

**WORK
WITH
IT
OR
LET
ME GO**



Leroy Mokgatle was told he was too small to succeed in ballet. But South Africa's Genée gold medallist tells **Katlego Mkhwanazi** about letting his unique qualities shine.

'My goal was to get to the Final and I did get that and more.' Leroy Mokgatle, a 15-year-old South African ballet dancer and the 2015 gold medal winner at the RAD's prestigious Genée International Ballet Competition in London, was speaking with TV news channel eNCA just after his win. Not only did he scoop the highest prize of the competition, but was also awarded the Margot Fonteyn Audience Choice award. The gold medal is not presented every year – which makes Mokgatle's achievement even more momentous.

I arrive in the afternoon at the Art of Motion dance studio in Johannesburg, where Mokgatle and 15 other students harness their dance skills, to meet the young gold medallist. Mokgatle and his dance coach and choreographer, Angeliqe Harris, welcome me into the premises, where Mokgatle and Harris both stay, along with other students.

Dressed in a black vest and sweatpants, a bubbly Mokgatle greets me with a smile – he has two hours to spare before lunchtime and before his academic class begins. He has been interviewed a couple of times since his return from London in September, but his face still lights up when he recalls the experience. Even with the 12 hours of rehearsals that he puts in each day – living and breathing dance – it never crossed his mind that he'd win a gold medal.

This year's competition saw 76 dancers aged 15–19, from 16 countries, take part in the demanding 10-day event. Four days were dedicated to rehearsals with dance luminaries at RAD headquarters. 'It was like a little bootcamp just before the actual competition, where we got to rehearse and that helped get rid of the nerves so that you don't just go straight into it,' says Mokgatle, now 16, sitting on the couch next to Harris, in her home.

For the competition the candidates had to perform their own original solo, a classical repertoire variation and a newly commissioned solo by Charlotte Edmonds. 'The first day at RAD headquarters was nerve wrecking because you don't know what to expect; you don't know how the dancers are or who would teach you,' says Mokgatle. His Genée highlight was working with coaches Lynn Wallis and Hilary Clark: 'Hilary drilled into us the importance of performance and technique.'

Mokgatle was introduced to ballet in second grade, after moving from the village of Bapong in Rustenburg, to the capital city – Pretoria – where he lived with his aunt and uncle. When the time came to select an extramural school activity, curiosity yanked him towards ballet. 'There were well-known sports but I didn't know what ballet was, so I just picked it and I loved it,' he explains.

Even with role models such as celebrated South African ballerinas Andile Ndlovu and Kitty Phetla, Harris thinks children need more education about ballet. 'When we have school performances, a lot of the kids laugh when the dancers first come out in their tutus. But once they get into the show, they are intrigued.'

For Mokgatle, watching older ballerinas on stage opened his eyes to the possibility of turning ballet into a career, something he didn't think was possible before.

Dynamite...
Leroy Mokgatle receives the gold medal from Dame Monica Mason (below); and (right) at the Genée
Photos: Elliott Franks



‘TRYING TO BE LIKE SOMEONE ELSE WON’T WORK. YOU HAVE TO FIND YOUR OWN UNIQUE BEAUTY’

But with his Genée success, this goal is within reach. He recently received sponsorships and has been offered a couple of scholarships to study and join dance companies overseas. However, he is in no rush to make a decision because his main focus right now is completing his studies. Art of Motion students graduate when they turn 16 or 17 and are then encouraged to work for international dance companies.

Dame Monica Mason, one of the Genée judges, was heartened by Mokgatle’s success. ‘It is a measure of the dedication of so many people,’ she says. ‘Leroy had a most secure and outstanding technique, but there was also a perfume of artistry about him. He’s blessed with an ability to communicate – he’s passionate about what he does. I will be very interested to see where he goes from here.’

With all his accomplishments, Mokgatle has raised the bar, not only for his peers but for the African continent – which he probably wouldn’t have achieved had he

listened to naysayers. According to Esmé Harris, Art of Motion director, it was said that Mokgatle would never have a career in classical ballet because of his ‘small’ physique. ‘I sat in the auditorium, hearing people around me saying how small and cute he was. But by the end of the evening, they were saying how they couldn’t believe what that little boy did and that he is dynamite,’ she says.

‘I have lived through a couple of careers where dancers have been demotivated because they don’t look a certain way. But if someone says you are not right for them, remember that you are an apple and they are buying pears. Find whoever is buying apples and you will be employed.’

Mokgatle might not be as tall and muscular as some of his peers, but he is able to make the most of his small frame as he navigates through teenagehood. ‘I’m still going through it [self-acceptance]. I have days where I’m very insecure about what I wear. Like today I am wearing a vest and I never ever wear a vest because I think my



arms are skinny,' he says, jokingly. 'But trying to be like someone else, I don't think is going to work for anyone. You have to find your own unique beauty. There are so many people in the dance industry so you have to be different in order to be noticed.'

For the first time, the Genée competition was live streamed across the globe. 'Freedom the Tribute', the contemporary piece that Mokgatle performed in the Dancer's Own section of the competition, was inspired by the death of Nelson Mandela and echoes his thoughts on self-acceptance. Choreographed by Harris, she explains that the piece showcases Mokgatle as a strong individual who 'doesn't need to be like any other boy because he can turn and jump just as well as the bigger boys.'

Mokgatle's love for dance is evident on his face whenever he is on stage. He moves gracefully and gives audiences a full-on performance. "Freedom the Tribute" was a very emotional piece for me,' he says. 'People always

see me as a happy and friendly soul but they never really see the inside and what I am actually feeling, and in that dance I got to put it out there.'

With his name already in the history books, and with his Genée goal done and dusted, there is one more thing he'd like his performance to achieve. 'The message I'd like people to take away from my performance is that I don't need to be what they want me to be. I got put on this earth the way I am and dance is a passion for me; either they work with it or they let me go.'