

# Song and Dance Man

Tommy Tune still follows his creative spirit



Tommy Tune in rehearsal with Ariana Lallone and Tobias Larsson

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF TEATRO ZINZANNI

**B**roadway stars do not come much bigger, literally and figuratively, than legendary song and dance man Tommy Tune. As a young performer from Houston, Texas, Tommy's greatest dream was to be in the chorus of a Broadway show. He accomplished that goal his first day in the Big Apple and has spent the last five decades building an iconic career in musical theatre that few can match.

As Tommy tells it, dancing has been a part of his life since before he was born. He speaks with a soft Southern accent unaffected by years of traveling the world, and points out, "My real name is Tommy Tune, so I was not going to go into accounting."

Coming of age during the Golden Age of the movie musical, Tommy's earliest influence was the musicals with a cast of thousands on the big screen. "My whole inspiration was the movies. In the movies of the '50s, people walked down the streets of New York and sang and danced, so I thought that is the way the world should be, it just wasn't that way in Texas."

With a storyline practically out of *Footloose*, Tommy recalls an incident when he and his friends held a picnic in the local park one evening. "The police came, and said, 'What are you kids doing here, unsupervised, singing, and dancing? We can't have this!' And I said, 'Well, they do it in the movies.'"

That intuitive beginning led Tommy to a flourishing career in performing, directing, and choreographing for the stage, film, and television. Along the way, Tommy has earned nine Tony Awards, eight Drama Desk Awards, three Astaire Awards,

the Society of Directors and Choreographers' George Abbott Award, plus the National Medal of Arts presented to him by the President of the United States.

## Knock You Out Choreography

Theatre reviewers of the 2010-2011 Broadway season noted the seeming return of the director/choreographer as a force on Broadway, a return to the day when one creative artist imparted a fluid concept to the overall look and feel of a production.

"A director/choreographer can give the whole show a sense of movement," as Tommy points out. "A lot of directors are frightened of choreographers because choreographers have been known to hijack shows and say, 'I see a dance here.' And they put in a big dance number, and the show never recovers because it's not a part of the fabric of the whole dramaturgical arc. When you're a director/choreographer, you have these dialogues with yourself so the answers come a bit quicker. I find that it does give a cohesiveness to the show."

A lifelong tap dancer, Tommy mentions the big Act I tap finale in the current Broadway revival of *Anything Goes*, directed and choreographed by Kathleen Marshall. "I couldn't keep my feet still!" He becomes nostalgic about these kinds of big musical dance numbers that were the bread and butter of Broadway musicals.

"Nothing can replace that energetic shock of a great dance number in a show," he feels. "And we used to have those kinds of numbers in every show." However, changes in times have brought changes to the musical artform. "I think our musicals have gotten more serious-minded. They used to be called 'musical comedies,' and now they're called 'musicals,'" as he lowers his voice to sound more serious.

Noting the trend toward more dramatic musicals with intense overtones, Tommy comments, "It's tricky. Musicals aren't reality. They're hyper reality — reality on steroids. So the jolt of a great dance number in a show — there's just nothing like it.

"We see this in the revivals, but I would love to see a new show with this. I loved the choreography of *The Book of Mormon*.

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And what Bill T. Jones did in *Spring Awakening* really knocked me out. It was so different, but the choreography served the piece. The choreography must always serve the piece."

**Joining the Circus**

Many can see that the musical theatre world is in flux right now, as revivals

bring the innocent musical comedies to play side by side with the satirical, often cynical, newer musicals. Tommy is also aware of the artistic battle, commenting, "We're searching for a new form."

When most experienced performers would hang up their shoes and spend their weekends giving master workshops, Tommy still hits the road on occasion, singing and hoofing for fans around the country with his show, *Steps in Time*. An autobiographical musical revue, Tommy takes audiences through his life and career singing songs from the shows that have meant the most to him over the years.

Tommy's creative side still gets the best of him, though. "I'm

searching the world for unique, original entertainment at this point in my life." For now, the search has brought him to Seattle, Washington, to direct and choreograph an original production, *Bonsoir Liliame!*, for Teatro ZinZanni. With a cast of dancers and contortionists, the all-new show turns the theatre into a spiegel tent draped in sumptuous red velvet as the performers delve into the memories and fantasies of Tony Award-winner Liliame Montevecci during her travels to Moscow, Paris and beyond.

Teatro ZinZanni features a swirling stream of performance and music that blend cirque, comedy, and cabaret into an unforgettable experience. Tommy seems to be right at home in such an artistic and adventurous setting.

He also wants to work on shows that will leave the audience transported, changed from having experienced the story as told on the stage through song and dance. "I look for shows that will do that. Whether they're joyful or very touching or very serious, the main thing is to reach out from the stage with our hearts and souls and make a connection with the hearts and souls of the audience. You want to leave them with something more."

Over five decades of experience boil down to the simplest yet sagacious advice. "When we do it right, we are like vitamins for the spirit," reveals Tommy. "The audience should feel like they've gotten a shot of some wonderful vitamin that gets them through as long as they can have the memory of it in the their brain. Each audience member can move it into the apartments of their mind, and there it can reside forever."

An entertainer to his core, Tommy continues to explore the inclusion of song and dance into everything he does, from walking down the street to spurring the musical theatre artform forward. Tommy says unapologetically, "Dancing just makes people so happy." **SD**

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