

# In Paris' Ballroom, HIV Care is Culture

**A spotlight on how the Ballroom scene is innovating access to HIV support.**

From the moment you enter the Ballroom, its unmistakable energy pulsates around you, welcoming you into a space defined by acceptance and understanding. Now, here in Paris, it has become a vibrant site for innovative approaches to HIV prevention and treatment, tailored to the experiences of LGBTQIA+ sub-Saharan African and Caribbean migrant people. Safe spaces for authentic self-expression have long been integral to the resilience of queer communities in the face of stigma, persecution, and health disparities. Since its development in the 1970s from the underground Black and Latino dance movements of Harlem, Voguing has fostered intimate, supportive communities known as Houses, worldwide.

Open to all & GILEAD | HIV

*"For me, Ballroom is another world. In our little world, we're safe, we're comfortable. We can do whatever we want, whatever we can't do outside—with family, or out on the street."*

## Waly Yacooba

Volunteer with Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF

Gilead Sciences SAS provides institutional support for/sponsors screening sessions organized by Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF.



## Revitalizing a long tradition.

At the forefront of this innovation in community engagement is Ariel Jean-Urbain, the founder of the LGBTQIA+ organization, Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF. Ariel first began the initiative in 2004 to address gaps in support disproportionately impacting sub-Saharan African and Caribbean migrant populations. Recent studies indicate that among people living with HIV in France, half of sub-Saharan African and Caribbean migrant men who have sex with men acquired HIV after moving to France<sup>1</sup>. In their countries of origin, where HIV is often endemic, LGBTQIA+ intimacy faces severe stigma and persecution. Under the weight of these challenges, young people can endure traumatic migration journeys to find safety in France. These experiences rooted in fears may delay them in seeking the sexual health support they may urgently need.

*"There are apprehensions, fears in our community. Often, in front of a white lab coat, we don't feel safe speaking. It takes time to break down those barriers."*

## Ariel Jean-Urbain

Founder of Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF

1. Arias-Rodriguez A et al. High proportion of born-abroad MSM acquire HIV after migration in France: first results from the ANRS-MIE GANYMEDE study. (2022). HIV Glasgow. 23-26 October 2022, Glasgow, UK / Virtual. J Int AIDS Soc. 25: e26009. Abstract P111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jia2.26009>

Rising to the challenge, Ariel has made it his mission to meet the community where they are, both physically and culturally—in Paris' Ballrooms. Besides being an advocate of sub-Saharan African and Caribbean migrants for nearly two decades, Ariel is also a known and trusted face within the Ballroom community. He realized that, by tapping into its large social networks to co-organize events with the Houses, he would be able to create regular opportunities for an engaged audience of hundreds to access HIV support and resources. Then came the challenge of creating a space large enough to welcome them all.



## Empowering spaces empowering people.

When Ariel shared his vision with Gilead to offer testing in the Ballroom scene, Gilead's team immediately saw the potential for a culturally rooted HIV prevention and management strategy. Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF leveraged an unrestricted grant from Gilead to carry out this initiative in one of Paris' premier Ballroom venues, ensuring a safe and festive environment. Aided by collaboratively designed educational tools, this innovative approach works to seamlessly integrate sexual health dialogues and HIV testing into the unique ambiance of Ballroom. Take-home materials like the "Oops" brochures, for example, reduce the stigma surrounding the importance of knowing your status, empathetically and playfully, while explaining options for seeking screening.

*"The Ballroom gives us a lot more visibility. And young people are more eager to come to these kinds of parties. When it's easier to go to places that already attract lots of young people, it's also easier to raise awareness of sexual health issues."*

## Daniel Sem Baruti

Volunteer with Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF

Equipped with their culturally tailored messages, Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF's volunteers, some who are Voguers themselves, can approach participants as peers among peers—immersed in the codes, culture, and mentalities of the people they are serving. Pressing needs like emergency or permanent accommodation, or settlement in the French system are many young migrants' first priorities, and areas where Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF is willing and able to help.

In a space of such authentic mutual support, there are countless ways to relate and create a sense of security before discussing the core message of HIV. Yet Ariel and his team's HIV prevention efforts have steadily become a recognized presence at the Ballroom, with open, enthusiastic conversations about sexual health increasingly welcome in the community's culture.



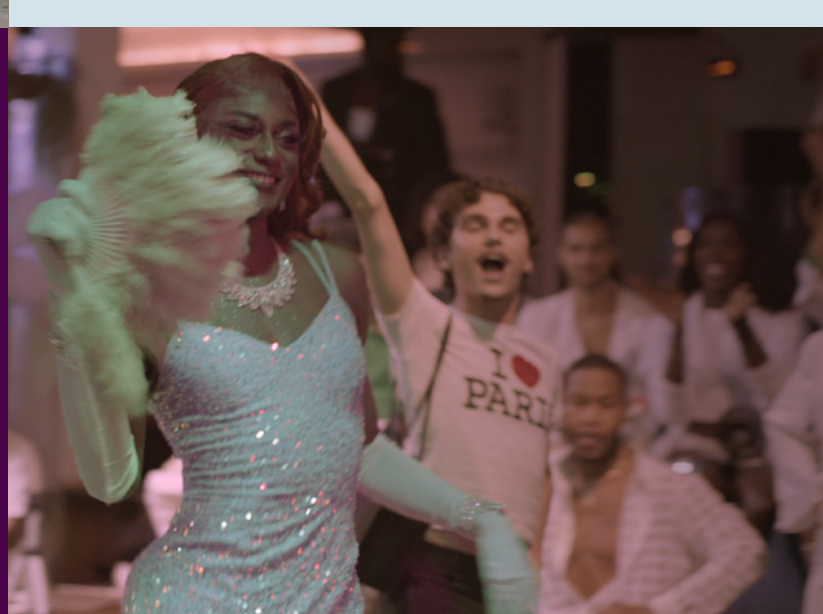
*"The first step of supporting this community is to welcome them, to listen to them, to learn about their expectations and needs. Through conversation, little by little, we introduce the subject of sexual health. Once they know 'I am in a place where I am heard and listened to,' the rest is done with a smile."*

## Ariel Jean-Urbain

Founder of Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF

## A place of support. A culture of care.

Within a Ball's celebratory, liberatory atmosphere, it's easier for people to broach the matter of sexual health with confidence. Through shared experiences—from Ballroom culture, to personal identity, to migration journeys—young community members first build trust and, as needed, offer guidance to HIV prevention and management resources. Whether or not individuals ultimately decide to receive HIV testing available to them on-site, visitors from around the world can find a space to express themselves through dance, foster creative community and, thanks to Ariel and his volunteers, access judgment-free assistance all before the party's over.



In leading this initiative, Ariel is overcoming one barrier at a time to connect vital HIV support with communities who need it, offering a profound inspiration to the global response to HIV. Not only does it integrate HIV awareness and testing into the cultural milieu where access has historically been limited. Crucially, this culture's courageous embrace of dialogues about sexual health reaffirms the universal importance of mutually supportive spaces in the mission to provide effective care to all.

*"Each person joining us brings know-how, ingenuity, creativity, honesty to the table. In a safe space like this, [they] can share it with others. Because people who experience the same difficulties, the same frustrations, can also share the same joys and the same happiness."*

## Ariel Jean-Urbain

Founder of Afrique Arc-En-Ciel Paris IDF

**Together, we can help end the epidemic for everyone, everywhere.**