

Celebrating an impressive feat

Tap ensemble marks 10th year

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The New Jersey Tap Ensemble in Bloomfield has reason to celebrate. The company, which marked its tenth anniversary, Friday, with "The Next Step," a fun-filled gala performance at Montclair State University's Memorial Auditorium, has a wealth of talented dancers with consistently high energy levels, and a repertoire that reaches from jazz classics into the future.

In the past decade, the troupe has advanced from a startup with an office in the home of its founder, Broadway veteran Deborah Mitchell, to a polished, professional ensemble. Now this group is eager to move forward. Among the evening's highlights was a premiere by international tap sensation Savion Glover.

Tap dance events often have a warm, family feel to them, and "The Next Step" gala was no exception. When members of the close-knit tap community come together, they like to emphasize the links between generations, affirming the continuity of this once-endangered art form. While delighting in youthful individuality and novel ideas, they also revere tradition and the great hoofers of the past.

"The Next Step" had it all. Mitchell honed her artistry with assistance from the late Leslie "Bubba" Gaines, to whom she dedicated a tribute, not only performing the jump-rope dance that was Gaines' fabled novelty act but also tapping a smoothly sensual, rhythmic response to "Begin the Beguine," one of her mentor's favorite tunes.

In bringing such standards to life, Mitchell has a stalwart collaborator in J. Leonard Oxley, her troupe's musical director, who led a seven-piece orchestra on stage. Jazz vocalist Linnie Godfrey also made a special contribution, lending her caressing tones to the Gaines tribute and to Mitchell's inventive "Moon Suite."

Mitchell established the NJTE as a home for local tap artists, and "The Next Step" also boasted of their accomplishments. Following a videotape in which company principal Maurice Chestnut appeared as an adorable 12-year-old prodigy, the dancer returned as the full-grown master of sophisticated rhythms in "Song for My Father." He and Dewitt Fleming, Jr., vied to outdo each other dancing with breakneck speed in Chestnut's choreography of "My Favorite Things." Another NJTE principal, Karen Callaway Williams, was shown in a clip from "Riverdance," before performing a light-hearted song-and-dance number to "Shaking the Blues Away." Parris Mann brought flash and humor to "On a Clear Day," while NJTE graduate Jason Janas sent videotaped congratulations.

Standouts in the evening's ensemble pieces included principals Jeffry Foote, Zack Manzella, and the irrepressibly joyous Robin Barker; while members of the NJTE's youth division brought their innocent charm to "Life," and "Ain't She Sweet."

Glover's piece, "Unfolding a New Work," introduced a totally original style to the gala. Challenged to rise to virtuosic extremes, Williams achieved moments of sheer glory, introducing and concluding the piece with solos of sustained speed and phenomenal clarity of detail. In between these solos, the ensemble combined elements of tap dance old and new—a stomping "buck walk" and the unexpected breaks characteristic of hip-hop. Glover's associate, Tommy James, arranged the music.

Acknowledging the company's gratitude to its supporters, the gala also featured the presentation of the "2004 Soft Shoe Award" to Barbara and Eli Hoffman.