

A KNOCKOUT OPENING NUMBER BY STUDENTS FROM THE HARLEM SCHOOL OF THE ARTS! —THE NEW YORK TIMES



Students at the Harlem School of the Arts performing at the Bessie Awards, held this year at the Apollo Theater

Ruby Washington/The New York Times

October 25, 2011

The Dance World Turns Out to Honor Its Own

By **BRIAN SEIBERT**

This year the Bessies moved uptown. On Monday the New York Dance and Performance Awards, named after the highly influential teacher and mentor Bessie Schonberg, were given out at the Apollo Theater in Harlem.

Downtown used to be what the Bessies were all about: experimental, noncommercial, insular. Lucy Sexton, who took over as director last year, is trying to pitch a bigger tent. It's easy to talk about diversity—and the word was repeated often on Monday—but the more than 1,400 people assembled seem to bear out the notion of the larger world of dance coming together. After winning for sustained achievement in performance (a tie with Rashaun Mitchell), New York City Ballet's Wendy Whelan used her speech to express interest in working downtown. "Call me," she said.

Many categories were new, but some of the old-time attitude survived. Announcing the winner for best production in a theater with fewer than 400 seats, Tere O'Connor couldn't resist throwing in that this category included most dance spaces. One winner announced by Mr. O'Connor, Ishmael Houston-Jones, listed the productions that he thought should have been nominated instead. (In the over-400-seat category, Alexei Ratmanky's "Bright Stream" won.)

Apart from a knockout opening number by students from the **Harlem School of the Arts**, there were no performances, although there was footage of the Lifetime Achievement Award winner, Trisha Brown, 74, dancing in Paris two weeks ago. Other footage showed snippets of nominated productions.

Bebe Neuwirth was a classy host in a sparkling jeweled choker who wittily commented on her script, ad-libbed and did a snatch of the czardas from "Coppélia" in her Manolos. She learned the dance, she said, from the 97-year-old awardee for service to the field, Frederic Franklin. And she was far from the only participant to trace a connection to that remarkable man, who had danced with Josephine Baker.

Appropriately for the Apollo, home to great tap dancers in the 1930s and '40s, it was a big night for tap. The little-known hooper Caleb Teicher was a surprise choice for outstanding individual performance. (He tied with the less surprising American Ballet Theater principal Marcelo Gomes.) The tap choreographer Michelle Dorrance was honored for stretching the boundaries of a traditional form. And Savion Glover won for sound design. He had to share the honor with Jon Moniaci, who did the sound for Beth Gill's piece "Electric Midwife." It was a big night for Ms. Gill, too. Right after she won for outstanding emerging choreographer, Ralph Lemon announced that his own three-choreographer jury, independent of the Bessie committee, had also singled her out as the year's most adventurous choreographer. Wordy citations, unwieldy category names, humble thank yous, shameless plugs—all in only two and a half hours. Steven Sapp and Mildred Ruiz-Sapp, giving out the award for outstanding production ("of a work not technically considered dance but happening in and influencing the dance community") to Karinne Keithley's "Montgomery Park," suggested that everyone "come uptown one day for real"—that is, to their neighborhood, in the Bronx.