

Review: The Smiling Boot transcends cultural boundaries

By Emily Criqui - Special to the Journal-World

Sunday, November 16, 2003

It was a foot-tapping, knee-whacking, back-in-the-dance-hall, twirling, kind of evening at the Lied Center Friday, when an enthusiastic audience responded to La Bottine Souriante's invitation to dance like chickens: "Just flap your arms -- like this -- and wag your behind -- like this -- like a chicken, 'cause it's a chicken, no, not a kitchen, a chicken song!"

At times jazzy, funky and even down right borderline honky-tonk, the music remained mostly accessible. Each style -- French, Irish, Cajun, Cuban, Puerto Rican, etc. -- lent easily into the next; yet the band resisted over-blending and so avoided the world music mire of mishmash. And though they sang in French and much of their English exposition got lost in spotty translations, they refused to let the audience get away.

This Quebecois/Canadian group, whose name means "The Smiling Boot," generated an infectious energy that the audience could not ignore. Sandy Silva's dancing feet drove a fantastic whirling, stomping percussion beat that communicated celebration across cultural boundaries.

But it was not easy. Early in the first half, the horn section, comprised of Jean Fréchette, Robert Ellis, André Verreault and Jocelyn Lapointe, tried to involve the reticent audience in unison handclapping. They resisted, content to merely watch the show from their comfortable seats. Efforts to include the audience continued to fall short throughout the first half, and the performers were forced to draw energy from each other.

Then, just before intermission, the band asked the audience to stand and participate in a "party song." Not only did they stand, but they clapped. And then

some bopped, and some swayed, but none were brave enough to answer the call to dance downstage -- yet.

In the second half, the audience loosened up and gave in to the band's intoxicating rhythms. And when the group next summoned the crowd to its feet, people came forward, dancing their way to the orchestra pit.

Silva, the group's percussive dancer, was definitely the favorite of the evening. Lithe and strong, her body stood as a concrete metaphor for the music. She came out wearing denim appliquéd with red flames and beating out an alluring rhythm on her chest and thighs. Later she donned red velour for a funky Afro-Cuban set. Still later she changed to French Country for a sublime violin and dance duo.

Silva appeared to draw sound from the very strings, wrapping the rhythms around her arms, pulling them down through her shoulders, torso, thighs and tapping them out of her feet.

By the time Silva reappeared in a pin-striped business suit, high-kicking and sashaying with the horn section, audience members were tapping their own feet, and knees, and standing on tip-toe, if need be, to see her.

Of course, La Bottine Souriante was not a one-woman show. Éric Beaudry's funky mandolin underscored by his amplified feet, tapping out the clave, set down a grinning salsa groove. Later, Beaudry on guitar and André Brunet on violin played a plaintive duet. And the comic Pierre-Luc Dupuis, the group's front man, was impressive on the button accordion, harmonica and scatting vocals.

La Bottine Souriante has been hailed as "The best band in the world" by the U.S.-based Dirty Linen magazine. And after two standing ovations and an encore Friday night, the band converted some new believers.