



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

Irish dance, hip-hop find a mutual groove Teens to perform for First Night

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By April Simpson, Globe Staff | December 30, 2006

Dancing to the rapid beats of Missy Elliott's "Lose Control," about 50 adolescent girls in T-shirts, shorts, and stretch pants confidently rolled their hips and swung their arms. Between the latest hip-hop moves, they seamlessly transitioned into a treble reel, a fast-paced Irish step dance.

When the disc jockey encouraged listeners to throw their hands in the air, the young women locked arms in two intersecting lines. With stiff upper bodies, they used fancy footwork to move in a complete circle. Yet when facing the audience, they let their arms naturally swing side to side as they performed a complicated heel-toe.

The dancers, a mix of two troupes, were fusing two unlikely forms, hip-hop and Irish, in preparation for their performance tomorrow night at Boston's First Night celebration. The dancers come from OrigiNation, which specializes in hip-hop, modern, and African dance, and the O'Shea Chaplin Academy of Irish Dance.

The dancers, ages 11 to 17 from Boston and neighboring suburbs, come from different socioeconomic backgrounds and are learning the value of cross-cultural collaboration, their instructors say.

"You're always going to have to learn to work with people who don't look like you or come from where you come from," said Shaumba Dibinga, founding artistic director of OrigiNation. "This is a huge team building exercise for them."

And, the teens had only four rehearsals to perfect one another's moves.

Lois Roach, a project manager for First Night, helped unite the two companies in 2002 after a trip to Ireland introduced her to Afro-Celt music -- modern dance rhythms with African and Celtic influences.

Roach said she wanted to bring together children who may not have otherwise interacted. O'Shea-Chaplin has 15 sites throughout Massachusetts, and primarily instructs Catholic school students. OrigiNation, located in Roxbury, offers programming for all youths but focuses on what Dibinga calls "underserved neighborhoods," including Roxbury, Mattapan, and Dorchester, which have had severe cuts to their public school arts programs.

Dibinga said she and Lisa Chaplin, co-director of the Irish dance school, are "strong believers" in young people learning from those outside of their everyday environment.

"I've seen [hip-hop] before, and it looked really hard and seemed really different than Irish step," said Catherine Abbott, 15, of Quincy. "But when we don't get some moves, we teach other."

Since the dancers began practicing the new choreography, many were challenged. In Irish jig dancing, the arms are locked at one's side, while in hip-hop, dancers freely move their arms and exhibit facial expressions.

"Not everyone has the same idea of what dance is," said Sayi Kabongo of Braintree.

Shamari Ervin of Mattapan added that "when you combine" the two forms "it's like a whole different dance."

Observing them, Roach said, "We're always hearing about what's going wrong in the city, but I can point at any given time to what's going right."

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