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RHYTHM OF MY SOLE

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree Bachelor of Arts with

Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By

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*****

Western Kentucky University

2012

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_____

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2012

ABSTRACT

Tap dancing was one of the first dance forms created here in America. It is a perfect representation of the mosaic that is America because tap dancing is the fusion of dances brought to this country by slaves and immigrants. This fusion has been passed down from generation to generation and evolves every day. When it was created, it was used in celebrations; later it was used in musicals and variety shows to entertain; now it stands on its own in concert setting and conveys stories, shows emotions, and still entertains.

I have created four tap dances; each is different in the story it tells or the emotions it portrays. I will present them in a concert form to entertain and show the audience that tap dancing can move one emotionally just as other art forms do.

Keywords: Tap dance, concert tap, hoofer, choreography.

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I would also like to thank the Honors College for giving me this opportunity. A big thanks to them as well for the financial support I received to do research for my CE/T project through the Honors Development Grant. The trip I made to Chicago was exactly what I needed to gather information and insight on my project.

I would also like to thank the wonderful dancers that made my dances come to life. They were so kind to take time out of their schedules to help me complete this project. It would not have happened without them.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family; particularly my parents and my first dance teacher Ginny Mount. Without my parents support of me dancing, this project would never have happened. And Mrs. Ginny was the one who first instilled the love of dance in me. I will be forever thankful to her for showing me how wonderful dance can be.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Tap dancing has always been my favorite genre of dance. I began taking tap, jazz, and ballet for recreational purposes; and tap dancing seemed to come more naturally to me than the other genres. The assortment of rhythms and sounds one can produce using the metal taps on the toes and heels of the shoes is limitless.

I also love the freedom that tap dance provides. In tap dancing, there is not a codified technique like there is with ballet. Ballet has a technique that is exactly the same wherever you go to take class. Tap dancing has certain vocabulary that is similar, but there are no absolute ways to execute many steps. Also, some steps may be called by different names depending on where you take class. When tap dance was forming, tap dancing was passed down from tap dancer to tap dancer. These hoofers[1] would informally watch each other in jazz clubs, like the Cotton Club, and on the streets in tap jams (an event in the streets or clubs when dancers challenged each other to try and out tap dance the other) and steal steps and add more to it to make the step their own.

Tap dancing is the first dance genre to originate in America. Its beginnings are as diverse as America itself. It developed from "intercultural fusions, which occurred through the interactions of Irish indentured servants and enslaved West Africans in the

[1] Hoofer is an old term from the 1920s and 1930s that stems from the flatfooted style of tap dance, which had its beginnings in buck dancing (Fletcher 93).

Caribbean during the 1600s, African American folk and Irish American laborers in the southern United States during the 1700s, and African American freemen and Irish American performers in northern urban cities in the 1800s," (Hill 2).

In this CE/T project, I hope to share knowledge of tap that I have acquired. I will choreograph tap dances that will show audiences that tap dancing is more than just rhythms and sounds, but can convey a deeper concept and evoke an emotional response. Through this thesis I will: explain a concise history of tap dancing and how it made its way to the concert stage; describe an interview I had with Mark Yonally, artistic director of Chicago Tap Theatre; and reveal my own endeavors while choreographing the dances for this project.

CHAPTER 2

CONCISE HISTORY OF TAP DANCE

Tap dance has been performed for many different reasons over the 400 years it has existed. Dances, such as the African juba, the Irish jig, the Scot-Irish clog, and the British hornpipe influenced the formation of tap dance. In the 1600s and 1700s these dances were performed as religious rituals, celebrations, and/or entertainment (in an informal setting). Slaves used to use drumming to communicate and celebrate. Slave owners outlawed drumming due to a fear of an uprising. The slaves then used their bodies to drum and this also included flatfooted shuffling and dancing.

Later, in the late 1800s, tap dancers (mainly white) began to perform on theatrical stages as part of professional shows and variety acts. These dancers called themselves "Ethiopian delineators." These men were mostly English and Irish and these dancers performed in blackface. One of the most famous song and dance routines was the "Jim Crow" created by Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice. It was not until William Henry Lane (Master Juba) began performing that African Americans became minstrels. He was the only African American to perform in minstrel shows until after the Civil War.

Eventually, tap dancing hit the Vaudeville stage. Just as minstrel shows, it was difficult for African Americans to perform on the same stage as white performers. Finally, a black vaudeville circuit was created for the African American performers to

catch their lucky break. There were still a few African Americans that were able to perform in the white vaudeville circuit, which included Ulysses “Slow Kid” Thompson, George W. Cooper, and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson.

The 1920s brought a great amount of change in the type of shoes used and the performance medium. This helped increase the knowledge and popularity of tap dancing. Previously the, “early styles of tap dancing utilized various footwear: hard-soled shoes, clogs, split-soled clogs, boots, and hard-soled shoes affixed with jingle taps, hobnails, even soda caps,” (Hill 83). It was in the ‘20s that the metal “taps” as we know it today were put on the toes and heels of shoes to help make the rhythms and sounds more audible and clear. It was also in the ‘20s that one could find tap jams in clubs such as the Hoofers Club in Harlem. If one wanted to learn tap, this was the place to go. Hoofers that frequented this club included Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Honi Coles, “Slappy” Wallace, and Baby Laurence.

Talking pictures were discovered in the ‘20s as well. With sound added to the movies, movie musicals became very popular; and soon featured tap dancing stars such as Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Gene Kelly, Ann Miller, Eleanor Powell, and Vera Ellen. These white performers fused their ballet and ballroom styles with tap dancing which created a different style of tap dancing from that of the African Americans. Following the same theme, it was difficult for African Americans to be in movies. There were some in movies, but they were never main characters, they only had supporting roles. These movie musicals transformed the image of tap dancing from the “shuffling darky” (Hill 96), to the sophisticated perfectionist. White dancers making tap dancing classier certainly helped the public accept tap dancing as an up and coming art form.

Movie musicals showcasing tap dancing continued to thrive throughout the 1930s and ‘40s. Also, in 1934, the Apollo Theater was reopened in Harlem as a “movie and variety theater for its local African American patrons” (Hill 102). Variety acts were the main attractions at the Apollo. The tap dancers at these performances would dance to music by live “big” bands that were popular at the time. During the reign of the variety act, comedy dance teams such as Stump and Stumpy (Eddie Hartman and James Cross), Salt and Pepper (Jewel Welch and Edwina Evelyn) and Spic and Span (Willie Joseph and Edith Edwards) were made famous through the Apollo Theater.

The ‘40s continued to bring new tap dancers into the movies and onto the Broadway stage. Then, in the 1950s, the performance of tap dancing began its decline. On Broadway, there was a shift in aesthetic preferences, so they began to use ballet and modern jazz dancing instead of tap dancing. The success of *Oklahoma* and *West Side Story* helped the popularity of these dance genres grow. When tap dancing was used in musicals, it was mostly for show and spectacle. Ballet and modern jazz dance choreography would tell stories and had concepts. When used in musicals, ballet and jazz dance choreography was able to help continue the plot.

Also, in the ‘50s, the style of music began to change to bebop and eventually rock n’ roll. With this change, the big bands of the swing era were no longer popular. The variety acts no longer had the big bands to accompany them. With the demise of the big bands went the Vaudeville variety act as well. Tap dancing still existed, but it was much harder to find. Television variety shows, like the Lawrence Welk Show, became popular during this decade, and this was one of the few places one could watch professional tap dancers, such as Arthur Duncan, perform.

In the 1960s, tap dancing remained under the radar, with not much happening outside of tap dance festivals. The tap renaissance finally began in the 1970s. In 1971, a new musical opened on Broadway, *No, No Nanette.* This musical included tap dancing and starred Ruby Keeler, a famous tap dancer who also starred in the 1933 musical film

Forty-Second Street. Because she was a known performer, this helped tap dancing become popular in musicals and in the general public again. Following this, other musicals such as *Sugar, Irene, Sammy, The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas,* and *Eubie* included tap dancing and were great hits.

Several college women (many of whom were modern dancers) also played a big part in tap dance's resurgence into the general public. They saw great performances by famous hoofers such as Baby Laurence, Honi Coles, Sandman Sims, Jimmy Slyde, Chuck Green, and the Nicholas Brothers. These very dedicated and interested women sought after some of these tap dance masters to learn their technique and style.

On the west coast, a group of dancers and musicians formed to create the Jazz Tap Percussion Ensemble. All three of the dancers (Lynn Dally, Fred Strickler, and Camden Richman), were trained modern dancers that became enamored with tap dancing. Because of their strong modern backgrounds, these dancers created something new and very unique. Unlike tap dancing, modern dancing had some type of design to the choreography and movement. The choreographers created patterns with the movements and would use stage directions to help with the meaning they wanted to convey. They used this training to explore tap dance choreography and create dances that had conceptual meanings.

Brenda Bufalino was a very prominent dancer who studied under Honi Coles, a well-known tap dancer from the '40s. She formed her own tap dance company known as the Dancing Theatre Company which had its first major concert, *Singing, Swinging, and Winging,* in 1978. This concert was a combination of music, singing, and tap dancing. Instead of separate short routines, which were how the variety acts of vaudeville were arranged; there was a unified flow to this concert just as a ballet or modern dance concert would have. Bufalino created suites of dances for the concert which helped unify the show. She has created and performed many other concerts in her still thriving career. She also formed another tap dance company, Bufalino and Company, which performed the

first a cappella tap dance for a large ensemble. This was a difficult feat considering the dancers had to be precisely in sync with each other.

Jane Goldberg was a student at Boston University when she decided she wanted to tap dance. She studied at Stanley Brown's dance studio and moved to New York a year later to study under Honi Coles. She eventually took private lessons with him, as well as with Sandman Sims, Charles Cook, Bert Gibson, Leon Collins, and Bubba Gaines. After studying with these great hoofers for about six months she realized she was not ready to perform; she decided to write about tap dance instead. She published her first article, "It's All in the Feet", about an interview with tap dancer Paul Draper, in April 1974 in Boston's *Patriot Ledger*.

Goldberg felt that in order to help the art form survive, she also needed to help pass it down. She arranged workshops and classes at which the tap dance masters taught. She continued to work with Charles Cook, and in 1977 received the National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in choreography to produce the lecture-demonstration *It's About Time*. It was such a great success that Goldberg and Cook were asked to perform at the American Dance Festival and Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. This performance was the first tap dance concert performed at this festival since Paul Draper's in 1941. Then in 1979, Goldberg's company, Changing Times Tap Dance Company, was founded, and had their first performance *Shoot Me While I'm Happy*.

Tap dancing hit new heights in the 1980s. It could be found on the Broadway stage in musicals, and even in Hollywood movies. Many of the same hoofers from the '70s continued strong in the '80s. The old tap dance masters were still teaching and performing; and all of the tap dance companies formed were creating new shows. Also, new tap dance companies were being established. They included: American Tap Dance Orchestra, LTD/Unlimited (which later become Rhapsody in Taps), the Peggy Spina Tap Company, Manhattan Tap, Collins and Company, Andrea Levine Jazz Tap, Anita Feldman Tap, Balletap USA, The Gail Concord Dance Theatre, DancEllington,

Philadelphia Tap Dance, Rhythm Anonymous, Sliver Bells, Ten Toe Percussion, Alfred Desio Zapped Taps, Hot Cross Buns, Austin on Tap, Tapestry, TAPIT, and NAWJA. These are not nearly all of the tap companies created, but they show how tap dancing was increasing in popularity and how it was not unusual to see tap dance concerts.

The 1990s brought a new wave of dancers. Savion Glover was one of them. He created and starred in the Broadway hit, *Bring In 'Da Noise, Bring In 'Da Funk*, which was made to honor some of the great tap dance masters, and soon after he formed his own tap dance company, Not Your Ordinary Tappers (NYOT). This company included more up-and-coming stars such as Jason Samuels Smith, Omar Edwards, and Ayodele Casel. Omar Edwards was the first to break out and he created a music group of which he was the tap soloist. He called his group Jubali. All of these dancers have gone on to create works of their own and help pass on the tap dance legacy.

Today, tap dance companies are as common as ballet and jazz dance companies. Many of the tap dance companies established in the 1980s and '90s still exist today, and new ones have been formed. Popular companies that are performing today include: Barbara Duffy and Company, Bill Evans Dance, Camut Band, Chicago Tap Theatre, Cats Paying Dues, Flying Foot Forum, Footnotes Tap Ensemble, Footworks Dance Ensemble, Hip Tap Project, Keanesense of Rhythm, MaD Theatricals, Melbourne Tap Dance, National Tap Ensemble, Rhythm Explosion, Roxanne Butterfly's World Beats, Rumbatap, Stepology, Tapage, Tapaholics, Tapestry Dance Company, and the list goes on. Tap dancing has even migrated and is performed in other countries. Which shows that tap dancing is accepted as a concert art form all over the world. Today tap dancing is celebrated just as much as the other concert dance forms. There are festivals and classes that promote and feature professional concerts that inspire and move audiences worldwide.

CHAPTER 3

TAP DANCE: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A TAP CHOREOGRAPHER

Chicago Tap Theatre (CTT) is a tap dance company founded in 2002 by Mark Yonally. After being in such prestigious tap dance companies such as the Bill Evans Dance Company and Especially Tap Chicago, Yonally wanted to create his own company with its own unique niche. He jumped right in and created the signature of his company, the "story-show." In this type of concert, the entire show is the same story, similar to a ballet or musical story line. Other dance concerts might have a different story for each dance in the concert. Many of the concerts that CTT creates and performs have a "conceptual, narrative (i.e., story-based) and more emotional approach." Such was their most recent performance of *Eyes Without a Face*. This particular show was based off of the 1959 French film *Les Yeux Sans Visage*. Yonally referred to it as a "tap opera." The show had a narrator to help explain what was going on so that the dancers could use their tap sounds as actual conversation. It was incredible. The acting and emotion the dancers put into the steps helped the audience understand what was happening.

To help make the tap dance steps portray meaning and take the place of conversation, Yonally used different styles for certain characters. For instance, one of the evil characters had a lot of slides on the floor, which gave all of her "dialogue" a sneaky feel. It helped show that she was conspiring against the other characters. Also, one of my

favorite parts was a fight between the father and daughter. The fight started more as a conversation, but the audience could tell by the dark, heavy stomps, increase in volume, and the wonderful acting by the dancers that they were very angry at each other. The audience could feel what they were feeling, and they weren't even using words.

I was lucky enough to not only see the concert, but also interview the founder and artistic director, Mark Yonally. Through the interview I learned why Yonally chose to pursue tap dancing, and how he comes up with his choreography, as well as other aspects of his concert tap dances.

Yonally has been choreographing for twenty years. He began to choreograph in college and has choreographed and taught all over the world. When he begins his creative process, he almost always finds the music first. He says that for him, music is normally the inspiration. Or, he will have an idea and then find the music he feels goes best with that idea. Recently, CTT has been collaborating with their on-staff composer Andrew Edwards. Together they have created the music to go with the tap dancing and the ideas that develop from Yonally's head.

Yonally tries his best to stay current in what is going on in the world today, which helps him come up with ideas and concepts. He likes to stay surrounded by media and pop culture and use his interests in pop culture to create his shows. He stays current by reading books watching television and movies, and listening to all types of music.

Yonally has trained in many styles of dance, but as he told me, tap dancing was the only thing he was good at; yet, he still likes to see other genres of dance performed. He also likes to incorporate other genres and styles of dancing into his creations. He has collaborated with contemporary and even flamenco choreographers. As he claims, "even

though I am kind of a one-trick pony, I don't want my company to be a one-trick pony."

Through Yonally's innovative ideas, CTT has come up with its very own concert style and I am sure they will continue to develop new and exciting shows. The tap dance concert was exceedingly inspiring to me. I was inspired to create new tap dance steps for my dances. It also inspired me to create a story in one of my dances. Seeing this show made me want nothing more than to tap dance.

CHAPTER 4

CHOREOGRAPHING CONCERT TAP

I chose to title this project *Rhythm of My Sole*, I wanted to put my personality and personal experiences into each of my dances. Like Yonally, the creative process for my dances began with the music selection. All four of the dances I created have a different concept and meaning I wish to convey to the audience. Also, the dances were performed in the Last Chance to Dance concert by WKU Dance Company members.

The first piece, "Miss Me?" is a self-performed solo that is fun and flirty. I wanted to show my own flirty personality through this dance. The song I chose is "I Want You Back," a cover by Colbie Caillat. I am dressed in a cute summer dress and I try to show off a little to get my ex-boyfriend's attention, but I try not to make it too noticeable. To help achieve this, I execute difficult steps that I try to make look simple, as if I require no effort to do them.

"Everything We Need is Here," is a duet. I chose to choreograph to Maroon 5's acoustic version of "Sunday Morning." This dance is about a fun, playful love. I want to make the audience see that the couple is in love and finds joy in just being with each other. I have them begin with the boy lying as if in bed, and as the girl walks by he pulls her down to be next to him. Throughout the dance I have more of this playful banter. I also have steps in which they execute ballroom-style dance moves. I chose to use this style of movement to help show the bond between the dancers.

The third piece, titled “Classically Hip,” is a battle between two different styles of tap dancing. The song I found to use is called “Brandenburg,” by Black Violin. The song is a remake of a classical song, but with hip-hop under beats. I wanted to play off how the song sounds. My idea was to take two styles of tap dancing, a more up right and balletic style, and a more down, into-the-floor hoofing style, and have them battle. The hardest part of this piece was making rhythms for each of the styles that sounded good when danced at the same time. I had to be sure the tap sounds did not over power one another, but instead complimented each other.

I really loved the concept of this piece, but unfortunately it did not work out as planned. I was not able to choreograph it the way I would have liked to. I needed to find a better bond between the dancers and more contrast between the two styles. There was not enough time to work on the choreography and to work with the dancers to better the piece. This happens often though even with professionals. A choreographer must decide whether or not a dance is ready to be presented on stage. In this instance my dance was not. I do intend to come back to this dance eventually; maybe then I will be more pleased with the outcome.

The final piece is another self-performed solo and is exactly what I feel about tap. This dance is titled “Rhythm of My Soul” which is similar to my thesis title. I chose for it to be a cappella because I wanted it to be all about the sounds. The concept I began with was a heartbeat. To me, the opening sounds mimic a heartbeat, and then they grow. The sounds become louder and faster with more complicated rhythms. To achieve this, I took standard tap dance steps and added toe pats and heel drops which added more sounds and required me to execute the steps faster. I also execute tap dance steps while turning to

make the steps more difficult and create a whirlwind of tap sounds. I feel as though this is how my heart beats. It beats in rhythms and syncopations, because I don't just live life, I dance life.

I am very happy with what I have created. It is an amazing feeling to create something and see it come to life; yet, as many choreographers feel about pieces they create, I feel as though my dances will never be precisely complete. There is always something you can change to potentially make the dance a little better, be it a step, costumes, or even the song. Through this project, I have learned it takes creativity, patience, and dedication to create concert tap dance pieces. One must be willing to offer a little piece of themselves when creating a dance so that it has a life to which the audience can connect. It is not an easy task, but I love doing it and will use this experience to help better my future endeavors in choreography.

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