



Facing the world... ballet class in Kibera
All photos: Fredrik Lerneryd

'CHILDREN CAN DREAM BEYOND THE SLUMS'

It is one of Kenya's most deprived communities, but ballet classes flourish in a Nairobi slum. In an area that needs so much, why bother with ballet? **Mike Wamaya** explains.

I was raised in the slums. I know the challenges – so perhaps it's easier for me to find a solution. When I was growing up, there was a serious drought here. The only way out people saw was to go into crime or football. Many people my age, 11 or 12 years old, ended up being killed by the police. My father then moved me out to a village, to keep me safer.

I left school at an early age and was a mechanic, learning to repair and work on cars. Then I saw a poster about auditions for the Kenya Performing Arts Group in Nairobi. I trained there, and later got to travel as a dancer to the UK and Netherlands. I had a scholarship and a chance to stay and work abroad. But I wanted to come back to Kenya and do something here.

In 2008, I was approached by the arts education charity Anno's Africa, who were looking for a trainer for the ballet in the slums around Nairobi. Anna Nygh, the head of dance at Anno's Africa, taught me the RAD syllabus.

For me, ballet comes before any other form of art. It brings confidence and resilience, and plays a big role in defining how children develop. The discipline that dance demands continues into their everyday lives. They realise they need to get their shoes ready and that they need to take care of their clothes. We also see children improving academically, because ballet helps you become organised. We teach them to look their teacher straight in the eye – it gives you the confidence to face the world.

At first, we were not really approved of by the Muslim community here in the slums. It took time, especially because we could not initially find appropriate clothes for the girls to cover their heads. One Muslim girl wanted to dance so much that she made her own costume. Her father came to the school to see how we work and what ballet involves. At first he was not sure about it, but is now one of our most supportive parents. Anno's Africa has opened two schools in Kibera.



The children have issues here. But in their ballet costumes, they are all equal

In Kenya, older children don't usually want to associate with smaller ones – they tend to stick to their own age groups. But we have found the children become open to sharing. We encourage the children in the higher grades to work with the lower ones, and now we find that they are also willing to share their school class work.

We have issues here that are unlike those in other ballet schools. Some children here lack nutrition, so you may find that the students are weak. We've set up exercises to help them build their strength up. In the slums, there are so many things happening in these children's lives. Some have been abused, some are HIV-positive. But when they are wearing their ballet costumes, they are all equal.

We make time for special talks, in groups or one-to-one, where the children can talk about what is happening. There was one girl who used to collapse and faint, and her teachers at her school threatened her with caning. She opened up to me about her problems at home: her parents were fighting, they couldn't lie down to sleep because so

much water was coming through the roof. I had a talk with her mother, and we came up with the idea of her selling bananas on the street to make some money. She's now doing that, and it's working very well.

Nobody's born a criminal – like prostitution or pregnancy, these things can be prevented, and the programme plays an important part in that. I work more hours than I'm supposed to, and if there are issues in the students' lives, I'll spend time at their homes to discuss it. At the end of the day, it's all about the children.

I have been very much surprised by the success of the ballet programme. We started as a small extra-curricular activity, and have seen it grow. Even now, it's difficult for my mother to understand how I make money from dance – but last year I was nominated for the Global Teacher Prize, and have been invited to speak about education at Oxford University. Some children tell me: of all the things I could do, I want to become a ballet teacher like you! They call me 'Mike of Ballet' – that's special.



Just this week, some of the children here were doing RAD exams. We insist that they have extra classes to prepare – we tell them that they won't be graded any differently just because they're from Kibera.

The number of children who want to dance with us is overwhelming – but we can't just kick them out. We have 150 children waiting, and we can't afford to have them all do dance lessons and exams. We are now raising money for our first arts centre in Kibera, including what will be the first ballet studio in the slums. If we can have a decent floor, a mirror and barre, and a space for the children – that's our key concern. We might not create professional dancers, but we will have people who appreciate dance. We have also been helped by dancers around the world donating clothes and shoes – dancers are good-hearted people.

Why do ballet here in Kibera? People connect ballet to the western world – it is perceived as only for the rich or the elite. Yes, it is expensive, but it belongs to everyone. We

are breaking barriers by doing it in the slums, and showing the world what's possible.

Dance leads you to anything. There might be some rare children who want to pursue ballet further. But they also get to mime other things they might want to be. They mime being a pilot, and from that realise what you need to do to become a pilot. One girl is getting straight As at school, and wants to carry on dancing – but she really wants to be a neurosurgeon. That's very special. We organised a Skype call for her with a neurosurgeon, and plan to do another. One day, she may be a dancing neurosurgeon! Children here can dream beyond the slums.

Anno's Africa is a UK-based children's arts charity running educational arts projects for children living in slum conditions in Kenya. annosafrica.org.uk

Mike Wamaya was speaking to David Jays