

Tune: At the Head of the Class Act

By Nelson Pressley

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For a man approaching 70, Tommy Tune is still strikingly cute. The Tony-winning director-choreographer-performer hit the stage at Strathmore Friday night in skinny jeans and with his collar popped, looking like a kid ready for his first big break.

Tune is 50 years into a triumphant career. There are nine Tonys in his collection, and "Steps in Time" is a casual retrospective of his stage-struck life and work. It's not the usual catalogue of musical theater hits, in part because so much of Tune's success has been as a director and dancemaker (1982's "Nine," 1989's "Grand Hotel") rather than as the front-and-center Broadway star he was in "My One and Only." At 6 feet 6 inches tall and with a singing voice that's always pleasant but seldom rousing, Tune has never exactly fit the classic leading-man mold.

Yet he is a traditionalist to the core, a sentimental link to the era before jukebox musicals and animated extravaganzas, a latter-day Fred Astaire. "Listen and learn" were the leggy Texan's first words to the audience as he tapped out a dance tutorial in scarlet cowboy boots.

Backed by a three-piece combo plus the Manhattan Rhythm Kings (the close-harmonizing trio Tune has worked with for years), Tune quickly set a winsome mood with songs and arrangements that were vintage Americana. A loping cowboy tune, a number about leavin' Texas ("though it hits me in my solar plexus"), the occasional use of tiny trombone-shaped kazoos -- you got the idea that Tune, who has concocted genuinely lavish spectacles on Broadway, was out for some low-key, loose-limbed fun.

A half-century on, can the man still dance? Tune, who famously broke his foot in 1995 during the out-of-town tour of "Busker Alley" (an injury that scotched the show's New York chances), didn't cover a ton of ground during his numbers, but the turf he covered was choice.

The hips swiveled and the shoulders rolled, and the arcs carved by his limbs during a brief Charleston were smooth and impossibly wide.

The "less is more" ethic reached a fine peak during a dance choreographed by Charles "Honi" Coles, who starred with Tune (and Twiggy) in 1983's "My One and Only." That selection led to a story -- one of

several recycled from Tune's 1997 autobiography -- about Coles's advice to Tune: Be "nonchalant." It was worth hearing again to see Tune's body demonstrate the lesson by degrees: He did the step freely, then with cool restraint, then barely at all, with each change paradoxically leading to a greater effect.

"It's not as easy as it looks," Tune said, sounding dead serious.

That deceptive simplicity seems to be the goal of the show, which played two nights here and is set to tour for the next few months. Music director Michael Biagi's arrangements were jaunty but subtle, giving Tune and the Rhythm Kings a soft cushion for a set list that mixed lesser-known songs with plenty of chestnuts. A Gershwin sequence concluded with Tune dancing in the half light, his steps not flashy but full of style.

Tune's between-songs patter got a bit showbizzy at times, but the saccharine lapses, while a constant threat, were rare. By and large, the old song-and-dance vaudeville vocabulary was invoked with uncommon class.