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Walking next to our shoes...

Office of Arts + Cultural Programming
PEAK Performances at Montclair State University

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**Isicathamiya**
is a type of a cappella singing specific to South African Zulu culture. Isicathamiya choirs are always all male. The term derives from the Zulu verb meaning "to walk softly" or "trample carefully." As they blend their voices into harmonious tones, the performers also carry out movements on tiptoe in a particular choreographic style. The origins of isicathamiya go back to the early 20th century, when Zulu communities started to migrate into urban areas. For a long time, Zulu travelers were housed in hostels where they were not allowed to make any noise—hence the need to walk on tiptoe. Gospel singing from the churches gradually came to influence isicathamiya. Today, these choirs compete against each other in contests organized on Saturday nights in Johannesburg and Durban.

Costumes also play an essential part. The men wear bright and expensive shoes as well as fancy suits that they absolutely cannot afford to ruin during the performance. Thus, the audience comes for great care and attention. The song lyrics speak of subjects from daily life, such as nostalgias for homeland, women, the dangers of apartheid, or the gospel.

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**About the Artists**

**Robyn Orlin**
born in 1955 in Johannesburg, South Africa, studied at the London School of Contemporary Dance 1975–1980. With the help of a full scholarship, she completed her Master's degree in Dance at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago from 1990 to 1993. Since then, she has been working consistently on her own pieces in South Africa.

**Swenkas**
Every Saturday night, the swenkas turn up in the orange light outside the basement of Johannesburg’s Jeepers Creepers, a tattoo shop, a white dustcoat and hat. Underneath their coats are stylish suits, with folded handkerchiefs showing from their top pockets. They are the supporting act for Isicathamiya competitions. The swenkas spin on the leather of their soles and flash a broad smile. They raise their legs, pulling back their trousers to reveal rakish shoes... which match their tie, handkerchiefs, and cuff links. It is important that everything match—the walking style, the presentation, and the quality of their suits.

Swarling is believed to have developed among men who mostly worked in cities, would return home for their Christmas holiday. To show their families that they had reached a certain degree of success in their careers, they would parade their best clothes to the villagers. From then it became part of hostel culture in Johannesburg. As preparation for going home, they would practice and perform before a judge. This became a competition, with men putting on a show and competing. The passion for this art form is reflected in their conscientious attention to style and detail. The judge of the event has no contact with anyone. The organizers of the event go to great lengths to find an impartial observer. They select the judges randomly every week from the streets of Johannesburg and explain the rules, and then the fun begins. Today, in post-apartheid South Africa, swanking is very much accepted as part of the culture.

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**Note provided by City Theatre & Dance Group**
Walking next to our shoes... intoxicated by strawberries and cream, we enter continents without knocking...