2020

Tap for the Times: A Study of Contemporary Tap Dance

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TAP FOR THE TIMES:

A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY TAP DANCE

A Capstone Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts

with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction

at Western Kentucky University

By

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May 2020

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ABSTRACT

Tap dance is an American art form that began with the blending of traditional dance styles from English and Irish immigrants and African slaves. Throughout the 20th century, tap dance developed many styles in response to cultural changes that took place. Contemporary tap dance emerged in the latter half of that century and continues developing today with the fusion of other dance genres and new technologies. This research examines tap dance history to create an understanding of how it developed through a historical lens and analyzes the current approaches applied to the artform along with the characteristics and creative processes of influential contemporary tap dance figures. I utilized this research to influence my choreography and discover my own artistic voice within the genre.

Dedicated to my parents, David and Jackie Wilham, for encouraging me in the pursuit of my passions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the support of the Western Kentucky University Mahurin Honors College, Faculty Undergraduate Student Engagement (FUSE) Grant, and the Department of Theater & Dance. I would like to thank my CE/T advisor, Professor Amanda Clark, for her guidance throughout this process, for four years of challenging tap dance opportunities, and for a constant push in the right direction. I would also like to thank my second reader, Assistant Professor Meghen McKinley, for encouraging my creativity, and for providing me the safety and comfort of her office couch. Additionally, I would like to thank Assistant Professor Anna Patsfall, who fostered my love for dance history and helped guide my choreographic voice.

I will be forever grateful for the dancers who brought my choreography to life, Kaetlyn Jeffries, Lexi Rice, and Mackenzie Weber. Thank you for opening up yourselves to this rehearsal process.

Thank you to my friends and family who have offered words of encouragement and who have held me accountable through the tough parts of this process. I could not have done it without your constant love, support, and occasional bribery.

And finally, I would like to thank the instructors at my home studio, Ellen's School of Dance. Thank you for instilling the love of tap dance in me from an early age, and for helping me to believe in myself in the pursuit of a dance career.

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Wilham, Elise. "Unsettled." Choreography presented in *The Dance Project.* Bowling Green, KY, Feb 2020.

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INTRODUCTION

The American art form of tap dance has a brief but complicated history. Tap dance began as the melding of traditional dance styles from English and Irish immigrants as well as African slaves. However, it is probably most well-known for its products in the 20th century. The many political, social, and cultural changes of this century caused shifts in what audiences desired from their entertainment and tap dance managed to adapt as these desires shifted. Tap dance has many styles as a result of its necessary adaptations, and these styles are what color its history making it such an interesting and difficult topic to discuss.

Tap dance is often credited to African American male dancers on the minstrel and vaudeville stages, and white male dancers on Broadway and in Hollywood. Individuals such as Bill Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and later on Gregory Hines and Savion Glover receive considerable credit for the development and continuation of tap dance as an art form. And while they are certainly key pieces to the puzzle of tap dance history, the women of tap dance often get overlooked. When the art form seemed to be in a downfall in the late 20th century, it was American women of all races who led the revival of tap. Women are a key part of its development for the concert stage which propelled tap dance into the 21st century. Contemporary tap dance has deep roots in the history of the dance genre but owes its recent developments to the attention of women.

My research briefly describes tap dance history to provide context for a larger conversation regarding contemporary tap dance. Chapter One unpacks tap dance history in such a way that explains stylistic shifts throughout its short history (compared to the lengthier history of other genres such a ballet or modern) by describing its various performance venues and the audiences that viewed each kind. Chapter Two then selects several female tap artists that I feel have made a notable impact on contemporary tap dance, describes the style and choreographic process of these dancers, and explains how I utilized these ideas to create tap choreography. Through my research of tap dance history and contemporary tap dance choreography, I hoped to gain an understanding of my own preferences within the genre. Chapter Three describes my current artistic voice through movement analysis and self-reflection. This exploration of contemporary tap dance challenges the reader to not only recognize the female contribution but discover the depth of stylistic approaches that are unique to this rhythmical American artform.

CHAPTER 1: A BRIEF HISTORY AND DEFENSE OF CONTEMPORARY TAP DANCE

As with any performance art, tap dance has grown and changed with the times. As popular culture changes audience demands shift, and so must the act. Tap dance has had many faces because of this. Tap dance gained traction right as the country turned towards the 20th century, a time that would bring a lot of political, social and cultural changes. During that century, America adjusted to an Industrial Revolution, dealt with several international conflicts, established formative civil rights and feminist movements; and at the end of the 1900s, it saw the beginning of the digital age. All of these changes brought about new expectations for entertainment as audiences demands adjusted with each cultural shift. For tap dance, an artform that lacked an established set of rules at the beginning of this time frame because of its newness, it meant that there was a freedom to follow the trends. This chapter succinctly highlights the major historical developments and the individuals that were influential in tap dance's evolution.

Foundations: Working Pastimes and Minstrelsy, 1650-1900

Tap dance is truly an American artform as it was created by the blending of several cultures that migrated here. It formed in America with notable influences from Irish and English immigrants and African slaves. The Irish jig, the oldest of Irish dance forms, utilized heel and toe sounds and intricate leg movements while the torso remained

upright and "virtually motionless".[1] English clog dancing came about when mill workers, who wore wooden-soled shoes, tapped their feet to the rhythms of the looms.[2] These wooden-soled rhythms combined with traditional Irish jig, hornpipe, and reel steps to become "hard-shoe" steps. [3] When West Africans were brought to the United States through the Atlantic Slave trade, they brought with them polyrhythmic dance to the beat of African drums. Generally, African dance is characterized by a hunched over bend at the waist while the feet stay close to the ground producing gliding, shuffling, and dragging steps.[4] Europeans were exposed to this African dancing through slaves that worked on plantations. Irish and English workers met in cities and factories where during down time they would dance together and share their steps with one another. This exposure to new movement ideas created the beginnings of what is known as tap dance today.

In the 1800s, tap dance took the stage for the first time in minstrel shows on white and black minstrel circuits. Tap dancers were often described by the "gimmick" they brought to a performance. For audiences, it was never enough to simply tap dance; it was about what made one tap dancer different from the one performing opposite them. Tap dance during this time period took the form of solos, duets, or small group acts that had 8-12 minutes to wow an audience with their rhythms and tricks. Typically, performances were song-and-dance or comedic acts that utilized African American stereotypes to

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1. Mark Knowles, *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap* Dancing (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2002), p.7.

2. Knowles, *Tap Roots,* 15.

3. Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 16.

4. Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 24.

entertain. At the time, these stereotypes were a rationalized practice even though it was demoralizing to African Americans. White and black dancers alike would perform these stereotyped characters in black face.

Thomas "Daddy" Rice was a white minstrel performer and he is the person responsible for introducing black-face performance to the minstrel stage. His character, Jim Crow was based off a slave worker he often saw from the dressing room at one of the venues in which he performed.[5] He created a dance based on this crippled man's deformities, and it included a lot of limping and dragging of the feet (shuffling) as he moved. The creation of this character normalized whites making fun of African Americans in the formal theater setting, a practice that was deemed acceptable by audiences due to the country's view of Africans as slave labor and nothing more. It became a common and popular practice for white minstrels to perform in blackface across the country. It also limited the kinds of characters black minstrel performers could portray. If black minstrel performers strayed from the traditional blackface characters, they risked not getting hired.

William Henry Lane, known as Master Juba, was a free black man known across minstrel circuits for his loose body style and "rhythmic wit." He did what he called "imitation dances" where he would imitate famous Irish jig dancers in his acts. Audiences were amazed with his accuracy in imitation, but they were more excited to see his own choreography and unique style.[6] He impressed audiences with his fusion of footwork, speed, and African style into the Irish jig and is recognized as the "Father of Tap Dance"

5. Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 79.

6. Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 89.

for being the first prominent figure to do so.[7] This unique style of dancing allowed him to gain a following within the black circuits and white circuits alike.[8] This attention propelled his dance career forward; though he still experienced segregation socially, his talent allowed him to become the first black performer (and one of the few) to tour with the white circuit, bringing the earliest version of tap dance to more audiences.

It was during this time period that the very basic tap steps were formed. The dance was mostly hops, leaps, stomps, and shuffles performed for the purpose of portraying bumbling characters. Tap dance was an upright, bouncy dance that was still very much like the Irish jig and English Clog. The addition of the African style did not immediately change the dance to what it is today, but it began the shift.

Turn of the Century: Vaudeville

The term "hoofer" came about in 1902 and helped redefine tap dance to incorporate flat-footed buck and wing steps to the hops and shuffles from previous tap dance. A hoofer, as defined by Constance Valis Hill, is "a tap dancer who emphasizes movements from the waist down and concentrates on the flat-footed percussive intricacies of the feet."[9] A hoofer combined the heel and toe and light-weight, airy qualities from the Irish and English, but added the weighted feel of the African dancer, who emphasized the flat-foot, to create a style of tap dance that was focused on the

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7. Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 91

8. Knowles, *Tap Roots*, 90.

9. Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History,* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010, 388.

sounds. The resulting style was referred to as buck and wing, which emphasized syncopation more than jigging did.[10] Syncopation is "a temporary displacement or shifting of the regular metrical accent to an unaccented beat, such as the beat of **2** or the **a** or the **and** count."[11] The buck style's new rhythms did not necessarily follow the rhythms in the music, but allowed the dancer to create their own and play the part of musician for the first time.

Tap dance first took the stage as a part of minstrel shows, but the next step was vaudeville. The vaudeville stage brought in broader audiences because it was a more refined version of minstrelsy. Vaudeville appealed to many people regardless of gender, social status, or where they were from, which gave freedom to the variety acts that performed on those stages to try something new.[12] It was on the Vaudeville stage that two different styles of tap dance emerged. The first was danced in hard, wooden-soled shoes and was of the buck and wing style of hoofers that emphasized the rhythms. The second was performed in soft shoes and was more associated with the song-and-dance version of tap.[13] Like tap dance on the minstrel stage, tap for vaudeville was a variety act meant to entertain audiences in short sets. A tap dancer wishing to perform in this setting would have to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses to create an act that would wow audiences. Those who were good at creating rhythms and could utilize them to fill an

10. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History,* 22.

11. Beverly Fletcher, *Tapworks: A Tap Dictionary and Reference Manual,* Trenton, New Jersey: Princeton Book Company, 2002, 141.

12. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 54.

13. Knowles, *Tap Roots,* 137.

entire act would dance. Those who could entertain with song or comedy would incorporate that into their dancing.

The vaudeville stage made dancing contests popular.[14] Audiences wanted to see their favorite dancers go head-to-head and battle with their best dance steps. Dance battles encouraged creativity among the competitors—they were forced to bring something new and exciting to the stage every time. Each contestant had their own gimmick that they could leverage but were challenged to present this gimmick in a new way so they could continually surprise their competition. This idea of dance battles was not new. It happened on plantations amongst the servants and slaves. It happened amongst minstrel performers. However, it was on the vaudeville stage that it became a staple of the genre, and it continues throughout tap dance history to be an important aspect of tap dance's development.

The Jazz Influence

The influence of the 1920's Jazz Age cannot go unnoticed when discussing tap dance. Though the Jazz Age does not necessarily provide tap dance with a new stage to perform on, it provided a new kind of audience that changed the game once again for tap dancers across the country. The Jazz Age formed as a part of a women's rights movement. Women rebelled against the expectations placed upon them in the 19th century in favor of more personal freedoms that were expressed through a new wardrobe, social pastime, and dance style. Jazz music grew to reflect the needs of these new audiences creating new opportunities for tap dancers. Tap dance is highly influenced by

14. Knowles, *Tap Roots* 137.

the music that accompanies it, so the American dance form went through a transformation along with the rest of the country. Jazz music brought new life to the country as audiences demanded a shift in their entertainment options and tap dance mimicked the country's newfound rhythms, style, and energy.

Jazz music, coupled with the social evolution of the time, encouraged social dancing amongst America's youth. New social dance crazes such as the Charleston, Black Bottom, and Suzie Q became the young person's favorite pastime. These dances were meant to be shared and were highly improvisational in nature, meaning anyone could adopt the steps and make them their own. So of course, tap dancers adopted these dances into their movement vocabulary; but mostly, tap dancers mimicked the energy and freedom of the social dances. It was during this time that jazz-tap dance emerged. Jazz-tap dance was known to match the speed of jazz music with the "rapid drumming" qualities it possessed. It stemmed from the buck-and-wing style, but jazz-tap was the most rhythmically complex kind of dance that had ever been seen.[15] "Both the music and the dancing were distinguished and admired for their speed and hard-driving energy."[16]

Tap dance did more than simply mimic the energy and style of jazz music and its accompanying social dances. Tap dance began to follow the structure of this new kind of music. Jazz music is based upon clear musical patterns and formulas; the structure of their music influences the foundation for the structure of tap dance patterns. Jazz music is based on the groupings of musical measures, or bars. 32 bars are called a chorus and tap patterns of this time fit into the musical chorus, even though there are varying ways in

15. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 79.

16. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 79-80.

which to do so. Jazz music also often utilized improvisation, which encouraged tap dancers to do so as well. Improvisation was of course not new to tap dancers (improvisation was the basis for the dance battles), but jazz music provided the structure in which someone could improvise while still being mindful of the musical cues.

It was also during this time that the codification of tap dance began. Ned Wayburn was a director and choreographer who began codifying his personal dance technique in the 1920s.[17] He was the first person to separate the parts of the foot into the toe, the ball, the heel, and the flat-foot by the sounds they make.[18] By defining the portions of the tap shoe and writing them down, he had created a very efficient way to teach tap. These separations of the foot were adopted by other teachers and became the basis for tap teaching techniques today.

John Bubbles, looking for his "gimmick" in dance performance, changed his body placement from the balls of his feet, like jigging dancers, back into his heels.[19] This allowed him to accent different beats and overlap musical phrases with a new weighted quality in the drop of his heels. This combination of elaborate syncopation and weight shifted to the heels has been defined as a new category of tap dance, rhythm tap.[20] Suddenly, the focus of his dance was no longer hopping on the balls of his feet like other tap dancers but driving his heels into the ground to keep time. Bubbles is the first notable person to make this change in his dancing and has since been named the "Father of

17. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 81.

18. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 82.

19. Brian Siebert, *What the Eye Hears*: *A History of Tap Dance*, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2015, 186.

20. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 88.

Rhythm Tap."[21] This shift of weight seems like a minor adjustment, but it has had a profound influence on tap dance, and it created a style of tap that would persist throughout history.

Broadway and Movie Musicals

The need for feel-good entertainment in America was strong throughout most of the 20th century. Two world wars, and the social changes that came along with them, pushed Americans out of their homes, and they sought entertainment to distract them from reality. Broadway and Hollywood musicals were exactly what they needed. While Broadway shows and Hollywood films featured various genres of dance, tap was indeed a special kind of dance on these platforms. Wayburn said that the tap numbers were the "bread and butter dances, something you can sell easily in the present show market."[22] Like the minstrel and vaudeville stages before them, tap for Broadway and Hollywood provided entertainment value, but the major difference between them comes in numbers. On minstrel and vaudeville stages, the solo or small group acts were favored. Yet Broadway gave way to the large dancing chorus where formation and unity became more important than the steps themselves. Movie audiences wanted the same thing. According to 1930's musical theater dance director Maurice Kussell, "For the screen, it isn't the step that counts, it's the formation."[23] The choreography for tap dances within the Broadway and Hollywood musicals of the 1930s and 40s were comprised of fairly simplistic steps

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21. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 88.

22. Siebert, *What the Eye Hears*, 142.

23. Siebert, *What the Eye Hears*, 231.

and movement patterns so that a large quantity of dancers could learn the steps quickly. As a result, little dance training was required before performing as a part of a large tap-dancing chorus.[24]

In Hollywood movie musicals, couples dancing was often a focus. The couples that danced became popular cultural figures. The tap choreography of the featured couples could be a bit more intricate than the choreography of a Broadway chorus because those roles required a bit more training. However, it was not really the dancing that made them popular; it was the perceived lifestyle of movie stars that people wanted to emulate. These stars glittered on the big screen, and audiences wanted to shine like them instead of living the reality of their daily lives. It was often said of star, Ginger Rodgers, that "she never appears to be working hard, and seems to dance in the beauty of an illusion."[25] The tap dancers of this time embodied a high-class lifestyle for the first time with their ease and beauty. Audiences sought out lessons in ballroom, ballet, and tap to emulate the lifestyles of their favorite movies stars as much as possible.[26]

Tap Dance's Decline

In the 1950s, tap dancers took harsh cuts to their lifestyle. Vaudeville variety shows declined, and Broadway shifted from a focus on tap dance to incorporating ballet and modern into their choreography. As a result, tap dance took a backseat during this

24. Siebert, *What the Eye Hears* 229.

25. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 115.

26. Siebert, *What the Eye Hears*, 231.

decade.[27] However, the legacy of tap dance was being passed on through the Copasetics, a tap dance club that formed after Bill Robinson's death in 1949.[28] Whenever Robinson was asked how he was doing, he always responded with "everything is copasetic," meaning everything was fine or good. A group of his friends (who were also talented tap dancers) reformed the "Hoofers Club" to the Copasetics as a tribute to his life and a dedication to tap dance.

Despite the formation of this club, tap dance shifted from live formats to television, and the number of tap performance jobs severely declined. Until this point in history, the transition of tap dance to bigger stages resulted in a growing audience base. For whatever reason, may it have been a shift in social taste or just poor timing, television did not take kindly to tap dance. Television had the potential of being the next "big stage" (or maybe more accurately, it could have provided the next "big audience" for tap dance) because television brought its content directly into people's homes and no longer required audiences to go out "on the town" to experience it. For one reason or another, tap dance was over-shadowed by comedy and musical acts on television. This caused a lull in tap dance history, and many tappers had to pursue other career options to make ends meet.

Contemporary: Resurgence, Renaissance, and Now—What does it all come to?

The transition to contemporary tap dance began in the 1970s after the genre declined. After this unsuccessful period of tap dance, it was unclear what the new "gimmick" would be that would make audiences interested in the genre again. In the

27. Constance Valis Hill, Tap Dance in America: A Short History, Online Text, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200217630/.

28. Siebert, *What the Eye Hears,* 354.

minstrel and vaudeville shows of the early 1900s, audiences valued the flashy steps and competitiveness of the dancers trying to out-do each other. They expected tap to have a wow-factor without any real depth to the movement. According to Constance Valis Hill, "[Tap dancers of this time] didn't have time for the development of ideas".[29] Broadway and movie musicals did not utilize tap for the development of ideas either. For these stages, spectacles were created by large numbers of dancers performing in unison or couples dancing through life effortlessly. The movement did not generally develop ideas; it filled in the moments between idea development.

Tap in the 1970s began to change its focus from pure entertainment value to a conceptualized dance form that is the basis for contemporary tap dance. Contemporary tap dance utilizes syncopation and complex rhythms of rhythm tap, but through a new lens. Contemporary tap dance values conflicting rhythms between dancers and the music, consideration for how dancers will move on stage in terms of the choreographic elements, and an individuality in each dancer's movement through the development of ideas that early tap dancers "didn't have time for."

The 1970s re-introduced tap dance to small jazz clubs that valued the classic jazz feel that tap dance was known for during the 1920s. At the same time, tap dance made a resurgence on Broadway in popular tap musicals such as *No, No Nanette, 42nd Street,* and several others. According to Hill, tap on Broadway inspired women to go to dance studios to learn how to tap.[30] Young females even sought the knowledge of the black

29. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 261.

30. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 228-229.

male hoofers and led the resurgence of the artform.[31] One of these leaders, Jane Goldberg said, "We all came out of the civil rights and the sexual revolution and women's movement, and so we had to save the art—we didn't have a choice."[32]

Many of these young women were trained in modern dance, so they brought their knowledge of concert dance styles with them as they took on a new genre. To these women, there was no reason that tap dance should not be utilized on the concert stage. They began to use their new knowledge of tap to create something the stage had never seen. Stylization was often just as important to these new tap dancers as the steps were, but the stylizations in these kinds of tap numbers were not limited to the flashy styles that Broadway and movie musicals valued. Some tap dancers also began to think about tap dances in terms of the choreographic elements of space, time, and energy utilized by concert dance choreography.

This change did not go by unquestioned. Many tap dancers accustomed to the old ways of putting together a tap act thought that choreographing tap dance in this way took away from its roots in improvisation and made it a less authentic performance. And the stylization that the young tap choreographers sought from their dancers was seen as a restriction to the old pros who could never imagine being told how to perform their steps.[33] This was a fundamental difference in ideologies. The hoofers grew up learning tap dance off the streets and had to create their own steps and stylizations, so they could stand out, and it was outrageous to down-right copy another person's movement. As explained by tap dance historian Brian Seibert, their aspirations lay in making a name for

31. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 229.

32. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 230.
33. Siebert, *What the Eye Hears*, 425-426.

themselves as a solo performer in "the circuit." Contrarily, the young modern dancers had grown up in dance schools where performance consisted of choreographers giving them steps and stylizations, and they aspired to be a part of thriving dance companies in their professional career. They did not see why tap would not fit into this idea of dance as well.

Despite this push-back from the older tap-dancing community, the young women continued to create with their new ideas of what tap could be, carrying on the legacy of the artform in a new direction that has only expanded to what we see in tap dance now. Today, tap dance is still seen on many entertainment platforms. There are many concert-based performances put on by companies such as Chicago Tap Theater or Dorrance Dance. Theatrical productions of tap dance are performed by groups such as Stomp and Imagine Tap. Tap dance can also be found on television shows like *So You Think You Can Dance,* and in movies such as *La La Land* (2016), though tap dance is less prominent in these mediums than before.

The Introduction of Social Media

The internet is the newest platform to explore, the new "stage" for tap to conquer, and it has taken tap dance to a new, more personal level. The fervor for learning the art that brought people to the studios in the 1970s is now bringing people to social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram to explore many dance genres, including tap. And while television did not succeed at bringing tap dance into people's homes in the 1950s, social media is certainly doing that now.

Because social media is a relatively new platform to present work, people are exploring many different ways it can be used to translate their art. Through the

observation of current tap dance profiles, it seems that at this point anything goes. Some artists, like Micheal J. Verre on YouTube, share short combinations that showcase their skills. Others, like Tap Dance Archive Productions and Operation Tap on Instagram and Facebook, share historical facts and videos to inform the audience of tap dance history or teach short combinations to challenge their viewers. Many tap dancers, such as Sarah Reich or Michelle Dorrance, share behind the scenes previews and videos of full-length choreographic works, and other tap dance companies share videos from their classes and intensives. While these approaches are different, what seems to be most important to tap dancers on social media is sharing their love for and creating awareness of the artform.

CHAPTER 2: THE CONTEMPORARY FEMALE INFLUENCE

As noted in the previous section, tap dance is probably most known for its development in the 20th century in the hands of African American male dancers on the minstrel and vaudeville stages, and white male dancers on Broadway and in Hollywood. People such as Bill Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and later on Gregory Hines and Savion Glover get a lot of credit for the development and continuation of tap dance as an artform. And while they certainly are key pieces to the puzzle of tap dance history, the women of tap dance often get overlooked. Women such as Eleanor Powell, Ginger Rodgers, and Anne Miller were all tap stars in their time, and they weren't the only females to take the stage in tap shoes. However, when reading tap history, these dancers are always listed as after thoughts. Either, the entire time period is recounted from the male perspective, then the end mentions females of the time and their contributions as a laundry list; or, the females are only mentioned alongside their male dance partners. There is not much discussion of tap-dancing women by themselves, or as major contributors to the art form until the contemporary era of tap dance.

When the artform seemed to be in a downfall in the late 20th century, it was the American women of all races who led the revival of tap; and women are a key part of its development for the concert stage and modern performance styles. As we have seen, contemporary tap has deep roots in the history of tap dance, but it owes its recent developments in tap dance choreography to the attention of women.

There are many female dancers who contributed to the resurgence of tap dance, but there are a few notable ones that I have been interested in and inspired by in the development of my own understanding of tap dance choreography. The following tap dancers are individuals that I have studied either by taking class with them in person or researching their work online. I have taken inspiration from these dancers for my own choreography of a tap dance trio called *Free to Express* that was performed in April 2019 at the WKU Dance Program's *Contemporary Connections: A Dance Research Showcase.* Each of these dancers has qualities or a choreographic process that I admire and wished to emulate within my own choreography.

One of the most notable contemporary female tap dancers in the field today is Brenda Bufalino. She began tap dancing as a child, but in 1955, at the age of seventeen, she moved to New York City to dance with rhythm tap dancer, Charles "Honi" Coles. It was from Coles that she learned that "its not the step itself, but how you execute it that makes it ordinary or incredible."[34] Because of this, Bufalino is not known for flashy steps, but for the flow of her choreography and her love of pure rhythm.[35] She fought for the art form writing in 1989, "Tap must be perceived as an artform, one that can be choreographed, performed in ensemble, notated, and put in repertory like other dance forms. Otherwise it is in danger of dying out again…."[36]

I had the opportunity to take class with her at the Big Apple Tap Festival in November of 2018. During that class, I got to explore one of her tap dance passions first-

34. Brenda Bufalino, Tapping the Source: Tap Dance Stories, Theory and Practice (Codhill Press, 2004), p.27.

35. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 231

36. Siebert, *What the Eye Hears,* 427.

hand. Bufalino is arguably most well-known for the layering of sounds in her choreography, called counterpoint. She composes multiple steps and rhythmical patterns that are then danced simultaneously to create music. When Bufalino does this, she is taking on the role of composer within her choreography. This is perhaps best seen in Bufalino's choreography for The American Tap Dance Orchestra; an ensemble tap company created by Bufalino in 1986.[37] In their 1989 MDA Telethon performance, they perform a section of counterpoint. There were three different parts, but when danced together the rhythms complemented one another. I tried this technique within my own choreography. Each dancer has their own part, but when danced together it creates a cohesive rhythmic pattern that not only supports the music, but that adds to it.

Another key influence on contemporary tap dance is Deborah Mitchell. She said about her own choreography, "I'm a traditionalist. If you see my work, you are going to see fundamental tap steps you recognize… I want them to use their spirit, not their bodies. I'm not interested in shape."[38] Mitchell discovered the Copasetics in 1979, and grew her love of tap dance by dancing with Copasetics member, Bubba Gains.[39] She has since created fully produced tap works and taught many great tappers of the next generation through her company, the New Jersey Tap Ensemble.[40]

Mitchell is another person I was lucky enough to take class with at the Big Apple Tap Festival, and I can attest to her words. The combination we learned in her class was

37. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* 264.

38. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History,* 353.

39. Siebert, *What the Eye Hears*, 451.

40. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History,* 353.

all based in traditional tap steps that she manipulated for rhythm and speed. There was no emphasis on style or flare and there were no flash-steps, it was all about basic footwork. I appreciate this kind of tapping as a student, but in *Free to Express* I chose to fall in and out of playing with the shapes of the body. There are times in the choreography where I felt the need to accent the music with full body shapes. There are also times that I felt like the tap sounds alone were enough. For me, there is a time and a place for additional shapes of the body in tap dance. I have found that I will let my interpretation of the music decide when to let the tap steps control the body and when to require specific shapes.

Another female tap dancer who has made an impact on the direction of contemporary tap dance is Acia Gray. While I have not had the opportunity to work with her personally, I have followed her work for several years. Early in her career she had the opportunity to work with "Honi" Coles and Jimmy Slyde.[41] She is described as an "athletic, spunky, firecracker, with concern for tone, texture, and body fluidity*"* while remaining a hard-hitting drum dancer. *[42]* Her first experience in a tap company required her to focus on the tricks and looking like everyone else in the company. Not fully buying into this idea of tap she created her own company with modern dancer, Deirdre Strand, that would showcase many styles of dance in one place. Their company questioned what each genre was supposed to look like by mixing dance genres within single works. For example, in their 1966 piece, *Rhythmic Influences,* they cast three tap dancers and three jazz dancers and allowed them to play off of one another.[43]

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41. Acia Gray, *The Souls of Your Feet: a Tap Dance Guidebook for Rhythm Explorers,* 2nd ed. Austin, TX: Grand Weavers Publishing, 1998, 11.

42. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, 355.

43. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History,* 355.

Gray finds it important that the dancers in her company are individuals and are free to express themselves through her choreography. She is quoted saying, "They are so different [among themselves]… and they don't dance like me."[44] This idea of individuality comes up a lot in tap history. Finding individuality in steps is how rhythm tap was passed down on the streets in its early stages and how tap acts on the minstrel and vaudeville stages got noticed. Each tap star had something about them that was unique enough for them to make a name for themselves. When I began choreographing in a rhythm tap dance style, it seemed a disservice to the history of the art to tell my dancers exactly where to place their arms, where to focus their eyes for each count of the music. I intentionally left room in my choreography for the dancers to play with the steps and make them their own. I pushed the dancers to make their own choices in how to perform the dance instead of having them do each step exactly as those dancing next to them.

My research of these specific artists directly influenced the artistic choices that I made in choreographing *Free to Express*. Some of these choices were ones I might repeat again, while others might be left aside in future choreography. For example, I really enjoyed creating the counter point rhythms, but I struggle with finding the right section in the music to use it. In the future, I might use counter point to develop choreography in silence. Or, I might utilize counterpoint only when I am using more traditional jazz music. As far as crafting the shapes of my dancers, I think it depends on the style of the piece. In general, I found the shapes I created to seem forced within the choreography. I wanted my dancers to move more organically after I watched it a few times. That is not to say that I will not want to refine the shapes and styles of my dancers in the future, but that

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44. Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History,* 355.

I might allow them to help me choose the shapes, so they feel comfortable with them from the beginning. As far as encouraging individuality within movement, that is one thing I am certain I will never stray from within my choreography. I think that within tap dance especially, it is important to allow each person to bring their own flavors to the movement. The history of tap dance has favored those who are different from those that came before them and even those that are dancing beside them. I hope that my future dancers would always feel like they were discovering themselves within tap dance instead of simply emulating my own style.

CHAPTER 3: MY CONTEMPORARY VOICE

From the beginning, the goal of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of tap dance by discovering my own choreographic preferences and where they originated within the genre. Through researching tap dance professionals and emulating their styles/processes, my choreography, *Free to Express*, served as an opportunity to explore what I liked and did not like in tap choreography. However, I quickly realized that I needed to create something a little more personal in order to discover my own style. When researching tap artists, I noticed they often have solos that they created for themselves that they are able to present as a token of their personal style—something they can refer to when describing the choices they typically make within their dancing. I decided that the culmination of my research must be a solo that I create for myself in order to decipher my voice in contemporary tap dance choreography.

The resulting solo, *Unsettled,* was performed at the WKU Dance Program's *The Dance Project,* a fully produced dance concert comprised of student choreography. This piece was heavily influenced by my knowledge of choreography for the concert stage which includes an understanding of the choreographic elements of space, time, and energy. It incorporated elements of modern dance such as breath-informed movement and full body connectivity. Finally, it explored tap dance's relationship with the music in terms of directly following or contrasting the melody.

The first step in creating this dance was finding a piece of music that inspired me. I knew that I wanted to use jazz music because of its importance in tap dance history, but beyond that I reserved conceptual ideas until the music was selected. The music selection completely informed all choreographic choices in this piece; I had no preconceived ideas or concepts before I found this music. I danced to Israeli jazz artist Adam Ben Ezra's "Brown Piano." Its soft beginning left me a lot of room to play with tap sounds, and its musical build inspired an abstract narrative of indecision on the path towards achieving a goal.

Once I selected my music, I then spent many hours in the dance studio repeatedly listening to the music and improvising movement until I felt that it looked and sounded right. As I previously stated, I had no preconceived notions for this piece, meaning that all resulting choreography was informed by my preferences alone. The fact that I incorporated modern dance movements and created a choreographic work informed by my concert choreography knowledge was not planned, but I now realize that these are key aspects to my choreographic style.

Unsettled became a piece about the inner conflict of making choices, and this concept was heavily supported by the use of pathways in space. For the majority of the piece, I traced the diagonal from upstage left to down stage right. The upstage left corner is the area from which I appeared. It was this area that symbolized security and I was unsure that I wanted to leave that place of safety and travel toward the downstage right corner, which was the area to which I was ultimately trying to go. I used the focus of my eyes to show my intention of moving towards the downstage corner, but I often recoiled on myself and retreated back up the diagonal towards safety. At the climax of the piece, I

leave this diagonal pathway in favor of a dizzying circle around the space that leads me to center stage where I had to make the final choice of which corner I was going to choose, ultimately surrendering to the downstage corner by sliding to the ground in that direction.

Within this piece, I did not intentionally choose to play with the shape of the body. I began with purely tap steps that followed the pathway of the concept I had created. But as the tap steps settled in my body and became muscle memory, I found myself adding small gestural movements—reaching towards where I was going, pushing away from the uncertain, placing a hand at my heart to find peace, reaching up to the sky as if in search of answers from a higher power. I surprised myself with these movements. They added deeper meaning to the piece earlier in the process than when I became certain of the story I was telling, but they became essential aspects of my movement. Unlike the shapes I created for *Free to Express,* these were 100% natural in their conception and their use, and I like the way they turned out.

The basis of my tap sounds began with directly following the rhythm of the melody in the music. The first section of tap movement in the choreography seeks to mimic the exact rhythm of the melody and uses different sounds of each part of the tap shoe to emulate the pitches. I am not creating my own music but following the guideline of what has been given to me by the composer, creating a cohesive and calming feeling at the beginning of the piece. By submitting to the melody already in place in the music, it is as if I am submitting to the idea of the choice I have to make. But, as I become increasingly unsettled by the choice I need to make, the tap rhythms stray from the melody. In these moments where the tap steps do not follow the melody, I used the dynamics of the music to guide my rhythmic choices. I was influenced by the music at all

times, but how I used the music changed depending on my relationship with the concept of the piece in that moment.

Before my research and work on my CE/T, my choreography experience was almost exclusively based in modern dance, so when choreographing this piece, I returned to the aspect of modern dance to which I am drawn—the use of breath to drive connectivity between movements. There were certain parts of the dance that I did not utilize any tap steps, and those moments are where the use of breath to influence movement are the most obvious. For example, about a minute and a half into the dance, as the melody lifted, I turned and reached towards the sky with one hand, but as the melody fell, I exhaled from the reach and slid to the floor. I also used the thought of breath to influence the composition of tap steps. At the beginning of the piece, each time I faced the downstage corner again was a new breath, and the tap steps were renewed to full energy. As the phrase grew longer the breath would die and the energy would fall until I could again reorient myself towards the goal of reaching that corner. Another example can be found at the climax of the piece where I was tracing the circle around the room while the music was building and my rhythms were at their fastest and most complex. It was not until the end of the build that I finally took a breath and slowed my feet down.

The hardest part about choreographing this piece was defining the ending. I was not sure what to do once I finally made the choice to continue down the path and make the decision. Every time I rehearsed it, I made different choices with how to use the music at the end of the piece because I felt different about the decision. Instead of making a concrete decision and setting choreography for the end, I allowed myself to give into

the changes I made every time I performed and let the end be a structured improvisation. I knew that I was going to ultimately continue down the original diagonal pathway, and I knew that I would probably repeat snippets of tap phrases used earlier in the dance, but every performance was a little bit different because I allowed myself to be influenced by how I was feeling in the moment. The piece did not end the same way twice.

Through the process of creating and performing this piece, I believe I have a good foundation for my own personal style within tap choreography. At the very least, I have learned to trust my instincts, even when they might be different from what I have seen or done before which will only help me to define my style in the future.

CONCLUSION

Through taking tap classes at the collegiate level, traveling to several tap festivals and shows, and analyzing tap dance available on social media, I have found tap to be less definable than ever. There is a group of dancers that seem most interested in tap dance as music. There is a group of dancers that are looking to infuse tap dance with technique from other styles. Tap dance is no longer contained to the stage performance or street improv, and it does not have to be just the shoes and the floor. New technologies have propelled tap into an age that is currently undefinable. Only time will tell what the signature of this time period is, and where it will grow from here.

Currently, we are in an interesting time period for the development of dance on social media. As the world becomes confined to their homes in the midst of COVID-19, dancers of all genres are taking to social media to share classes and choreography. In order to keep our mental and physical health while confined to small spaces, we are being encouraged to take classes from new people all across the world. More dance is being shared to the general public than ever before, and people are able to experience it in the comfort of their own homes. As we share dance with each other, I look for there to be even more fusing of dance genres. It seems likely that sharing dance with the global community will encourage people to adapt aspects from many genres and cultures to add to their practice that they can share when life returns to normal later and influence the development of individual styles.

My own style will of course grow and change over time just as the genre of tap dance has done thus far. But this research has given me clarity for what my preferences are now which will make me better at conveying and sharing my ideas with others. Because of this research, I will be a better ambassador for the art form as I understand its history and my place in it.

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