Electronic effects muddy inventive tap performances

By Laura Molzahn
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If you double down, you're putting yourself out there, throwing down the gauntlet. It's a step beyond the ordinary — exactly what Dorrance Dance has done in "ETM: Double Down," an evening-length show that takes tap into the realm of electronic dance music.

Innovation is in Michelle Dorrance's wheelhouse, however. She got a MacArthur "genius" grant in 2015, at the age of 36, for breathing new life into tap. Plus she and "ETM" co-creator Nicholas Young have both performed in "Stomp," the long-lived percussion show whose calling card is invention. On Friday night -- a gala performance that opened the run of "ETM" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, ending Sunday -- the Chicago Human Rhythm Project conferred its Juba Award on Dorrance and Young for their groundbreaking work.

Young seems the guiding force in "ETM," however. A drummer as well as a dancer, he's well-acquainted with DJ culture — the origin of electronic dance music — and electronic equipment. He got the idea to create small trigger boards for tap dancers that, coupled with a software program and a digital audio workstation, would enable the manipulation of live sounds, synthesizing them, looping them. Voila, electronic tap music was born.

"ETM" uses dozens of these small boards, some portable, to create unusual effects. In fact the stage presents a bewildering array of these wired gadgets as well as raised platforms, some for a drum kit and piano, others for tap, sound recordings or live, digital or acoustic. I couldn't always tell — filled the space, as did performers: seven tap dancers, a B-girl, a bassist/guitarist, a pianist, a singer.

Each of the show's two acts gets off to a slow start. The initial sections of the first act (I counted seven there) introduce the boards in a kind of setting-up ceremony; sound art including B-girl Ephrat "Bounce" Asherie, and bassist/guitarist Gregory Richardson, looping sounds. Twenty minutes in, the show actually catches fire, the dancers pounding out rhythms to a funky bass boat — having fun, teasing, joking. Next, Dorrance, Young and Warren Craft play three sets of snares, creating an avalanche of sure, but the second act seemed more heavily electronic, opening with vocalist Aaron Marcellus loop ing rhythm, melody and harmony in three wordless compositions too many. Later he delivers three pop songs, whose lyrics are in shifts the mood again. And the work concludes with heavily synthesized, rather uninspired electronic beats, suggesting a video game, and all hands on deck, including Asherie frog-hopping across the stage.
sound that eventually pulls
in the other tappers. Fi-
nally, four dancers on (un-
wired) boards produce an
exquisitely orchestrated
symphony of sounds, some
produced by slamming
down heavy chains.
It was hard to tell for
the program but incompre-
prehensible in performance. I
think they're intended to
provide context for a sud-
den shift to sadness and
trouble, especially in what
seems a tap-danced break-
up. An ensemble section
opening with a visual joke

“ETM” is headed to burst-
ning with wonderful danc-
ers, expert musicians, cre-
ative manipulations. But it
can seem a riderless horse,
out of control. And the
contrast between the first
act—more acoustic set—
and the second made me
realize how much of my
enjoyment of tap comes
from seeing the individual
dancer and connecting
sight with sound: This
particular person is making
these particular sounds
with his or her feet right
now.

To muddy that equation
with electronic effects,
however ingenious and con-
temporary, was a seri-
ous disappointment. To
quote the band Parliament:
We want the funk, give us
the funk. Don’t multiply
special effects at length.

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