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REVIEW

## Ugandan children on tour: orphans dance for orphans

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*Special to Newsday*

Half of Uganda's population of 24 million is under 14, and 1 million children have had a parent die of AIDS. When a child loses a parent, he loses a lifeline to the past.

For 10 years, the nonpartisan Uganda Children's Charity Foundation has worked to mend that breach with traditional song and dance. Every other year, two dozen parentless children celebrate the results in a U.S. tour of the irrepressibly upbeat "Children of Uganda." The funds they raise go to support hundreds of other Ugandan orphans.

An ebullient guide, Peter Kasule - one of the original Children, now 25 - ushers us into the patchwork of ancient kingdoms and ethnic groups that constitutes modern Uganda. Before a backdrop of blue or dusky pink sky, the show moves briskly through 16 numbers and almost as many regions and clans.

In the north, Acholi girls celebrate their budding womanhood by doing the ding ding, a dance of hip shimmies and whisking wrists.

Six-year-old Miriam Namala, the most adorable and youngest troupe member (most are in their teens), sings the Bunyoro-Kitara lullaby "Titi Katitila," about a bird who sleeps best after visiting a friend.

The nomadic cattlemen of the Banyankole in the west are represented by the ekitaguriro. Singers low like cows, and the male dancers pound their feet in complex rhythms while wielding thin wood cattle prods.

No matter the people or region, there are certain constants, such as the drums. Arrayed in a row, each of the half dozen standing drums possesses its own rich tone. A few numbers are pure drum, with six players striking the cowhide surfaces with thick sticks in a dramatic choreography. More often, hand harp, xylophone and flute overlay the brash, layered beats, suffusing the tunes with a nimbus of sweetness.

The other constant is the girls' shimmying hips. Their speedy wiggle-waggle, innocent in its sensuality, is the eye of the storm. It sets the rest of the body in motion.

The show is ideal for kids, with its fast pace, oscillation between ferocity and softness, and youthful cast. Plus, the price is right for the kids: \$15 at night, \$10 for the matinee.

For the rest of us, Kasule might have mapped the dances not only geographically but in time, especially since the current turmoil in Uganda - the massive number of deaths from AIDS and civil war in the north - is why we have "Children of Uganda."

A couple of pieces in the show are dedicated to the civilians resisting the incursions of the brutal northern rebels, the Lord's Resistance Army. Most, though, could have happened anytime between the pre-colonial period and now. We want to know, do Ugandan teens still do the larakaraka or is the dance purely a historical artifact? While the tragedy behind "Children of Uganda" couldn't be more concrete, the show itself floats outside of time.

CHILDREN OF UGANDA. Directed by Peter Kasule. Through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Ave., Manhattan. Tickets \$10-\$25. Call 212-242-0800 or visit [www.joyce.org](http://www.joyce.org).