



## Tune, Tommy (b. 1939)

by Bud Coleman

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At 6-foot-6-and-a-half-inches, Tommy Tune cast a long shadow over Broadway for many years, accumulating nine Tony Awards in eighteen years. Tune is the first person to have won Tonys in four different categories: Best Director, Best Choreographer, Best Featured Actor in a Musical, and Best Actor in a Musical. (The only other person to accomplish this feat is Harvey Fierstein.)

Since making his Broadway debut dancing in the chorus of *Baker Street* in 1964, Tune was almost synonymous with the Great White Way until 1999, when he departed to star in the Las Vegas spectacle *EFX*.

An only son, Thomas J. Tune was born in Wichita Falls, Texas on February 28, 1939. He started his dance training as a five-year-old. He ultimately received a B.F.A. in drama from the University of Texas at Austin and an M.F.A. in directing from the University of Houston.

After ten years of being a very tall chorus boy in many Broadway productions, Tune played David in *Seesaw* (1973), a gay choreographer who stopped the show (and won his first Tony) with "It's Not Where You Start, It's Where You Finish." Although *Seesaw* was directed and choreographed by Michael Bennett, Tune collaborated with Bennett on his own choreography.

On stage, Tune was usually cast to showcase his fresh-faced sweetness and infectious enthusiasm.

While appearing in the chorus of *How Now, Dow Jones*, Tune was spotted and whisked off to Hollywood. A seven-year contract with Twentieth Century Fox resulted in Tune's appearance in one of the last of the film musicals, Gene Kelly's *Hello, Dolly!*, starring Barbra Streisand. Tune also served as the assistant choreographer on the television variety program *The Dean Martin Show* during its last years on the air.

Tune received Obie Awards for his direction of the off-Broadway hits *The Club* (1976) and *Cloud Nine* (1981). As director or choreographer (and frequently performer as well) his Broadway successes include *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1977), *A Day in Hollywood / A Night in the Ukraine* (1980), *Nine* (1982), *My One and Only* (1983), *Grand Hotel* (1989), and *The Will Rogers Follies* (1991).

Tune's star seemed to tarnish with the quick closings and/or bad reviews that met the arrival of *Stepping Out* (director, 1987), *The Best Little Whorehouse Goes Public* (co-director and choreographer, 1994), and *Grease* (creative consultant, 1994). After breaking his right foot in 1995 during the final out-of-town tryout performance of *Busker's Alley* in Florida, he has not returned to Broadway.

Tune's trademark style is infused with a respect for and knowledge of old-fashioned musical theater, but staged with state-of-the-art savvy. While other choreographers such as Jerome Robbins and Agnes de Mille individuated members of the ensemble, Tune celebrates the chorus line.

A choreographic sense of humor also distinguishes Tune from his peers; his dancing dolls in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* and his staging of the Hollywood Production Code as a tap dance in *A Day in*

*Hollywood / A Night in the Ukraine* remain comedic classics.

Normally reticent about his personal life, Tune shocked many by discussing his bisexuality in his autobiography, *Footnotes* (1998). "What I arrived at in my 59th year is that I just want to walk in truth and live by my own time." The book contains moving passages about his lover of almost ten years, stage manager David Wolfe, who died of AIDS in 1994, and about actor and costumer Michael Stuart (1943-1997), with whom Tune lived for seven years.

AIDS also robbed Tune of his longtime agent and close friend, Eric Shepard. Indeed, Tune notes in his autobiography, that "Since AIDS claimed his [Shepard's] life I've won nothing. My career has floundered. The man behind the man. Gone."

In late 2002, Tune returned to New York for an off-Broadway "all-singing-all-dancing tuneful big band show" entitled

*Tommy Tune: White Tie and Tails*. In this revue, Tune, backed by the Manhattan Rhythm Kings, performed song and dance numbers set to the music of such composers as Peter Allen, George Gershwin, and Cole Porter.

### **Bibliography**

Tune, Tommy. *Footnotes*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998.

### **About the Author**

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