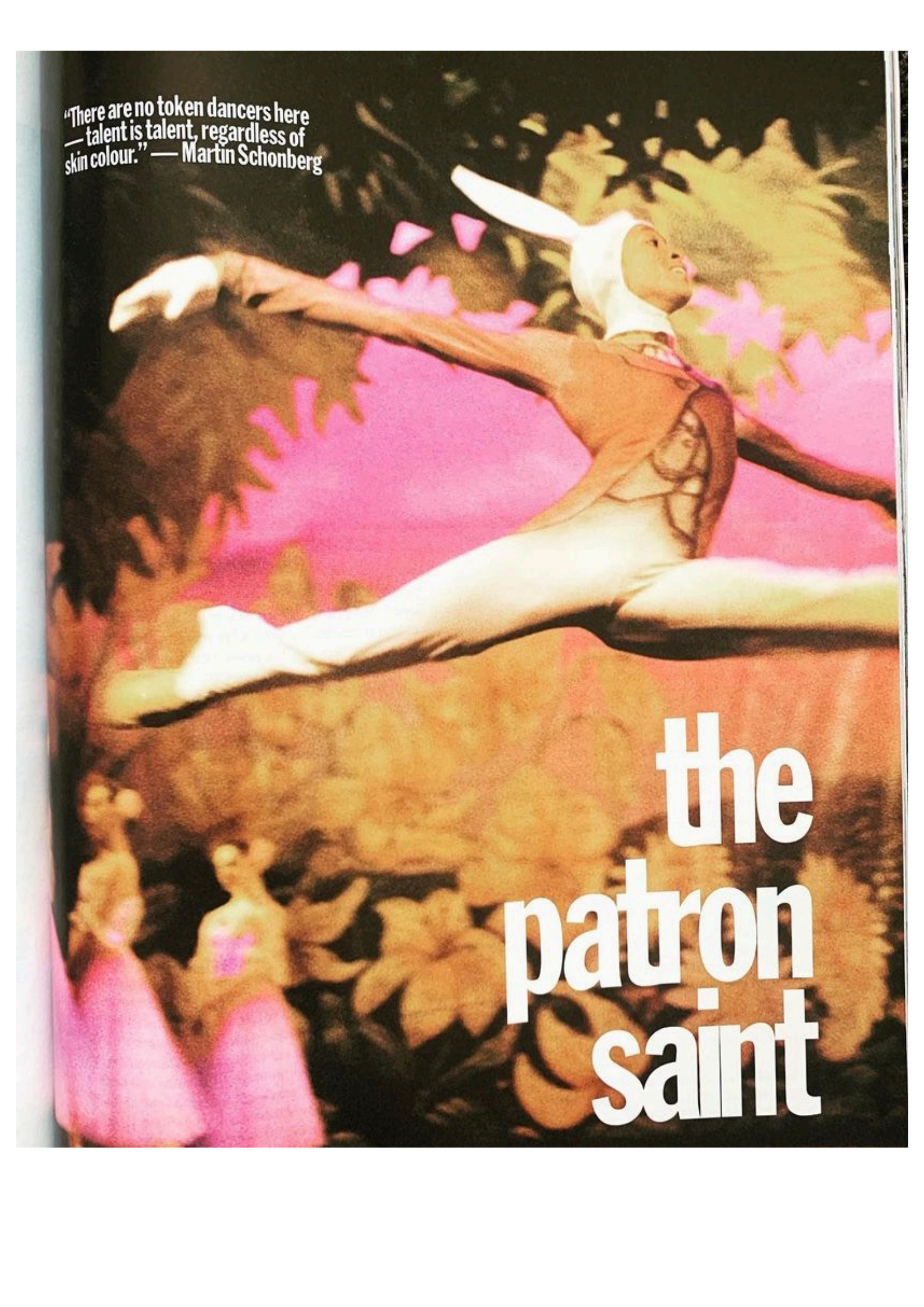


"There are no token dancers here  
— talent is talent, regardless of  
skin colour." — Martin Schonberg



# the patron saint

**One man had a vision: to take ballet — the supposedly 'elitist' art form — to the townships. Martin Schonberg's dance company Ballet Theatre Afrikan is not only receiving critical acclaim for performances that have overwhelmed audiences, but it's also being recognised for changing the lives of young people who would ordinarily have little access to the arts.**  
 By Kerry Invin. Photographs by John Hogg.

A group of young South African dancers is celebrating life in movement, form and expression. Their legs, long and disciplined; arms, placed and graceful; faces alive, captivating and beautiful. Their bodies, moulded, twisted, strengthened for hours, months, years; their efforts, guided so that the human body and spirit can be appreciated. This is Ballet Theatre Afrikan, a South African story of hope, amid all the reports of crime and corruption.

Dancer/choreographer Martin Schonberg is the creative force behind this creative phenomenon. After returning from a successful solo career in Europe,

South African-born Martin was shocked by the comment of a fellow South African that "black people can't do ballet". Furious, he set about disproving that myopic, racist outlook by teaching ballet in Katlehong, east of Johannesburg, over weekends. Most of the kids who attended his classes came from the Model D schools of the day and many of them are still with him today.

As you watch Ballet Theatre Afrikan, the colour of the dancers is insignificant, for it is clearly about talent. Martin likes to use the phrase, 'sweat equity'. "If a dancer wants to perform, he or she has to work hard and attend all rehearsals. There are no token dancers here — talent is talent, regardless of skin colour."

Talent, Martin believes, is first evident in a dancer's eyes: "There must be a little naughtiness." And the eyes of BTA dancers do seem different. They're filled with a passion for their art, as well as a deeper understanding of it; something not expected from dancers still completing their schooling. There is also a sense of confidence and depth. "I encourage these young people to find themselves. They must be exposed to society, which, as artists, they need to mimic." Because of this philosophy, they are encouraged to take the different opportunities that come their way. For example, one of the dancers recently returned from Canada, while another prepares to leave for Sweden. And so, through dance, they've been exposed to different cultures and places.

They've witnessed the power of their performances on countless audiences. Martin has actively sought to provide them with a connection between the effort of dance class and the quality of performance on stage. "You can only belong in a theatre if you grow up in a theatre, otherwise it is a foreign experience," he says.

"The company has become a vehicle for the talents of many leading South African choreographers. I want my dancers to be as stimulated by dance as I have always been." Martin did not dance professionally in South Africa because, at the time of his

career, it seemed that the male dancer mostly courted the female dancer, lifting and supporting her. "I have a small frame, and I didn't only want to lift dancers, I wanted to dance, really dance." It was different in Europe, where his talent landed him in several prestigious dance companies. "There, pieces were created especially for the dancer," he says. Back in South Africa, Martin calls himself a pedagogue, an educator of children. He investigates the different body parts that a dancer uses with the precision you'd expect from a physician or surgeon. "I love teaching. I find it very exciting to analyse the body; to figure out what needs to be concentrated on. I come up with a concept, transfer it to the child and see the results. We're not just regurgitating, but educating the body and the mind. It excites me daily."

The dedication of the young BTA dancers is striking. On Saturdays, while other teenagers their age sip cappuccinos and giggle in shopping malls, the members of Ballet Theatre Afrikan tirelessly rehearse. This is the only day free from school, ballet, Spanish or modern exam preparation. It is a day set aside to polish, perfect or learn a performance. It is the sacrifice that the audience does not see.

Martin insists that BTA's dancers are responsible for their talent. He asks dancers joining BTA whether they have to dance, whether it is an intrinsic need. This, he says, is an indication that the hard work required is not "sucked out of thin air — the dancer has the final responsibility". Martin teaches them that the dancer must draw inspiration from the stage — from the different choreography — but ultimately, that he or she cannot be moulded like clay or forced to perform. "The dancer is a human being first and dancer second," he says.

This is a man who is painstakingly dedicated to detail, even when it comes to the company's name. "Everyone's a critic when it comes to the name of the company. They all complain about the 'k' in Afrikan, but it just looks right. It balances it visually ... it also brings in a flavour of Afrikaans."

Although worshipped by his students, Martin has a tremendous sense of humility. "I don't see myself as the next great South African choreographer. BTA is not there so that I can express myself through the dancers. I am musical, sensitive, practical ... but I get on with it. The dancers are tools that South African choreographers can explore. I am only too happy to polish and work on their technique."

Coupling South African choreographers with BTA's diverse and talented dancers has produced electrifying results. A breathtaking mosaic of different cultures and influences blend on stage. ▶



incorporating movements not seen anywhere else in the world. Small wonder that Ballet Theatre Afrikan is in great demand in the international arena.

Watching "Thari", a dance choreographed by Vincent Sekwati Mantsoe, a famous South African dancer and choreographer, is an emotional experience. The dancers explore modern and traditional, classical and African movements. "It's a remarkable piece," says Martin. "It captures the flavour and texture of South Africa, as well as the influences of the Western world, and interprets them in a new and exciting way.

"Vincent was fascinated by the kids. He never thought that he could explore classical dance with them, but we worked hard together. He loved it. At the time he choreographed "Thari", I was teaching Checcetti exams. He loved the arms. He worked some classical movements into his choreography, with respect and humour, in a real and sincere way."

When working with BTA, choreographers have access to a number of talented principals. "All of my principals are divas in their own right," Martin laughs. "Kristin Wilson, Kitty Phetla and Lorna Maseko move onto the stage, purposefully placed there at the same time, and the eyes do not know where to look. I love tall dancers. I love putting Kitty (6 foot 1 on points) on stage. Then Thoriso Magongwa comes on and the audience is finished!"

Ballet Theatre Afrikan has embraced modern times and change; coupled them with hard work, and produced astounding results. Most of the dancers use the word 'family' to describe their involvement with BTA. "Despite our different backgrounds and personalities, we all stand together," says Lorna, who has been with the company for half of her life. Dance, they say, has provided them with a sense of individuality and a means of expressing

themselves. As Thoriso says, "It's unusual to have a boy from Soweto doing ballet." Like many of the BTA members he likens dancing to the essentials of life: "Humans need food and oxygen; I need ballet." For him, the disciplined lifestyle is a way of overcoming life's threat of mediocrity.

The group's vocabulary is crowded with the word 'obsession', something that Kitty believes is the result of travelling with the company and being exposed to international standards. But although Ballet Theatre Afrikan has a string of audiences thirsting for the next performance, the eternal sword of Damocles, sponsorship — or lack thereof — hangs over them. "We're in a difficult situation now," says Martin, who, despite offers of employment overseas, has committed to staying with BTA. "We're one of the most wanted groups overseas, yet in South Africa we can't get funding. My dancers need to make a living and gain the respect of their profession, but I may be forced to encourage them to take up different bursaries. They don't want to go; what they'd prefer is an international career from here.

"My dream is to turn the dance school into a youth company, an outreach company and a professional company. There's also a huge black audience that would love ballet and I want to reach it. Theatre makes such a difference to society; it's such a powerful form of communication. When my dancers retire, I believe that they'll go back into the system and enrich it. Can you imagine what they'll choreograph after all they've been exposed to?"

*Ballet Theatre Afrikan will be performing (as part of the FNB Vula Dance Umbrella at the Wits Theatre on March 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>;) at Pretoria's State Theatre from May 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>; at Secunda's Johannes Steggeman Theatre on May 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>; and at the Civic Theatre from August 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>. For more info, phone (011) 728 9002. ●*