

ARTFORUM

JANE GOLDBERG BRECHT FORUM

In *Topical Tap/Rhythm and Schmooze*, 1990, Jane Goldberg taps out the history of tap dancing, talking all the while of her 17-year love affair with a medium that carries the sound of its own making with every expertly placed ball, heel, and toe. Reminding us too of how, in the early '80s, she contributed to a tap revival, Goldberg confesses to her pains in attempting to make a career out of a form inextricably associated with poverty and repression, and rarely represented by more than one media figure at a time—Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Gregory Hines. Not surprisingly, she goes for comedy to lighten the burden on her unhappy feet, and comes up with an alternative account of its history. It began with Jewish women, she suggests, tap, tap, tapping their feet as they impatiently waited for Moses to descend the mountain. It gathered momentum with all those “wandering shoes” and stopped in Ireland for a warm-up on the gravel roads alongside grimy peat bogs, before making its way over the ocean via the shackled feet of men reluctantly rowing their way to slavery in America.

Goldberg pulls off an intimate evening with her savvy, informative, and highly entertaining tap talk covering a range of current events. She misses by a fraction though, and there lies the rub. Somewhere in this endearing account of dancing feet that automatically make people want to clap their hands, she

aims too low. For essentially, this provocative and intelligent material, which brings with it rich historical resonances relating to both dance and life, remains schematic in Goldberg's account. Nevertheless, the manner in which she intertwines her running commentaries on art-politics, feminism, and racial strife with a variety of time steps—providing footnotes that identify the originator, and often the date, of a particularly interesting combination—makes a strong case for this sort of “tap monologue.”

Presented at a small, downtown space chosen for the sound of its wooden floor (a veritable Stradivarius of floors, she quipped), *Topical Tap* has the feel, and the appeal, of a work in progress, out on the road. For the piece to make it in New York, however, some of its parts will need to be strengthened and revised. For example, the syncopated rhythms of foot and mouth are an instantaneously successful combination, but one that could benefit from more developed writing both verbally and musically. The wooden floor that is her instrument could also accommodate more complex choreography, and her autobiographical material—which includes an ironic discussion of some of her failed ambitions, and her successes—needs to be subjected to a storyteller's scrutiny so that the audience can get some distance on her confessions as we do in Spalding Gray's work.

Indeed, Goldberg's show raises questions about the monologue form: how fine is the line between personal catharsis and viable performance? At what point does an audience balk at the role of unwilling confidant? Goldberg is tackling these issues through an unlikely hybrid of tap dance and confessional monologue and, in the process, she is creating a genre all her own.

—RoseLee Goldberg



Jane Goldberg, *Topical Tap/Rhythm and Schmooze*, 1990. Performance view.