

# Matrix:Midland 2011 Review: StepCrew show a whirlwind of energy

By Steve Griffin for the Daily News | Posted: Sunday, June 12, 2011 7:00 am

Midland Center for the Arts president and CEO Mike Hayes had a good idea what awaited people attending the Friday evening performance of The StepCrew, a dance and musical act at MCFTA. "I saw 20 minutes of rehearsal this afternoon, and I had to go home and take a nap," Hayes said before the curtain opened for the MATRIX: Midland Festival event. More than one audience member marveled along similar lines after the fast-paced show.

Built around Irish step dance's North American evolution into the modern tap of New York City and the Ottawa Valley step dance of Canada, this was stage show, not just a concert. StepCrew (which features three dancers from the internationally known traditional Irish band the Chieftains) fields six dancers: three representing the Ottawa Valley style, two tap dancers, and an Irish step dancer. You'd be forgiven if you lost track of who was from which school, as all danced splendidly in more than one style. Doing double duty dancing and playing fiddle were Jon Pilatzke and Dan Stacey, StepCrew founders and longtime friends who as youths excelled in competitions in both arts across their native Ontario. With dancers Cara Butler and Jon's brother Nathan they formed the StepCrew, which also features tappers Sarah Uddin and Christine Carr.

The dancers were often joined by Mark Sullivan, a six-time Canadian fiddling champion, from the five-piece backing band — a splendid group of musicians who kept things moving without trying to steal the show.

At one point, Jon Pilatzke and Stacey playfully drew bow-like across Sullivan's fiddle a variety of implements from broomstick to flagstaff to golf club to coat hanger (Pilatzke removed the coat and flung it over his shoulder first), baseball bat, to the crowd's delight.

But, for all the musical magic, the audience gave its strongest applause to the dance routines, often clapping along and sometimes rewarding with applause particular segments as if they were jazz solos.

Cara Butler, Irish step dance champion, Folger's coffee commercial star and original Riverdance lead dancer Jean Butler's sister, claimed the stage as her own each time she appeared, dramatically, from the wings.

Particularly charming was a skit in which Jon and Nathan Pilatzke and Stacey tried to dance their way into Butler's heart, with a single flower among them. They scrapped and showed off until, exasperated and amused, she grabbed the flower herself and danced off, leaving the boys to their own devices.

A special treat was the singing of Alyth McCormack, new to the StepCrew. The native of Scotland's Hebrides Islands transported the audience in Gaelic and English, and even performed

syllabically tricky 'mouth music.' In long dress and high heels, she provided costuming contrast, too.

The entire company, though, put on a bit of the ritz, the men gradually giving up suit jackets but only to trade them for vests, and the women changing into metal-shimmery tops for the second act. Change was constant. Dancer lineups shifted like hockey lines, and pacing flitted from elegant to foot-stomping and back. Fiddling and dancing alternated, then merged. Contrasts in gender and style were spotlighted in mock dance contests and other exchanges.

Among Friday's jewels: McCormack singing a duet with Sullivan's fiddle; a number in which the six dancers wielded broomstick-like staffs as batons and percussion instruments; Stacey's "how ya doin'?" to the front row, the first directly spoken words 15 minutes into the show, before he began sawing on a solo fiddle number.

The crowd saved its most enthusiastic applause for a dance the sextet performed sitting down, a precisely choreographed whirl of arms, legs and feet — with Jon Pilatzke and Stacey playing their fiddles besides. After the other dancers fled for the wings, the Pilatzke brothers served as stagehands, dancing the chairs offstage.

The all-age crowd of about 900 (usher's estimate) drew quiet for quiet times and rollicked at others, a credit to them and to dancers and musicians that understand pacing and clearly love doing what they do. Each distinct personality - members from Ireland and Scotland to Toronto to Vancouver -- shone, all night.

The sound level was comfortable. Lights, handled by a StepCrew staffer, were right on the money. MCFTA's stage crew drew Dan Stacey's praise.

The reviewer would have only two requests: Turn up the volume on the taped biographical vignettes narrated at the start of the show, and tame the band a touch for McCormack's singing. The dancers' stories, and McCormick's exquisite voice, are too good to miss.

StepCrew members are involved in all sorts of projects, making 'Crew appearances relatively rare. The next is the Dublin, Ohio, Irish Fest in early August, and then a 10-day tour of Japan, while they each stay busy in the meantime.

Nobody in Saturday's audience would doubt they have the energy to do it.