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REVIEW: 'Irish Homecoming' stages a triumph

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IOWA CITY — "An Irish Homecoming" is part bonfire, part pep rally and a major victory for performers and audience alike.

The Celtic music and dance celebration filled The Englert Theatre with a footstompin', hand-clapping hooley Thursday night for the first of two sold-out performances from Hancher's relocated season.

Brogues, jigs and feet flew through the air for 2 1/2 hours, led by the New York-based Cherish the Ladies and its sassy Irish whistle maven, Joanie Madden. Joining the six marvelous ladies onstage were powerhouse singer Maura O'Connell; hilarious singer/guitarist Dermot Henry; mesmerizing accordion/bouzour duo Bohola; seven champion stepdancers; and five high-stepping lasses from Claddagh Irish Dancers in Dubuque, clad in their gorgeous solo dresses.

That was nearly more talent than the Englert stage could hold. I'm sure the dancers would have liked a little more room for the flinging finale, but it was really special to experience this show in such an intimate setting. Being close enough to see Cherish's Mirella Murray smile blissfully as she played her accordion, seated next to Bohola's Jimmy Keane who played his accordion with his eyes closed, lost in the reverie, added an unexpected layer of enjoyment. And to see the flying footwork up close was beyond thrilling.

Throughout the show, the masterful musicianship, from jubilant jigs and rollicking reels to heart-wrenching ballads, made it hard to sit still. Several songs sparked spontaneous bursts of hand-clapping, hoots and hollers — not surprising from a region home to the lively County Johnson Irish, SaPaDaPaSos and Wylde Neptiles.

The songs just kept rolling from the tireless players. Even though the groups have separate identities and established repertoires, the most amazing thing was the way they could blend seamlessly when playing as one. They traded melodies and harmonies, stepping into the spotlight and just as easily slipping into supporting roles, offering their own spontaneous stomps and whoops after especially fiery passages.

Just as captivating were the quiet moments, when Michelle Burke wrapped her delicate, pure voice around a mournful melody or O'Connell sang of the trials Irish immigrants faced through famine and perilous seas.

O'Connell and Madden complement each other's larger-than-life style, making saucy asides, filling the stage with theatrical exuberance. And even when O'Connell is singing the Irish blues, she has a smile on her face that lights up the room.

As wonderful as all the stepdancers are, a special nod must go to Canadian Dan Stacey, who not only dances with amazing precision, agility and vigor, but plays a mean fiddle, as well. And even when he's seated, his shoes

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(Rounder Records)

Cherish the Ladies, performing as part of Hancher's "An Irish Homecoming" at The Englert Theatre, includes (back row, from left) Joanie Madden, Kathleen Boyle, Michelle Burke and Mirella Murray and (from row, from left) Roisin Dillon and Mary Coogan. The show opened Thursday and continues tonight at 7:30. Both performances were sold out.

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