, Avery Fisher Hall, the Apollo Theater, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and Lincoln Center. Akpan toured with the off-Broadway show *Hoofin' 2 Hittin'*, where she was a featured stepper and dancer.

**C. BRIAN WILLIAMS** is the Founder and Executive Director of Step Afrika! He is a native of Houston, Texas, and graduate of Howard University. He first learned to step as a member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.-Beta Chapter in the spring of 1989. While living in Southern Africa, he began to research the percussive dance tradition of stepping, exploring the many sides of this exciting, yet under-recognized American art form, and founded Step Afrika! in 1994. Williams has performed, lectured, and taught in Europe, Central and South America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and throughout the United States. He is the founder of the monumental Step Afrika! International Cultural Festival in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Through Williams' leadership, stepping has evolved into one of America's newest cultural exports and inspired the designation of Step Afrika! as Washington, DC's official Cultural Ambassador. Williams has been cited as a "civic/community visionary" by *NV Magazine*, a "nation builder" by the National Black Caucus of State Legislators, and a "minority business leader" by the *Washington Business Journal*. He is the recipient of numerous Artist Fellowships; the Distinguished Arts Award from the Coalition for African-Americans in the Performing Arts; and the Pola Nirenska Award for Contemporary Achievement in Dance. He is also featured in *Soulstepping*, the first book to document the history of stepping. Williams earned the 2008 Mayor's Art Award for Innovation in the Arts and has led the company to multiple Metro DC Dance Awards for Outstanding New Work, Excellence in Stage Design/Multimedia, and Outstanding Group Performance. In 2018, Williams received the Mayor's Arts Award for Visionary Leadership from the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.