

# Broad Street Review



## **‘Thank You, Gregory’ at Annenberg (2nd review)**

**BY:** Janet Anderson 10.13.2009

Tap is a uniquely American dance form with black, Irish and street improvisation roots. But if you think tap dancing is a quaint relic from the past, think again. *Thank You, Gregory*, a fine piece of theater as well as an homage to tap dancing, literally wowed its audience.

## **In the steps of their forebears**

Every red-blooded American, every race, religion, country of origin, loves tap dance. The whacky-whack, clickety-clack of tap delights everyone. This is a dance we all contributed to, with roots in African-American movement traditions, Irish step dancing and just plain street improvisation moves based on sound.

Philadelphia was once a center of tap, with tappers meeting at Broad and South Streets to improvise. The last of the great figures from that era LaVaughn Robinson, died recently at age 80 after a long career of performing, teaching and inspiring dancers. His brilliant pupil and fellow teacher Germaine Ingram still dances in and around Philadelphia. Robinson never failed to remind any dance writer in his presence that tap was “sound dancing” and a genre completely its own.

But if you think tap dancing is a quaint relic from the past, you need to think again. *Thank You Gregory*, a fine piece of theater as well as an homage to tap dancing, literally wowed its audience. Tony Waag, the artistic/executive director of the American Tap Dance Foundation who created and staged this tap extravaganza, made it clear in his opening remarks that, while the show honored the memory of the late great Gregory Hines, its real purpose was not to eulogize the dancer (who died in 2003) but to “thank Gregory not because he had died, but because he was an ambassador for this art form.”

## **From Fred Astaire to Peg Leg Bates**

The program’s first half focused on the great tap dancers of the past through film footage of a dazzling array of tap legends, from Fred Astaire, Ann Miller, Ginger Rogers, Donald O’Connor and Ray Bolger to Charles “Honi” Coles and the Copasetics, the Nicholas Brothers and the exceptional Peg Leg Bates, who managed to become a great tap dancer with one good leg and one wooden leg.

What made this montage effective was the presence onstage, below the film of the tap legends, of today's young dancers demonstrating they too could do the Shim Sham Shimmy, the Stroll and many of the other extraordinary moves executed on screen by their elders. Like their predecessors, they tapped on roller skates, imitated Fred Astaire tapping with a microphone as his partner, and one even managed to replicate the effect of tapping with one good leg and a peg leg.

### **Two cute brothers**

Still, nothing brought more life and energy to the show than Maurice Hines, Gregory's older brother, who came onstage to talk about how the two little boys started a tap dance routine, which they first performed at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Maurice shared this youthful experience while standing beneath a photo of Gregory and himself dressed in suits with short pants and sporting big grins.

"We were cute," he laughed, "we could get away with anything." The truth is they were very cute, but also they were terrific dancers.

Maurice spoke charmingly about his brother, their childhood act of Hines, Hines and Dad (who played the drums), and his love for Philadelphia. Dressed nattily in a tux, Hines said: "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, 'Man! Maurice looks good in those clothes'." Then he executed some terrific tapping and bowed.

A short film of an older Gregory Hines played overhead showing Gregory working alone in a studio. It was the perfect reminder of the tremendous talent of the man being honored and his incandescent brilliance.

### **Edgy new material**

If the first half focused on the past, the second brought everyone squarely back to the present. This was a strong presentation of tap dancers working with edgy, aggressive and bold material. The dancers tapped to everything from Tchaikovsky to Stevie Wonder and even performed a stirring segment to the Beatles' *Eleanor Rigby*.

This troupe performs as an ensemble, so it's impossible to single out any of the many outstanding individual performances. Still, the dancers who tapped and slid were fantastic, and the woman who tapped backwards and soundlessly was extraordinary. These young dancers did all the crazy wonderful steps of their forebears, but adding in a little rap and a bit of attitude that was strictly 21st Century.

### **Rushing the stage**

The show never really ended. There was a terrific number with the cast sitting on chairs tapping, and then audience members were invited onstage to dance with the cast. A large group of middle-aged ladies—dressed in jackets indicating they were tap dancers—

rushed down from the balcony, while others just sauntered down the center aisle and began tapping away with the troupe. Suddenly the show became a jamboree.

The bottom line? Everyone loves to smack their feet on the floor, make percussive sounds with their body and derive the unique pleasure this whamming and whacking produces. But it isn't often we get to see this many extraordinary professional dancers participating in such a terrific show, or be reminded of all the remarkable personalities who've nurtured this uniquely American dance form. So thank you, Maurice, Tony Waag and Randy Swartz, for bringing this show back to Philly, somewhat revised, not to mention including Gregory's marvelous brother Maurice.♦