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STYLE

Dance

Washington's Step Afrika! Brings the Rhythm Home

There's nothing understated about the dance or the dancers of Step Afrika!, the District-based troupe that brings step dancing, the percussive form created by African American fraternity brothers and sorority sisters, to the concert stage. Their animated programs place stepping in a historical and cultural context that includes tap, South African gumboot dancing, Zulu tribal dances, voguing and hip-hop.

Wednesday evening's performance at Gala Theatre was a homecoming — back in Washington after a year on the road with a number of new and unrelentingly energetic company members, they put on a lively, sometimes ear-splitting show.

Akin to tap but with a heavier flat-footed attack on the floor, stepping also features upper-body embellishments — body percussion of sorts,

with hitting, slapping and clapping along with singsongy vocal chants, calls and responses.

The world premiere of "Drumfolk! A Gullah Percussion Suite" features percussionist David Pleasant, who draws from rhythmic traditions of the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. "Drumfolk!" pays tribute in ecstatic, rafter-rattling syncopations to slaves who defied outlawed drums by maintaining traditional African rhythms through percussive dances. The eight dancers form a revivalist ring shout, stomping, clapping, pounding and chanting in worshipful abandon. But as the work shifts to marching band rhythms, it loses momentum and fealty to purpose.

South African native Lesole Maine is effervescent in "Sebenza (Work)," a theatrical and funny take on the traditional gumboot dance.



BY LYDIA MARTIN — STEP AFRIKA!

From left, Step Afrika! dancers Brian McCollum, Paul Woodruff, C. Brian Williams, Jason Nious and Aisha Lord perform in Tanzania.

Bent forward, slapping the sides of these boots, the men find a sense of playful camaraderie. The trickery of many step dances shines in "The Pledge Scene" as four men — bulldog tough on the outside but soft-hearted beneath — try to strut be-

fore a line of sassy sorority sisters and an overbearing pledgemaster, who mocks the guys' awkward, rough-around-the-edges steps.

The program repeats through Sunday.

— Lisa Traiger