

Song and Dance Man

Tommy Tune

Let's do a little roll call: Fred Astaire. Gene Kelly. Gregory Hines. Tommy Tune.

Tommy Tune, the last song and dance man standing, comes to the Hult Jan. 23 to perform a drum-tight set with the Manhattan Rhythm Kings. This is not a show to miss: terrific music and dance, and the opportunity to experience one of our greatest living performers. Tune is the real deal.

When I talked with Tune after a rehearsal in New York, he was excited about some new numbers that will premiere in Eugene. *Taps, Tunes and Tails* has garnered breathlessly enthusiastic reviews. The show is Tune's homage to jazz titans Irving Berlin, Cole Porter and George Gershwin, and will get the bi-coastal royal treatment from OFAM's Emerald City Jazz Kings and the Manhattan Rhythm Kings.

Tune discovered the Manhattan Rhythm Kings trio singing to a rapt crowd on a New York street corner in 1984. "There was singing. There was dancing. Money was flying," Tune said. He slipped them his card. After 20 years and hundreds of performances, Tune and the Kings are like family, he said. They've traveled the globe together, sharing the quintessentially American arts of tap dance and jazz.

Tune's years on the world stage haven't muted his Texan charm.

"My parents say that I danced before I walked," Tune said. Born in Wichita Falls, Texas, in 1939, Tune remembers crawling across the floor when snappy music from the radio compelled him to get up and do a little number on his hind legs. And when mom and dad turned off the music, he'd crawl on, puzzled.

Tune started taking dance lessons at five, when Miss EmmaMae Horn discovered him in a class she taught at Tune's elementary school. His family couldn't afford studio classes, but Horn said he could take tumbling and tap "gratis." Tune said he went to the dictionary and was pleased when he read that gratis meant free. "I could afford that," he said.

As a young boy, the only live dance Tune saw was the yearly tour of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo. He loved the story, color, movement, the music, but, he added, "I never thought I'd be that old."

Tune's talents were as apparent as his future height of 6 feet 6 inches. "I just got taller and taller, more gangly each year after a summer's growth," he said. As he looked less and less like the classical ballet dancer, Tune shifted his dream to becoming a Broadway



dancer. Fred Astaire seemed tall and skinny on the screen, a welcome identity for a gawky teen. And no tights needed. "Fred Astaire wore pants," Tune said. "I've been wearing pants ever since."

Tune is far too modest to mention he has received nine Tony Awards in multiple categories, including acting in a musical, directing and choreography. He won these accolades through the relentless pursuit of excellence and a love of the craft.

"In live theater, there are no retakes, no editor," Tune said. "It's live and can only exist here. That's the sadness and preciousness of live entertainment."

A performer may gain the mastery that comes with time, but finding something new

and exciting in every one of a thousand shows is what makes someone good, great. Technique is not an end-all but a beginning, and audiences complete the circuit. As Tune puts it: "The movie or television performer says 'I am here.' The live performer says 'I am here with you.'"

Tune has also appeared in films. In *Hello Dolly*, director Gene Kelly gave Tune what he called the best direction he ever received. Between takes Kelly kept telling him, "Tommy, dance better."

Tune worked with some of the greats. Charles "Honi" Coles, vaudeville star with the world's slowest soft-shoe, sweetly admonished Tune: "More nonchalant! More nonchalant! Never let them see you sweat." In advice as fit for a poet as a dancer, Coles told Tune, "It's not the sound you make, it's the space between that gives it its essence."

Tune credits his longevity as a performer to moderation, yoga, and like the rest of us, generally trying to look after himself. "Oh, and then there's the dancing," he added. He takes voice classes each week and paints for pleasure. There's an energy in his voice that is unmistakable: This man loves his job and is just as excited to take on new challenges as anyone half his age. "You're either getting better or you're slipping," he said.

When pressed to let on about a favorite production, Tune said, "I always say my favorite project is the next one." **EW**

THEATER BY SARA BRICKNER

Death of a Dream

Death of a Salesman still resonates

Arthur Miller's 1949 classic *Death of a Salesman* is not light entertainment. The tale of a family ravaged by the illusion of the American dream, requires a skillful performance to evoke sympathy for the exasperating, often shallow, characters. But the cast at the Very Little Theater pulls it off with subtlety and finesse.

Willy Loman (Patrick Torelle) is a prideful, all-American working Joe, humorous at best and intolerable at worst. His wife, Linda Loman (Christine Cody), is passive, doting and anxious. Willy's favorite son, Biff (Mike Hawkins), a high school football star, is an insecure 34-year-old drifter. The younger son, Hap (Alexander Pawlowski) is a superficial, chauvinistic businessman who has still not managed to come into his father's favor. It's hard to feel for them, but ultimately we do.

The show is a mixture of gritty social commentary,

tragedy, and a bit of understated humor. The cast brings out the subtleties, especially the humor. It's easy to focus on the tense, dramatic interludes, losing the moments of cynical wit. This cast makes the most of the irony hidden in Miller's words.

The most poignant scenes, though, are those in which the family is together onstage. Torelle does well in his lone moments of insanity. But he is best when interacting with his wife and sons, just as Cody is compelling in her expressions of distaste. Together, they capture the tender familiarity that comes from a life spent sharing a bed and Cody adopts the exhausted appearance of a woman who has spent years trying to placate and mend her family's dysfunction.

Torelle's performance is seamless. He emphasizes the tragedy of the character's refusal to face truth, fluctuating between rage, pleasure, hope and despair. Willy's descent into madness is heartbreaking, and it is during these vulnerable moments that Torelle shows him at his most human.

The supporting cast is also stellar. As a whiney, young Bernard turned successful, well-rounded adult, Kevin Kelley

is especially brilliant. Steve Mandell's Charley is perhaps the best supporting role, showing a Charley who is simultaneously wisecracking and wise. Pawlowski makes an excellent Hap, and is believable as a callused, selfish son only marginally interested in his father's welfare.

Pawlowski contrasts well with Hawkins' Biff, who has a difficult task transitioning from a confident, happy-go-lucky football star to the adult world. As the only truly dynamic character in *Salesman*, Hawkins portrays Biff's progress from a confused individual who has lost faith in his paternal idol and realizes his father's prerequisites for success don't work in the real world. Hawkins' performance ensures we understand Biff's progression into a wiser man but doesn't beat us over the head with it.

The resounding theme of *Salesman* is that blame should be placed on society, not the individual, and impressive acting from Torelle and the rest of the VLT cast render the death as nothing less than a tiny catastrophe. *Death of a Salesman* is playing at the Very Little Theater Jan. 20-23, 27-30, and Feb. 4-5. **EW**

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