



DANCE | DANCE REVIEW | 'MONK'S MOOD'

Looking at One Life by Starting at the End

By GIA KOURLAS DEC. 14, 2009



Thomas F. DeFrantz, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is also, according to his program biography, “a globally circulating artist and academic.” In “Monk’s Mood: A Performance Meditation on the Life and Music of [Thelonious Monk](#),” Mr. DeFrantz, a tall, slender man with a head full of dreadlocks, aims to be a tap dancer and a storyteller.

Performed Friday through Sunday at the Joyce SoHo, “Monk’s Mood” examines Monk through his music and relationships. The work, presented by Mr. DeFrantz’s multidisciplinary group, Slippage: Performance/Culture/Technology, begins at the end of Monk’s life.



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Monk’s Mood: The piece, which looks at the life and work of Thelonious Monk, was performed by Thomas F. DeFrantz at the Joyce SoHo. Christopher Pierce

In the production the improvisational component isn’t limited to Mr. DeFrantz’s dancing: digital pads on the stage activate sound and imagery, including video and photographic stills. Throughout the performance, Eto Oro, credited with visual design and technical direction, controls the cues.

After an opening dance, Mr. DeFrantz, as Monk, eases into a chair but can’t get comfortable; his body twitches as if he were being driven mad by rhythm and memories. His left foot flutters nervously; he sighs, looks down, crosses a leg and takes a sip of water. The work’s narrative, which includes a hokey pas de deux between Mr. DeFrantz and a pink-patterned dress meant to evoke the memory of Monk’s wife, is often contrived.

Although Mr. DeFrantz is a passable tap dancer, his stamina isn’t strong enough for the nearly 50-minute piece. Neither were his shoes; at one point he left the stage, and a man in the back of the theater announced, “We’re holding for a shoe change.” (It made for a particularly awkward lull.)

What is clear throughout the work is a sense of Monk’s isolation. The lighting design, by Tim Pickerill, works wonders, transforming the stage into a nightclub, highlighted by vivid reds and blues, or into a melancholy room with a slanted ceiling, created by aiming a shaft of light at the chair. Here Monk’s loneliness is palpable, and through lighting, the mood works.

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