

SA's Via Katlehong pantsula's across the world

South African dance company, Via Katlehong has wowed audiences far and wide from New York to Germany to Spain. The group has been touring the world for the past 16 years increasing their fan base as they go along. Gumbboot, jazz, traditional, hip hop to pantsula - these energetic dancers have come a long way from 1992, when the group was formed.

 By [Sindy Peters](#) 9 Nov 2009



How was the dance company started? Why the name Via Katlehong?

David Mahlaba: "Via Katlehong was formed in 1992, originally a community troupe, Via Katlehong was composed by (former street dancers) youths from the township of Katlehong in the East Rand now called Ekurhuleni - notorious war zone during the 1980's uprising in South Africa and where most people were affected by 1990 - 1992 violence. Katlehong became known as one of the no go areas (unsafe place). The concern was to make a difference in the township and encourage people to enjoy the place as before the violence took place. The VIA (slang) - means 'Go Along Katlehong there is life.'"

Why would you say is the group so successful?

Mahlaba: "Coming from a disadvantaged community with lack of facilities and specialising in dances like Pantsula in South Africa as it was classified as related to criminals and people who are not trained post-apartheid in that regard they were seen as something that is and will not be professional today against all odds Via Katlehong performed in African countries, Europe and America from theatre, corporates, hosted workshops etc. Via Katlehong regards that as success even though we are not yet there..."

Where do members learn how to dance? Does anyone in the group have professional training or is it all self-taught?

Mahlaba: "You can't find a Pantsula, Gumbroots or Zulu dance academy here in SA, even though you will find a lot of Western originated dance forms institutions here in South Africa. It is a natural God-given talent that got opportunities to be exposed in good platforms within the global arts industry, sharing stages with many diverse "professional genres of arts", collaborations with artists and workshops. Some members got invites to share experiences with various practitioners around the globe and still came back to share their experiences with the Via Katlehong family."

The group does a number of dance styles, but which is the most requested form? Which style does the group excel in?

Mahlaba: "Yes we do different styles but the most requested one is Pantsula. We excel in Pantsula, Gumbroots, tap and combination routines of the three and it's very interesting to watch and the rhythm at the end is crazy."

Is this a full-time career for all the dancers involved?

Mahlaba: "For 15 members it is a career, the rest are still part of the development."

David, as a founding member, did you ever imagine the production would become so big?

Mahlaba: *"Me and my students then and still now we all shared same vision and did see it coming one day and still dreaming and pushing for more."*

We see the company aims to create a place that keeps kids off the streets and away from criminal activity. How successful is the company at doing this?

Mahlaba: *"Some of students from the development today have accomplished a self reliance in their lives. Some today married with houses and kids and still being able to sustain themselves within the field and in a normal life and still engaged with the community."*

You offer training free of charge. At the end of this training are some students picked to join the company?

Mahlaba: *"Yes, of course, all 15 professional outfitted ones were all groomed from the early ages of 10 - 16 years. First international touring opportunity for the company was one student in 2000, then five in 2002, six in 2003, seven in 2004 eight in 2006, nine in 2007 and this year 2009, 13 dancers. Four promising kids from the upcoming ones from the development have been given an opportunity to tour with the company for encouragement."*

What's it like travelling across the world to perform? What is the reception like overseas?

Mahlaba: *"When you are out of your country whether in poor western African countries or in Europe, you 100% feel that you are professionally respected through your art, the treatment you receive keeps you going, it really motivates. We always achieve standing ovations from our audience."*

Favourite country to perform in?

Mahlaba: *"Definitely France. Don't matter the language, it's like our second home or maybe we were born for the place. They have kept us going by respecting and believing in us and still not yet tired to invite us after we performed in more than 20 cities, collaborations, workshops, residencies but still have love for the Via K Township Boys. We wish it was same with SA."*

You have had plenty of success overseas, but what about in South Africa?

Mahlaba: *"Before it was very difficult to be acknowledged here at home due to political reasons that's why we focus on what was positive by profiling ourselves out there to look better when we are home. Our focus now is home even though we have not yet done enough to reconnect or market ourselves very well and restart to be able to be given a stage to exhibit our wonderful work and definitely we won't go wrong, for now it might be a question of marketing ourselves."*

What would you say is your biggest Achievement so far?

Mahlaba: *"To be still existing and surviving within the field is a big challenge especially for one to make a living with this form of art. Very few who are selling Pantsula and Gumboots dance can at least still stand and say we are happy for now. Many hang up and venture into something else just for the sake of surviving, and having to fulfil a need of paying to eat and have something to put under the nose. In most cases artists find it difficult to reconcile with their decisions because art is an addiction."*

What makes a successful dancer?

Mahlaba: *"Rehearsals are very important more than the performance itself, discipline, perseverance, openness to other art forms and all welcome criticism in order to see room for development, we learn everyday."*

Immediate plans for 2009?

Mahlaba: *"We are running a Project for Katilehong, Thokoza and Vosloorus(KATHORUS in Ekurhuleni) Townships seven primary schools for a start. We do free dance performances, workshops for school and the event has been organised to showcase the outcomes of the workshops we did at schools. The aim: we have seen a potential of natural talent from the students, promote the arts and culture with natural talent to be added in the schools curriculum."*

Soon leaving for France to present our new piece called "WOZA" - means come. And we will be back on 16 December 2009.

What else is left for the Via Katilehong Dance Company to accomplish?

Mahlaba: *"A lot. Even though our legacy is to own multifunctional permanent rehearsal space with good facilities for artists, students and the community."*

Will you have any involvement with the 2010 FIFA World Cup?

Mahlaba: *"We would love to be part of World Cup, it everyone's dream. But not yet for now."*

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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