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Review: Christian Swenson's 'human jazz' show has legs

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PERFORMANCE REVIEW |

There may not be a name for what Christian Swenson does — but there's no denying that he does it remarkably well. And his new solo show, "Body of Music," offers a perfect opportunity to watch him doing it.

Swenson describes his stage actions as "human jazz." His only instrument is his body, but "body" doesn't quite do justice to all the moves and sounds in Swenson's repertoire. Blurring the boundaries between song, dance and mime, he casts a strangely sculpting light on all three activities, trilling a note with a flutter of his fingers or stretching it out with a gorilla-wide extension of his arms.

With Swenson, body is tuned to voice and voice is tuned to body in ways that make them seem one protean unit. His pleasing baritone, if delivered straight, would sit nicely in any traditional musical setting. But Swenson is after something more. He seems at times to have a whole little orchestra in the caverns of his throat, issuing sounds that his arms, legs and feet shape or translate or hand off into the ether. Notes get bounced like basketballs — or lobbed like yo-yos.

He likes to strike gospel notes or take the abstracted sounds of conversational rhythms and parlay them into percussive patterns. Often he seems to be channeling invisible presences as he explores minor-key modes in which the melismatic ripples of his voice induce a trancelike effect in his listeners. Or maybe he's just recalling a long-ago musical tour through the Balkans.

He does sometimes break into recognizable songs — "Stormy Weather" and "I Am a Pilgrim" are two examples — toying with timbre and melody before introducing the actual lyrics. He also has an uncanny way of becoming his own backup combo, doing "instrumental solos" while the "singer" takes a break.

And then there are his occasional comments: "It's different because it's music that's got feet, you see."

Yep, that's it.

In a performance of "Body of Music" earlier this month, Swenson closed with some spoken-word material — good as far as these things go. But it's the whole package of sound, moves and expression that makes him one of a kind. If you've never seen him, here's a chance to add a completely new kind of performance to your theater experience.

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