

Study Guide for Teachers



Soul Steps

presented by
Young Audiences
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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Soul Steps uses the body as a percussive instrument in this interactive performance that celebrates the history of African-American step dance while inviting students to participate in a rhythmic jam! Infusing step choreography with today's hottest beats, steppers perform complex bodywork and engage students in interactive breakdowns of step moves that allow them to be a part of the action on stage.

Bringing history to life, Soul Steps also demonstrates South African gumboot dancing, considered to be the early roots of step dance, and explores the development of step among African-American fraternities and sororities.

LEARNING GOALS

Students will

- Learn about the development of step among African-American fraternities and sororities and the influence of popular music on step dance.
- Explore South African gumboot dancing and its connection to step dance.
- Participate in rhythmic and verbal call and response patterns and learn basic step movements.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

Step is a dance of unity and strength. During the 1920s, as African-Americans struggled against racism and inequality, African-American fraternities and sororities on college campuses gathered to perform stomps, claps, and chants that demonstrated their unity and celebrated their identity.

This legacy has early roots in the gold mines of South Africa in the late 1800s. While working in the mines, black miners discovered a new language through rhythm.

Far from their families, they worked all day in hot, dark mines that were filled with contaminated water that made them sick. Their supervisors did not want to spend the money to drain the mines, so they made them wear tall boots, known as "gumboots," to protect the feet of the workers.

While working they were not permitted to communicate with one another. If they were caught talking, their supervisors would beat them or kill them. To survive, rhythm became their voice. The miners would slap the sides of the gumboots to create rhythms that expressed their frustrations, desires, and longing for home.

BEFORE THE PROGRAM

Writing Prompts

- What is one style of dance have you been exposed to? Where were you when you experienced it? How did the performance make you feel? What does watching people dance make you think about?
- “What I like most about dance is...”
- What frightens me the most about dancing is...”

AFTER THE PROGRAM

1. Think you can Step?

- Stand up.
- Clap out a beat only using your hands.
- Now apply that same beat to your body. (Hint: You can clap, hit your legs, and stomp your feet to make the beat.)
- Try to switch things up by using the space around you. Move around either forward, backwards, or in a circle.
- Work with levels, get low to the floor or try to add a jump.
- For older students, after creating a beat, try working with one another to layer rhythms and perform more than one beat at a time. One student or a group of students can perform one rhythm, while another student or group of students performs a complimentary rhythm.

2. I am...

Like the miners told their story through gumboot dancing, let's find our own story. Write a paragraph about what you would want your dance to be about. It can be about anything that represents you, from your family history to the things that make you special. What do you want your steps to say?

3. Words and Rhythms

Find a favorite poem, piece of literature, or song and create rhythms to symbolize the meaning. Begin by writing down a few key words that you feel are most important from the text. Next, think of a movement, using your body, that captures the meaning of those words. Finally, add stomps or claps while performing the movement. (If you choose to work in pairs, one student can layer the step with the original words.)

VOCABULARY WORDS

Step: A percussive dance, originating among African-American fraternities and sororities, that uses the entire body to create rhythms.

Gumboot Dance: A South African dance, also known as “isicathulo,” that creates rhythms by slapping the sides of the dancers’ boots.

South Africa: A country on the continent of Africa.

Fraternity: An organization consisting of only males on a college campus who consider themselves to be part of a brotherhood that works to better the community.

Sorority: An organization consisting of only women on a college campus who consider themselves to be part of a sisterhood that works to better the community.

Call and Response: A pattern that involves one person or a group of people shouting a word or phrase, or performing a beat, and having others respond with a word, phrase, or beat.

ARTIST INFORMATION

Soul Steps speaks the language of rhythm. Founded in 2005 by dancer/choreographer Maxine Lyle and based in NY/NJ, they are dedicated to celebrating the African-American tradition known as “stepping.” They have toured all over the world, bringing step everywhere from Brooklyn to Kosovo. They were featured on Good Day NY, CBS 2 News, Paris Fashion Week, and the Diesel Jeans viral video, “The A-Z of Dance.” Blending hip-hop rhythms, complex bodywork, and call and response, Soul Steps has been described in the *NY Times* as giving a performance that’s “electric and joyous.”

RESOURCES

The Divine Nine: Sororities and Fraternities on HBCU Campuses

www.hbculifestyle.com/the-divine-9-sororities-and-fraternities-on-hbcu-campuses

South African Gumboot Dance

www.worldartswest.org/plm/guide/printablepages/gumboot.pdf

Gumboot Dancers

www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0Q51WVrR40

Step Performance from *So You Think You Can Dance?*

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GChyifblvU