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Step Dancing's Great Strides Into the Mainstream

By LISA TRAIGER
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Step Afrika! may well be among the best-kept secrets on the local dance circuit.

The seven-year-old troupe appears regularly on a variety of showcase programs throughout the area and tours internationally, but it didn't make its full-evening debut here until this past weekend. What took so long? The nine performers and three guest artists filled the Dance Place stage with high-energy percussive stepping from the African American fraternity and sorority tradition as well as South African Zulu and gumboot styles. And the audience couldn't get enough of the lightning-fast stomps, claps, slaps, kicks and rhymes; the performers, equally adept at complex stepping, dancing and, most vital, acting, drove the crowd to whoops and hollers.

It's no surprise that an excellent step dance company makes its home in Washington. Howard University, the birthplace of a number of black fraternities and sororities nearly 100 years ago, incubated the close-knit brotherhood and sisterhood organizations that continue to support



BY LARRY MORRIS—THE WASHINGTON POST

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and a complement of sisters decked out in black berets and platform shoes opened the program with a vivid peek at the pledge process; pledgies must carry information around campus, answer promptly to their upper-class brothers or sisters, and always do their homework. Next, charismat-

ic Paul Woodruff showed how easy a basic step should be by plucking 10 brave souls from the audience and breaking down the arm and footwork patterns for them to try.

Guest artist Sduduzo Ka Mbili, originally from Durban, South Africa, and of late at the helm of his own company in New York, contributed a robust, limber solo, "Juxtapower," that emoted themes of bondage and freedom. Kirsten Smith's "Can U Dance?" incorporated clever poetry by Darrius Gourdine matched by equally witty choreography that referenced dance styles from the ballet to the bump to breaking and contact improvisation. The powerfully spiritual "Wade," with its reenactment of a baptism and compelling use of gumboot, tap and church-inspired dance, and "Sebenza" ("Work"), a South African gumboot dance traditionally performed by miners to pass the time in the harsh work environment, demonstrated the troupe's versatility.

A scene featuring a trio of motley brothers

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Step dancing has traditionally been performed in the closed circle of fraternities and sororities for their members, invited friends and family. But Williams and his colleagues at Step Afrika! lead step dancing into the realm of other percussive forms of movement and share it charmingly.