

STEPPING OUT

Dance Company Celebrates Rich African American Tradition



By Patrick Neas

Stepping is a unique and important American contribution to dance. In this highly energetic African American tradition, the dancer's own body becomes a percussion instrument. Through handclaps and footsteps, the dancers are able to create a dizzying array of complex rhythms.

The Harriman-Jewell Series will present Step Afrika!, the highly acclaimed step dancing ensemble, at 7 p.m. Friday, April 5 at the Folly Theater, 300 W. 12th St.

Step Afrika! is one of the hottest companies on the dance circuit. They have performed around the country and around the world, so it's exciting that they're finally making their Kansas City debut on the Harriman-Jewell Series.

"We've never presented Step Afrika!, but I have seen them before in New York," said Clark Morris, executive and artistic director for the Harriman-Jewell Series. "I am really excited to present them. They're one of the top ten African American dance companies."

Founded in 1994, Step Afrika! is totally dedicated to African American step dance, a tradition that was born and developed at African American colleges in the 1950s. Step Afrika! has developed its own expression of step, which not only draws on African American traditions, but also native African roots.

The company began as an exchange program with the Soweto Dance Theatre of Johannesburg, and is the first professional dance company totally devoted to step dancing.



“Step Afrika! has been to over 60 countries, and they do an extensive American tour every spring, so we’re on the tail end of that 50-city tour,” Morris said. “They’re also an official cultural ambassador for the United States, so they go on trips that are sponsored by the U.S. government to export our art to the world.”

The Harriman-Jewell Series prides itself on almost always using live music when it presents a dance ensemble. In the case of Step Afrika!, the dancers are also the musicians.

“What they use primarily for music is created by the body itself, by slapping their legs and their feet and chest and different kinds of hand claps,” Morris said. “As in the African tradition, they also sometimes use sticks that are pounded on the ground in different rhythmic patterns. Sometimes they’ll use drums, as well. But most of the percussive line is produced Bobby McFerrin-style, by using their own bodies as instruments.”

This “self-percussion” has its roots in the 1739 Stono Rebellion in South Carolina. Twenty slaves revolted near the Stono River, banging on drums as they marched through the streets, calling other slaves to join them. It would become the largest slave rebellion in the history of the South. Before it was over, between 30 to 50 African slaves and 25 colonists were killed. After the rebellion was suppressed, drums were banned to prevent any future illicit communications between the slaves.

“My understanding is that the program does trace the roots of how this art form was developed,” Morris said. “There will be some traditional African dances and a lot of variety throughout the program. There’s even some audience participation.”

Morris says that Step Afrika! is “big into education.”

“All of the dancers are college graduates,” Morris said. “Most of them have come out of colleges that have formal step programs at their fraternities and sororities. Mostly that’s where the tradition remains alive. They frequently work with children, and we’ll have them doing that in our community, teaching kids some moves and some of the choreography.”

Step Afrika! should have great appeal for audiences of all ages. Based on what he’s already seen of the group, Morris says he can’t wait for them to play the Folly.

“What I saw in New York was a very visceral performance that gets you on the edge of your seat,” he said. “I just think it’s going to be a terrific experience here in Kansas City. I’m thrilled that we’re getting to present them.”

To reserve tickets and for a complete listing of all concerts, go to hjseries.org.

