

Danceworks' Happy Tap Dance Exploration

John Schneider : 6-7 minutes : 8/12/2026

The annual summer Danceworks on Tap concert last weekend was a highly skilled and personable demonstration of the art of tap dance. The continually fascinating foot-percussion was varied, intricate, clean, and flawlessly tied to its musical accompaniment. Cheers from the audience at the Milwaukee Youth Art Center's main hall grew and grew through the hour-long concert's twelve numbers.

The 22 dancers on opening night looked so happy to show us their art. It was showing with no showing off. There was room for thought.

Danceworks on Tap was created in 2000 by the late Amy Brinkman-Sustache, a co-founder of the entire Danceworks MKE organization. Her daughter, Gabrielle Sustache-Turner, has been tapping in these concerts since she was in grade school. Gabi, as she's known, is a 2020 graduate from UWM's Dance Program and the current voice of Danceworks on Tap. She choreographed the concert's first dance, appropriately titled "In the Beginning". She also performed it with long-time DOT dancers Kate Krause-Blaha, Holly Swenson, and Tina Wozniak.

Hip-Hop Tap

Accompanied by Black Violin's hip hop music, the quartet executed ever-changing steps in perfect unison, shifting positions in relation to the audience, and opening to occasional solo and duet passages.

That was the concert's basic style: so much happening at foot-level; torsos, arms and hands falling into place; smiles on the face that seem genuine.

Swenson choreographed the next dance, "Be OK," set to the heartening song with that title by Ingrid Michaelson. Company member Kelly Kotecki Escorcía performed it with guest dancers Julia Richter & Abby Knueppel. For me, the theme was friendship.

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That led to "Love Without Measure," choreographed and danced by Gabi to the recorded voice of E. E. Cummings reciting his poem "I Carry Your Heart with Me," then a gorgeous recording of Peter Sandberg's "Remove the Complexities." Dressed in white, under reverent lighting by Colin Gawronski, Gabi executed

infinite quick taps within the slow downbeats of Sandburg's shimmering, harp-like music. When it ended with a baby's cry, and I knew that Gabi meant it as a tribute to her mother.

Driving Energy

Rich Ashworth is an internationally acclaimed dancer, choreographer, and teacher of African Diaspora dance forms. He earned a BFA in Dance in Buffalo in 2007, and an MFA in Dance from UWM in 2021. He works with Danceworks Tap Performance Workshop, where artists explore and expand their ideas. He choreographed two of this concert's dances.

The first, *Lean on Me*, shares its title with its accompaniment by Hot Club Nouveau. Eight women of various ages from the Workshop, dressed in their summer casuals, tapped very hard and fast, sending driving energy into the audience until the music was replaced by grateful cheers.

That was followed by the virtuosic tapping of *Unsquare*, choreographed by Gabi for herself, Swenson, and Krause-Blaha. They danced in silence for some time. Amazingly, when jazz master Dave Brubeck's *Unsquare Dance* began to play, it was in perfect tempo with the dancing.

Funky Beats

Another highlight followed. It was titled *Perfunktory Beats* and choreographed by Wozniak to music by Kodō, an internationally celebrated Japanese taiko drum ensemble. Eight dancers in large dark sunglasses placed their respective three-legged stools within spitting distance of the audience, sat and started tapping at top speed, then stopped that and switched to speedy arm and hand moves until the audience was laughing. They stood and repositioned their stools several times, sitting and tapping in full-bodied silliness; comic virtuosity performed in perfect unison.

The first of two dances from the Danceworks repertory followed. *Bad Romance* was choreographed by founder Amy Brinkman-Sustache. Swensen reset it on Richter, Knipple, and Performance Workshopers Rachel Schram and Andrea Svoboda. The accompaniment is "Bad Romance" by Postmodern Jukebox, sung by a female vocalist. An admiring male whistle in the darkness signals the arrival of the glamorous girl dancers, each a bit of tease with her coy, flirting tap moves. This well-titled satire ended in fashion model poses and recorded male whistles.

Gabi choreographed the sensitive follow-up, *Five by Five*, to music by Radiohead. She danced it with three of her fellows. Every movement seemed a push forward from the old roles.

Then *Traveling at the Speed of Light* to "Don't Stop Me Now" by Queen arrived. Created by DOT's Nikki Junkel and danced with flash by Gabi and Abby in jackets and jeans, it's ready for Broadway.

Next from the DOT repertory, Amy Brinkman-Sustache's *Superstition* was a tap conversation among Gabi, Rachel, and Holly, set to the spiritual music of the South Korean guitarist Jung Sungha.

Ashworth's second contribution, *Mojo Working*, shares its title with a reggae song by Cas Haley. "I've got my mojo working," Haley sings. So did the women Workshopers who executed this experimental tap dance.

Wozniak choreographed the company's finale to a Daphne Willis' song titled "Do It Like This." *Like This* was the title.

[John Schneider](#)

John Schneider is the Shepherd's dance writer. He is a longtime artist-in-residence and performing arts faculty member at Marquette University, and the founding director of the much-awarded Project Non-Violence.

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