

Suddenly There Came a Tapping

BY BURT SUPREE

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ALFRED DESIO. At Dance Theater Workshop (August 10 to 18). *Zapped Taps*.

A compact performer who danced in the original Broadway productions of *West Side Story* and *Fiddler on the Roof*, Los Angeles-based Alfred Desio offered a concert of tap dances featuring electronically amplified tap shoes: the sound zapped through synthesizers, special effects modules, and a battery of other equipment. If you gotta have a gimmick, this is not a bad one—particularly handy if you were to do a concert without live musicians. Here, Desio was assisted by dancers David Sharp and Damon Winmon, plus percussionist Roger Boyce (who offered two solos of his own), and presented 11 short pieces that slipped effortlessly from one to the next.

It's fine to see Desio (in *Ragatap* and *Zapped Taps*)—wired up, earphones in place—shove a bank of equipment onstage and to watch its little red and green and blue lights blink along with his dancing. (In *Ragatap*, his plugged-in taps make blue and magenta lights flare and fade with the sound, and he casts a rainbow series of multicolored shadows.) Musically the result just isn't all that inherently interesting, although the sounds produced are not so manipulated that they lose rhythmic connection with the footwork.

A number of dancers are working with amplified taps—Gregory Hines and Charlie Moulton come immediately to mind—so I guess this is a wave of the present. But as far as I'm concerned, the sounds Desio raps out in his regular tap shoes are richer, more varied, more rhythmically playful, easier to tune in to. The old-time acoustic sound is more beautiful to me. Fiddling with switches and listening to feedback inevitably distracts from the essential music-making of tap. The taps take second place.

Don't get me wrong. There was a lot to like in Desio's program, but the electronic stuff—the novelty—wasn't it.

In the first dance, *Dança Solitária*, Desio blends the crisp, introspective patter of his taps with contrasting guitar music



Alfred Desio and Damon Winmon

that is so nearly independent it's almost intrusive. His upper body scrunches slightly, digging in, as his shoulders hunch forward to emphasize a step. Oddly, he never looks up, doesn't, in effect, introduce himself; rather, he lets his taps speak for him. Though there's sufficient wit in the dancing, it seems studied, overly dry—lacking the usual illusion of spontaneity. Later on, as I get used to his style, I don't miss that so much.

Sturdy David Sharp takes over for his own somewhat coy *Alternating Current*, in which the bubbling "Tap-Tronic" score by Desio virtually echoes Sharp's

bold tapping. Initially I thought that the impact of Sharp's taps, slightly delayed, rippled out to produce the music, but, in fact, the score was set and the tapping interwoven. *Covering Ground*, a duet for Desio and Winmon, a tall, skinny guy with hiked-up shoulders and a winning style, is full of broad, rhythmic action in the dancing, and the clatter produced by their amplified taps combines with a hollow, twanging, preprogrammed score that culminates in a dense rhythmic racket. In *Capriccio Stomp*, unamped, the same pair choo-choos side-to-side, perfectly coordinated in their unison tapping. Lots of

snap crackle pop in this piece—scots, slaps, little cries punctuating the sharp raps and light chatter of the footwork.

Sharp, with a crooked grin, slips into surprise splits, bounces into repeated forward flips, falls head over heels in his *Direct Current*, and Boyce beats out a couple of riffs on the taps while Sharp's feet are conveniently upturned. In *Dinah* (to Thelonius Monk music), Winmon is bossy, insistent, impatient, huffy with someone offstage, then turns all charm for us—with lazy, floaty hands, sassy looks, spry crisscrossing steps, and jokey tap-bourrées.

Tiger Rag was choice, and it permanently endeared the performers to the audience. Desio and Winmon bring on a 1930s wind-up Victrola and an old 78 (their only one, the other copy broke) of "Tiger Rag." Singing light syllabic scat and the familiar "Hold That Tiger! Hold That Tiger!" over the instrumental, they rock side to side, do the simplest pointy-foot steps neatly in place, and a couple of times burst unexpectedly into brief, enthusiastic blizzards of tapping. Without a trace of mockery, *Tiger Rag* had the innocent charm and sly elegance of another era.

My other favorite was *Implants*, a splendid acoustic duet for Desio and percussionist Roger Boyce. Desio dances right next to Boyce, laying down a steady rhythm on a mylar-covered sheet of ma-

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sonite that produces higher sounds than the theater floor can. Boyce keeps his drumming soft. Early on, there are Spanish effects in the ornamented rhythms of Desio's tapping. Then he returns for a couple of moments to the basic beat. Together they play with and against each other, making marvelous music. Desio displays an amazing range of pitch in his taps, devises delicate rhythmic variations dotted with slides, scrapes, and flutters. Getting faster and lighter, but not louder, the dancing and drumming whip their intensity into a galloping chase. ■

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