



# GISIMBA MEMORIAL CENTER

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **MINDLEAPS AT THE UBUMUNTU ARTS FESTIVAL: DANCE AND HUMANITY COME TOGETHER IN RWANDA**

Can art heal a broken society? Can it give us a common language to share and express our histories, our sorrows? Can it help heal historical divides across peoples and regions?

Such questions may seem too big to answer, but these are the questions boldly asked by the Ubumuntu Arts Festival, to be held this year on 16–17 July in Kigali, Rwanda. (Ubumuntu, pronounced *ubumunu* without the “t,” loosely translates as “being human”.) This ever-evolving event, which has been held each year since 2015 at the end of the 100-day commemoration of the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi, will take place in the outdoor amphitheater of the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center in Rwanda. The art festival, founded by Rwandan artist and curator Hope Azeda, was inspired in part by Desmond Tutu’s words: “My humanity is bound together in yours, for we can only be human together.”

This year, amidst strict precautions due to Covid-19, there will be more than 50 performances with representation from at least 30 countries. “We’ve been getting tested for the virus every two to three days,” said LaMar Baylor, Artistic Advisor of MINDLEAPS, one of the local organizations participating in the festival. (Baylor also dances in Disney’s *The Lion King* on Broadway.) MINDLEAPS is an international NGO that provides dance & education programming for at-risk youth; it has worked in Rwanda since 2014 and has been a festival participant every year.

This year’s MINDLEAPS dance piece is called “Ritual” and will be performed by eight talented young dancers from MindLeaps and Gisimba Memorial Center. “Rwandans dance for every single reason,” explained Kirven Douthit-Boyd, guest choreographer of the MINDLEAPS piece, adding, “The art form is sacred to the people.” Douthit-Boyd, an accomplished American dancer, arrived in Rwanda for the first-time last month. He danced with the Alvin

Ailey Dance Theater for more than a decade and now works at one of the largest community arts centers in the United States – the Center of Creative Arts, or COCA, in St. Louis, Missouri. “The first movement of the piece starts with singing bowls to clear the space,” he explained, “And the second movement expresses the pure joy and need to dance and move our bodies.”

MINDLEAPS Rwanda was quick to respond when the initial pandemic lockdown began almost a year and a half ago in March 2020. Within a month, they launched their adaptive “work-around” plan: the Virtual Academy (run entirely on WhatsApp), which enabled academic classes to continue uninterrupted, as well as providing nutritional support for students via home deliveries. MINDLEAPS’ Virtual Academy is an academic extension of its methodology, which uses free dance classes as an entry point to build (and measure) cognitive and life skills in children and youth, ultimately leading to successful integration into school and the workplace. It nurtures all aspects of the students under an art-centered ideology.

“Our staff was just brilliant during Covid-19,” said Rebecca Davis, MINDLEAPS’ Founder and Executive Director. “It really helped us understand that our mission is to protect and educate children. It’s easy to think that our goal is dance classes and data, but actually everybody still served the mission in a totally different way during the pandemic.”

The artistic collaboration between Kirven Douthit-Boyd, MindLeaps and Gisimba Memorial Center was made possible by the generous support of the US Embassy, Public Affairs Office.

This year’s Ubumuntu Festival activities will embody many of these stories of change and adaptation during the time of the pandemic. Activities include performances, workshops, panels and online discussions. To see MINDLEAPS and Kirven Douthit-Boyd’s piece *Ritual*, tune in online: Friday, July 16<sup>th</sup> at 12noon EST/6pm CAT at <https://ubumuntuartsfestival.com>.

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See also:

<https://mindleaps.org>

<https://ubumuntuartsfestival.com>

<https://www.gisimbamemorialcenter.org/>

