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Sound Check – A Tap Dance Journey

By: *Joel Benjamin*

Brenda Bufalino - photo by Debi Field.

In the guise of a visit to the long defunct Fazil Studios, Brenda Bufalino and Tony Waag have fashioned a delightful evening of evocative tap dance with a soupçon of ethnic and popular dance thrown in for good measure. For those either too young or not savvy about New York City dance history, the Fazil Studios on Eighth Ave. were the sine qua non of shabby, but cheap, rehearsal space where thousands of tap, ballet, modern and ethnic dancers and choreographers honed their craft. Since it was one of the few rehearsal halls that allowed tap dancing it is appropriate that Ms. Bufalino and Mr. Waag should drape their revue on this revered—and reviled—piece of dance history.

Sound Check featured the delicious live accompaniment of Bernice “Boom Boom” Brooks on drums, Cameron Brown on bass, Basilio Georges on guitar, Jonny Peiffer on piano and Charlie Tokarz on reeds. Their witty, rhythmic and melodic support was invaluable.

Throughout the program videos recalling the great Copasetics and other legends of tap were shown, while the live dances included performances by the NEW Tap Dance Orchestra, a young quintet who danced with exuberance in “Buff Loves Basie Blues,” “Where is Sheboygan” and “Time Steps” all alluding to the past while bringing a fresh, new, unadorned approach to tap—less jazzy and more modern. Barbara Duffy choreographed and danced in “In the Groove,” an all-female number that certainly shattered any beliefs that women aren’t as tough and inventive as their male colleagues.

Harold Cromer, an old-timer showed the younger Cartier Williams a thing or two in “The Jitterbug Waltz” and Mr. Williams joined Ranya Renée in sweet and sassy competition in “Duets” accompanied by Ms. Brooks pounding away on a plastic bucket.

Ms Bufalino sang and danced with stylish energy belying her age. She had a command of the tap vocabulary and knew how to put over a song in her growly, expressive voice. She also wrote the lyrics for several of the numbers and created choreography for “Footage,” “It’s the Floors” (a witty paean to the hardwood floors of the Fazil studios) and the grand finale, “Haitian Fight Song.” Mr. Waag, also a consummate veteran performer showed how witty tap can be in “I’ve Watched Them Come and Go,” dedicated to all the masters that influenced him.

The centerpiece of the show was an extended montage in which Ranya Renée displayed belly dancing and Aurora Reyes, accompanied by Basilio Georges, showed elegant restraint in her “Flamenco Latino.” As they danced, the tap dancers and musicians went about their business showing each other tap riffs and musical improvisations re-creating the ambience of Fazil’s.

Sound Check had a deceptively offhanded feel, which increased the audience’s involvement in the private/public, behind-the-scenes world of yeoman and neophyte dancers.

Ms. Bufalino and Mr. Waag put together an altogether engaging evening of nostalgia, dance history with an encouraging glimpse at the future of tap dance. It’s important work that these two are doing and the fact that they were able to gather such a combination of performing artists under their aegis is heartening.