

The Dance Journal

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A Philly Thank You To Gregory!

Oct 7th, 2009 | By Dance Journal Staff | Category: Reviews



by Steven Weisz for The Dance Journal

I will admit that I have never really been a big fan of tap dance. It has always had that cheesy connotation left over from bad dance recitals and student competitions. That is until I came to Philadelphia, where the late Nicholas Brothers, Honi Coles, and LaVaughn Robinson had their roots and launched their careers. They inspired whole generations and built a foundation, which has led to a very strong tap community in the region, spawning such festivals as Jaye Allison's Tap Challenge and Tap Teaser.

To put it all in perspective, F. Randolph (Randy) Swartz, director of Dance Affiliates, which produces the Annual Dance Celebration series at Penn's Annenberg Center, offered a unique historical overview and tribute to tap with this evening's opening of Thank You Gregory: A Tribute to the Legends of Tap.

The program began and was continually interwoven with multimedia and old cinema footage depicting such tap legends as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Ray Bolger, Fred Astaire, Ruby Keeler, Jeni Legon, Ann Miller, Eleanor Powell, The Nicholas Brothers, Honi Coles and more. It was through these montages, that I came to realize the incredible history of tap and one that I had actually grown up with my whole life, from watching movies to attending performances on Broadway.

But this evening was also a tribute to Gregory Hines, who along with his brother Maurice, while being raised in New York and studying in Harlem, had always admired

and been inspired by Philly tap. Gregory, who died of cancer in 2003, brought the tap community together and elevated the art form, crossing boundaries to new found audiences.

And this influence was no where better demonstrated during the performance by the hoofing of Jason Samuels Smith. Heralded by Gregory Hines as “possibly the next greatest tap dancer”, Jason’s tributes to former greats and to his mentor brought the house to its feet in a solid round of applause.

Not to be overlooked were several stunning tap numbers by Chloe Arnold, a protege of Debbie Allen. Her improvography, rhythmic patterns, phrases and accents were both dazzling and sizzling at the same time.

The show was not all nostalgia as the cast demonstrated new visions for tap to such numbers as the Beatles “Eleanor Rigby” and even blends of new music with the likes of “Music Box” by Regina Sektor.

Maurice Hines himself took to the stage with a nostalgic look of his career with brother Gregory, opening with a number they once did together at a very young age at the Apollo Theater. Now at the age of 66, he is still dancing and choreographing, but remembers his start in Philadelphia with the production of Eubie! With a mixture of soft shoe from the memorial tribute to his brother, to the 11 o’clock number from Sophisticated Ladies, Maurice brought charm, wit, style and that ever large presence of the Hines brothers to the stage.

The final numbers featured a Hoofers Line followed by an encore chair dance with choreography by the Copasetics. What was one fabulous evening of dance and tap came to a close with an invitation to tappers in the audience to come on stage to dance the classic Shim Sham Shimmy with the cast. As cast and audience, continued to tap, even when the music had ended, this was perhaps the true tribute and thank you to Gregory!