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Urban Athlete

Sweating to an African Beat

By JULIA LAWLOR

MY love of West African dance far exceeds my capabilities as a practitioner. No matter. Fifteen years had passed since my last class, and I was ready for another try. So one recent afternoon I wrapped a piece of African cloth around my waist and entered a packed studio at the Alvin Ailey extension center in Manhattan.

This was an all-levels class, which theoretically meant beginners were welcome. But the crowd — mostly women, with a few brave men — seemed fairly proficient.

My pasty Irish skin was no anomaly: the class of 30 or so represented many ethnicities and, equally refreshing, a range of body types. As at most African dance classes, there were drummers; by the halfway point, a total of eight had appeared with their djembes, hand drums made of animal skin stretched over a wooden base).

In West Africa, as throughout the continent, traditional dance might celebrate a birth, a harvest, a wedding or a coming of age or appease an especially irascible spirit. Always, there are the drums, played with hands and sticks. The dancers' job is to interpret the language of the drums and to respond to certain rhythms, or "breaks," that signify when a step should start or stop.

Unlike, say, ballet, in which the torso is held rigidly and the positions of the arms, hands and feet are strictly prescribed, African dance allows more freedom. Heads bob, arms flail, backs flex, and the upper and lower body are often moving to different rhythmic patterns. Feet are bare, and blisters are part of the price of admission. Throw in a few hops and leaps, and you have a vigorous, fast-paced aerobic workout.

I was wiping the sweat from my brow soon after our teacher, Vado Diomande, led us in warm-up exercises. He spent 15 years as a dancer for the national ballet in Ivory Coast, his native country, and he is also a master drum maker. His

strength, for a 51-year-old, was astonishing — at one point, he dropped to the floor and held a plank position, bent his elbows as if to perform a push-up, then hopped across the floor several times without breaking form.

He taught us a celebratory dance called koukou, which is practiced in various forms throughout West Africa. Breaking it down into easy-to-learn chunks, he went over each combination, then began to string them together. We practiced the entire dance several times, and just as I was beginning to get the hang of it, he stopped. He told us that we would perform it again at the end of class — twice if we didn't get it right the first time — and that we would now move on to the next phase of class.

That involved dividing us into groups of four. Each group moved across the floor from one end of the studio to the other while performing a step he had demonstrated. Then we returned to the back of the line and repeated the pattern with a different combination.

This part of class tends to raise the anxiety level in beginners like me because of its potential for maximum exposure (and embarrassment). But I also found it exhilarating when Mr. Dio-

mande demonstrated a step that I picked up easily, successfully making my way across the floor to the beat of the drums.

As the combinations grew more complex, I slipped out of line and observed from the sidelines. (Mr. Diomande explained later that if he didn't throw in some difficult steps, his more advanced students would "just stay home.")

Patricia Seabrooks, one of Mr. Diomande's regulars from the Bronx, took my hand and pulled me back into line. She showed me the step until I could execute it with confidence. Later, when Mr. Diomande noticed that I was lost, he moved directly in front of me and repeated the combination.

Class ended with a procession in front of the drummers. Students bent down one by one, bowed their heads and touched the floor in front of each drum. Mr. Diomande explained that this was a traditional way of honoring the spirit of the instrument.

A few brave souls then did solo celebration dances as the rest of us clapped along, hoping that any remaining irritable spirits had been thoroughly appeased.



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The Ailey Extension offers five beginning West African dance classes per week for \$16.50 each; 405 West 55th Street, Clinton; (212) 405-9500, aileyextension.com.

Vado Diomande leads his Alvin Ailey Extension West African dance class.