

StepCrew's talents, artistry highlighted during Four Arts performance

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Wednesday evening while this country continued its annual obsession with watching American Idol, the audience at The Society of the Four Arts witnessed the 12-member Canadian-based ensemble The StepCrew offer and captivatingly share its own exuberant, delicious and most importantly unpretentious feast of genuinely authentic musical performance in the form of Irish stepdancing, Ottawa Valley stepdancing and modern tap.

At first, the six dancers, dressed in conservative black with occasional splashes of color on top, appear to be almost as if they are kids at a talent show who have wandered into this tiny auditorium space. Then the pulse from the onstage band began and a transformation took place as the three young women and three young men entered their own worlds that contain the sheer joy of the body in motion.

As he danced his brief solo in Evolution, one of the introductory pieces of the first act, shaggy-haired, boy-next-door Nathan Pilatazke remarked in a voiceover that it actually was not the feeling of performing onstage in front of an audience that drew him as a young boy into dance but rather afterwards the “jamming in the parking lot with the others before going to bed.”

That statement sets the tone for the evening: a complete sense of camaraderie, give and take and the always striving to make everybody else on the team look good. Without the tones of grandeur, rigidity, and narcissism that permeates that “other” unnamed and acclaimed international, mega-stepdance production, The Step Crew honestly — and disarmingly — illuminates the relationship of music, song, and footwork with heritage.

For instance, in The Jiggs Set, a simple and wonderful sylvan green forest light cue, immediately brings us down from the high of the opening number to the innate and deeply felt soul of the dance’s country roots, which were engagingly performed by three fiddles.

The rest of the evening then showcased the talents of the ensemble in continuously changing combinations of personnel, including showcasing the talents of vocalist Alyth McCormack and violinist Mark Sullivan.

The first act concluded with Acapella. Here, the band went quiet as feet alone met floor, featuring extraordinarily complex and technically demanding sequences of intricately synchronized footwork. Alas, the very shallow rake of the seating in the auditorium hardly afforded the majority of the audience a proper view to actually see the dancers’ feet below their knees in order to truly appreciate the dazzling speed and precision of the steps. Thanks to outstanding sound engineering, however, the rhythmic complexity of the choreography was stunningly apparent as the adrenaline of the entire company propelled the audience into intermission.

A highlight of this company's modern day interpretations of Celtic music and dance came during the second half in Stix. In this piece each dancer employs a white pole about 5 feet in height and rubber-tipped at each end to percussively knock, beat, thump or otherwise pound into the floor rhythmic accents that are integrated with the tap choreography.

As the dancers traveled the floor in continuously unfolding spatial patterns and tight traffic they traded the poles, twirled them, balanced on them and alluded to Scottish sword dancing in which the poles represent rapiers, with the men placing them flat onto the floor to create the boundaries for small geometric spaces into which the women stepped, flicked their feet as if to drive away evil spirits and defied the danger of the metaphoric sharp edges.

Although the highest caliber of technique and artistry is on display, humility is also a signature of this company's work. It is clear that this quality is grounded in a sense of the music and dance, always in the service of tradition and legacy to honor a rich cultural inheritance.

Such pride was evident when one noticed the white belt of Nathan Pilatzke's brother, Jon, with a bright red Canadian maple leaf stamped on the buckle. Indeed, all that was missing during the rousing ovation at the performance's conclusion was for the entire auditorium to burst into the country's proud anthem of solidarity, "Oh, Canada!"