

# The Star-Ledger

## Tapping their way through history

Monday, November 07, 2005

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### DANCE

If it's got rhythm, you can tap to it. That's one message in the new dance program assembled by Deborah Mitchell, artistic director of the New Jersey Tap Ensemble in Bloomfield.

Mitchell's delicious new revue, "Generation Tap," which received its premiere at the Robert V. Van Fossan Theatre of Bloomfield College on Saturday, takes viewers on a musical journey that begins in the 1930s, with Duke Ellington's classic "Take the A Train." The dancers follow the meandering path of American popular music, decade by decade, until they discover hip-hop and the bootylicious vocalists of Destiny's Child singing "Loose My Breath." Couched in an atmosphere of tongue-in-cheek nostalgia, this musical travelogue is sheer delight.

Yet the New Jersey Tap Ensemble also employs some phenomenal hoofers, like Maurice Chestnut, Karen Callaway Williams and DeWitt Fleming, Jr., not to mention Mitchell herself and a passel of youngsters eager to make their mark. With its numbers expertly arranged and rehearsed, "Generation Tap" supplies an evening of powerhouse dancing.

The clever premise of this show is a school project. Teen-age members of the Tap Ensemble's junior division gather around a laptop computer to research the history of tap, scrolling past the names of famous performers and downloading the dance music of past generations. "What did Disco sound like?" seems like an innocent question, until it summons a pulsing vision of disco queens with their hearts on fire, led by ballroom partners Denise Alexander and Addam Stell. The narrators, a likable group featuring Devin Arroyo, Evan Ruggiero, Lenny Vasile and Kyle Wilder, are likely to get carried away themselves, and start rockin' to Elvis or jiving to the inspirational call of James Brown's "I Feel Good."

While the narrators hold the show together and supply comic relief, featured performers bring the music of various eras to life and provide some serious thrills. In "A Train Called A" (a contemporary response to Ellington), Chestnut displays amazing speed, which he juxtaposes with the languorously extenuated melody; Fleming stomps, dancing in an aggressive, funky style, and Callaway Williams performs a riff that integrates itself subtly and smoothly with the rhythm. Here we have three dancers -- and three markedly individual responses to the same musical material.

Callaway Williams returns to pace Mitchell in a delicate and slyly insinuating duet to "They All Laughed." Fleming shows another side of his talent in "Cute." Floating like a butterfly even as he delivers a clean drum-roll of taps, he saves his heavy, chugging heels for the end. Nine-year-old talent Hassiem Bey hilariously impersonates Michael Jackson in a pop-and-lock dance set to "Bad." Then Bey accepts the challenge of a tap duet with Chestnut, whose already speedy feet seem electrified by the revved-up percussion of the 1987 Jackson hit.

The second portion of "Generation Tap" appropriately brings the youngsters of the company to the fore. Here Wilder was the standout, whether showing off with toe-stand wings in "Act of Faith" or with his sinuous articulations in a hip-hop trio.

Informal and relaxed, yet packed with adventure, "Generation Tap" is one of the most delightful programs the New Jersey Tap Ensemble has produced.

<http://www.nj.com/events/ledger/index.ssf?/base/entertainment-0/1131343044202450.xml&coll=1>