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Dance Review: Bay Area Rhythm Exchange

Bay Area Rhythm Exchange
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Channing Cook-Holmes. Photo courtesy of Stepology.

Tap dancers and tap dance students, you quickly learn, are a breed apart, a fraternity (or, if you will, sorority) that functions according to its own rules and priorities and adheres fiercely to its own code of loyalties. How else can one explain the roaring crowd in attendance

at the Bay Area Rhythm Exchange produced at San Francisco's Herbst Theatre Saturday evening (Aug. 20) by Stepology, the organization responsible for the 2005 Bay Area Tap Festival? The week-long event, which consisted mostly of workshops and master classes, was not widely advertised in the general press, yet Saturday's audience turned out to be both enthusiastic and sophisticated. Very few dance festivals invite the paying customers to end the evening by hopping on to the stage for a Shim Sham finale with the official talent; at the end, dozens of aficionados filled the stage.

Earlier, we sympathetic aliens, who found it hard to resist participation, discovered much congenial entertainment in the dancing of the legendary Arthur Duncan. He was preceded by sets with members of a younger generation of tappers—Channing Cook-Holmes, Joan Hill, Edward Jackson, John Kloss (who directs Stepology) and Sam Weber. The practiced onstage musical trio included Jerry Kalaf (music director/drums/vibraphone), Louis Durra (piano) and Jeff Chambers (bass), though, as we were reminded more than once during the evening, tappers are musicians, too. To underline that fact, the program opened with the dancers working the instruments, yielding gradually to the advertised musicians.

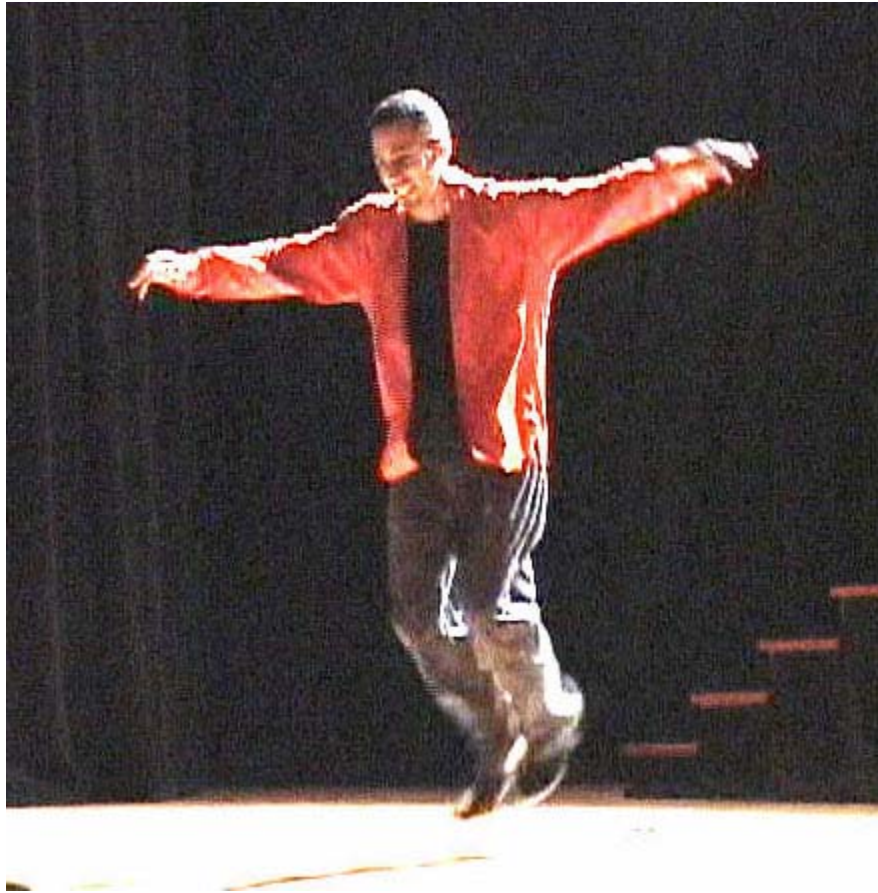
Tap can't help but be a dance of joy, even if moments of melancholy occasionally cloud a performance. What astonished Saturday was the variety of attack and the caliber of musicianship; tap is as much a matter of assimilating a personal style as of displaying a distinctive technique. I had never encountered Jackson before Saturday, but I'm not likely to forget him. The notes tell us that Jackson was propelled into a tap career by seeing Savion Glover. Saturday's was a display of the ferocious attacks and self-absorption that seem to characterize tap in the Glover era. Jackson proposed idiosyncratic rhythmic patterns, which resounded like cannon shot. At some point, he tore off into an improvisatory zone, building tension, the torso doubled over, the tempo mounting. At the end, he tore off his short, releasing a pent-up energy like a steam engine about to explode. Sure, there was an element of manipulation here; nevertheless, I haven't seen anything more exciting in a local dance this year.



Tap legend Arthur Duncan. Photo courtesy of Stepology.

At the other end of the evening, Duncan epitomized the old smoothie school of tap. His manner was gracious, suave, endearing. He rendered Duke Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" in a congenial croak, but the rhythm was there, in the voice and in the pearly footwork, ornamented by the windmilling arms that seemed part of the tap artistry of an earlier generation.

Kloss clearly relishes engaging an audience. He immediately establishes a nexus with the musicians and seems to feed off them. He takes off on percussive riffs, but always seems to reconnect with the music for cadences. What one gathers is Kloss' specialty—a thrilling skim across the stage, almost approximating a water skier—was much in evidence Saturday.



John Kloss. Photo courtesy of Stepology.

Weber's style leans to integration of the upper torso, so that the whole body seems to respond to the music and often to merge with it. Weber, who, I believe, boasts some ballet experience in his past, floats around the stage, turning with consummate grace, arms extended. He's a fluid talker, too.

Hill, a trained pianist who started tapping when she was 50, offered "Blue Moon" at the piano, then eased, without a beat, into a graceful shim sham. Cook-Holmes demonstrated his talent for soft shoe in a blissful "Bye, Bye, Blackbird."

The cast jammed together for a single episode after intermission, accompanying their routines with comments that enlightened neophytes in the crowd. But too much of the second half was given over to a tiresome audience participation shtick dubbed "Tap of Fortune." Selected at random (?), three members of the audience each imitated one of the evening's dancers, the names drawn from hat. They broke up the house, but this spoilsport member of the crowd would have preferred more of the real thing.

For more information:

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