

Gumboots: A History

Gumboot dancing was born in the gold mines of South Africa at the height of the migrant labour system and during the oppressive Apartheid Pass Laws.

The mine workers were not free to move around at will and were separated from their families for long periods of time. At best, working in the mines was a long, hard, repetitive toil. At worst, the men would be taken chained into the mines and shackled at their work stations in almost total darkness.

The floors of the mines were often flooded, with poor or non-existent drainage. For the miners, hours of standing up to their knees in infected waters brought on skin ulcers, foot problems and consequent lost work time. The bosses discovered that providing gumboots (Wellington boots) to the workers was cheaper than attempting to drain the mines. This created the miners uniform, consisting of heavy black Wellington boots, jeans, bare chest and bandannas to absorb eye-stinging sweat.

The workers were forbidden to speak, and as a result created a means of communication, essentially their own unique form of Morse Code. By slapping their gumboots and rattling their ankle chains, the enslaved workers sent messages to each other in the darkness. From this came an entertainment, as the miners evolved their percussive sounds and movements into a unique dance form and used it to entertain each other during their free time.

Gumboot dancing has developed into a working class, South African art form with a universal appeal. The dancers expand upon traditional steps, with the addition of contemporary movement, music and song. Extremely physical, the dancing serves as a cathartic release, celebrating the body as an instrument, and the richness and complexities of South African culture.

GUMBOOT DANCING IN SOWETO

In 1974, Mrs M Makhudu formed the Thabisong Youth Club in Soweto, with the purpose of bringing youth off the streets to learn about the ways of their people and to teach them some of the traditional tribal dance which was gradually being lost. Many forms of dance were taught to the young people, including the unique South African dance bred out of the hardship of working in the mines, the Gumboot Dance.

Members of the youth club went on to form the Rishile Poets, who performed songs and poetry around the townships of Soweto to nearly 15,000 people in two years. This company eventually became the Rishile Traditional Dancers in 1990 and then the Rishile Gumboot Dancers of Soweto, combining the magical African rhythms of song and poetry with the excitement and exhilaration of the Gumboot Dance.

Zenzi Mbuli (Director) and Tale Motsepe of Future Artists Empowerment then consolidated the group to form a top performance ensemble, performing such numbers as the haunting Mabele and the surprising I'm Too Sexy. For the next two years, the company toured the community festival circuit in South Africa, and then went on to tour the international festival circuit performing in Australia, Belgium and South East Asia.

In 1998, Zenzi, Tale and the Rishile members began working in partnership with SFX Back Row, Fifth Amendment, and Columbia Artists Theatricals, Inc to create a new version of their show, GUMBOOTS.

GUMBOOTS premiered at the Standard Bank National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa on June 29, 1999. The production sold out within days, earning standing ovations at every performance.

Since then the production has successfully toured the UK and North America; Following its UK premiere at the 1999 Edinburgh Festival, GUMBOOTS embarked on a nation-al tour of the UK including a three week engagement at the Lyric Theatre in London's West End. It then played to great critical acclaim in venues across North America, including an extended sell out run at the Just For Laughs Festival in Montreal.

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