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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation

STEP AFRiKA!

Step It Up

By Anna Drozdowski

I'm so very glad that I had the good sense to seek out the Step Afrika show after stumbling over the announcement for their performance at the Temple Performing Arts Center. I'd first seen them in D.C., on a mixed bill where they were a beacon of good humor, precision and grace, and they proved these things again in long form last month.

The evening, which ran a bit like my memories of lecture/demonstrations from elementary school, delivered on my early experience and then some. Good humor, check. The audience was exuberant and boisterous, the lobby mobbed (more a product of the ticketing system, it turned out, than a jam-packed house) and the critical mass in the theatre was ready for the whooping and hollerin' and community event that was to come.

But don't let that word community fool you. This was a performance where participation was genuinely encouraged--not awkwardly demanded, but insouciantly and expertly egged on. It was also one of razor sharp precision, where the battery of feet, hands, ankles and sternums were drilled in a way matched only by the Singer sewing machine. These were a good looking and graceful group, and by grace, I mean equal parts sass, attitude and ferocity in technique. This was balanced by big presence, cooperation and a real joy in performing that I'd almost forgotten was possible.

I've fallen into a rut recently of seeing slightly-sad, moody, modern dance. The kind with the pajama-like costume or the frying-pan program notes that tell you how to experience the event. Inevitably it ends up looking like little more than a wet noodle without a reason to pay attention. I can't remember the last time that I saw someone smile onstage in a way that was genuine, or a demonstration of really enjoying the thing they were doing and sharing.

Step Afrika oozes that very simple and long forgotten thing: they showed us that they were having fun and they gave us permission to do the same (literally, on the mic and figuratively with the snap of a finger and the lilt of a hip). I laughed with my seatmates, and not just the one that I came with. I didn't hesitate with the call and response, or fade off after three half-hearted efforts toward clapping in sync. I held my breath as the company managed to top each section with a polyrhythm even more complex than the last, and did so in a way that demanded everyone's concentration and a lot of well-deserved audience appreciation.

I know that what Step Afrika does, their millions of beats per minute, is no small piece of work—it is real work. But you just can't fake it, you can't phone in that kind of infectious enthusiasm that radiates in their focused attention to both feet and faces. So contagious, in fact, that it almost made the few moments of hyper sexualized stereotypes okay. And so at the curtain call, when the artistic director stood up to tell us where each member went to college (props and whistles to Howard) which Greek system they matriculated through (sigma alpha wha?) and what they majored in (biology, law, seminary…) I had to think a minute about what I'm doing in my life that is a damn good time, and helps me knit together my brain and my body.

Seeing the postcard for Kulu Mele's upcoming performance at the Painted Bride reminded me that I have a lot more interest in rhythm than I've been letting on. And that in some circles you're not only allowed to let it show, but if you don't you're denying your own heartbeat.

Step Afrika, Temple Performing Arts Center, October 18, 2012.

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