

REVIEW: DORRANCE DANCE, TAPPING OUT THE JOY

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Michelle Dorrance's newly expanded work "Myelination" takes its title from science. It refers to the formation of myelin sheaths around neurons, a process that speeds up the transmission of nerve impulses — and an apt analogy for a dance brimming with electricity, with movement so swift it defies comprehension. For Ms. Dorrance, the impulses are rhythmic — her medium is tap — and they travel among the dancers with the efficiency and inevitability of a biological phenomenon.

It's not news that Ms. Dorrance is a virtuoso, both as a dancer and choreographer. The double bill she presented at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday, opening night of her company's two-week run, confirmed her command of her form, her ability to play around with it, uncovering hidden facets, as adroitly as she honors its conventions.

The more classic offering came first, with the premiere of "Until the Real Thing Comes Along (a letter to ourselves)," a gleeful tribute to the music of Fats Waller and, perhaps more incidentally, to the dancers' friendship. The sound of tapping preceded the sight of it, with a brief overture in darkness before the curtain rose on four women — Ms. Dorrance, Melinda Sullivan, Josette Wiggan-Freund and Jillian Meyers — pounding out that most familiar phrase, a time step, in vivacious unison.

Ms. Dorrance draws out each performer's individuality, in vignettes that find them slipping into exaggerated costumes and characters: a mustachioed singer (Ms. Sullivan) eagerly pursued by the lonesome Ms. Meyers; a floundering clown (Ms. Dorrance) in an oversized jacket and suspended pants. Ms. Wiggan-Freund puts on a red velvet dress and, to "Ain't Misbehavin'," basks in her own lithe elegance, her arms curling upward like plumes of smoke. They all can act, but what comes across most convincingly is their joy in dancing together.

It's no coincidence that "Myelination," too, starts in the dark, giving sound a moment to itself; in tap, listening is as paramount as seeing. Before Kathy Kaufmann's lighting makes an entrance, we hear the first few beats of an original jazz score by Prawn til Dante — the pianist Donovan Dorrance (Ms. Dorrance's brother) and the bassist Gregory Richardson — with the vocalist Aaron Marcellus. Playing live onstage, they're joined intermittently by the multitasking dancers Warren Craft on guitar and Nicholas Van Young on drums.

Eleven dancers strong, the extraordinary cast of "Myelination" comprises its own orchestra, including the break dancers Ephrat Asherie and Matthew West, whose pretzeling floor work compliments the tappers' rapid-fire footwork. Over 45 action-packed minutes (the work has grown since its humbler beginnings at Fall for Dance in 2015), soloists emerge from the ensemble with improvisations ranging from euphoric to dystopic. Most unusual — and exemplary of Ms. Dorrance's experimentation — is a somber solo for the lanky Mr. Craft, who repeatedly crashes to the floor, legs sliding out from beneath him, as he explores the art of the fall.

Made up of many sections, “Myelination” stumbles into the occasional awkward or meandering transition from one to the next. Still, the brilliance of Ms. Dorrance’s choreographic mind — and what she inspires in others — holds it together.

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