

'Riverdance' at the Orpheum

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In the front left corner of the Historic Orpheum Theatre in Minneapolis sat a large pyramid of musical instruments and empty chairs. These chairs would soon be filled by members of the "Riverdance" Orchestra.

This talented group would recreate melodies that can only be described as hauntingly beautiful. All of the music was composed especially for "Riverdance" by Bill Whelan. These enchanting strains would come from a unique blend of such distinctive instruments as a fiddle, uilleann pipes and low whistles, soprano and alto saxophones. Other instruments adding to the "Riverdance" music were a gadulka, kaval, gaida, accordion, electric and acoustic guitars, drums and percussion, a bass guitar, bodhran, darabukkas, dunbeg, ouda and keyboards.

While extraordinary dance technique is generally the first thing that comes to one's mind when the name "Riverdance" is mentioned, the music is just as integral. During the "Riverdance" showcase at the Orpheum, which will run through April 5, audience members can enjoy the bewitching tale of Ireland's history through dance, instrumental and vocal music and video and slide projection — with a little gymnastic ability thrown in for good measure.

"Riverdance" was originally created and produced by Moya Doherty in 1994 for a Eurovision Song contest. The roots of

"Riverdance," however, can be traced back to 1893, when the Gaelic League was formed to revive the use of the Irish language. Special camps were formed to teach schoolchildren about their culture. At these camps, the children learned ceils, a kind of campfire dance of Ireland that showcased the step dancing from which "Riverdance" evolved. The straight, unmoving upper bodies are relatively unique to Irish step dancing. This type of dance was created to spite the oppressing forces during the time Irish culture was being oppressed. Dancing was forbidden, so the Irish invented a style of dance that could be easily hidden from those only able to see the top half of the dancer, so that the dance could be excused as movement rather than dance.

The "Riverdance" Irish Dance Troupe, who currently pass on the Irish tradition of step dancing, is entirely made up of World Champion Irish Dancers from Ireland, Britain, The United States, Canada and Australia. Eileen Martin and Pat Roddy are the lead dancers in the Minneapolis run, but the troupe can account for hundreds of championships and awards.

The main theme of the "Riverdance" performance is the progressive story of Ireland's history and how that culture changed throughout history and interacted with new cultures. It is a way for Irish history to be retold and the heritage to be creatively passed on, as well as a way for voices of the culture to be heard, understood and appreciated.



Photo by Joan Marcus courtesy Merle Frimark Associates

Eileen Martin and Pat Roddy in a scene from "Riverdance."

The March 13 performance at Minneapolis featured the technically superior footwork and outstanding music of the production, which were enhanced by three screens on stage. Various Irish-looking landscapes, celestial phenomena and other scenery were projected onto these screens, which acted as narrative and added to the Irish atmosphere. The landscapes shown on the screens were absolutely breathtaking. The visual art portrayed and the music kept the audience captivated.

The passion of Ireland's tale portrayed by everyone involved in the production was exemplified by Eileen Ivers, an astounding fiddler who played with great feeling. The well-constructed and amazingly-performed show helped some audience members appreciate their Irish roots and taught others more about another culture that is different from their own.

In the second half of the show, there was an especially outstanding number called "Trading Taps," which shows the interaction of the Irish reel dancers and African

American tap dancers. What started out as a somewhat friendly competition of dance styles and abilities turned into an amazing group of dancers who could perform the other culture's dance and do other tricks within the dance, including flips, splits and toe dancing. Another culture was represented with a Spanish Flamenco dance, which was one of the few dances that did not depend on the special Harlequin floor which travels around with the production. The similarities in the footwork of the Irish reel and those of the other cultures' dances were highlighted in a very effective way.

Aside from the superior music and dance abilities, as well as the fascinating story of Ireland's history which was enhanced by slides or videos, the overall theme of the "Riverdance" performance seemed to be the oneness and interrelated qualities of all cultures.

To view this unique and entrancing history lesson for yourself, visit the Orpheum Theatre in downtown Minneapolis before April 5. Tickets for "Riverdance" can be purchased by calling (612) 339-7007.



Photo by Michael Le Poer Trench courtesy Merle Frimark Associates

A scene from "Riverdance" which focuses on the evolution of Irish dance and its influences on other cultures.