

CRITIC'S PICK

Review: Lindy Hopping Into the Present With Caleb Teicher and Co.

In "Sw!ng Out," Teicher and a creative team bring vernacular dance to the Joyce. Tacked onto the end? A jam for all.



AJ Howard and LaTasha Barnes take a swinging turn. Credit...Grace Kathryn Landefeld

By **Gia Kourlas**

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Dancers possess agility of both the body and the mind, but the dance artists behind "Sw!ng Out" are especially brimming over with it. Improvisation, for the most part, is what guides them along, giving them chances to live on the edge and, in turn, to generate a different program each night.

In the show, a sweeping ride through contemporary swing dance directed by Caleb Teicher, the Lindy Hop — the form that originated in Harlem in the 1920s — does its best to land in the here and now. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it

doesn't. [Presented by the Joyce Theater, "Sw!ng Out,"](#) is a group effort, featuring a team of collaborators.

As the show's director, Teicher, who uses the gender-neutral pronouns they and them, prizes the intimacy and spontaneity of jazz music and dance; under their direction, the 12 dancers of "Sw!ng Out" make choices depending on partner, music and mood. Couples switch in and out of traditional gender roles; a dancer that starts out leading might end up following. Within those quick, fluid shifts, what really stands out is how the logic of movement coincides with the dancers' trust in each other.



From left, Barnes, Evita Arce, Caleb Teicher, Howard, Gaby Cook and Michael Jagger. Credit...Grace Kathryn Landefeld

Sometimes, you can see it in their eyes: A split-second hesitation converts to an effortless spin that twirls along perfectly to the music. These bursts are captivating, even oddly adventurous, and for the audience, a chance to grasp something of the performers' sensorial secret language. "Sw!ng Out" is perpetually merry. (And at times, cloyingly so.)

Along with Teicher, the creative team is made up of the dancers Evita Arce, [LaTasha Barnes](#), Nathan Bugh and Macy Sullivan, and the composer and bandleader Eyal Vilner. But if the evening has a star beyond some of its dancers — Barnes is especially

extraordinary for the way the past and the present can pass through her compact, nimble body — it is the evening’s vocalist, [Imani Roussele](#). Her creamy, unaffected voice and delivery has no tricks; the lyrics lead her.

The dancing begins with the feet — and the curtain raised just enough for viewers to see them. As it lifts, six couples dance with furious gusto in front of the band, until, eventually, they kneel before the musicians, whooping and clapping. Throughout, duets stream across the stage as the dancers glide from one partner to the next, making it seem that their bodies are filled with air. Case in point: Teicher, lithe and sleek, soars over a dancer in a straddle jump. But there are also quieter moments of spry, soft footwork. Sometimes couples shuffle along in dreamy contentment while a spotlight singles one out for a moment — playful, seductive, impish.



Howard and Cook.Credit...Grace Kathryn Landefeld

While the spirit of “Sw!ng Out” is intentionally buoyant, the show can also drift into nostalgia as the dancers try to find their footing in that elusive, sweet spot — the place where a potentially old-fashioned form is instilled with modernity. The relentless smiles, too, can make this show a hair too cute for its own good. A guest appearance by the actor and clown Bill Irwin brought out the vaudevillian side of the show with scatting wordplay that involved layering syllables and some hat choreography, too. Was this really necessary? His presence broke the flow.

It was the galvanizing choreographed group sections that balanced out the improvisations, that made the stage swing. These were the peaks of “Sw!ng Out” that made you want to dance, too. Teicher and company made space for that: After the first half, titled “The Show,” and an intermission, the band returned and audience members were invited to an onstage social dancing experience called “The Jam.” Teicher, in a quick introduction had four words of advice: “Don’t hog the floor.”

Some did anyway. But others took Teicher’s suggestion to spread out, and it was the dancing that sprang up in other parts of the theater – on a balcony, under a darkened staircase – that cemented the message of “Sw!ng Out.” The pandemic isn’t over, but as Rousselle sang “Let the Good Times Roll,” it was about dancing through to bliss: If you need a break, take one. Swing it out.

Sw!ng Out

Through Oct. 17 at the Joyce Theater, Manhattan; joyce.org.

Gia Kourlas is the dance critic of The New York Times.