



Upper Elementary | Performance Guide



Walton Arts Center



Step Afrika!

Stepping is a dance form of synchronized percussive movement, singing, speaking, chanting and drama that melds folk traditions with popular culture. Developed by African American fraternities and sororities, stepping is now practiced worldwide. As the first professional company dedicated to this new tradition, Step Afrika! shares its history while promoting themes of teamwork and cultural understanding.

CC6 RL: Key Ideas and Details 3; Craft and Structure 5 and 6; Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7 and 9.
CC6W: Research to Build and Present Knowledge 8. CC6SL: Comprehension and Collaboration 1d and 2. CC6L: Knowledge of Language 3a. Arkansas Learning Standards in Social Studies, Theatre, Music and Dance.

Ready, Set, Show!



“If you can talk, you can sing. If you can walk, you can dance.”
— African proverb

The Art Form

Stepping is a unique dance tradition created by African American college students in which the body is used as an instrument to create intricate rhythms and sounds through a combination of footsteps, claps and spoken word. The tradition grew out of the song and dance rituals practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities in the 1940s and was a way for members to communicate pride and allegiance to their group.

Stepping was inspired by the traditions of Africa, where dance and music have been an essential part of everyday life for all people. Both young and old dance and make music to connect with their traditions, and to encourage crops and to mourn their dead. Stepping also draws from elements of gymnastics, tap dance, marching and even stunt work. Step dancers often use props such as canes, rhythm sticks and blindfolds.

The Artists

Step Afrika! is a dance company founded in 1994 and based in Washington, D.C. The first professional company in the world dedicated to promoting understanding and appreciation for the dance tradition of stepping, *Step Afrika!* employs the art form as an educational tool for young people worldwide. As a cultural ambassador for the United States, *Step Afrika!* represents the nation at events around the world through special invitations from American embassies.

The annual *Step Afrika! International Cultural Festival* in Johannesburg, South Africa, is the culmination of a ten-year collaboration with the Soweto Dance Theatre that unites artists from around the world in dialogue and dance performance. The company has been featured on CNN, BET, PBS & NPR and has performed in North & South America, Europe, Africa and the Caribbean.

The Performance

Knee slaps, flat-footed stomps, sandpaper drags, and resounding claps rattle the rafters whenever *Step Afrika!* takes the stage. Intricate kicks, stomps and claps fill the air with rhythm. Part body percussion and part poetry slam, the performance displays teamwork, team spirit and honorable competition. The company shares the history of stepping while emphasizing pride in teamwork, dedication to skill building, and the importance of education.

Learning Activities

Quick Write

Every culture has traditions of food, music, dance, clothing and other arts. Step dance is a way for people to celebrate and share their culture with an audience. Ask students to reflect on cultural traditions with the following writing prompts:

- >What are some of the cultural traditions you celebrate?
- >What other cultural celebrations or traditions are you familiar with?
- >What can you learn about people by experiencing the art that they create and perform?
- >How do these different art forms help people to express their emotions? To tell their stories?

Analyze

Watch to see how the dancers make music with their bodies by stomping, clapping and vocalizing. The collegiate step tradition employs props, creative formations and

chants as well as references to traditional African dance forms. Look for movement that relates the following dance traditions:

- >The South African gumboot dance is a dance where the dancers wear rubber boots (gumboots) that are hit with their bare hands to make rhythms (patterns of sound).
- >South African Zulu dance features athletic kicks, energetic movements, and words in the Zulu language.

Feel the Rhythm

In stepping, the performers communicate with each other, much like the drummer and the dancer in African dance. The communication is passionate and emotionally charged, often telling a story or communicating a feeling. Rhythms are an essential part of this communication. Divide students into small groups and ask them to create a rhythm signature to communicate something about them as a team.

When creating a rhythm signature, follow this sequence:

- >Think individually.
- >Share with the team.
- >Plan with the team.
- >Create with the team.

Students can use their bodies by clapping, stomping, or snapping their fingers. Encourage students to experiment with the sounds and patterning of their rhythm. After developing a rhythm, have each group share with the class. Use the following questions in discussion.

- >How did the tempo of the rhythm affect what you felt as a performer or as an observer?
- >How did the dynamics (loudness or softness) of the sound affect you?
- >What feeling did the rhythm convey?
- >What did the rhythm signature communicate about each team?

Performance Vocabulary

>**Beats** are sounds that repeat again and again in a regular pattern. Beats are everywhere, from the ticking of a clock to the sound of footsteps. When people clap their hands to music, they sound the beats.

>**Rhythm** is a pattern of long and short sounds organized by beat, accent, and tempo.

>**Accents** are beats that are sounded more strongly than others. In most American music, beats are arranged in groups of two or three with the accent on the first beat. In African music, the accent is usually on the second beat.

>**Tempo** is the speed at which beats are played. There is a tempo for every song. Imagine a song you know well. How would it sound if it were played much faster or slower than you're used to hearing it?

>**Hard stepping** is a rapid and intense form of stepping.

>**Show Dogging** is a part of a step routine that occurs when someone breaks the synchronization and unity.

>**Signature Step** is a step that embodies the character of a fraternity or sorority and is nationally known by all its chapters.

>**Tribute or salute** is to imitate the steps or style of another fraternity or sorority in a positive way.

>**Crack, dis or cut** is to make fun of another fraternity or sorority to dramatize a step competition.

>**Retrospect** is a step that celebrates a fraternity or sorority's history or favorite steps.



Learning Activities

Theme

Many things inspire choreographers to create dances. Often the music is the inspiration. Sometimes the choreographer is inspired by a story or a visual image. Generally there is an overarching theme to which all the parts of the dance relate.

Ask students to look at a work of visual art to imagine how that image could inspire the creation of a dance.

- >What shapes, colors or objects do you see?
- >How does this image make you feel?
- >What action words (verbs) do you see in this image?
- >How is movement implied in the line, shape or subject of the image?
- >What seems to be the central idea or theme of the work as a whole?

Ask students to think about themes and ideas while they find their own space in the room that will allow a freedom of movement. Select and play a piece of music that relates to the tone of the visual art work. Ask students to start moving appropriately through space. Have them think about the image and how it could inform their movement. Now, ask each student to settle on one movement that they feel represents their feeling about the image. Have them repeat this movement continuously until it feels fluid and focused. Direct students to work in groups of four to learn each individual movement, and collaborate on a combination of the movements to create a dance phrase. Students can work together to refine the transitions between each movement. Share and analyze each phrase as a whole class by asking the following questions:

- >What shapes and images were seen during each group's performance?
- >What emotions were present in any of the dance phrases?
- >Was it clear to see what inspired each group's performance?

Call and Response

Call and Response is a traditional African storytelling device. Call and response occurs when a leader calls out words to which others respond; call and response can also be danced. StepAfrika! teaches the following call and response sequence to students around the country.

Leader: Attention!

Class: Huh!

Leader: Brothers and sisters!

Class: Yes!

Leader: Brothers and sisters!

Class: Yes!

Now use the following movements instead of words.

Leader: Stomp foot once

Class: Clap 4 times

Leader: Stomp foot twice

Class: Take 4 steps forward

Leader: Stomp foot 3 times

Class: Clap 4 times

Leader: Stomp foot 4 times

Class: Take 4 steps backward

Analyze

Look

What movements did you see that created a playful atmosphere?

How did you think the costumes helped the dance?

How would you have dressed the dancers?

How did the dances include props, costumes, lighting and the movement itself?

What did you see develop in the dance?

Who were the characters?

Did you identify specific activities?

Listen

How does the rhythm add to or work with the visual and physical elements of the dance?

Did the rhythm help change the mood of each section? How so?

Did you hear any culturally specific music or themes in any of the pieces?

Think and Feel

Did you feel the rhythm in your body?

What do you think the dances were about?

What images did you see within the dances?

What kinds of stories did the dances depict?





Learn More Online

<http://www.stepafrika.org/home.htm>

<http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Roots-of-Stepping---African-Dance&id=1017941>

<http://www.africanside.com/discussions-about-africa-and-african-news/african-dance-introduction-african-dancing>

http://dance.lovetoknow.com/History_of_African_Dance

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1524911>

Learn More in Your Library

Fine, Elizabeth. *Soulstepping: African American Step Shows*.

Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

Haskins, James. *Black Dance in America*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Junior Books, 1990.

Malone, Jacqui. *Steppin' On the Blues*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996.

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Walton Arts Center

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