

MUSIC: Group finds beauty in trash

SCRAP ARTS MUSIC: Audience can't help but absorb performers' vibe.

By DAWNELL SMITH
Anchorage Daily News

Published: February 13, 2006

When Scrap Arts Music got into the Phonk on Friday, the ice rink in Town Square started to melt. The roads got slushy. People unbuttoned their coats and peered around for the source of heat.

The audience inside the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts knew where the fire started. Right there on stage, with drumsticks and sculptural scrap instruments as varied as cymbal fragments, steel drums, gongs and artillery shells. The five performers flung themselves from instrument to instrument, gliding on wheeled drums or jumping, whirling and crouching from place to place.

All five performers have a rich background in percussion, but several played soccer for many years too. At times, their performance posed the question, is percussion a music style or sport?

Their sound went from muscular to sweet, tender to outrageous, goofy to lithe. A trancelike pall fell over the Atwood Concert Hall, and no one cared much that children screamed and laughed and bounced in their seats. Who wouldn't?

At intermission, a teenage girl rapped the seat next to her like a hand drum and a boy about the same age re-enacted a drum solo from a seat on the mezzanine.

Scrap Arts Music has energy in spades and passes it on. They make music accessible, not precious. They play with an immediacy, athleticism and delicacy that move through the bones before getting to the brain.

Though they value their drums, no performer takes ownership of them. They leap from one to another, toss them aside and finish the show by throwing their last few instruments on stage after they exit.

The group's founder, Gregory Kozak, built the instruments from scrap metal, hose, playground equipment, plumbing fixtures and other discards from construction sites and junk yards in Vancouver, British Columbia, the group's home base.

Using drums made of scrap material is not just an artistic choice but a political one. When you see junk transformed into this kind of visual and aural magnificence, you think about rummaging through the recycling bin and hanging onto those few boxes of

household appliances. Come to think of it, Alaska is loaded with scrap potential, much of it in our yards.

Yet for all the show's physicality, political implications and humor, the performers touched much deeper emotional notes in their quieter pieces, gracefully turning discarded objects into vehicles of wistfulness and loveliness.

In the opening number, Kozak used a cymbal fragment to play a lonely scrap tune. Soon after, the others joined him, using lines of ABS pipe as instruments.

But not long into the show, Scrap Arts blasted into several explosive numbers on instruments with names such as the Humunga drum, Junk-on-a-Stick, Scorpion drums and the Plankophone. Their arms and sticks moved like jackhammers as their feet bounced and leaped through compositions such as "Engine of the Future," "Phonk" and "Synthesoid Plasmatron."

After a lively number, the players stood in a line as if to bow to the crowd, but then they bent down to pick up their Annoy-o-phones and began inflating the balloons like circus buffoons. With silly instruments in hand, the performers clowned around with whining, wheezing sounds until they popped their balloons in unison and marched off for the next number.

Much later, Kozak played one of the more surprising and arresting pieces on a tall string/percussion instrument, the Mojo, that rolled on stage like an IV stand. He played the Mojo like a harp or bass, plucking strings in a melodic way, then using drum sticks to sustain the resonance of both beat and string. That an instrument could come from the union of a sailboard mast, steel bowls, wood, aluminum scraps, and piano and bass strings encapsulates the magic and artistry of the show.

Scrap Arts performed only once in Anchorage but spent time doing workshops, scouring for junk and visiting other communities in the state. Alaska Junior Theater, the presenter of the show, is also collaborating with Rare Earth and several other groups to develop scrap arts bands in Alaska.

Come spring, we can see what magic comes of Alaska scrap when the first of those bands plays downtown on Earth Day, April 22.

In the meantime, keep an ear to the junk yard. You never know what you might hear.

Daily News arts reporter Dawnell Smith can be reached at 257-4587 or dsmith@adn.com.

Review: Scrap Arts Music, Alaska Junior Theater