Tap makes a joyful noise with ‘JUBA!’

BY LAURA MOLICHEN
Chicago Tribune

Something about tap dance feels thrillingly essential. As one intensely unplanned moment follows another, the synergy of dance and music seems beyond control, like a wind that blows strong or that slows and dies, leaving everyoneべathed. Not good, but when the individual can ride, maybe even create that way, it’s heroic.

Opening night of the Chicago Human Rhythm Project’s 20th annual “JUBA!” performances, Thursday at the Museum of Contemporary Art, focused on the individual, with solo turns by four artists, three of them accompanied by a jazz trio: Aziz Mire-Ali Feb-

ry on piano, Julius Paul on bass, and Spencer on drums. The chemistry worked or it didn’t, but the chemical reactions were fascinating. For the second half, M.A.I.D. Rhythm performed Jumaine Taylor’s “Supreme Love” (2016), which wrestles eight individuals into an unusual herd. That haunting dance repeats Saturday on an otherwise different program, while Friday features Groundhog and LinkRob Kilamon.

Every successful tapper delivers both an aura portrait and a performance persona. Apollode Cose led the evening with a casual colloquial, smiling, speaking to the audience and the musicians. Dancing a zappas at first, she found her way slowly into the music but picked up steam once the complex piano melody kicked in. With comic lightness, she took a bobbing, leap-on-truckin’ walk across the stage and seemed to comment on her own steps in a virtuosic sequence of nearly faultless and inaudible tapping.

Sly, contemplative, more than a bit of a showoff, Nico Rubio was an instant hit. Though the mood was playful, Rubio’s strong aura and visual contrasts gave every thing he did drama: suspended slides, drag and standby alternating balan-
ces on toes and heels; giant hops on one leg, with a sliding dance at the audience; a scooting run some-
how complicated with light taps. Everything Rubio did complemented and en-
chanted the music; he swung particularly well with the bass.

Maud Arnold chose what seemed a pop song, played by the trio, for her solo—and its monotonous rhythms did her no favor. Fluid motions of the torso and legs, regularly turned in and out, were more noticeable than her beats. Rarely making eye contact, she seemed an object to be admired, sometimes coy or seductive, particularly in her closing slow pace.

Carter Williams also used a pop song, though his was recorded. Let’s Play the slow, “nerved rendition of “Up Against the Wind.” Despite my misgivings about the recorded music, he performed with a deep theatricality, growing out of his sense of containment. Ensoused within a harsh spotlight, he emphasized symmetry and con-
trast, punctuating the end of a vocal line with res-
signed together and a perfectly timed click. Ulti-
mately, emotional intensity and the controlled, textured choreography produced a poignant work.

Theothers were all showstopping, tumbling musi-
cally. Soloists give the dance-
covers the chance to be them-
selves—and they remain themselves in the hair-
raising union sections, like the one near the end in

which whirling, laughing collisions null the hilarity
of many forming one.

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