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DANCE REVIEW

Tap-Tap-Tapping Out a Message of Style, Not Just Skill



Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

From left, Michelle Dorrance, Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards and Chloe Arnold danced in "Charlie's Angels" at Tony Waag's Tap City festival.

By JENNIFER DUNNING
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The summer Tap City festival is always breezy, hard-dancing fun. Tap enthusiasts are the best kind of audience: generous and appreciative, including both fans and old-time tap stars who don't happen to be performing that night but often join those onstage for the infectiously spirited, full-cast "Shim Sham Shimmy" that ends each program. And Tony Waag, the founder of the festival, is the most genial and relaxed of hosts, a slightly melancholic, blithe spirit who overcame the usual odds of dance presenting to end this seventh annual festival, which also included classes, workshops and panel discussions, with four sold-out shows.

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The "Tap Forward" show on Friday at the Duke on 42nd Street didn't need the electricity of a packed house to be exciting. The program of dance by relatively new tappers, with a few veterans thrown in, was one of those "remember when" nights. Style triumphed over mere

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Briana Blasko for The New York Times
Kazu Kumagai in the festival's "Tap International" program.

technique and concept here, with one terrific act and soloist following another, building to mid-show standing ovations and a final jubilant roar from the audience.

Thursday's "Tap Internationals" program had been heavy on technique and concept and suggested, dispiritingly, that the world was full of disciples of [Savion Glover](#) who lacked that tap star's distinctive exaltation. Friday's show opened with an expert group number by the Tap City Youth Ensemble, followed by the feather-footed, musically astute Margaret Morrison and the Bay Area Dance Company. "Mr. Kicks," a solo performed by DeWitt Fleming Jr., was more song than dance. And then the floodgates opened, with one dancer after another pouring out onto the stage to remind you that the styles of the

great old tap stars — at least those who resurfaced in the vivid 1970s tap reunions around New York — were about individual personality as much as dance skills.

My favorites were two irresistible soloists and two groups. Michelle Dorrance, who appeared in several numbers, looks like the actress [Hilary Swank](#) and dances like some of the oddball characters Ms. Swank tends to play. Ms. Dorrance was an untamable, tomboyish force of nature in "Baobabs," a little jewel of a trio that also featured the pianist Matthew Chicurel and Miriam Chicurel, whose translucent voice sang of taming love.

Rangy, skinny and unpredictable, Ms. Dorrance also danced in "Charlie's Angels," a sizzling trio of dancers choreographed by Jason Samuels Smith, and performed with two other exquisite stylists, Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards and Chloe Arnold. And Ms. Dorrance danced as if she knew a secret or two but wasn't telling in an exuberant and crisp finale with Barbara Duffy & Company.

Parris Mann's tap world is universes distant from that of Ms. Dorrance. Tucked into a large velvet jacket, Mr. Mann jostled with gravity in a solo in "With Love to Deborah Mitchell," performed by Ms. Mitchell's New Jersey Tap Ensemble, which should immediately set up shop in Manhattan.

Mr. Mann is a showman, but he has the tap chops to back up the good-natured pizzazz with musically phrased volleys of footwork punctuated by sudden quick tilts to the floor, ponderous yet soufflé light, that were a surprise and a pleasure in a time when tap seems to have settled into loose verticality. The piano playing of J. Leonard Oxley added much to the suite.

The dancing of Jason Samuels Smith, an established star and tap force of nature, was another great pleasure, as was that of Karen Callaway Williams, a gifted traditionalist with laughing eyes. Sarah Savelli's well-choreographed "Summertime" offered ample opportunity for stylish self-expression by four vivid soloists: Ayodele Casel, a New York favorite, and Michela Marino-Lerman, Carson Murphy and Ms. Savelli.

The evening included the presentation of the Tap City Tap Preservation Award to Susan Goldbetter, the Hooper Award to Ms. Mitchell and the "Toe-Knee" Award to Michele Ribble for what Mr. Waag described as her sustaining friendship.

Thursday's "Tap International" program, also at the Duke, nearly drowned in extraneous elements like saxophones and a [Carmen Miranda](#) getup. But there were a few highlights, including a solo by the superb Japanese tapper Kazu Kumagai, an exuberant number by Sharon Leahy's Rhythm in Shoes tap and hoedown troupe from Dayton, Ohio, and a wittily phrased duet, "Pa' Los Rumberos," choreographed and danced by Max Pollak and Chikako Iwahori.

The level of dancing was otherwise respectable, from performers including Jussi

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Lindroos (Finland); Alexander Ivashkevich and Anton Merkulov (Estonia); Reco Cheng and Ringo Yang (Taiwan); a Japanese quartet (Takahiro Kobayashi, Mr. Kumagai, Daisuke Omiya and Shoko Taniguchi); Gilberto de Syllos and a mugging Christiane Matallo (Brazil); Ms. Iwahori (Japan); Ms. Duffy and Andrea DelConte (United States); and Mr. Pollak's multinational Rumba Tap, described in the program as representing "the Globe."

Both shows were considerably buoyed by musical accompaniment provided by Bernice Brooks (drums), Theo Hill (piano) and Joe Fonda (bass).

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