

# Danceworks' 'Rhythmworks' a Testament to Amy Brinkman-Sustache

John Schneider : 6-7 minutes : 8/23/2024

In the decade leading to the pandemic, I've enjoyed the annual concerts by Danceworks on Tap, the professional tap dance company founded and led by Danceworks co-founder Amy Brinkman-Sustache. At the concert's comeback last summer, Brinkman-Sustache hobbled onstage to welcome us with her leg in a cast and a walker. She'd had a fall, she explained. Then she slipped right into a highly comic skit performed with her daughter, the dancer/choreographer Gabrielle Sustache. At the curtain call, mom hobbled back out to thank us for coming, and to make us laugh again with this closing admonition: "Go out there now and be tappy." Those are the last words I have from her. She died of cancer last month.

As tap dance artist and educator, she stayed current with every new idea and development in the dance form. I'm sure she contributed a few. In performances and interviews, she taught me that American tap dance is rooted in the dances of African slaves and Irish immigrants. Her smart, surprising, often breathtaking performances honored that history.

Now the Danceworks on Tap concert has been woven into a DanceLAB series called *Rhythmworks* under the artistic direction of Christal Wagner. *Rhythmworks: Mosaic Motions* was presented last weekend. It included a film clip compilation by Wagner showing Brinkman-Sustache at work over the years.

The entire concert honored her. Along with great tap dance, it included contemporary work based in African dance, hip hop, flamenco, kathak and K-Pop danced by professionals, students and community groups for an all-ages audience. I remembered that the performing arts were born in ancient drumming, chants, and dance that opened souls to the ineffable.

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The Danceworks' studio theatre with its black curtain backdrop was bare but for a scuffed-up hardwood floor cover. As always, lighting designer Colin Gawronski did wonders with modest equipment.

## Dancing Barefoot

The opening number, *Exodus*, was danced barefoot by choreographer Prince Andrean and dancers Akanke Davis Attiya Muhammad and Nura Pollard. Accompaniment by Mamady Keita, a djembe drummer from West Africa, included the voice of a Black immigrant to the U.S. describing his push for respect and power. The great jazz singer Nina Simone took over the soundtrack, followed by the Homeboyz' explosive "This is America."

Prince Andrean (Andrean Maxwell) has danced with, among many groups, Milwaukee's Ko-Thi African Dance Company in both its youth and adult companies. He's traveled the country learning African dance styles and European classical styles, and his choreography draws from all of it. It's ferociously fast, full-bodied, and highly theatrical. The dancers took on the character of hard-working Black immigrants very aware of their challenges.

## Virtuosic Dancing

The precisely titled *Flamenco and Kathak* followed. It was choreographed and performed by flamenco expert Kerensa DeMars in hard-soled high heels, and the kathak experts Varsha Prasad and Cyenthia Vijayakumar dancing barefoot. DeMars trained in Spain for 10-plus years, performs internationally and directs Milwaukee's Studio K Flamenco. She returned later in the concert with a solo work of pure flamenco virtuosity titled *Return to Water*, stamping and clapping in rhythms expressing Nature's wildest possibilities.

Trained in India, Vijayakumar is the founder and artistic director of Milwaukee's Aarambh Kathak Dance School. Prasad is a dancer, teacher, and movement therapist based in Bangalore and Coa, India. They also returned, to dance *The Journey* and *Charurang*, virtuosic examples of Kathak style, the later breaking character delightfully to finish with a pantomimed basketball game. Prasad also danced a mysterious, sensitive solo, *Ripples of Time*.

## Complicated, Syncopated

Danceworks on Tap presented *Good To Go*, choreographed by Tina Wozniak who was joined onstage by her long-time colleagues Gabrielle Sustache, Nicki Platt, Holly Heisdorf, Kate Krause-Blaha, and Kelly Kotecki Escorcia. I adore their complicated, syncopated, never repetitious tap dancing. It's a celebration, not a showing off. It's there to share.

Danceworks' jazz master Gina Laurenzi choreographed *Moving Fiercely Forward* with her Jazz Workshop students. The young dancers showed what a body can do if given the chance and the room.

Alex Vanissaveth teaches South Korean K-Pop Dance at Danceworks. He also leads Milwaukee's K-Pop performance group MkeMe Crew. His workshop did a knock-out show dance, and his company did two of them. The fearless dedication of these young dancers heartened me.

Richard Ashworth has an international resume in dance styles of the African Diaspora. He created *Wading Deep Waters* for Danceworks Tap Workshop members Andrea Thiel Svoboda, Jenni Taylor, Chelsea Robinson, and Franceszka Lesniak. The waters carried me away.

Gabrielle Sustache choreographed *Groove* for Danceworks Youth Performance Company Seniors Melissa Henningson, Lily Nielsen, and Lorelei Wesselowski. It looked like fun. I wanted to join. *What if...?* was a concert highlight, a brilliant Hip Hop duet by Sustache and Wezley Turner, a Marquette Nursing School graduate skilled in the form. *The Getdown* by Danceworks on Tap closed the show to thunderous cheers. The program note reads: "For mom."

## [John Schneider](#)

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