

Young performers find joy in face of Uganda's tragedy

By Valerie Gladstone, *Globe Correspondent*

NEW YORK -- To the sound of rhythmic drumming, 11 girls in the troupe Children of Uganda strutted onto the stage at the Joyce Theater in New York recently. It was the start of a rehearsal for the electrifying show they have performed in more than 25 American cities since January and will present at the Berklee Performance Center tonight and tomorrow.

Waving their arms overhead and kicking up their legs, they formed a circle in front of the drummers as three tall men and one small, feisty girl sang a sweet song, accompanied by xylophones, pipes, and flutes. Performing in practice clothes, not their multicolored costumes of brightly patterned Ugandan cloth, raffia skirts, leg rattles, beaded jewelry, and headpieces, the dancers moved as if they were at a boisterous family party.

Peter Kasule, the elegant 25-year-old artistic director and the MC for the show, put up his hands to end the sequence. Kasule, who previously performed with the troupe, explained that they'd been a little off-tempo. Noting his correction, they began again. Then the boys jumped in with great theatrical flourish, smiling broadly as their feet moved to the rapid rhythms.

Children of Uganda are phenomenal, both as artists and as people. All 22 members, who range in age from 6 to 18, have been orphaned by AIDS or war and live in the Daughters of Charity orphanage in Kampala. In Uganda, 2.4 million children have lost one or both parents to AIDS and civil war.

"We dance and sing and drum about the beauty of Africa and Uganda," Kasule said. "We don't talk about our tragedies. We want people to see our joy and to create hope."

The troupe, which has performed at the White House, on "Late Night With David Letterman," and with U2's Bono and is now on its sixth US tour, exists largely because of the Herculean efforts of Alexis Hefley, a former Texas banker, who founded the nonprofit Uganda Children's Charity Foundation in 1995 to help children affected by the country's poverty, illiteracy, and disease.

As the rehearsal continued, Hefley watched intently from a seat in the orchestra and recalled the first time she saw children from the orphanage perform. She had just arrived in Uganda, driven by her religious faith to try to find a way to relieve some of the country's problems.

"The nun in charge wasn't your ordinary nun," Hefley said. "She was more like Whoopi Goldberg. She encouraged the children to dance and sing, and they'd perform for local weddings, graduations, and for visiting dignitaries. When I saw their happiness in spite of all that they had suffered, they inspired me to help them find a way out of their circumstances."

After assisting at the orphanage for a year and a half, Hefley returned to Dallas, established the foundation, and began raising money for the orphanage and the orphans' education. "I realized that if people could just see them and become aware of how happy and talented they are," she said, "they would want to help."

She was not wrong. UCCF began by housing and schooling 50 children; it now cares for 750, offering eight of them scholarships to attend American colleges; a tutor travels with the company. Kasule is in his final year at the College of Santa Fe, where he is studying music technology to become a music producer.

Hefley now wants to establish a multipurpose center for the performing arts, where the children would study music, dance, drama, and radio, recording, and computer technology. Earnings from the tours, private donations, and grants from foundations, corporations, and faith-based institutions fund UCCF's activities.

Given the dire conditions in much of Uganda, how does UCCF choose who can live in the orphanage?

"We take the children living in the most vulnerable circumstances," Hefley said. "They've either been stranded without an adult to care for them or their region has been affected by the rebels, especially in the north, and it's not secure for them. Our little 6-year-old, Miriam Namala, an amazing singer, lost her father to AIDS, and her HIV-positive mother was too sick to care for her. By the time she was 3, she was caring for her family."

And who becomes a member of the troupe? "The most talented," she said. "When you see them perform, you know who they are."

Kasule put troupe members through three months of rigorous training before the tour.

"They have to learn a variety of dances," he said. "Many Ugandans intermarry with people from the bordering countries. I like to represent those areas as well. Add to that

that there are 52 ethnic groups in Uganda. So we have a lot to draw on, for each group has at least four dances that they treasure, each with its own distinctive movements, music, and costumes."

Zaam Nandyose, 16, loves the rousing "Bakisimba," which celebrates the creation of banana wine for a king of ancient Uganda. The musicians and dancers mimic the king's increasingly wobbly walk as he becomes drunk.

"It feels very natural in my body," she said. "And it's fun. I never thought I'd have fun after my father passed away. I was so sad that I thought it was the end of my life. But dancing with this company has changed everything."