

CONCERT PREVIEW: AMAZONES: Beating taboos

Contributed by Carolin Vesely
Tuesday, 02 October 2007

African women play music of peace, empowerment on drums they're not supposed to touch
CONCERT PREVIEW

AMAZONES: THE WOMEN MASTER DRUMMERS OF GUINEA

Friday, 7:30 p.m.

The Park Theatre (698 Osborne St.)

IMAGINE being shunned by your family and friends for playing a musical instrument.

That's what happened to a group of Guinean women when they began studying the djembe (JEM-bay), a drum traditionally reserved for the men of their West African homeland.

Today, the Amazones: Women Master Drummers of Guinea travel the globe pounding out messages of peace and empowerment, breaking centuries-old taboos in the process.

The eight-member ensemble, which also includes singing, dancing and other traditional instruments, will make its Winnipeg debut this Friday at the Park Theatre and Movie Cafe.

The Amazones date back to 1998, when Mamoudou Conde -- a master African sculptor and manager of Guinea's national dance companies, including the world-renowned Les Ballet Africains -- was appointed producer and managing director of Les Percussions de Guinee.

"I said to myself, 'why don't women play the djembe?'" recalls Conde, 47, who was born in Guinea, but moved to the United States in his 20s.

During his travels, Conde saw many western women learning to play the djembe -- which, he points out, originated among the Mandingue people of West Africa and is the most popular and well-known hand drum on the planet.

In Guinea, however, it was taboo for women to even touch it.

"It would've been shocking for me, as a youngster, to see a woman play the djembe in my village, or anywhere in Africa where I've been," Conde says.

Inspired by his uncle, a legendary choreographer whose founding of Les Ballets Africains in 1952 helped transform the world's view of West African culture, Conde set out to break down what he saw as a cultural and sexist barrier.

Despite resistance from male drummers and government officials, he began sponsoring master classes for female drummers, whom he recruited "from among those living in the most difficult conditions that an African woman has to endure: homeless, jobless and often with children to support."

In 2000, Conde included two female artists on Les Percussions' North American tour.

Further motivated by the enthusiastic reception, from the male performers and audiences, he chose eight of the strongest players.

The women, ages 18 to 35, began intense percussion training, gradually expanding their instrumental repertoire to include balafon (a wooden xylophone with slats tied to a bamboo frame), krin (a hand-held cylinder made from a piece of hollowed-out tree trunk) and flute.

The name Amazones, he says, "recalls the courage of the intrepid warrior-women of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey (now Benin.)"

The troupe, which tours internationally and has gained wide acceptance in its native land, currently has a waiting list of more than 50 names.

Amazones: Women Master Drummers perform Friday at the Park Theatre. Doors open at 7:30 p.m. Tickets are \$22.50 in advance, \$25 at the door and are available at the theatre (478-PARK).

Drumming workshops with the band will be offered at Hand Drum Rhythms (17 Harrowby Ave.) on Thursday (6 p.m. and 8 p.m.) and Saturday (10 a.m. and 1 p.m.) Fees are \$25 per workshop, or take a second for just \$15. Call 233-7743 to register.