

## Batoto Yetu through Lisbon, in New York and Luanda

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BatotoYetu (Swahili for "Our Children") is an arts organization dedicated to fostering self-esteem and cultural awareness in children through the preservation and expression of African arts, culture and folklore. For the past 19 years, BatotoYetu has worked in the US, Portugal, and Africa to inspire both youth and adults to connect with and respect African culture through the promotion and preservation of African dance, focusing heavily on the cultural traditions of Angola. Working within and outside of existing school systems, I applied my career as a highly successful dancer and choreographer to this mission, inspiring youth to treasure their heritage, contribute to their communities, respect themselves and others, and excel in all aspects of their lives.

Figure 1 - BatotoYetu children in New York



BatotoYetu's performances are based on epic events and burst with energy and satire. Whether ten minutes or an hour in length, ten performers or two hundred, each performance is an expression of African culture and an enrichment of its roots. The Birth of NzingaMbandi Carnegie Hall Performance, in New York City for example, portrayed an exciting dance epic based on the true story of NzingaMbandi, a young princess who became Queen of Matamba (present day Angola), leading the resistance against colonialism and enslavement in the 16th century. As the story unfolds,

\* Dancer, born in Luena, Angola, studied in Lisbon, living in New York City since 1985.

the audience embarks on an adventure through the turbulent and triumphant times of the ancient civilizations of the Kingdom of Kongo, experiencing history in motion through the songs and dances of its citizens. The Birth of NzingaMbandi was developed at The Yard in Martha's Vineyard, Carnegie Hall and Symphony Space. The completed work premiered in the summer of 2003 at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, subsequently touring the United States and the Caribbean.

The mission of BatotoYetu in Angola is now to help nurture and change the fate of youth, thereby changing the fate of the country. Through the revitalisation of Angolan Culture, BatotoYetu aims to inspire people of all ages, promote community celebration and pride, foster unity, embrace diversity, and instill a genuine spirit of peace in all of Angola. Angola will be looked upon by the rest of the world as the model for the preservation of African history in its purest form – a place where modern society is perfectly in sync with the traditions of our ancestors.

My vision for a cultural village in Angola began taking shape twenty years ago, while working with Jacques D'Amboise at the National Dance Institute for a performance for 1,000 children at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theatre, I knew that someday I wanted to create this level of performance in my home country of Angola.

I began BatotoYetu in Harlem, creating an in-school residency and pre-performance program for at risk New York City youth. These dancers eventually performed on some of the most prestigious stages in world. Their self-esteem grew as they began to understand who they were, and who they could be. These young students stayed in school and off the streets. I knew that for many of these children, African dance was doing more than shaping their lives – it was saving them. My work in Harlem and then in Portugal eventually led to performances in Angola, and from these opportunities others have grown. In recent years I have worked with children from an orphanage at the Ilha, creating astounding performances that, like elsewhere, have sparked great passion in the young performers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.batotoyetu.org>, accessed on 05.03.2010.