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TOMMY TUNE STILL DANCING TO THOSE FASCINATING RHYTHMS

HEDY WEISS on July 29, 2015



Tommy Tune will be the headliner in the Chicago Human Rhythm Project's 25th anniversary Jubilee celebration on July 30.

When Tommy Tune – the dancer, actor, singer, choreographer, theater director and producer was awarded his 10th Tony Award in June – a Special Tony for Lifetime Achievement in the Theater – he playfully quipped:

“Right now I’m thinking of Texas in the 1950s. You see, my father’s great dream for me was the same as every Texas father’s dream for their first born son – they wanted us all to leave Texas, go to New York, and dance in the chorus of a Broadway show. And I did it, and I loved every single time step.”

The man who, early in his career, would tell directors who asked him his height that he was “5 feet 17 and 1/2 inches tall,” continues to love performing, and to work hard at it. In fact, when we chatted earlier this week by phone he had just gotten out of rehearsal for “Taps, Tunes and Tall Tales,” the one-man show he will perform as the headliner at Chicago Human Rhythm Project’s 25th anniversary Jubalee Gala, to be held July 30 at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

“I was born to rehearse,” said ever-fleet Tune, now 76, who will receive yet another tribute at the gala – CHRP’s 25th Anniversary JUBA! Award for Extraordinary Lifetime Achievement. “My knees and hips are okay, and no one has said ‘Stop’.”

According to the performer, “Taps, Tunes and Tall Tales” is “an autobiographical stroll celebrating 50-plus years of big-time showmanship,” and, since its debut in 2008, it has been in a constant state of revision (“I keep adding and subtracting”). It tracks his career from his arrival in New York City as a fresh-faced kid from Texas, through his most popular roles on stage and screen, to his ascension as one of Broadway’s most accomplished director-choreographers, whose hit shows include “The Last Little Whorehouse in Texas,” “My One and Only,” “The Will Rogers Follies,” “Grand Hotel” and “Nine.”

Accompanied by Michael Biagi, his music director for nearly four decades, Tune will sing standards by Irving Berlin, Kurt Weill, Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer, Burt Bacharach, the Gershwins, Carole King, Green Day and more.

Here are excerpts from our chat:

Q: How do you stay fit and ready to dance?

A: I do something physical every day. Today it was just a hard rehearsal. I've done yoga for many years, but recently I lost my teacher and I haven't found a replacement yet.

Q: What recent additions have you made to "Taps, Tunes and Tall Tales"?

A: This past February, at New York's City Center, I was part of an Encores! production of the Gershwins' "Lady Be Good" [a madcap musical set during the Roaring Twenties]. It was a big success, so I've taken one song from the first act, "Fascinating Rhythm," and another from the second, "Little Jazz Bird," and put them in this show. I also finally figured out what "Little Jazz Bird" was all about: It was Ira Gershwin writing about his brother, George, who went to Harlem, fell in love with the jazz he heard there, and then made it part of his work, from "Rhapsody in Blue" to his Broadway shows.

Q: Is it true that your first love was ballet?

A: Yes, that was my dance dream until I turned 13. But during the summer between when I was 13 and 14 I just shot up, and I realized I'd have to be some other sort of prince. Then my mother took me to see the movie "Easter Parade," starring Fred Astaire, and while he was not tall, he looked tall on screen because he was so skinny. So he became my model.

Q: What changes have you observed in the dance world since you began as a chorus boy?

A: I remember going to see the Bolshoi Ballet when I was young and being so amazed, but my teacher said: "They're like circus performers; everything is over-extended and overdone." And then I looked at Margot Fonteyn with the Royal Ballet and she was so understated and nuanced. I think there's just too much of the phenomenon of 20 pirouettes and voices on steroids now. There's been a loss of nuance in lieu of pyrotechnics.

Q: What recent musicals have you enjoyed?

A: I loved "The Visit," which was so beautifully wrought by [director] Graciela Daniele, despite its tough story. And I think Chita Rivera gave her best performance ever in it – so controlled, with such exquisite depth and understatement. I saw it three times. And I loved "Once," because it's the kind of show that makes you want to lean forward in your seat. If I had a wish it would have been to direct "The Light in the Piazza," another

show I loved. Now, everything is blasted at you. When I first got to New York there were no microphones in musicals. Then, step by step, they started souping it all up.

Q: What is most important to you as a director?

A: My great mentor, Mike Nichols, always reminded me that the most important thing to get right is the tone of a show. And the wonderful tap dancer, Charles “Honi” Coles, another mentor, would always say: “Can you make it more nonchalant? Don’t let them see you work; let them be thrilled at what you’re doing.” I’ve tried to capture that in my one-man show, so that the stories are just a step along the way to the dance numbers, and each step is important to the whole. Many shows these days begin with such a high level of energy, and then they exhaust themselves and the audience trying to sustain that level. You just don’t want a whole night of desserts.

Q: Do you have a new musical in the works?

A: Yes, but I’m superstitious and can’t talk about it. All I can say is that it’s based on a silent film, and it has an original score.

NOTE: Tickets to CHRP’s 25th anniversary Jubilee Gala are \$500 (for the reception, performance and seated dinner) or \$250 (for the reception and performance only). For tickets or sponsorships call Tim Bowser at (312) 542-2477, ext. 211, or visit chicagotap.org. The cocktail reception and silent auction begin at 5:30 p.m. The performance and award presentation starts at 6:30 p.m. Dinner is at 8 p.m. (City chic attire is suggested.)

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◀ Tommy Tune



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Hedy Weiss has been Theater and Dance Critic of the Chicago Sun-Times since 1984, reporting on local, national and international productions, as well as a wide range of other subjects including art and architecture, books, travel and international affairs.

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