

# The Star-Ledger

## A good party

Tap ensemble offers spirited tribute to Harlem Renaissance

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"Class, sophistication -- and a good party." According to Deborah Mitchell, who directs the New Jersey Tap Ensemble in Bloomfield, that's what lured visitors to nightspots in Harlem during the 1920s, a period also known as the Harlem Renaissance. The tap ensemble recalled that fabulous era when it presented "First Stop on the A Train," an infectiously high-spirited program at the Community Theatre in Morristown on Sunday.

Mitchell herself, chicly attired in a charcoal suit and raspberry-colored hat, acts as narrator, guiding viewers through the doors of long-vanished saloons.

Three dancers -- Mitchell flanked by Maurice Chestnut and DeWitt Fleming -- personify the elegance of the period in a delicious number called "Truckin'," advancing hip-first and pointing slyly from side to side.

In an early party scene, the thunder of the ensemble's feet seemed to herald the arrival of an unstoppable force, and in the "Stomping at the Savoy Number," a parade of soloists alternately scorched the floor or spun threads of filigreed rhythm.

Mitchell emphasized that Harlem in the 1920s was "the home of happy feet," a neighborhood where society flocked to watering holes like Connie's Inn, Small's Paradise, the Savoy Ballroom and the legendary Cotton Club. Her references to racial segregation at these establishments, however, underscored that in those days African-American artists were working under a cloud of bias, hoping to win recognition and equality through the arts. The story of tap is implicitly the story of social struggle with a smile on its face, a chapter in the epic quest for civil rights.

For the most part, "First Stop on the A Train" emphasized the context in which tap dancing flourished rather than honoring great personalities, although Ella Fitzgerald turned up (with Denise Alexander lip-synching to a recording) in a segment devoted to amateur nights at the Harlem Opera House and the Apollo Theater. This segment seemed like an excuse to showcase Chestnut, a virtuoso who in "Song for My Father" produced an astonishingly nuanced stream of taps.

"First Stop on the A Train" recalled not only Harlem's nightclubs, but also social and theatrical dances like the Charleston, performed here by a vivacious group of five women. It pointed to the contribution of those forgotten dancers, who honed their art in blistering, street-corner challenges. Karen Callaway Williams, a "Riverdance" veteran, stylized the fruitful rivalry between African-American and Irish-American tappers in her choreography for "High Tide."

The tap ensemble has paid tribute to Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in the past, and here again Williams offered a nod in his direction with her feather-light rendition of "Tappin' the Blues Away." Yet this show suggested that tap is a communal creation greater than the sum of its stars.