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## Stepping Into the Realm Of Art

Step Afrika! Program Ranges From Muscular To Quietly Intense

By Sarah Kaufman  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Monday, November 13, 2006; C05

A little goes a long way with percussive dance. Whether it's tap, Irish step dancing or other forms of musical footwork, choreography generally takes a back seat to rhythm, the body is less involved than the shoes, and the sound can become overwhelming. Yet in an engaging, richly textured program last weekend at Dance Place, Step Afrika! demonstrated that the stomping, body-slapping art of stepping has boundless expressive possibilities.

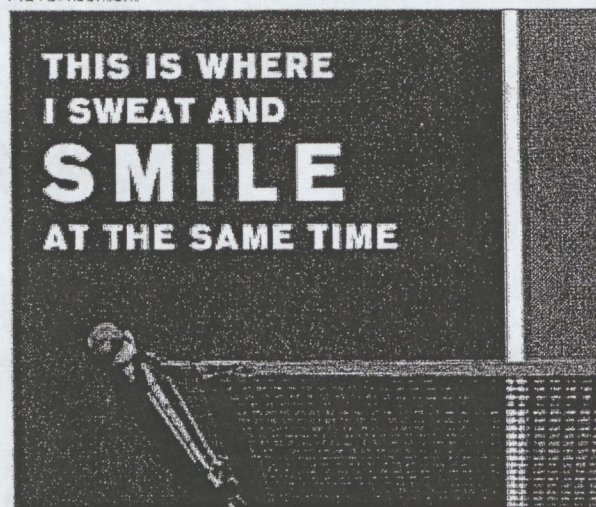
Step Afrika!'s work stems from both traditional African dance and its distant cousin stepping, a competitive dance practiced on college campuses among black fraternities and sororities. The group was founded in 1994 by Brian Williams, a Howard University graduate and Alpha Phi Alpha stepper who was struck by the similarities between stepping and what he saw on his travels through Africa. Generally, his troupe performs stepping and African dance side by side, or mixes the two forms. For this program, however, he wanted to bring both dance forms into the 21st century, which is how "Nxt/step" came to be.

In "Nxt/step" the performers were both onstage and onscreen, as the dancers responded to video images of themselves. In creating this clever work, choreographer Jakari Sherman picked up pointers from the New York-based Bridgman/Packer Dance, which has also performed its brand of interactive video dance here. It was a good match for Step Afrika!, whose members are aces at syncopation. This was critical when, for instance, the onscreen dancers, projected on the backstage wall, laid down one beat, and the live dancers interwove their own. At one point, the video imagery that joined the live dancing showed some of the live dancers, creating a complex web of images and rhythms. Pulling off this challenging work required stamina -- stepping is extraordinarily taxing for a few minutes, let alone 20 -- and coordination, and there were a few glitches Saturday night. But these aspects aside, the tricks of the camera and the way the dancers reacted were great fun to watch.

"Nxt/step" was the closer in an evening that showed the blistering power of percussive dance as well as its softer, more introspective sides. The group's desire to see stepping taken seriously was reflected in "Can You Dance?," in which one of the dancers displayed his smooth, slithery abilities while a recorded voice-over asserted that steppers are not just "Greeks from school days" but legitimate artists. The narration ended with a taunting shot at the audience: "Can you step?" Ooh. Take that, skeptics. Except that it seemed strange to kick the show off with such a defensive posture -- presumably, the ticket holders who sold out the performance had already accepted the troupe as an artistic enterprise. The weekend's performances were sponsored by DancePlace and the Washington Performing Arts Society.

The works that followed "Can you Dance?" demonstrated the power and undeniable cool of stepping, as well as its relation to African dance. "Ndlamo," inspired by Zulu traditions, was a tidal wave of fierce

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muscular energy, as one dancer after another pounded and thrashed to the thunder of three drummers. Bits of character study and comedy were skillfully woven into "Sebenza," drawn from the dancing of South African miners, who make percussive use of their tall rubber work boots.

"The Deacon's Dance" and "Wade," first seen in September at Dance Place's season-opening program, turned stepping into an aching expression of spiritual anguish and redemption, accompanied by low, purring gospel singing onstage. More than any of the others, these two works took stepping into rarefied territory, where dance is not just physically or rhythmically impressive -- it feels essential. Stepping's awesome coordination, aerobic energy and noise were all stripped away, and what remained was quiet white-hot fire.

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# The Washington Post

C8 FRIDAY, JUNE 2, 2006

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

## Step Afrika!'s Foothold in the Future of Dance

By Lisa Traiger  
Special to The Washington Post  
Friday, November 10, 2006; WE20

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."

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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., Cheverly, 301-277-1710; and Wednesday at 8 p.m., Reston Community Center, 2310 Colts Neck Rd., Reston, 703-476-4500.*

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