

DeFrantz describes creative process for Thelonius Monk performance

Sarah H. Wright, News Office
December 8, 1999

Over the course of one hour, Assistant Professor Thomas DeFrantz's subtle and inventive use of tap forms as well as other media brought renowned jazz pianist Thelonius Monk both joyfully and painfully to life.

Professor DeFrantz of music and theater arts performed the original tap composition, "Monk's Mood: A Meditation on the Life and Music of Thelonius Monk," in Kresge Little Theater on December 3 and 4.

The action of "Monk's Mood" takes place in the apartment (containing a piano, Victrola, records and an old easy chair) and inside the mind of Thelonius Monk (1917-82). Professor DeFrantz choreographed 17 solo tap dances to accompany Mr. Monk's music and to denote different stages in the musician's tempestuous life.

Professor DeFrantz performed with delicacy, speed and a certain forthrightness about the difficult and sometimes unpleasant character whose story he told. Dressed in the jacket and tie that were once de rigueur in jazz clubs, he handily mixed classical and modern techniques, including a choreographic nod to Alvin Ailey's signature stop-time poses.

"Monk's Mood" arose from Professor DeFrantz's fascination with Mr. Monk's unique way of hearing and playing, the choreographer said. "Monk took a basic tonality, such as a chord progression. But he didn't hear it like that and he didn't play it like that. Working with his way of playing, even simple tap steps become very, very strange. In a way, my steps are analogous to his piano keys; I'm trying to find his rhythms with my feet," he said.

As Mr. Monk was a man of many moods, Professor DeFrantz had to create many dances to portray him. Some dances had melancholic qualities, such as "Humph," "Introspection" and "Body and Soul." Some teetered on a fabulous hysteria, such as "Rhythm-a-ning," and some seemed to exist simply for wonder, such as "Round Midnight" or for joy, such as "Little Rootie Tootie" in which Professor DeFrantz danced a whimsical pas de deux with a little red wagon.

Professor DeFrantz's performance was directed by Brenda Cotto-Escalera, associate professor of theater arts, with visual designer Eio Otlitgbe (SB 1999). Puppetry artist Noelia Ortiz-Cortes provided the tiny puppet of Monk and a piano for "Ruby My Dear," drove a little red wagon for "Little Rootie Tootie," and "danced" as Nellie and Baronness Nica, using only dresses and hats.

RESEARCH AND REHEARSAL

Professor DeFrantz, who is the archivist and historian for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York City, described his research process in a presentation of video and dance at the November Arts Colloquium hosted by Alan Brody, associate provost for the arts.

At the time, "Monk's Mood" was still in rehearsal, and Professor DeFrantz gave the group gathered in Killian Hall rare insight into the challenges and rewards of working in dance.

He began with the floor, its character and quirks. Everyone in the audience could see the black marley floor taped atop the wood one, but no one else could feel its subtle shifts he felt with his feet.

"I'll warm up, find out what the floor is doing," said Professor DeFrantz as he moved in decreasing concentric rectangles around the black mat. Forehead wrinkled in concentration, he listened as he moved, repeating tiny steps to make sure. "There's a crease here. I want to avoid that."

Describing his search through tap history for material for "Monk's Mood" and other compositions, he noted that tap dancing is not "codified," like ballet, so as a dance historian and choreographer he has had to rely on sources such as 19th-century lithographs and woodcuts and early 20th-century film to unearth tap's first forms. These arose from dance competitions held between Irish and African-American residents of lower Manhattan – "Riverdance" meets step dancing, said Professor DeFrantz – and combined the staccato footwork of jigs with extreme upper-body poses, as if hieroglyphs had sprung to life.

Tap dancing had its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, he said. It lost momentum during World War II due to a shortage of shoe leather, and then, according to some, tap's conventional "square rhythm" was killed by the unconventional rhythms of bebop.

QUEST FOR THE HEART OF TAP

Professor DeFrantz's search for the roots of tap involves both a journey through media ages – woodcuts through film and television – and a journey inward, towards his own choreographic voice. It's an intimate way of working, one that requires him to "inhabit" historical styles – he uses video tape and a mirror to do this – and then work out for himself how to "incorporate quotations in my own choreography."

To illustrate, he showed a video clip of "Class Act," a show in which tap masters Cholly Atkins and "Honi" Coles performed to the tune of "Taking a Chance on Love," known as the "slowest soft shoe ever," he said.

As the tape rolled, he mirrored their steps, giving his audience three dancers to watch at once. Atkins and Cowles are credited with calling bebop the killer of tap. To watch Professor DeFrantz is to know it ain't necessarily so.


A version of this article appeared in *MIT Tech Talk* on December 8, 1999.

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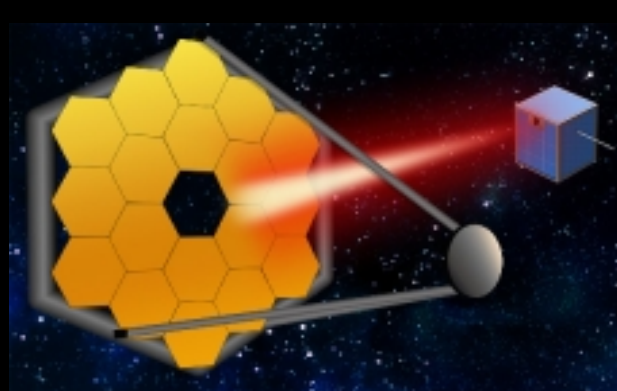
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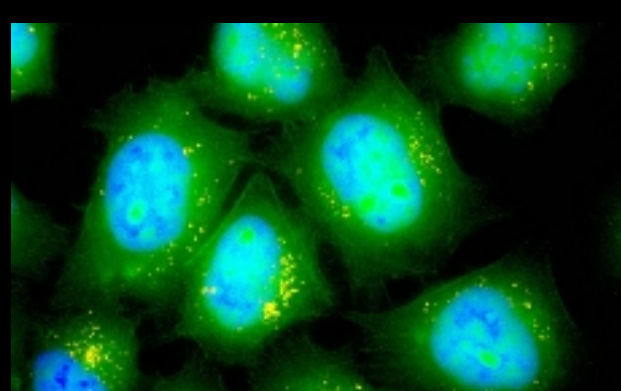
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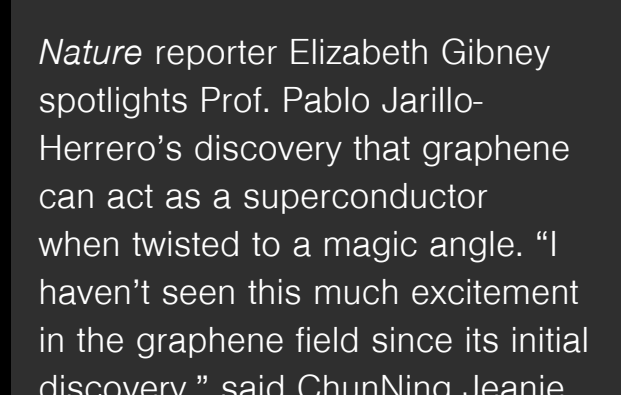
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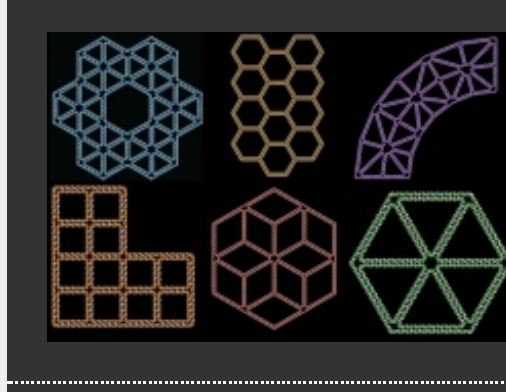


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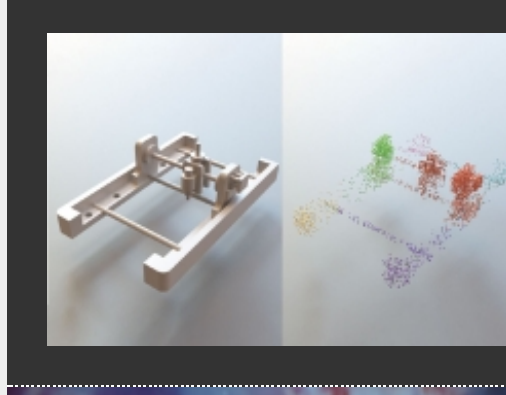


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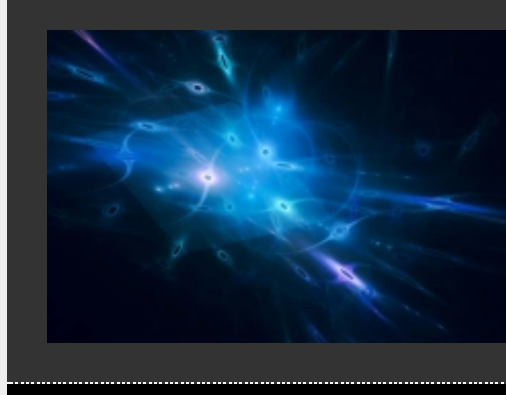
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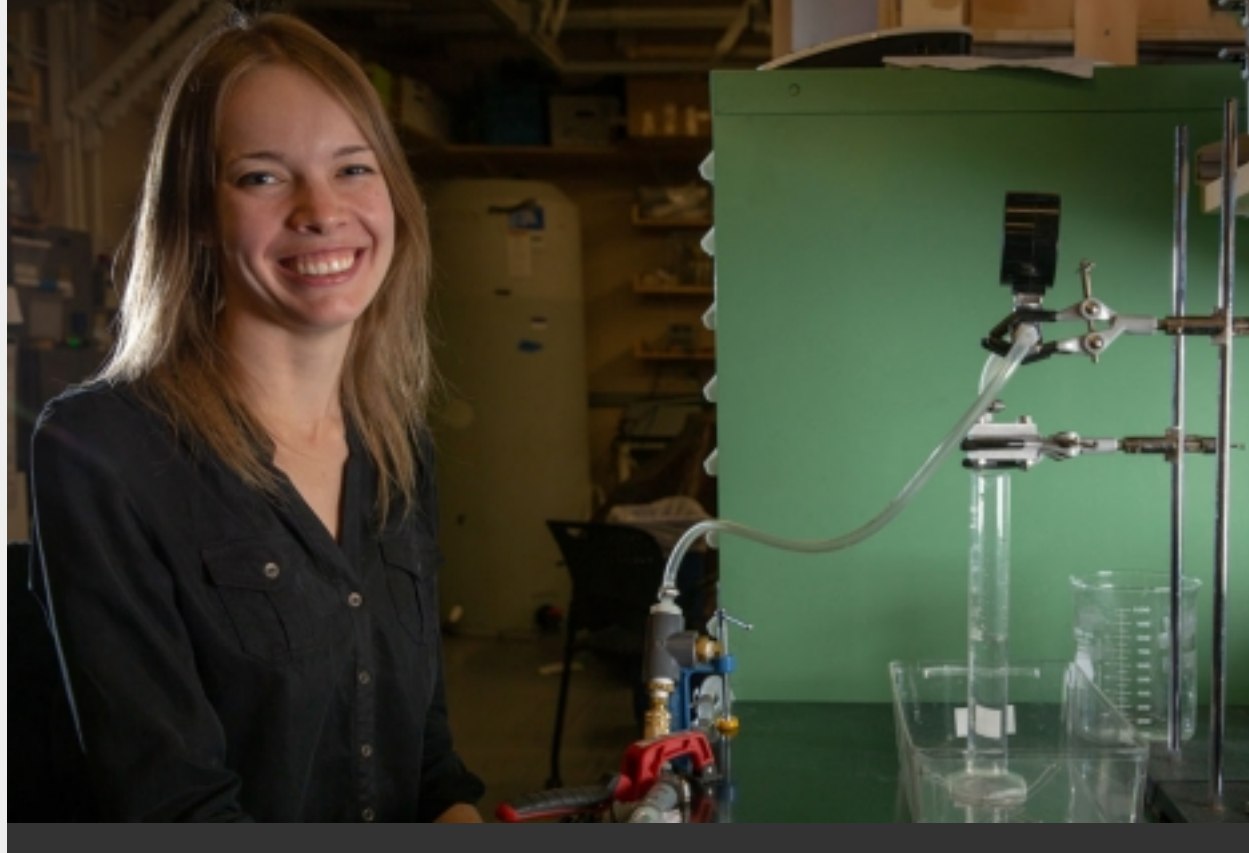
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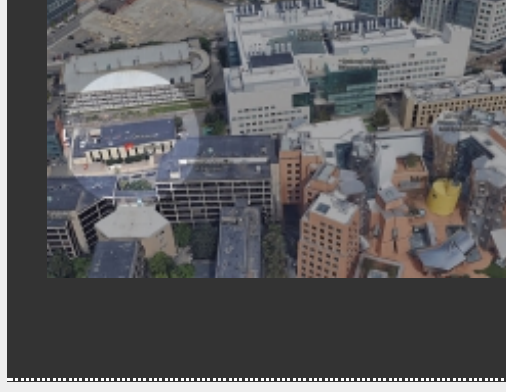
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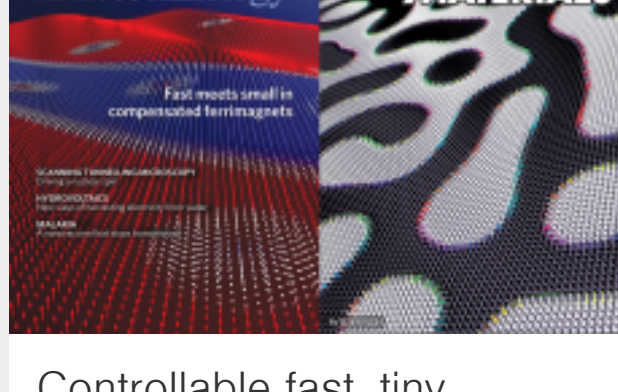
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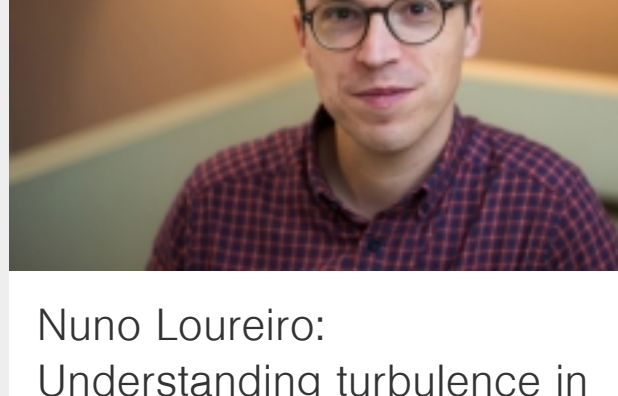
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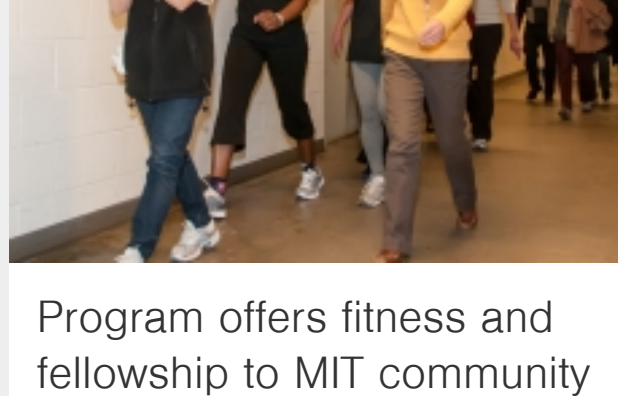
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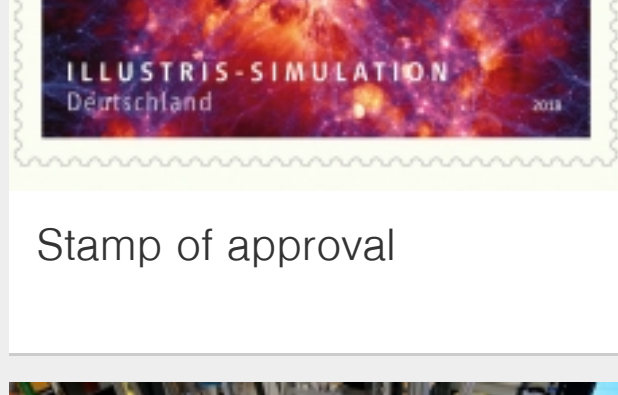
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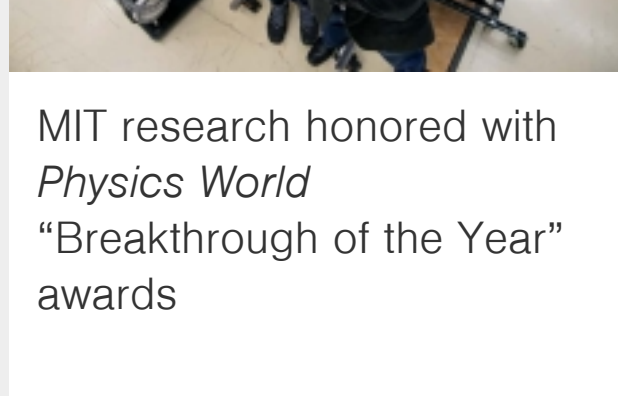
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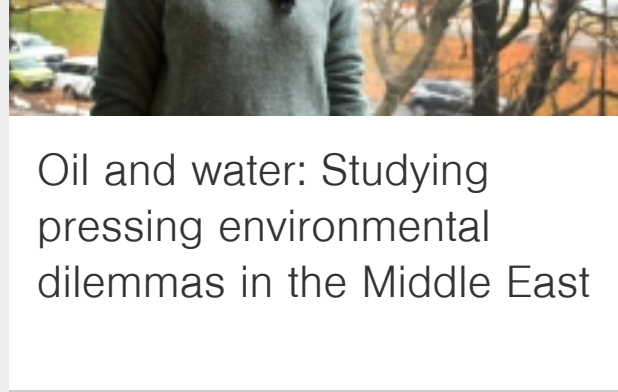
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IN THE MEDIA




Writing for Forbes, Prof. David Mindell explores the concept of using work, in particular the duties a home health aide performs, as a Turing test for the abilities of AI systems.

"In this era of anxiety about AI technologies changing the nature of work," writes Mindell, "everything we know about work should also change the nature of AI."



Prof. Pattie Maes writes for Wired

Increasingly mainstream component of therapeutic intervention. "While we need to be careful to make sure these designs safeguard privacy, give complete control to the user and avoid dependency whenever possible," writes Maes, "there are countless possibilities for digital, wearable technologies to supplement and even replace traditional drugs and therapy."




Los Angeles Times

Los Angeles Times reporter Sara Cardine spotlights a new book written by four MIT students that offers high school students encouragement and insights on growing up. "Upperclassmen, and adults for that matter, you think they have everything together," explains undergraduate and co-author Mina Fahmi. "It helps to be reminded everyone's still trying to figure things out."




The Washington Post

Prof. Maria Zuber, MIT's vice president for research, speaks with The Washington Post about the significance of China successfully landing a spacecraft, called Chang'e 4, on the far side of the moon. "Certainly there will be some great new science," Zuber said. "But I would say the landing of Chang'e 4 is a teaser for what comes next."



Writing for Wired, Prof. Carlo Ratti predicts that in 2019 researchers will develop new methods for allowing people to use the internet in less intrusive ways.

"The internet of things will continue to grow, and we will work out more ways to develop 'things' that allow us to enjoy the internet without being overwhelmed by it," writes Ratti.



TechCrunch reporter John Biggs writes that MIT researchers have developed a system for 3-D printing glass that offers users more control over the material and final product. "The system is interesting because it actually produces clear glass structures that can be used for decoration or building," Biggs notes.

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