

40-year cultural odyssey to meet the return of a cultural legend

Alan Donovan set to revive the African Heritage with a nostalgic show in Nairobi

BY VITALIS KIMUTAI

In 2003, Kenya's famous pan-African gallery, African Heritage, co-founded by Alan Donovan and former Vice-President Joseph Murumbi, closed down its 51 outlets worldwide and suspended its shows highlighting African culture, textiles and fashions through Kenya's African Heritage Festival that had travelled the world with its troupe of models, musicians, acrobats, stilt walkers, chefs, hairdressers and others.

The last major tour of Kenya's African Heritage Festival was across Kenya to 23 Kenyan hotels, heralding the African Millennium in 1999-2000 after two nights of shows on a specially built metal catwalk over the pool of Nairobi Serena. The shows were in honour of the double volume opus *African Ceremonies*, by the intrepid photographers Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith, who signed hundreds of their books during the tour.

In 1998, African Heritage had travelled to South Africa to produce the African Renaissance show for 4,000 guests arriving for the First Telecoms Conference in Africa. African Heritage made its last European tour in 1995, to 11 cities with its troupe packed into a luxury bus, followed by a caravan of lorries loaded with plants, lighting and sound equipment, musical instruments, costumes and fashions, plants and hand painted murals to transform every venue into Kenya with scenes of the Kenya Coast, mountains and game parks, courtesy of Lufthansa Airlines and the Hotel Intercontinental. The Hotel Intercontinental was the site of the debut of the first African Heritage Night nearly 50 years ago in 1971.

Alan Donovan was even asked by the OAU to give a lecture on his recipe for the unprecedented success of the African Heritage shows and tours which attracted many private sponsors.

Now, 18 years later since the African Millennium Tour, Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher have produced another double volume opus, *African Twilight*, seeking out and concentrating on the vanishing cultures, rituals and traditions not surveyed in their first 16 books. Thus they have done what no photographers can ever do again, as most of these rituals and ceremonies are now extinct or vanishing.

The release of their new



PHOTO | FILE

The then Nairobi Mayor Margaret Kenyatta checks out an old food dipper after she opened the first African Heritage Gallery in Nairobi in January 1973 as Vice-President Joseph Murumbi and African Heritage founder Alan Donovan look on.

double volume opus, *African Twilight*, has stirred Alan Donovan to reconstruct Kenya's African Heritage Festival once more. Most of the more than 100 costumes, fashion designs, textiles and jewellery have been stored in a warehouse near Nairobi, and are now owned by Kenyan designer Makena Mwiraria. Alan has contracted bead makers, tailors, and embroiderers to reconstruct Kenya's African Heritage Festival. This work has been going on for several months and will continue until the Festival is presented on March 3. It will recall another memorable show he did to launch Angela Fisher's first magnificent book *Africa Adorned* on African body ornamentation and jewellery in 1984.

It was not long before that show that he had introduced Carol and Angela to each other, a collaboration that has resulted in several more beautiful books.

For that show in 1984, he combed the continent to present a show based on the theme *Africa Adorned*, which won wide acclaim. As recounted by Kenyan journalist Margaretta wa Gacheru, the show at the Hotel Intercontinental in Nairobi "was an evening of African magic and sheer joy ... one of the rare occasions when one feels just slightly smug having been in attendance to witness "history" ... well, at least a most extravagant occasion with a mixture of awe and epicurean appreciation ... a chance to see Mr Kenya Mickey Ragos flex his bulging biceps or Miss Africa Khadija Adam careen along the catwalk waving at her fans. There was the blend of feathers and fetishes and fabulous frocks made out of mainly hand stitched, hand-woven or

spun pan-African fabrics from Madagascar and Mali, Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana, Cameroon, Uganda... and the incredible hand embroidery from Ethiopia..."

It will be difficult for Alan to top that show as many of the most gorgeous textiles of Africa are also vanishing or no longer woven or worn due to massive imports from China, used clothing from the USA and the very labour intensive work required to create these fabulous textiles which he considers one of the greatest gifts of Africa to the world.

It all started back in 1971, just a year after Alan's arrival in Kenya. After staging his first exhibition of artifacts from Northern Kenya in October 1970, which was attended by Kenya's first foreign minister and second Vice-President, Joseph Murumbi, the two linked up to savour Murumbi's dream of a Pan-African Centre in Nairobi, where artists and art works and artifacts from all parts of the continent could be shared with local people and the many tourists who visit Kenya. African Heritage was borne and was a success from the beginning.

In 1971, Alan went on his first tour across America with African art, crafts, textiles



Mr Alan Donovan, founder of African Heritage House.

and jewellery. The tour was in heavy demand with showings at important galleries and department stores like Nieman Marcus, at Black Expo in Chicago and at the Egg and the Eye in Los Angeles and many locations along the way. Part of the tour involved fashion shows of African costumes and fashions. In New York, an entire city block was closed off for a street fashion show with the mayor as guest of honour with shops along the route showing African designs in their windows. Unfortunately, not all the fashions from Nairobi had arrived in time. Alan was forced to contract a seamstress from the famed Lincoln City Opera who made elaborate costumes. He opened his suitcases and pulled out the indigo dyed Adire cloth from Nigeria, the ornately embroidered Shamma cloths from Ethiopia, the mud-cloth from Mali, the sumptuous hand woven Kente cloth from Ghana and the luscious raw silk from Madagascar.

They got to work and produced a small collection for the New York Street Festival with some models wrapped in African textiles with large amber beads from Mali or strings of ostrich egg shell beads from Kenya as Alan did not want to cut into the beautiful fabrics. The other fashions from Nairobi then arrived before Alan travelled on to Denver and Chicago, where he was met by Jesse Jackson to produce daily shows at the cavernous Chicago amphitheater for Black Expo, where performers included Aretha Franklin and Michael Jackson. He ended up spending a few days in the John Deere hospital before going on to California.

Alan has never looked back since and African Heritage has

produced hundreds of designs under his direction, many of which will be shown at African Twilight In Nairobi at his African Heritage House on March 3. As part of the festivities, he will present an African Heritage Lifetime Achievement Award to acclaimed Kenyan designer Sally Karago, who won the first Smirnoff Fashions Award for her stunning barkcloth wedding dress draped with porcupine quills.

Recovering from a serious illness which put him on a wheelchair, Alan is now back at work, getting ready to welcome Angela Fisher and Carol Beckwith "Home" to Kenya, when 400 guests will arrive at African Heritage House on a train to celebrate this great work.

Stars at the show will include the legendary Ayub Ogada, who travelled the world with his eight-stringed nyatiti, Jabali Africa, who travelled across Europe with Alan in 1995 when he left them in New York City, Papillon, the brilliant young musician who creates his own instruments from musical instruments thousands of years old, and the sensational trio of the 1990's, Rare Watts who will come together with solo dancer Fernando Anuangu, and his Maasai dancers who perform at Espace Cardin in Paris.

Also in attendance will be the first Miss Africa from Kenya, Khadija Adam, who went straight from an African Heritage catwalk on to the catwalk of the famous Parisian couturier Yves St. Laurent as his first African lead model and the longest reigning Mr Kenya Mickey Ragos and the male star of African Heritage for 22 years will attend together with Catherine Karl, the long reigning head model of African Heritage who returns from Germany, Ehipany, the lovely Ethiopian model who took over as the last head model, Rose the African Heritage house model, Dorothy Ochieng, who was discovered by Alan Donovan on a train to African Heritage House and who now owns Mochez Models who will present new stars Maglina, current Miss World Kenya, Gloria, and Sally Diana, as well as Ajuma, who has been lighting up the catwalks of the world. There are also African Heritage dancers John Radido and his partner Saida, along with African Heritage acrobats and a stilt walker.

The train will depart the Kenya Railways Museum on March 3 at 2.30 pm for what will be the African Twilight Gala Night of the Century at African Heritage House, with cuisine from the leading hotels of Nairobi including Nairobi Serena, Hotel Intercontinental, The Norfolk, Ole Sereni Hotel and the Carnivore, all of whom have hosted African Heritage Nights and events and festivals over the last half century.