The NB RebELLeS practice their gumbotting routine. The dance was the creation of slaves in South Africa, and the RebELLeS use this powerful tool of colonialism, patriarchy, and all other types of oppression that plague society. Photo by Marie-Christine Allard.

By MARIE-CHRISTINE ALLARD

There are many uses for rubber boots. The obvious ones are to keep your feet dry when it rains or to keep them clean while doing yard work. Some even use them asUFFE shoes. But the Fredericton-based group the NB RebELLeS have found a new use: challenging capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and all other types of oppression that plague society. They are feminists; they are synchronized; and they call out oppressors to the catchy rhythm of stomping and gumbotting.

As any of the Gumbotting RebELLeS would explain, the physical form of gumbotting as a dance is only one aspect of this tradition. “If you wanted a sterile description of gumbotting, it is stomping, slapping, and clapping; but it is so much more than that,” says the group. The richness comes from the symbolic value of its history, and its use as a tool of communication and resistance,” stated Carolyn, a gumbotteer in the troupe.

Gumbotting started in the mines of South Africa when slaves were given rubber boots because it was cheaper than draining water out of the mines. The slaves were working in the dark and were forbidden to talk to each other, so they developed a type of language by stomping and slapping their boots in defiance of the slave owners. The practice has evolved out of the mines, and is now used as an art form in a spirit of celebration. As a practice that came from oppressed peoples, the RebELLeS feel that it is an appropriate medium to further the feminist struggle.

As their own form of resistance, the NB RebELLeS gumbotters weave parts of their manifests into their performances, stating their view on issues of colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism while sharing their ideas for a better world. By using the dance as a vehicle for their message, they are able to reach a much wider audience.

“Gumbotting is so accessible and draws people in. We’ve been at events where everyone seemed hostile and we weren’t even sure if they were going to clap. But we’ve had people come to us at the end and tell us that they had never heard of gumbotting before. I can’t help but think that maybe you managed to slip in such a feminist message.” We’re making people aware that there is still a women’s movement and that we need to stick together. It’s a way for us to show our strength.

“It is a visible part of the feminist movement, and blatant hypocrisy is often lacking,” added Keri, another member of the troupe. The NB RebELLeS do not preach to the converted, nor do they organize. They partied at two ‘Women in Business’ conferences on International Women’s Day this year, which was attended by many women working in a corporate environment.

“We felt that it was important to speak specifically about how capitalism hunts women’s bodies but doesn’t message for it. That was the only time I’ve actually noticed people walking out of our performance,” laughed Keri. “It was antithetical to our conference and provocative, but we wanted to show up and challenge people, challenge their assumptions, and the way their assumptions exist in the world.”

As Keri explains, most performances were well received: “I’ve had an intergenerational spectrum of people come to me and tell me ‘that was amazing!’ I even had a lady ask, ‘Can I gumbot with my cane?’”

Keri reflected on one of the most powerful moments for her, when she was executive director of a Women’s Centre in Montreal. “Right before we took the stage, some of the female clients of the centre were talking about the fact that they had recently started talking openly about her experience. During our performance, I talk about feminism and give our definition of a Feminist, and while reading the newscast about one of the stories about them in the air at that point, the woman was sitting in the audience and said ‘you have no idea how much one of your poems changed my life! I got off the bus and the majority of the crowd to do the same. It was such a powerful message.”

For more information, check out the gumbotters’ blog at gumbotters.blogspot.com.