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A toe-tapping celebration of dance rhythm

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For The Inquirer

I'd never seen a feminist tap-dance number before. But there it was, just one of the dozen brilliantly executed sequences in *Thank You Gregory: A Tribute to the Legends of Tap*, which had its world premiere at the Annenberg Center on Tuesday night.

The show, produced by Dance Affiliates, is about to embark on an 11-month tour, so see it while you can. This is a rare opportunity to watch 10 superb tap artists perform everything from classic vaudeville-style slapstick (a ukulele duet! a sequence with tappers on roller skates!) to dramatic postmodern dance, accompanied by a first-rate jazz trio.

Its title is a bit confusing. (Is this an homage to Gregory Hines, the great American tap dancer/singer/actor who died in 2003 - or a tap history lesson? Answer: both.) And the large number of tap legends referred to can be overwhelming. But, ultimately, this is a joyful celebration of that amazingly varied, soul-stirring thing called rhythm.

The troupe consists of nine performers, including two bona fide tap geniuses: Dormeishia Sumbly-Edwards and Jason Samuels Smith. Dancer No. 10 is Maurice Hines, Gregory's older brother, now 66 and a tap legend in his own right. His connection to his late brother, with whom he began dancing professionally when they were 10 and 5, gives the evening an important extra dimension.

The first half of the program surveys such different tappers as the acrobatic Nicholas Brothers, the suave Charles "Honi" Coles, and Brenda Bufalino - one of the most important female tap dancers of the last several decades. Company members dance in the styles of these artists, while video footage and still photographs are projected on a screen behind them.

After the intermission, the stress was on recent approaches to tap, including a powerful piece choreographed by Michelle Dorrance, combining percussive sounds with modern-dance gestures.

A mesmerizing short film by Tony Waag focused on a single dancer's feet, tapping a cappella as the image and sound were manipulated in various ways. But a clip of Gregory

Hines dancing an intense and challenging solo from the 1985 film *White Nights* - projected while Smith and the gifted young Kendrick Jones doubled, or responded to, Hines' taps - was the most emotionally satisfying part of the program.

Oh, yes; in that "feminist" number, several cast members "protested" the identity issues facing female tappers, via a blues song and some clever choreography by Bufalino.