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The Boston Globe

Theater & art

FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT

Maurice Hines reflects on past in ‘Tappin’ Thru Life’

By Karen Campbell | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 06, 2013

Maurice Hines may be nearing 70, but he exudes the energy and infectious enthusiasm of a kid with a new toy. He talks a mile a minute, is quick to laugh, and, God in heaven, does the man have stories.

Hines brings his stories, songs, and dances to the Cutler Majestic Theatre May 14-19 in his show “Tappin’ Thru Life.” Infused with personal reflections, the show, presented by ArtsEmerson, traces Hines’s six decade-plus career and is a tribute to his brother Gregory, who died in 2003. Backed by the Berklee College of Music Jazz Ensemble playing arrangements by Nelson Riddle and Tommy Newsom, the show also features two young tap-dancing brothers, whom Hines has been mentoring for the past three years.



SCOTT SUCHMAN

In “Tappin’ Thru Life,” Maurice Hines looks back on a passion for tap that began when he was tiny.

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Hines was only 5 years old when he put on his first pair of tap shoes and headed with his mom and 3-year-old Gregory down Lenox Avenue in Harlem, to the Wally Wanger dance studio. “This teacher said, ‘What can you do?’ ” Hines recalls. “I said, ‘I can turn

around,’ and I did six pirouettes on one foot, and she said, ‘Get this child to class.’ But they wouldn’t take Gregory because they didn’t think he could retain steps. And I cried, because we did everything together.”

So young Maurice would go home after lessons and show his little brother everything he learned. “He could just look at a step and do it,” Hines says.

Tappin’ Thru Life: An Evening With Maurice Hines

Cutler Majestic Theatre, 617-824-8400.

Also performing: ArtsEmerson

First performance: May 14


Closing date: May 19

Ticket price: \$25-\$89

Company website:

<http://www.artsemerson.org>

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Their parents quickly realized the boys’ talent and took the two to study tap with Broadway choreographer and teacher Henry LeTang, the premier instructor for children at that time. LeTang began creating routines for the duo, patterning them after the famous Nicholas Brothers.

When the Hines brothers were only 7 and 5, LeTang took them to the famed Apollo Theater for its popular Amateur Night. “There was this woman there who was bossing everyone around,” Hines remembers. “She said, ‘I’ll put them on as a special treat, but they can’t compete ’cause they’re too cute and they’ll win. It’ll be unfair.’ She didn’t even know we could dance. I asked her who she was, and she said she was a comedian. Turns out it was Dinah Washington.”

The Apollo became the Hines brothers' theatrical home. "That's how I learned my craft," Hines says. "Every week there was a different star, and I'd be watching. I'm so blessed to have had that life." As the two young boys developed into full-fledged hoofers, they became a touring act, opening for Gypsy Rose Lee, Lionel Hampton, and others. With the addition of their drummer father, Maurice Sr., the act morphed into Hines, Hines & Dad, and racked up nearly three dozen guest appearances on "The Tonight Show." "Johnny Carson helped us go to the next step," Hines says.

Hines recalls one especially memorable show with Judy Garland. "She jumped onstage and said, 'Hi, I'm Judy Garland.' We rehearsed a number together, then we never saw her till we went on to perform. But she came up later backstage and said, 'You guys are great. I'm going to come back and watch your part of the show.' And I can see her standing there in the wings, watching us and smiling, like it was yesterday. I live for those memories. Telling those kind of stories is so important to me."

The idea for "Tappin' Thru Life" was sparked, he says, by a big article on tap dancing that omitted any mention of Gregory Hines, who had been not only a renowned performer but a tireless advocate for tap, lobbying for National Tap Dance Day and mentoring a host of younger dancers, including Savion Glover. "I thought, how soon they forget," Hines says, his disappointment still palpable. So he set out to create a vehicle that honored his brother and their rich life together. The show includes a film of the two of them dancing in the 1978 Broadway hit "Eubie!," some of whose choreography was by LeTang. Toward the end of "Tappin' Thru Life," Hines dances the first soft-shoe routine he and his brother ever learned together as children; he performs it next to an empty spotlight. It's a tribute he also danced at his brother's memorial service. "I wanted to feel his presence on the stage with me," Hines says. "It's very emotional, but it's also uplifting."

As much as "Tappin' Thru Life" focuses on the past, it also features a significant nod to the future with the inclusion of tap-dancing brothers John and Leo Manzari, whom Hines discovered in 2009 during a master class and open audition for a 2010 revival of "Sophisticated Ladies" at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. He chose the pair, only 17 and 15 at the time, to make their professional debuts during the show, which he choreographed and starred in. Hines showcased their talents in the musical's second act.

Similarly, the brothers have their own segment in “Tappin’ Thru Life,” and they credit Hines with launching their career. “He saw potential in us,” says Leo, now 18. “Three years ago we were kind of raw talent, but he thought he could help us grow. He saw us as two brothers who love to dance together, and he wanted to shine a light on that.”

“We pretty much represent what Maurice and Gregory did,” says 20-year-old John, “a passing of the torch kind of thing. He gives us the opportunity to perform by his side and choreograph our own work. It’s a bold move, very validating.”

Hines calls the duo “a phenomenon,” and says helping them, as well as other young performers, is a way of giving back. “They are young and learning and they want it and they work hard and they deserve it. I am so proud of them.”

The brothers, in turn, seem to be learning from his example. “I admire his stage presence, the way he connects with the audience,” Leo says. “It’s not like he’s a performer. It’s like he’s your ultimate friend. He talks to [the audience] like he’s in his living room talking one-on-one.”

And onstage is right where Hines says he wants to be, “just having a good time and laughing. My mother used to always say when you go onstage you want your audience to leave saying, ‘I had a good time, baby.’ And they will, ’cause I’m gonna have a good time. Nothing can stop me.”

Karen Campbell can be reached at karencampbell4@rcn.com.