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Going On by Going Back

By Deborah Jowitz

OLD, NEW, BORROWED & BLUESY. Presented by Changing Times Tap Dancing Company at Bouverie Lane Theatre (May 28 to June 7).

The true-life plot of Jane Goldberg's tap musical, *Old, New, Borrowed & Bluesy* is a pleasantly rickety structure. You keep thinking it'll fall like an old hatrack if anyone hangs one more number on it. In the show (at the little Bouverie Lane last month), everyone plays himself or herself with gusto. Goldberg is introduced to us in rhyme by her long-suffering neighbor, writer Stewart Alter (who really did write a lot of the material). She's determined to succeed as a tap dancer, and her strenuous sessions get between Alter and his muse. Goldberg persuades Charles "Cookie" Cook (of Cook and Brown) to take her on as a pupil, and not far into the second act, they're the headliners of this show. How's that for an American dream?

Cook and the other dancers in the show—Bunny Briggs, plus Jackie Raven and Lynne Jassem—are gotten into the first act on the pretext that they're renting the studio where Goldberg practices. Performers and audience agree to pretend that this Cinderella story is happening right on stage, but it's a raffishly loose arrangement. Hell, we know they're entertainers. Pianist Jim Roberts, drummer Jim Payne, bassist Ratzo B. Harris play from a little platform high above the stage, and the dancers call gleefully up to them "Take me home!" when they're ready to wind up a number. All the performers talk to the audience, and once when Goldberg asks

Cook nicely if he'll teach her, he cracks her up by muttering something about that being a strange request since here they are working together.

Goldberg's rhythms are cleaner and subtler than they used to be. The style she's building for herself honors the hoofing tradition of her teachers, but it's full in space, juicy and unselfconsciously female. Her many outfits are spruce versions of the thrift-shop glad rags she used to sport, and she looks fresh and pretty in them. She can almost sing too. (Most of the engaging original songs are by Alan Rosenthal and Alter.) The heart of the show is her relationship with the spry and acid Cook. Before they meet, he does a sand dance, rubbing out sly rhythms in a puddle of fine sand. When he's gone, she cleans up after him, making her broom dance a tentative response to his virtuosity, brushing broom on floor, feet on floor, feet against broom. "Who the hell do you think you are?" he rasps later, and she yells back that she's gonna succeed, whatever he thinks. They're an unlikely pair, the seasoned black hooper who knows all the answers, and the feisty young white woman with all the questions.

Alter has a couple of nice numbers too. His unwilling fingers begin to peck tap rhythms in tandem with Goldberg, and pretty soon he takes up tap in self-defense. He dances "The Frog Prince" in swim fins. Cook dances his *I Remember Hanya* (He appeared in *Kiss Me Kate*, and Hanya Holm told him to cover more ground), and a fine comedy routine in which he comes stumbling down the aisle with a bottle, which he renounces for a bunch of roses. Briggs performs the most extended numbers in the show. While the excellent band plays "It Don't Mean A Thing," he makes a very big thing out of letting his feet slither elaborate rhythms along the floor. Later, to "The Very Thought Of You," he stays straight, pursing his lips, opening his soft round eyes wide, and keeping his intricate tapping right under him for a long

time, every now and then hushing our applause: "Not yet, I'll tell you when."

Briggs dances as if he's listening to the rhythms he's laying down. Monitoring them, with every now and then a smile and a glance for us. Cook and Goldberg do that too. Raven and Jassem, like singer Gil Nelson, are more deliberately ingratiating, sell a little harder.

The night I saw the show, Bert Gibson was in the audience. ("All for you, Gib, all for you," calls Briggs quietly.) The pair of crutches explains why Gibson won't be dancing, although he scats "The Bullet" for Jackie to do and corrects Goldberg's

rendering of his time step. His wife, Sandra, comes up to join the finale though, and Jazz Richardson, and one of Gibson's mates in The Chocolateers (a '30s trio), Paul Black. A stout man in a suit, Black lets Briggs lure him into a snatch of the old novelty act "Pecking," and, wonder of wonders, he can still do his famous split, hiking up his pants, taking it slow and easy. His friends haul him up and hug him, thrilled, and through the applause he shouts to us, "Thank God for old men!"

Old, New, Borrowed & Bluesy is about nostalgia, but also about going on and going ahead.