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REICHHOLD CENTER FAMILY SERIES CONCLUDES WITH DANCE

The Reichhold Center for the Arts' Family Series celebrates the handclapping, foot stomping rhythms of Step Afrika! The dance troupe performs at Island Center on St. Croix on Friday, May 25, 2007 at 8 p.m. and at Reichhold Center on St. Thomas on Saturday, May 26, 2007 at 8 p.m.

Step Afrika! is a unique dance company that merges the African-American phenomenon of "stepping" with South Africa's renowned gumboot dancing. Stepping is a rhythmic dance form that came of age in the 1900's when Black fraternities and sororities developed signature moves. South Africa's gumboot dancing evolved from the stomping patterns of workers in the mining fields.

The fusion of these two dynamic dance forms led to the Step Afrika! International Cultural Festival in Johannesburg, South Africa as a collaboration with The Soweto Dance Theatre. Their first production was in December 1994, a few months after Nelson Mandela's election.

Following the success of the festival, founder Brian Williams launched Step Afrika! in the United States in 1996. Since then, the Washington D.C.-based ensemble tour annually around the U.S. and the world.

While on tour, the nine-member group gives a history of stepping and how it arrived in the Americas.

Among the touring pieces is "Wade," celebrating the merging of gumboot dance, collegiate stepping and tap, all performed to African-American spirituals.

In "Sebenza" or "Work," the gumboot story unravels out of the mining fields of then-apartheid South Africa. The gumboot sounds were used like a Morse code communication device among the workers who could not talk to each other. The steps then evolved as a way for the miners to create rhythms with their boots to pass time. The dance has become one of the most popular in South Africa.

Along with the cultural dances are the more traditional steps. "The Pledge Scene/1989" highlights the pledge process that has traditionally served as the foundation for Black college fraternities (Greek) life since the early 1900's. This production shows the rituals and its varied artistic creations from fraternity greetings, pledge songs or poems, to traditional stepping styles.

Various stepping styles are the subject of "Shhh!" The dance showcases the uniqueness within each of the African-American Greek-letter organizations, such as Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity or Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Additionally, "Shhh!" unconventionally merges the male and female traditions.

Step Afrika!, teaches step to students throughout the year through its "Stepping with Step Afrika!," "Step Up to College," and "Forward Steps" programs, in conjunction with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts' Education Department. In addition, Step Afrika! has been a Kennedy Center Artist-in-Residence since 1998.

Step Afrika! will hold a residency for public and private schools students on Thursday, May 24, 2007 at 9 a.m. at Reichhold Center and Friday, May 25, at 9 a.m. at Island Center. The residency is sponsored by Virgin Islands Council on the Arts.

The Step Afrika! performance is sponsored by First Bank, First Insurance, Marriott Frenchman's Reef Resort, Tropical Shipping, Theodore Tunick Insurance Company, the Virgin Islands Council on the Arts and Innovative Communication Corporation.

Tickets are available at Urban Threadz, Alliance Clothing and UVI Bookstore on St. Croix. On St. Thomas, tickets are at Modern Music, Parrot Fish, UVI Bookstore, V.I. Bridal & Tuxedo, Urban Threadz and the Reichhold Center Box Office at 693-1559.

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