



South Africa's Pantsula Dancers Bring Life to the Streets

By Whitney Richardson Jan. 27, 2016

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Pantsula isn't just a dance, but a way of life in Johannesburg's townships. Small surprise then, that for the South African photographer Chris Saunders, a two-month magazine assignment to document it led to a six-year journey through his homeland.

With precise and technical footwork, often to the accompaniment of house music, pantsula dancers use hectic city streets as their stage surrounded by traffic, pedestrians and vendors. With ample skill and dedication — many of the troupes practice several hours a day — they have become recognized leaders and entertainers in their townships.

“The guys are trying to spread a message of better living through the dance,” said Mr. Saunders, who first started taking pictures of pantsula dancers for the 2010 Dance issue of Colors magazine. “Everywhere you walk down a road, there's kids playing, people dancing, people barbecuing ... it's got a vibe. It's street culture.”

The performances of pantsula, like many art forms rooted in street culture, are typically responses to cultural and political issues in the communities. When a state of emergency was declared in South Africa in the mid-1980s, pantsula allowed male dancers to bond over their shared experiences under apartheid.

If that sounds reminiscent of early B-boy culture of the South Bronx, it's no accident. After the international release of “Beat Street” — the 1984 movie chronicling New York's nascent hip-hop scene — breakdancing influenced pantsula style. Similar to breaking crews, pantsula troupes staged battles trying to top one another on skill, precision footwork and creativity. And, as with B-boy culture, the dancers' flamboyant fashion sense was almost as important as the dance itself, adding style and attitude to the spectacle.

It took Mr. Saunders several months to get beyond the scene's fringes and earn the trust of pantsula crews, who were apprehensive that they would be misrepresented by a white South African. He showed up to the same townships day after day, often never pulling out his camera. By the time the dancers were comfortable with him, he had understood the pulse and rhythms of the dances. With each beat, he paced and timed his shots.

“I didn’t want to focus on the negativity that surrounds the reality of a lot of people’s lives in the scene. I wanted to focus on the dance, the beauty of the culture and what they’re trying to portray to the world,” said Mr. Saunders, who first featured his pantsula series at last year’s LagosPhoto Festival. “They want to be professional dancers.”

In 2012, he met Daniela Goeller, a German writer based in Paris, who had received a fellowship to conduct research on pantsula. Ms. Goeller was also drawn to the dance, but said she was mostly concerned with creating an archive of the current dancers to show its greater, collective significance in South African culture.

“The history of pantsula is poorly documented and its importance as a youth-culture and an identification for young people is largely overshadowed by the dance as an art form alone — two reasons to protect this particular cultural heritage,” Ms. Goeller wrote in an email. “The social aspect is important.”

Since moving to Johannesburg herself, Ms. Goeller and four pantsula dancers and directors founded Impilo Mapantsula, an umbrella group that unites more than 50 pantsula troupes across Johannesburg and supports the dancers’ professional development. They are writing a book about the culture, which includes Mr. Saunders’s photos and which they said would be the first major document of its history and current practice. The dancers featured in the book will also receive a selection of images for their own use, and a percentage of print and book sales will help Impilo Mapantsula support the dancers.

“There is no coherent documentation about this dance form, its history, where it comes from,” Ms. Goeller said. “There is really an opportunity to gather this information so this culture can be recognized.”

Sicelo Xaba has been a pantsula dancer since he was 13 and is a co-author of the pantsula book and one of the founding members of Impilo Mapantsula. Growing up in a small township in west Johannesburg, Mr. Xaba, 38, remembers being exposed to musical and dance influences from around the world. His mother and father loved to dance around their small home to South African jazz artists, as well as James Brown, Michael Jackson and Miles Davis, who were played on vinyl.

He joined the pantsula group Red for Danger when he was 16 and has been with it ever since. In the past few years, Mr. Xaba has watched a handful of pantsula groups garner international recognition, including Via Katlehong, the South African dance troupe that had a run of performances at the Alexander Kasser Theater at New Jersey’s Montclair State University in 2013.

But with each victory, Mr. Xaba says he is only reminded of how far the pantsula dance troupes still have to go in gaining it credibility as an accepted dance form. He would like to see a bigger international market so that dancers can make a living by touring.

Lately, he has been obsessing over Michael Flatley, the stepdancer and choreographer known for his over-the-top “Riverdance” extravaganzas.

“Michael Flatley does work as art, though it is dancing,” Mr. Xaba said. “And that’s what I think is pantsula. If you are on that level, the whole world is going to pay attention. And when the whole world pays attention, then people who can invest in this can say, ‘We can buy this idea.’”