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Beat goes on for Jeh Kulu

Sally Pollak

By Sally Pollak

Awa Drame performed a mini dance the other day at Muddy Waters.

Mini because she was slinking and bopping between a bench and a couple of tables. Mini because she did only a short section of a piece she'll perform tonight. Mini because she was dancing solo, and she's part of an ensemble. And mini because she's in kindergarten.

Awa represents the second generation of dancers in Jeh Kulu Dance and Drum Theater, a Burlington-based ensemble that performs dances with roots and rhythms from West Africa. She belongs to the first generation to grow up learning these dances from a Guinean dance master, Sidiki Sylla.

At Muddy Water's, she kept her eye on her teacher, who tapped out rhythms on the table.

"Sidiki is a true elder in this form," said Awa's mother, Jamaica White, 33, of Burlington. "He's a cultural historian."

Jeh Kulu, which means community in the Bambara language in Mali, formed in Burlington in the early 1990s. After members of the company took a trip to Guinea and Senegal to study with African artists, they decided to invite their African teachers to Burlington, to lead the company, to continue their studies, to teach others.

Sylla, now 45, is a former member of Guinea's national ballet company. He has performed extensively throughout the world. He is one of three Africans who relocated to Burlington in 1998 to be part of Jeh Kulu. Two of the artists, Sylla and drummer Ismael Bangoura, are still with Jeh Kulu.

"The people who work with me in Jeh Kulu have so much love for African dancing," Sylla said. He's gratified by his decision to move here to be one of a few African dancers in a troupe that performs traditional dances of West Africa -- dances performed at Guinean rituals such as weddings, births and school graduations.

"That's my country; that's my house, what I know," he said of Guinea, "but you got to stand up, stay on your feet and do something good for your life. Why I come here? Because I'm a dancer, and I love this country, too."

Jeh Kulu has about 16 core members, 14 of whom will perform tonight at Contois Auditorium in Burlington. The vast majority of the group are dancers; a handful play drums. It's a high-energy, physical, aerobic dance form with footwork that can be technically challenging, said member Zyck Baggett, 37, of Essex. She's been with the company 11 years and is one of the dancers who traveled to Africa to study.

"It's poly-rhythmic, with different rhythms fitting together like a piece of a puzzle," she explained. "A huge part of learning the dance is understanding the music and the rhythms. You move inside the rhythm, that as a Westerner you would've never heard of or thought of till someone shows you."

By adding African dancers and drummers to the troupe, a certain level of authenticity and artistic integrity was gained, Baggett and White said. The dancers also have lifelong practitioners of the art to learn and draw inspiration from.

"When Sidiki and Ismael came, it really humbled me a lot," White said. "We had to re-learn things, and really shape our group around respect for the culture it comes from."

Sylla has nine sisters, the only brother in a family of 10 siblings. His mother is Senegalese; his late father was a chauffeur. His older sister, Fatou, was an extremely talented dancer, he said. When he was a kid, he used to hide from his mother and follow his sister to watch her dance. He started dancing at age 7.

"In Africa, you dance all day," he said. "You eat, go to bed. Then dance all day."

At 45, Sylla perhaps can't dance all day. But he says the spirit that he felt run through him, guiding him to a dancing gig in Burlington, is still strong.

"The first time I see these guys dance, I feel like working for these people," he said. "They're gonna be better, better, better. I never see white people dance African dance like Jeh Kulu. That gives you energy. You're gonna do more, more, more."

At least for a while.

"I'm not going to be tired right now," he said, when asked about dancing into middle age. "Another 10 years, I'm going to take it down."

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BOX: IF YOU GO

WHAT: Jeh Kulu Dance and Druth Theater

WHEN: 8 tonight

WHERE: Contois Auditorium, Burlington

TICKETS: \$12 in advance; \$14 at door; \$6 ages 3-10; 863-5966, www.flynntix.org

MORE: African dance party, 10 tonight at Nectar's

INFORMATION: www.jehku-lu.org

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