



TAPPING INTO A RICH VEIN OF TALENT

How Pirate Productions put together Stepping Out

Pirate Productions are putting on another ambitious show in November – a production of Stepping Out by Richard Harris. Duncan Roberts talked to director Karim Hyatt and choreographer Dominique Vitali about the show. Steve Eastwood too photos at last Sunday's rehearsal.

Get Karim Hyatt started on Stepping Out and there's no stopping him. A chat with the director of Pirates' latest show has me furiously scribbling away trying to keep up with Hyatt's high-tempo patter – if he has managed to transpose his energy and enthusiasm into the show, then the audience is in for a real treat. He is even enthusiastic about the enthusiasm of choreographer Dominique Vitali – so much so, in fact, that Vitali has to calm Hyatt down. "Actually, I had to calm Dominique down," says Hyatt as he explains the inception of the show.

Having observed Vitali work on Pirates' pantomime last year, Hyatt asked the choreographer if he would be interested in helping him put on Stepping Out, the show adapted from the Richard Harris play about a group of amateur tap-dancers who are inspired to perform in public by their teacher, a former professional dancer. "I was thinking; if Dominique can get me

to dance, then anything is possible." Having sown the seed in Vitali's mind, the choreographer just couldn't wait to get started. Indeed, when the pair sat down to work out the timing of the production – already slated for November this year – it became clear that they had no time to waste, especially as they were going to have to get the cast to learn to tap dance to a high standard.

The show tells the story of nine people – one man and eight women – each with a problem, who join a tap-dancing class in a shabby church hall. Their teacher and her accompanist have their own problems, not the least of which is to keep their respective tempers while trying to teach their difficult charges and get them ready to perform in front of an audience.

Initial auditions were held in February, and proved to be something of a shock when around 80 hopefuls turned up – an unprecedented number for the company. "We only had about two minutes each to assess their potential," says Hyatt. Eventually, they managed to whittle the 80 down to 26. That group then spent several months learning the rudiments of tap-dancing and getting to grips with some complicated choreography. "They worked their socks off," says Karim, "and it was one of the hardest things I've had to do to call those who didn't make the cut."



For your information

- Stepping Out is performed at Gasperich Parish Hall from 17 to 22 November at 8 p.m. each evening.
- Tickets (Euro 12) are available from Janice Allgrove, telephone 021181767, email jallgrove@hotmail.com.
- The cast includes: Allison Kingsbury; Liz Turner; Amanda Hyatt; Maiken Thandrup; Clare Abbott; Cíara Barker; Lindsay Crouch; Valerie Scott; Zeta Field & David Mittel
- Dominique Vitali is putting together a major show for October next year, under the working title "A Musical Celebration". There will be open auditions early next year, but he is now looking for a production team. Anyone interested can contact him at: dvitali@mobilux.lu



Dominique Vitali (left) and Karim Hyatt at last week's rehearsal

"Their commitment has been astounding," says Hyatt who scheduled rehearsals twice a week since April, with cast members working on their steps in their spare time as well. Vitali concurs. He was amazed to see the progress his charges made over the summer months – the results of which were seen by audiences at the Pirates cabaret show in September, which climaxed with a routine by the full complement of 26 dancers. Hyatt says he considers the cast of the show to be all 26. "If I could have changed the show, I would have done to fit them all in."

In the end, he selected his final cast of nine by watching how the actors worked with each other and choosing a group whose chemistry really gelled. He says they now have the confidence and acting abilities he requires, and that the final few weeks of rehearsal are just a matter of fine-tuning. Vitali, who says the group basically learned in six months what it would usually take three years at dance school, is ecstatic at the way the nine cast members are working together and have gained in confidence. "At first they were overawed by the routine I suggested for the finale, but they have calmed down and are now spot on."

In addition, Hyatt has a technical team that he says is as close to perfection as you can get in Luxembourg. It includes, among others, Chris Wilson as stage manager and John Brigg in charge of lighting. Furthermore, caretaker of the venue, André, has been a diamond at providing refreshments for rehearsals and solving any problems with the hall. "Basically, if the show is shit, it's my fault," says the director.

He chose the play because it offered women the chance to play a number of lead roles. "I think women really miss out in local amateur theatre," Hyatt says. "The best and meatiest roles are always reserved for men." It is strange then, that *Stepping Out* follows hot on the heels of the New World Theatre Club's sell-out production of *The Vagina Monologues*. This hasn't escaped Hyatt, but, he says, his show is written for a general audience, whereas *The Vagina Monologues* was definitely aimed at women. It is a comedy, but the underlying feeling is that the characters are real people with real problems, he explains. "Every character has something and undergoes a journey throughout the play," he says. "I have tried to put the characters in stark relief, maybe slightly exaggerated to emphasise the emotion involved."

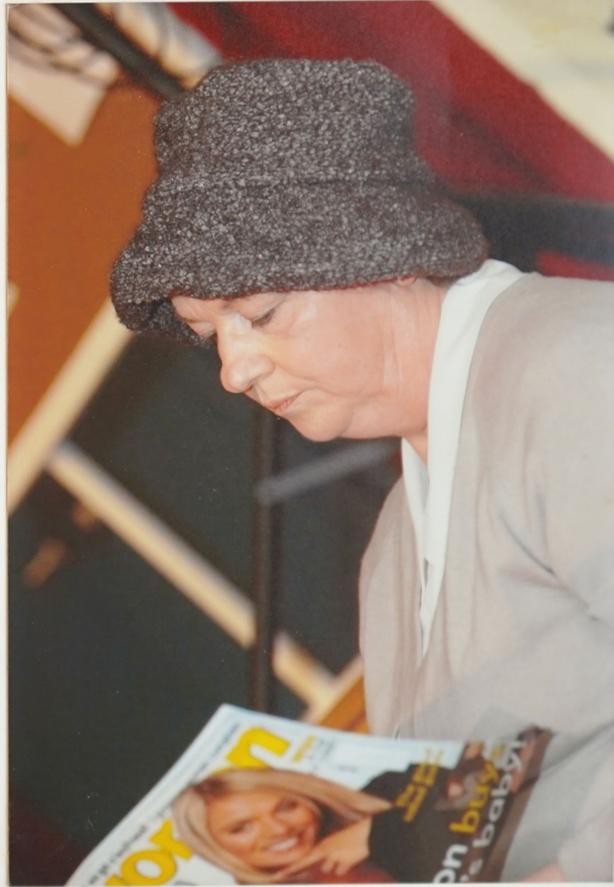
The process over the last six months has, then, in many ways mirrored the story of the play – turning novice tap-dancers (lead Alison Kingsbury was the only cast member with any significant previous experience) into a tight, well-drilled and exuberant chorus. "We've almost become like a family," says Hyatt.



Photos: Steve Easton



Lindsay, Clare, Valerie, Amanda, Ciara, Alison, David, Maiken.



Liz as Mrs Fraser



Ciara, Alison, David, Zeta



Maikea & Lindsay



Amanda, Valerie, Zeta



Ciara, Valerie, Lindsay, Maikea



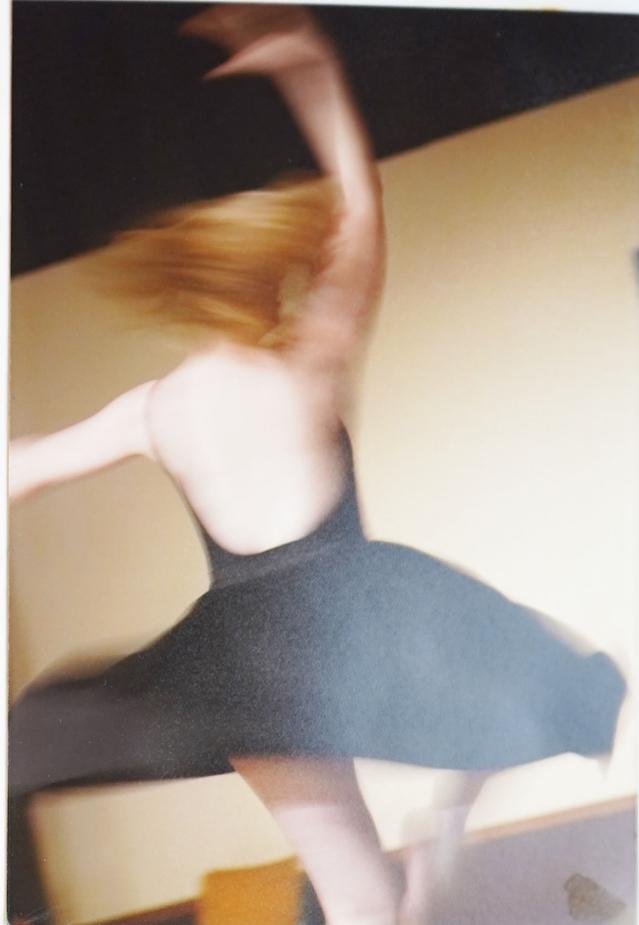
Tap classes





The sad stories are told





Alison does a beautiful solo



David Liz



Liz fills in while the others change for.....



The finale!



Sat. Nov. 22nd

Dear Liz,

Congratulations!

You were superb, why have you been hiding your acting light under a bushel all these years?

Campbell especially liked the bit in front of the curtain and my favourite was your inebriated scene. Now you've come out from behind the piano, you'll have to continue!

Love Barbara.

Finally came the Mavis Turner Tappers, resplendent in Blue shiny jackets, made I'm told by one of the members of the group. Mavis had certainly worked hard with this group and their enthusiasm showed. The lines, occasionally crooked were quickly straightened. The one gentleman, suddenly flying off the stage in an uncontrolled frenzy into someone's arms soon recovered and returned to do a sort of windmill thing ! One young lady in a zealous display of arm waving nearly fell off the stage, luckily only losing her hat. The smiles of obvious joy and a devotion to tap, were there for all to see. The set pieces performed by quartets of dancers were amazing. The lightness and spring in the step were a tribute to the many hours spent rehearsing in the local Church Hall. The finale, when one very excited member managed to end up the wrong side of the curtain, brought the house down. The only negative comment I heard was from some grumpy old dear sitting behind me, complaining about the music. She apparently thought it would have been better with a piano ! I don't think so my dear !! The stewards finally removed her when she started singing 'Happy Birthday' to Mendleson, was it or was it Peter Mandelson, I really don't know ? The whole show was a great success and the Mavis Turner Tappers were the best item. I look forward to seeing them next year, when I'm sure they will be even better. Just one comment, I think it might have looked better if the jackets all finished at the same height above the ground, just a small niggle, from a professional !!

Skit for cast party written by
Geoff Stevens