

A Big Hand for the Little Ladies

BY SALLY R. SOMMER

SOLE SISTERS. At La Mama E.T.C. (October 16 through November 2). Presented by Changing Times Tap Dancing Company.

Jane Goldberg's new edition of *Sole Sisters* is a saucy, neat production that celebrates women in tap, amiably mixing the older generation with the younger, and proving that women were, and are, terrific tappers. Time was when women got shuffled under and pushed into the chorus lines, but now, as the current movers and shakers behind tap, they are uncovering their history. Tap history in general is still in its infancy, still trying to sort out who began what and when (was it Irish or African?). Goldberg announced: "I tell them the Jews started tap. Running through the desert gave us incredible rhythm."

Sand dancing really came along in the 1800s, but until I saw Harriet Browne, I thought this style belonged to the men. Not so! Browne laid down her board, sprinkled it with sand, pawed around, then broke into fast, whispering rhythms. Her footwork is neat, close together, even sassy, and her tempos subtle and sure. Tall and plump. Browne could be 40 or 60. A seasoned performer who dances with genial, wry humor, she wraps up the audience in the circle of her pleasure. This is, I think, a distinctly feminine perfor-

mance quality, one which gave grace and goodwill to the entire evening.

The new *Sole Sisters* has been cleverly directed by Constance Valis-Hill. She tightened and trimmed the original version (seen last year at Greenwich House in rough-cut) and paced the show to snap along. The script (by Murray Horwitz and Susan Woolhandler) interweaves personal raps with a little history and keeps Goldberg and the sisters talking to the point. Goldberg is fusing talking and tapping, and with this edition she has refined her rap—and timing—to something very individual and offbeat that is both confessional and wacky. Since last year, Sarah Safford returned her *Post-Partum Blues* into a very funny, oddball number in which Safford, backed by a chorus of Jo McNamara, Dorothy Wasserman, and Browne, wails about trying to be both a mother and a tapper. Safford's persona is a delicious blend of wiseacre and innocent, her little boop-de-boop wavering voice wailing, "I've got 'em/The Post-Partum Blues!"—a familiar complaint of women dancers.

Frances Nealy, another handsome, ageless woman, who worked with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, did two wonderful dances. Her *Stair Dance*, à la Bojangles, had the audience cheering. Nealy began her *Dancin' Is My Game* by telling us that in the good ole days, "which maybe weren't so good," she was known in the business as "Twinkle Twat." Then she knocked out a debonaire soft-shoe that was easy and clear, managing to be beautiful and gutsy in the same moment. Miriam Greaves-Ali and Josephine McNamara demonstrated two other tap traditions. McNamara is a tiny, redheaded Irish step-dancer who popped down her taps in the hornpipe with lyrical clarity, so light on her feet that she just skimmed the stage. You adored her. You loved the dance. You wanted to be like her when you grew up. In contrast, Greaves-Ali did a funky version of the South African Boot Dance dressed in the improbable combination of knee-high rubber boots and a gold lamé jumpsuit.

Brenda Bufalino represented, she said the "Italian" tradition. I don't know any body with more range. She swings from soft-shoe to tough get-down tapping from jazz to bebop rhythms with insouciant ease. Bufalino is a blazing-hot performer, totally in control of tonalities and even when her feet are quiet, slow and clicking, you know she's just waiting to sock it to you. Surely the best female technician around, Bufalino proves that the women are a match for the best of the men. In fact, *all* the dancers are proficient technicians.

Dorothy Wasserman is a young tapper who demonstrates this. I've been watching her perform through the years, getting better each time, and now she has the feet and the persona. Lanky and casual, she lays down the taps with confidence, enjoying every second of her dancing.

Right now, tap is ready to take off. The younger generation has come a long way since the beginnings of the tap renaissance in the 1970s. Technically they've got their feet together. And they're primed for serious choreographic challenges.