

Delou and the African Diaspora Drum and Dance Fest



Night is falling in Little Haiti. Summer rains moisten the air even after the last late afternoon drop. Humidity connects bodies and elements in our tropical, pluralistic town. The feeling of dew on the skin is a shared practice. It is nearly 8:00 p.m. and the sun is still out with a post rainbow hued sky. I enter the Little Haiti Cultural Center. The lobby welcomes you with a wrap-around mural painted desk, created by local artist Jude Papaloko.

The halls buzz with musicians and dancers entering and exiting the large and exquisite dance space. Inside the room, resident dance company Delou Africa Dance Ensemble rehearses for their headlining concert at their **3rd Annual African Diaspora Drum and Dance Festival of Florida** taking place on Saturday, Aug. 4 at 7:45 pm.

“Pick it up a notch!” exclaims Njeri Plato, Delou’s founding director. “Folks — go all the way down,” she insists and gestures to her dancers to bring their entire torsos forward. “Everybody understand that?” Trinidadian born Plato began West African dance in the 1970s in New York City and continued after moving to Miami in 1981. After visiting Senegal and Gambia in 1985 with subsequent trips of intensive study, she started her dance company, Delou African Dance Ensemble, in 1987.



http://artburstmiami.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/IMG_03811.jpg “Delou means ‘to go back or return’” she explains through a vibrant smile. “It is a return to Africa... and the West Indian genres of dance including *yanvalou* (from Haiti), traditional West African and Mozambique (rhythm).” It is clear that her passion for African dance and culture is grounded by knowledge and rooted in respect. “We want to bring cultural awareness and unity and show that African drum and dance has no language barriers.”

The festival is comprehensive, offering 24 workshops over 3 days with 15 international choreographers. The spirit of collaboration is evident during the rehearsal when Delou’s

music and historical consultant, Ibrahima Dioubate, stops the dancers and drummers and motions over to Plato. After a brief discussion, they tweak a moment in the choreography. Guinean born Dioubate, whose lineage is Griot, is an oral historian and master musician of traditional instruments such as the balafon and djun-djun drum, which date back to the 13th Century.

Griots are not just musicians, but cultural leaders who serve as peacekeepers, spiritual advisors, and engage in diplomacy. They are central figures in celebrations and rites of passage as they offer historical knowledge and information that moves society forward. Dioubate was born into a Griot family and his knowledge base is an accumulation of lived and ancestral experience.

After some gestures to the dancers, he makes eye contact with Mamadouba Mohamed Camara, one of the visiting artists featured in the festival. He came several weeks early to help Dioubate, one of his lifelong mentors, comprise the show conceptually and musically. Camara explains to me that his family in Guinea did not approve of him becoming a musician in his youth. "My dad was angry. He saw me performing on TV and broke the TV," he remembers with a chuckle. Many years have passed since then and Camara is a world renowned musician with a vast international reach. He admits that now "my mother is happy."

Inside the rehearsal, Camara sits center among six other drummers. He signals the commencement and ending of each song through visual and auditory cues. He stops the music, stands and gives a choreographic note to the dancers. I look over as the drummers seize the moment to massage their blood-pulped palms.

Delou Africa Dance Ensemble teaches us that the drum is more than an instrument, it is a relationship. The 3rd Annual African Diaspora Drum and Dance Festival of Florida will provide three days of such relationships from Cuba, Senegal, Ivory coast, Republic of Guinea, Haiti, and beyond.

One of the many highlights of the festival is the "Bridging Cultural Gaps" concert on Sat., Aug. 4th at 7:45 p.m. that will feature Delou Africa Dance Ensemble, Delou Fatale, and a special collaboration from master artists from the Caribbean and West Africa. The concert will end with a Dundunba celebration. There will be an award ceremony, which will conclude with a raffle drawing that will include two round trip tickets to South Africa, and other prizes.

The festival takes place Aug. 3 to 5, at the Little Haiti Cultural Center, 212-260 N.E. 59th Terr., Miami; tickets for the various workshops range from free to \$20; tickets for the Saturday concert cost \$15; go to addff.delouafri.org for more information on times and events.

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