

I was asked by the Oregonian music writer to be part of a panel that went to see the tap musical "Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk" After the show we went back to the newspaper offices to discuss it. I joined a group of three African-American Portlanders: Singer and actress Julianne Johnson, jazz drummer and bandleader Ron Steen and Kuwana X. Watson the editor of a hip-hop magazine "The Other Side. " The article appeared February 19th 1998.

Decoding 'da message

Portlanders weigh in on "Funk" and find

It's more than a show - it's a lesson

By Marty Hughley

"Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk," the touring Broadway musical playing through March 1 at Civic Auditorium, is explosively energetic and entertaining. It's also a thought-provoking mix of history lesson, cultural commentary and aesthetic argument. And it's a look into the heartbeat of American society through an unlikely vessel: tap dancing.

Created principally by tap prodigy Savion Glover and producer/director George C. Wolfe, "bring in 'da Noise" works on multiple levels. Its vignettes touch on the black experience in America from slavery to hip-hop. It sketches the development of tap-dancing as expression and entertainment. And it makes a case for the importance of unbridled rhythm as a foundation of the African American psyche and society.

"Bring in 'da Noise" has also ruffled some feathers - particularly with characters that represent (some would say ridicule) such earlier black entertainers as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson who danced in movies with Shirley Temple.

To get a wider view on "Bring in 'da Noise" and how it deals with issues of art, race and society. The Oregonian gathered a small panel of Portlanders with varying perspectives and took them to Tuesday's opening night show Here are excerpts from an often freewheeling post-show discussion:

On how it changed impressions about tap-dancing...

- Kuwana X. Watson: I like the way this show mixed tap with hip-hop flavors and put on a good show by that. I learned a lot. I didn't really know what tap was about, or that a lot of black folks tapped.
- Ron Steen: Fortunately, I had a chance to play with Savion about five years ago, so I knew about that level of tap. But before then I hadn't realized that kind of technical proficiency existed. In terms of the advances made, he's like the John Coltrane of tap dancers. I was till surprised there would be that many people in this show dancing on

that high a level. It's almost like the change from minstrelsy to modern jazz. These cats were unbelievable.

- Sue Ceswick: Tap is kind of a spiritual practice, but you don't hear people talking about that very much. So to have that was inspiring for me. I'm telling you, my students are going to improvise tomorrow. The thing about this show is, they're not afraid to make mistakes. They've done this show a million times and it still seems fresh.

On tap's prospects for the future...

- Ceswick: It does give tap-dancing a real shot in the arm in terms of visibility and hipness. These guys have really broken through.
- Watson: I liked the historical background on tap. And for the tap scene now, I think if it continues to add funk into it, it'll attract a lot more young people to it.

Right now, the hip-hop industry is taking to tap, because in one of Puff Daddy's latest videos, he and Savion are tapping with each other. I work in a music store and we have videos on all day. When that one comes on people just stop and watch them do their thing.

On the show's treatment of black entertainers earlier in this century...

- Ceswick: I thought it was a cruel parody of Bill Robinson.
- Julianne R. Johnson: I don't think it was a parody on him, but on the Hollywood system using him.
- Ceswick: He was pretty well-respected though, and really furthered the visibility of blacks in movies at that time. And so to talk about him as if he were like Stepin Fetchit, is mean-spirited. He took those roles as the servant because that's all that was offered to him. He's sort of an unfair target.
- Steen: I hear what both of you are saying. And the question really is, is something better than nothing? Was it good? No. It's almost like, there's a knife in my back six inches, that's better than it being in there eight inches.

I always thought of Bill Robinson as the Satchel Paige of dancers. He was already almost 60 years old when he got any major film credits. Like Paige they let him into the major leagues when he was like 47, so most people never got to see him in his prime. To judge those people now, based on a 1998 standard, I have trouble with that.

On the argument that blacks shouldn't compromise their culture for personal gain...

- Steen: Any white artist that comes from any kind of impoverished background is never asked, "What are you doing for your people?" That question is never asked of members of the majority culture, it's only asked of minorities. And that whole question is so unfair _ as hard as it was for Stepin Fetchit to even exist at a time when people were still being lynched. He didn't create the system. He wanted to live a life as normal as he could.

On the balance between sensation and seriousness...

- Ceswick: Well, it seemed like they glossed through some things that were really

heavy. Like the lurching scene, they might've put a little pause in there to let it resonate.

- Johnson: I appreciated the fact that the transition was quick: he struck the pose and the lights went out. Theatrically, that was wonderful. But then everything just needed to stop for a moment - no noise, no funk. And let everybody realize what you just saw.

On calling it what it is...

- Johnson: I keep coming back to the whole idea of tap being called tap and Savion trying to rephrase it and saying, "No, it's hitting!" It's as if he's saying, "Don't tap or skirt around the issue; hit the nail on the head." Look at it for what it is, and then you can create something new or create an extension from it. But you can't do that unless you look at things the way they are - as uncomfortable as it makes you, as cold or warm or large or humble as it makes you.

On the show's ambitious scope...

- Steen: What the whole show was about was the transition from the entertainment to this total self-expression, like tapping a vessel. A means to express something beyond entertainment, to a spiritual level almost.
- Johnson: I really am glad that we had the opportunity to have a young person make a comment about where we've been in dance and in music and in history. Those are three really wonderful avenues to explore and to link them together is great.

It took everything on a journey to the present and then on and yet it addressed where we had been. Each one of these vignettes made you think, from your own personal experience. And that makes a good show. It's not whether you love it, it's whether you think about it.