

[The Washington Post]

NOVEMBER 10, 2006

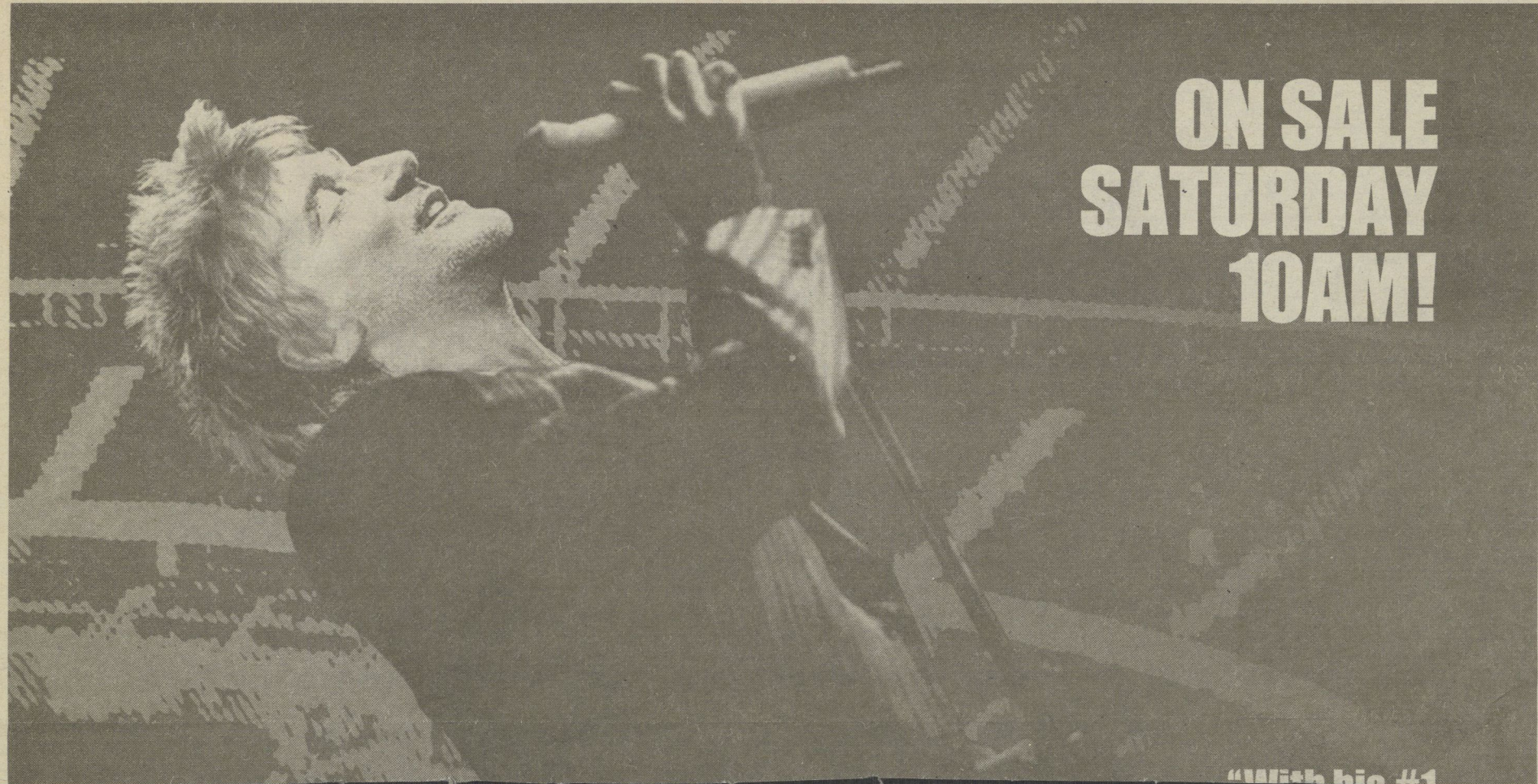
Weekend

In Focus
Talking
fact and
'Fiction' with
Will Ferrell
31



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BY ERICK WATSON

Kirsten Ledford, center, and fellow Step Afrika! dancers will perform at Dance Place this weekend. The troupe's new works mix traditional movements with futuristic elements.

Step Afrika!'s Foothold in the Future of Dance

By LISA TRAITER
Special to *The Washington Post*

On Saturday and Sunday at Dance Place, Step Afrika!, the company that brought step dancing out of the collegiate yard and onto the concert stage, will step into new territory. Company founder and Executive Director Brian Williams says: "While we're about preserving the tradition of stepping, we felt that it was time for us to try to take stepping in some new directions. We're ready to lead and show others what might be possible."

The premiere work, "Nxt/step," is an experiment on a number of fronts. With choreography by Houston's Jakari Sherman, a former Step Afrika! dancer who founded and directs the G-Force step team for the NBA's Houston Rockets; video technology designed by Williams with technical input from modern dancers Art Bridgman and Myrna Packer; and an original score by Jonathan Matis, who directs the District's chapter of the American Composers Forum, the work launches stepping into the 21st century.

Williams discovered step dance — the rumbling percussive dance form with its insouciant call-and-response refrains — while a marketing major at Howard University, where he joined Alpha Phi Alpha, one of the nation's oldest African American fraternities, founded in 1906. A stint living in Africa opened Williams up to similarities between stepping and South African dance, particularly gumboots, in which coal miners syncopate their percussive footwork and workaday chants by slapping the sides of their rubber Wellington boots. But Williams also noticed the same circular formations, call-and-response chants, processions and improvisatory solos in Zulu and other African dance

forms that he knew so well from step dancing.

Last month, on an afternoon during Howard's homecoming weekend, Williams pointed out a circle of young men from Omega Psi Phi clapping, singing and building up percussive power. "This is directly descended from African dance," he said.

"Nxt/step' is still an exchange at the core of the work. We're still sharing with other communities; this time they're just different art forms and different ideals," Williams said.

Choreographer Sherman began stepping in high school and joined Alpha Phi Alpha at the University of Houston. These days, he reports, stepping is thriving in the Texas city, with teams of dancers forming in middle school and earlier. For this new work, he fuses traditional stepping with what he termed "futuristic elements and movements."

"You'll see traditional things like the Alpha

train, work with canes, work with chairs and a lot of the traditional body movements and body positions from stepping," Sherman said about the regimented movement and the riffs on popular culture and college life that steppers favor. He also changes time signatures, from the expected 4/4 to 3/4. "That," he said, "brings out more unusual sounds and rhythm patterns than in typical stepping."

In another new work on the program, "16.19.06," step meets ballet in a new trio by young D.C. choreographer Robert Bettmann. Using a 17th-century chaconne by Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe digitized and rejiggered by Loren Ludwig for 2006, the work features Washington Ballet Studio Company member Corey Landolt and two Step Afrika! dancers. "I'm not trying to do [a piece] that just says we're all happy dancing together," Bettmann explained. "I'm looking for a place where in a non-valued

way the forms can exist together in 2006, which means not trying to make the ballet people do step or the step people do ballet."

Concert dance, particularly classical dance, is frequently marginalized, Bettmann said. "One of the ways is through lack of relevance to our experiences today," he said. "Step, a 20th-century form, is relevant to a community in ways that classical music and classical dance have a hard time connecting."

For Bettmann, placing ballet and step alongside each other opens up the classical world and the pop culture world without placing judgments on either. "By putting ballet and step together, I'm trying to just create a piece of dance for today."

The company also will perform other works in its repertory in the coming week: Wednesday and Thursday at 10:15 and noon, Publick Playhouse, 5445 Landover Rd., Chertsey, 301-277-1710; and Wednesday at 8 p.m., Reston Community Center, 2310 Colts Neck Rd., Reston, 703-476-4500.

Step Afrika!

Dance Place
202-269-1600

Saturday and Sunday



BY ENOCH CHAN

Step Afrika! aims to preserve step dancing, a percussive form with call-and-response chants.

Mini Reviews

A star (*) denotes a show recommended by our critics.

Opening

CORTEO

(By Cirque du Soleil at City Center through Nov. 26)

This serene, Felliniesque fantasy of a clown's afterlife is visually spectacular, so sumptuously designed that its sheer beauty threatens to outshine its stunts. And the stunts are pretty good — like death with a smile, the kind with benevolent angels hovering just overhead. Despite the live New Age music and state-of-the-art stagecraft, there is a throwback tone to "Corteo." Circuses often huff and puff, but Cirque — the gold standard of big tops, even in a silver medal show — never breaks a sweat.

— Nelson Pressley

★ EQUUS

(At Washington Shakespeare Company through Nov. 26)

The excitement in Peter Shaffer's 1974 drama is generated by the unraveling of a psychosexual crime involving a teenage boy (Jay Hardee) whose obsession with horses metastasizes into violence. The less compelling aspect involves the hang-ups of the man conducting the investigation: a disillusioned psychiatrist


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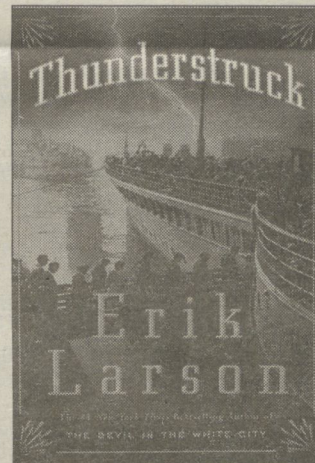
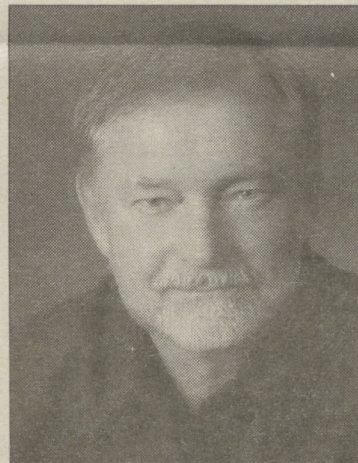


Alice McDermott

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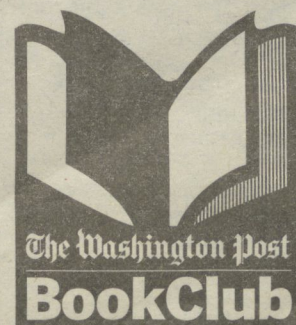


Monday, November 13, 2006
12:00 - 2:00 p.m.

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