Introduction

Tap dance has been long forgotten in the majority of dance programs in higher education. The lack of knowledge of this dance form deters students from learning about a style so rich in cultural history, in part because it derives from many different aspects of performing arts. At Ohio University, numerous courses are offered for students to learn about the history of dance, including History of Modern, 20th century dance, history of African dance and Black Dance Forms. These classes are offered as a part of the component of the dance curriculum. However, tap dance is only a small portion of the content of history courses. The history of art informs present day art and holds an important place in the rise of many styles of dance. Tap dance’s history is essential to the future world of dance. In this thesis, I first present the history of tap, followed by the importance of tap in education, and my conclusion. My attempt is to capture the attention of professors and students and allow them to explore the importance of the realm of tap dance as an art form.

The Early Influence: The Misconceptions of Historical Context

Tap dance evolved over time, merging from various components of dance that were found in West African tribal dances, Irish step dancing, and English clog dancing.¹ Although there is an ongoing debate on the development of Tap, some sources give credit to Irish dancing as the originator of its progression as an art form. Some writers further believe that Irish dance had an influence on African dance.

However, in reality, both African and Irish were primary influences on Tap, but not on one another. Both were done in their original form in their native land and were later interconnected to form new styles of dance. Therefore, the confusion lies in the hands of the writers that have re-written dance history to fit what society believes. Marshall Stearns, author of *Jazz Dance: The story of American Vernacular Dance*, looked deeper into this subject to help his research for his book. After many years, he concluded that Irish dancing did not have an influence on African dance, but later became associated with one another when brought to the United States.\(^2\) The true development of tap happened over an extended period of time with the continuum of change in music and dance. In Africa, the traditional dances performed were a primary influence on the beginning of what is known as “vernacular dance”, which means movement that is developed as a part of everyday culture in a certain environment. African people used their life experiences to create ways of moving as a means of communication to other slaves as well as in ritual and occasion.

Around the mid 1500s during the slave trade, over 10,000 slaves per year were transported from Africa to the West Indies and forced to dance aboard ships. It was in the new land that the people obtained their first contact with the European and British styles of dancing. Overtime, the mixing of all these styles came about as multiculturalism spread across the world. Stearns writes, “several American dances

have been observed in what was *probably* their original form in Africa.”³ This quote indicates that the African traditional dances were still a part of the new stylized forms of dancing. It also shows that the use of “probably” means that historians descriptions are uncertain as a result of the lack of knowledge and acceptance of African culture and influence in America. The blending of these dances formed a new way for the people to move. Writer Lisa Lekis analyzed the many interpretations of this cultural mixture of dances. According to her, the slave trade and the European migration to the New World inevitably “[produced] a new form [of dance], not African, not European, but fused from the meeting of two races in the New World.”⁴ When these “new” dances were brought from the West Indies to the United States, American society changed and influenced the movement of the already diluted style. This was the rise of vernacular dance in the United States. It is important for students to know about the mixing of cultures and the role it played in creating new dance forms like Tap dance. Many styles of dance come from more than one tradition, which allows the movement vocabulary to expand different aspects of acculturation, making the movement both dynamic and complex.

Once in the United States, the dances continued to grow into many different dance forms. White professionals began picking up ideas from the Negroes because they were in a better position to profit from the art form and attract audiences. For example, Thomas Dartmouth Rice borrowed songs and dances from the African

---
American people and set the course for what later became the minstrel era. He became the character Jim Crow, a Black crippled slave who worked out in the fields of his owner. Rice imitated him after close observation and became one of the most popular acts of this era. Minstrelsy was the most popular form of entertainment in the United States for more than half a century and even spread to many parts of the world. At this time, tap dance was not classified; dancers performed a mixture of different styles. The shows often applied movement of the Irish decent, including the Jig and the Hornpipe. Other major dances were The Buck and Wing, Soft shoe, and the Cakewalk. The mixing of both Irish and African dance helped dancers of that time create new, rhythmic steps to perform in front of the audience. The emphasis on the legs, with no upper body movement reflects the Irish influence while the reference to the shuffling and rhythm of the steps reflects Afro-American elements.

After the Civil War, Negro minstrel companies began to hit the scene of live entertainment. Although the war ended in 1865, there were only three Negro companies performing on the road almost 25 years later. This number is compared to the dozens of white troupes that were also travelling during this time. Of all the performers, one Negro dancer stood out. His name was William Henry Lane and some sources give him credit for being the founder of Tap Dance. Writer and theorist Edward Le Roy Rice confidently states that “the world never saw his equal.” During the 1840’s, the blending of these styles were acceptable in the performing of Negro companies. Lane was possibly a reason for the change in this style of dancing.

---

professionals even began to describe the performance of Irish Folk Dance as the general style of Negro dancing.\(^7\) Lane’s influence on the impact of minstrelsy comes from years of struggling to become a performer. He became the first African American to perform for an all white audience. The huge influence of this one Negro dancer adopted the idea that minstrel shows have retained more integrity as a Negro art-form that any other theatrical derivative of Negro culture.\(^8\)

The Harlem Renaissance was an important change, not only for dance, but all forms of art. Originally called the “New Negro Movement”, this progression took place during the 1920s and 30s and opened the door for many Black artists through poetry, dance, literature, music, and visual arts. This movement that organically evolved had a deep impact on the words of so many poets, intellects and artist around the country and an even deeper impact on the lives of the viewers and readers. This period, which lasted 10-15 years, marked the rise of Black intellectuals in American society, paving the way for many African Americans and their successors. The Broadway show, *Shuffle Along*, which opened in May 1921, is often credited as the start of the Harlem Renaissance. This all-Black show was created, directed and performed by a team of Black comedians.\(^9\) It was the first Black show on Broadway to last for nearly one year. It is noted that it was an “… outstanding Negro musical to play white theaters from coast to coast.”\(^10\) During this era, over forty Black musicals

---


graced the stage with large casts and chorus lines of dancers. Music was changing as a result of this movement, which made way for the introduction of new forms of dance.

White dancers then began to search for inspiration from other Negroes and adopted new steps from performers like David Reed in the 50s. Although African dance played a significant role in the history of tap dance, it would be misleading to not give Irish and clog dancing the credit it deserves. The Jig, deriving from Ireland and the Clog from England were two of the most influential dances from the Old World in the rise of minstrelsy. The well-established tradition of the jig transpired into the movement of both Negro and white performers during this time. The dance consists of rapid leg and foot work, with the arms held close to the sides and the upper body completely stiff. There is also a large amount of skill present when tapping with both toes and heels. The Jig accounts for one of many dances still performed in its original form today in both Ireland and the United States. Clog, on the other hand, has changed over the course of the years. A better way to say that may be that it has evolved into new styles. For example, none of the original clog dances had syncopated rhythms and over time the creation of swing added a different twist to its innovative style. Swing, along with the Buck and Wing, became popular as minstrelsy took over the face of live entertainment. Buck and Wing was a mixture of the Jig and Clog, accompanied by song and dance. Dancer Tom Barrett believes that this style of dance
hurt the original clog by taking out dancing and adding acrobatics. This had a huge influence on a tap step called ‘the wing.”

During this time, minstrelsy was the only way to make a song a national hit in one season in the United States, until around 1960, when minstrelsy was slowly being replaced by Vaudeville. Although not proven, scholars believe that Tony Pastor was the official founder of vaudeville entertainment. The Vaudevillian era was a term used for the variety of entertaining acts that combined acting, singing, and dance, including what was later referred to as tap dance. Tap dance developed into a style of its own around the 1960s. Some performers used wooden-soled shoes, which allowed sound to come from their feet and others performed in soft-shoes, which again was accompanied by a song and dance. This introduction of taps on the bottom of dancers’ shoes occurred at the same time as the uprising of Black Musical Theater. Black Musical Theater was an opportunity for African American people to perform without Black face. Some of the previous minstrel dances were reintroduced and stripped of the unrealistic qualities that the white people used to make fun of Blacks while performing. Because of the lack of funds, the Negro groups performed in rural areas, in small venues such as low class carnivals and medicine shows. By touring to different venues, they brought attention to Black Musical Theater and further defined their craft.

11 Barrett interview with A.J. Liebling, New York World Telegram (9 November 1932)
Over the course of my research, I noticed a shift in historical information. Because tap is a form of dance that evolved rapidly, during a period of great change, its history is somewhat unclear. For instance, according to Mark Knowles, the first minstrel shows took place in 1928, while Stearns marks the period at starting in 1945. Knowles referenced Stearns book in his bibliography, yet the dates are more than 15 years apart. In another book, author Jerry Duke, who also referenced Stearns, states that the minstrel era started in 1840. Which author is correct? In a leisure conversation with friend and tap dancer Jumaane Taylor, he stated that Stearns’ provides the closest documentation of the true history of Tap dance. In this book, he gives primary credit to the influential African dances that were brought from the U.S. to the West Indies. In Jerry Ames’ book, *The Book of Tap*, he credits European styles as the first influential dances to inspire tap. These dances include English clog, Irish Jigs, and Morris dance. The debate arises when reading about clog dance. The word “buck,” which came from the West Indies and was named after African dancers labeled “Po’ Bockorau”, suggest some European styles were developed by slaves after they arrived in the West Indies. Another larger influence on clog dancing was the Ring Shout, which was another dance brought to the new world from Africa. In that case, facts are proven that both styles of dance contributed to Tap dance, but the African influence was greater.

In summary, it is essential that students know the history of where dance evolved into many different styles. It is also important that students know about the

---

primary influences on Tap dance, which are also the primary influences of Jazz dance. African dances were created without influence from European styles. The Jig and Clog were also dances traditionally performed in Europe. As a result of the slave trade, the dances were brought together and performed in the West Indies. So it is not that one dance influenced the other, but that they mixed them together to form a whole new genre. These dances were brought to the United States, where the original tradition was changed. Once it changed, it was referred to as African-American dance, which was popular in the U.S. The varied forms of the traditional styles of African and European were the secondary influence on the rise of tap dance. Many dance scholars reference Stearns’ book, which gives primary credit to African dance’s influence on tap before European styles, yet most historical works favor the European styles.

*The Later Influence: The Underdogs*

The fall of Tap dance occurred possibly as a result of the advent of television shows in the early 1950s. According to Dianne Walker, “I asked some of the old guys what happened. They said TV came in and killed it- it had been a live performance.” American television entertainment replaced dance from being live on stage to being on screen and in films. Agnes de Mille starred in Oklahoma, a Broadway production that performers traded in their tap shoes for toe shoes. This performance changed different societies’ views on dance. Alternate dances, including Ballet and Jazz, caused Tap to take the backseat to Broadway and Musical Theater, which overtime

---

took a backseat to television. Tap dancer Cholly Atkins said, “Television helped to kill tap. See it was very difficult for good tap to catch on television-wise [since] it had more depth to it than TV could accommodate.”\(^{17}\) He also added that its cost were prohibitive, in particular the cost associated with managing the logistics of tap floors for rehearsals and performances. Companies were often unwilling to pay these costs. Television, as a venue, pushed producers to come up with new forms of entertainment, whether it was variety shows, talk shows or comedy shows. But, many of these productions showcased ballet and jazz dances, excluding tap dance. Artists like Fred Astaire and Paul Draper hit the screen with tap dance, but added balletic movements. Tap dance on film became more about personality and music rather than true tap. This marked the beginning of the demise of tap dance. The popularity of television and film performers such as Fred Astaire, preceded by Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and Gene Kelly, drew people away from live performance. Their style was much different than the live hoofers that were performing. These “on-screen” dancers added elegance and grace to the upper body and brought out personality that made their audiences intrigued with their movement.

Due to the popularity of television, many dancers were left unnoticed during the twenties, thirties, and forties. Around this time, one of the most important arenas for the exchange of style and rhythm was the Hoofer’s Club in Harlem. This gambling establishment was one of the well known venues for tap dance, especially for Black

---

tap dancers looking to build their craft.  
It was owned by Lonnie Hicks, who was a piano player from Atlanta. Hicks allowed any dancers to practice and experiment with movement on an open stage. All of the up and coming “tap cats,” as they were called, attempted to keep tap dance alive. “The minute we had free time, we’d stuff our tap shoes in our pockets, hang the shoelaces around our necks, and sprint over to the Hoofer’s club,” said tapper Maceo Anderson, who later became a member of The Four Step Brothers, one of the longest lasting performing groups during the 1920s.

The Hoofer’s Club harbored some of the world’s greatest tap dancers, whom I call the underdogs because these performers were unnoticed, but still struggled to keep tap alive, despite its lack of popularity.

King Rastus Brown made his presence known at the Hoofer’s club and popularized the time step. He did not gain as much fame as Bill Robinson, in part because he refused to perform for all White audiences and he preferred to perform live. He was a major influence on what is called a buck tap dancer. “He danced flat-footed, close to the floor, moving from the hips down, and swinging.”

Students don’t really learn about Brown in history classes because he never hit the big screen or performed in clubs with large venues in Harlem. Also, unlike other live performers, he had no comedic undertone in his performances. Bill Robinson, on the other hand, had it all. His personality and charm helped to win over the audience. Many of his steps came from Brown, but he changed them and brought tap up on the toes. The difference

---

between these two tappers was that Brown helped teach the young tappers who would become the next generation of tap dancers and Robinson only claimed to have helped them. “He [Robinson] said that he taught us, but he didn’t,” said famous tapper Fayard Nicholas, a former member of the legendary tap duet, The Nicholas Brothers.  

An important figure in tap and another king at the Hoofer’s club went by the name of John Bubbles. At a young age, John “Bubber” Sublett had the urge to perform. He started off as a singer, but later found a home at the club through tap dance. He was a hoofer who gained much of his movement style from watching the steps of other tappers. His career expanded to performing all over the world. He teamed up with another tap dancer and took their act, Buck and Bubbles, on the road around 1922. He gained much popularity from both Black and White audiences. Then later, became the teacher of a young man named Chuck Green, who later mastered the art of tap dance.

Another notable dancer, Baby Laurence, was determined to demonstrate how tap dance offered a new dimension to jazz music. With the development of jazz music, the style and rhythms of tap dance changed as dancers reinvented the movements in order to keep the dance relevant. Jazz music and jazz dance is something we talk about in history classes, but we never talk about the influence tap and jazz had on one another. What’s not mentioned is Baby Laurence’s explanation as to why tap is like jazz music. Just as in jazz music, a tap soloist improvises and expresses him/herself

---

through music and/or dance. When Laurence once visited a Jazz history course at the New School in New York, he encouraged students to look deeper into the art of tap dance alongside jazz. The progression of tap over the years is similar to the progression of jazz and other styles of dance that came along as a result of the change. Laurence mentioned that he classifies dancing to jazz music in three ways, “tap, interpretive, and choreographic.” He further explained that “tap” represents hoofing, “interpretive” expresses the body motion, and “choreographic” attaches importance to dances influenced by modern and ballet. Baby Laurence was around at the turning point of tap, after men like Bubbles and Robinson was performing. However, he still watched and learned at the Hoofer’s club and became more of a traditional hoofer rather than a buck tapper, possibly due to changes in music during this time. Performers such as, Honi Coles and Cholly Atkins, became popular around the same time. These two army vets, who started a duet that performed all over the world, gained much respect for their routines. They mostly focused on soft shoe and “swing dance,” which occurred at the same time as the development of jazz. They then added comedy to their act, which made their shows more marketable. Atkins and Coles performed for awhile in the 1950s until booking gigs became more difficult and scarce. In an effort to stick with their craft by doing solo works, the team broke up and went their separate ways. Coles opened a studio and Atkins went to teach at Katherine Dunham’s School of Dance.

_The Rebuild_

---

Why did tap dance make a comeback in the 1960s? Although television never died, the popularity of live performance was brought back to life through the newer tap artist of the sixties. Jazz music had taken over a larger part of the entertainment world and could be credited for helping to bring tap back to the stage. Jazz scholar and referenced author Stearns put together a show entitled “The Newport Jazz Festival” with the goal of bringing back a lost art form, Tap dance. The combination of both jazz and tap awed the audience and started the rise of live entertainment again. The year 1969 was a great year for tap dance. A former dancer, Leticia Jay, presented a powerhouse tap performance called *Tap Happening* to bring audiences’ attention back to tap dance. The cast included some of the greatest tap dancers, including Chuck Green, Sandman Sims, and Dr. Jimmy Slyde. It became the dance event of the season, with packed houses and great reviews. This marked the beginning of the return of tap dance on Broadway.

Today, the legacy of tap dance is kept alive through tap artists who refuse to let it die. Dianne “Lady DI” Walker is one of many artists who helped bring back the popularity of tap dance. Furthermore, she is still striving to keep it alive and kicking into present times. She believes that the best thing to do is “put the best of what we have up on stage; if not, we’re wasting our time, and we don’t have that kind of time.” Tap is a visual art form and live performance is what makes it come alive. Present day tap artists learn about the history and legacy of tap through festivals, history classes, and panel discussions with tap masters. Melba Huber writes, “The

---

American art form of tap is energizing, exploding, expanding, and education, thanks to the older tap masters, often known as “hoofers,” sharing their craft with young tap artists, students, and teachers. I had the pleasure of meeting Huber once at the St. Louis Tap Festival the year she wrote this article. She had been studying and researching the art of tap for some time and she was writing the article to inform readers that tap was still alive and a relevant dance form. She actually believed that the start of the “energizing of tap” came from tap artist Gregory Hines, who recently died in 2003. Hines career involved starring and dancing on film, Broadway, commercials, and even shows in Vegas. He was an all around performer, mixing acting, singing and dancing into his performance. He even introduced one of the most popular films about tap and entitled it simply “Tap.” A new interest in Tap came along with this film as well as the many tap contests Hines’ sponsored across the country.

**Tap Dance and Education**

The history classes offered at Ohio University, and many other institutions cover many areas of dance including, Ballet, Modern, African, Irish, English, Jazz dance, and other dance forms. All of these styles of dance play a role in the development of Tap, yet dance students do not usually learn of Tap dance’s essential history. However, it is important for students to learn, not only admired dance forms, but also less popular styles that led to what these forms have become. Studying dance in college allows students to prepare for a career as a dancer, teacher, and choreographer. Students should study all forms and their history so that these forms

---

are not lost. After researching the history of Tap, I learned about the many artistic influences Tap had and currently has on the world of dance.

Tap dance plays an essential role in Black history as well as dance history. During the later years of slavery and the earlier years of the development of tap, this style helped to break down cultural and racial barriers. Dances brought over from other countries helped to build the dance vocabulary of the United States, which brought traditional and innovative styles together to establish new dance forms, like Tap. According to theorists, an African American man named Master Juba created tap.26 Around this time, Blacks were not allowed to perform for White audiences. However, because of Tap, Juba became the first black man to perform in front of an all White audience. It is also evident that both the Hoofer’s Club and the Apollo Theater helped to bring diverse people together in one setting. As a result of the Harlem Renaissance, the migration of Blacks in Harlem increased tremendously, which could be a reason for the hiring of Blacks in this community. The Apollo Theater was the first to hire black entertainment in the city of New York.27 The Hoofer’s club was open to all tap dancers, regardless of their race and social status. Because of places like these, Blacks found a way to make income in such a huge city. Many theaters began to allow Black people to perform, in part because they paid them lower wages.

There are professional dancers who make a living solely from performing tap. Just like any form of dance, there are tap companies and tap performances. The artists today have made it their goal to keep tap dance alive. One of the most effective ways to do this is by having tap festivals all over the world, featuring some of tap’s top artists. Today, there are festivals in locations such as Sweden, Germany, Canada, and Japan, just to name a few. These festivals are the backbone of tap education. Workshops typically include an array of classes, panel discussions and video history class for students to learn from the tap legends that helped build the tap industry. These festivals typically honor one or more “Doctors of Tap,” a term used to describe artists who were honored and celebrated at Oklahoma University. Every year, the tap world loses another “Doctor”. Only three of the nine legends who have spent their lives educating and influencing young dancers to pursue tap dance as a primary art form are still living, Dr. Bunny Briggs, Dr. Jeni Legon, and Dr. Prince Spencer. Previous “Doctors” such as, Dr. Cholly Atkins, Dr. James “Buster” Brown, Dr. Henry Letang, Dr. Fayard Nicholas, Dr. Leonard Reed, and Dr. James T. “Jimmy Slyde” Godbolt all died within the past ten years. In order to “preserve the knowledge and history of tap, the masters have been honored at tap festivals where they teach classes, perform, and inspire a new generation.” Some theorists believe that these festivals are a large part of tap’s expansion. This is one of the only ways for the younger tap artist to catch up with tap dance’s past.

---

29 Huber, Melba. “Tap Masters pass it on.” *Dancer Magazine*, p. 68
30 Huber, Melba. “Tap Masters pass it on.” *Dancer Magazine*, p. 71
I had the pleasure of attending many of these festivals. I received some of the best information from listening to the instructors and “Doctors of Tap”. At the St. Louis Tap Festival, I was able to meet and take classes from legends, including Leonard Reed, Jimmy Slyde, and Ernest “Brownie” Brown. One important aspect of these classes was the oral history they shared while teaching the steps. Instead of just showing and performing, they told the class about the origin of the steps and why they are important to Tap dance. However, most colleges do not encourage students to attend or organize tap festivities, which means that the students who are pursuing dance at the college level do not receive this vital information.

Over the course of the years, I met many people while attending these festivals; one person in particular took me under her wing and taught me a lot about the art of Tap dance. Tap artist Dianne Walker has been around for quite some time. She began dancing when she was 2 ½ years old, but stopped around the age of 14. After meeting Tap dancer Willie Spencer in the 70s, she realized that her calling was dance and decided to pursue a career in Tap dance. Over the years, Walker has gained much popularity in the dance world, particularly in tap. She has worked with and motivated many of the current tap artists. After having many conversations with her, I concluded that learning the oral history from a person of such stature greatly contributes to a student’s education.

Conclusion

As a component of this paper, I hosted three workshops and a performance with the sole purpose of educating the students at Ohio University on a form of dance not represented in the School of Dance (see Appendix I). During the performance, I talked to the students about the history of tap and its origins. After receiving a grant, I was able to bring two Chicago tap artist to Athens that taught, performed and educated the students about tap. To further my research, I asked the audience members to fill out questionnaires after the performance portion of the events. The questionnaire and results are below:

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Are you a dance major or dance professor? YES  N
2. Have you ever been introduced the history and legacy of Tap dance? YES  NO
3. On a scale from 1-10 (ten being the highest), how much did you know about tap prior to the concert? _______
4. Do you enjoy watching Tap Dance? YES  NO
5. Now that you have seen the show, are you more interested in how tap was developed? YES  NO
6. Do you believe it would be a good idea to implement Tap Dance Classes and/or tap history classes in the dance program at OU? YES  NO
7. If there were such a class, would you register for it? YES  NO

Any additional comments can go on the back
These are the results of the people who were dance professors and/or dance students.

The audience’s responses suggest that many students who are dance majors at Ohio University are unaware of the history and art of tap dance. However, every student who completed the survey was interested in learning more about Tap and even in taking a Tap class. According to the survey, on a scale from one to 10, with ten being the highest, more than half the population of the dancers in the audience indicated they had little to no knowledge of Tap. Even the non-dance majors believed that tap dance should be implemented into the curriculum of the School of Dance. In the school, dance majors learn about every form of dance that contributed to the development of Tap dance, including African, Modern, and Jazz. A large part of Tap
dance’s development originated from American styles of dance. Tap dance is an American art form, which is essentially why it should be the first form of dance to be recognized in dance programs of higher education. It is important for students who are studying dance to know the history of Tap and its contributions to other dance forms. Some agree if a dancer does not know the history of their art form, they cannot be considered an artist of that particular art form. Tap dance is more than just tapping and without knowing its rich history, one cannot consider themselves a Tap dancer. Some classes, including Modern history and Black Dance Forms briefly cover Tap, however, the history of tap dance is too large to be one part of another class.

Tap dance is a very relevant and contemporary art form in today’s society. Although dance programs differ from one University to the next, the goal of each program is to educate the students on the many important aspects of becoming artists. As a student at Ohio University, I learned that when you are studying an art form, you must be open to other forms of art. Dance can be a painting, a song, a form of instrumentation or a poem. Becoming a well-rounded performer is the key to expanding creativity and production in the arts. Artistry can come from any place or discipline and students should learn about every form of art, including Tap dance.
Interview with Shelly Leonhardt

I searched for alternative ways to support my thesis and encourage readers to pay attention to Tap as an art form. I was introduced to a very important young woman, Shelley Oliver, a professional tap dancer who has taken her craft to another level. I became fascinated with Oliver because she started a tap program at Muhlenberg College, which is a small liberal arts school in Pennsylvania. While researching, I read an article that she wrote entitled “Tap in Universities.” In this article, she explains the importance of having a tap program at her school. She further explains the benefits it places on the dance program as a whole. I then called Oliver and asked if we could have a phone interview to get her opinion on the importance of teaching tap in university dance programs. She agreed to the interview and we set a date and time for it to take place. I was thrilled that she took time out of her busy schedule to talk to me for my thesis. It was important for me to hear her opinion because in her article, she explains the importance of tap dance in universities. My conversation with Oliver helped to expand my research and open the door to the root of my thesis.

Transcribed Interview

Cala: What is your name and occupation?
Shelley: Shelley Oliver and I am a professional tap dancer
Cala: How many years have you been tap dancing and what is the role it plays in your life?

Shelley: I started tap dancing when I was a child. I’m 51 now. I studied classical ballet. In the 80s, I started leaning towards tap. And tap defines my career.

Cala: Did you take all styles of dance as a child? If so, was tap always as important as everything else?

Shelley: As a young girl, tap was given equal value as the other forms. When I went to England for training, ballet was much more important at the time. Until my 20’s, it changed.

Cala: Tell me more about the tap program you started at Muhlenberg College? What is the curriculum and opportunity for students?

Shelley: The philosophy at the school is everyone at the college is able to take dance classes, although they have a dance major. Therefore, everyone will benefit no matter what. I was there when the dance department started. Everyone is a specialist in their own dance form. I started teaching for the community, until 1993 when the tap program started. I teach advanced, intermediate, and beginners tap for the students. The tap ensemble fall semester is a credited course and I have about fifty kids a week.

Cala: What were some obstacles you faced when starting this program.

Shelley: Luckily, I had support from the director. It’s a theater and dance program and tap plays into musical theater. The theater and dance department are strong supporters. The only obstacle is flooring. To put a tap piece in a concert with modern and ballet, you have to lay a floor. There can be limitations. But it’s great! My husband is a jazz artist and every year we make a custom made tap score. My husband performs live with the students. The students feel out evaluations and they love tap dance.

Cala: How big was the tap program when your first started and how big is it now?

Shelley: It started off with one community class to a one credited course. And now it’s three levels of technique, the performance course, and other levels for the community. It went from 25 to 100 students. There are about 2400 students overall, the freshmen class as majors is 70 students.
Cala: How do you feel tap relates to other styles of dance like ballet and modern?

Shelley: Musicality. You can recognize music, musical form, bars, and sign signatures.

Cala: In what ways do you think an individual can contribute to my argument that tap should be taught in higher educated programs? Do you have any suggestions on ways on person can get the point across?

Shelley: Primarily, it is tap so I take the time out of class to teach this history. The students understand the heritage. You can start a petition or write an article. Start a class for fun outside of the curriculum. The students may even go to the authorities and tell them that what they want.

Cala: After looking at about 30 schools that offer dance as a major, only four programs offer tap dance. How does this make you feel?

Shelley: Tap has been a special smaller place in people’s hearts. It was usually mixed with jazz when I was growing up. I am not bothered by this factor, but I would certainly want more options. There was a point when tap was gone. It is in a very healthy place after being revived. In time, things will change.

Cala: When you refer to “educating the whole person” how does this relate to this statement?

Shelley: In tap class, I often teach the time step. On one level, you execute. But when you teaching the “whole person,” you have to understand what kind of learner you are dealing with, whether it’s visual, verbal, etc… As a teacher, I have to be aware of the process each student uses in learning. I try to make it more teacher-centered. How I relate to other people. They have to write and process everything they learn. I use problem solving. I say do a time step in ¾ time. I make them figure it out on their own… cognitive learning. I work on many levels in the classroom, which is totally appropriate for a liberal arts college. This is how the program is surviving.

Cala: What encouragement do you have for a student wanting to pursue tap dance as a career?

Shelley: Practically, I think they should go to as many tap festivals as they can afford. Find a mentor and then move and find another one. Keep practicing!
Cala: Who are the Shelley Oliver Tap Dancers?

Shelley: It’s a Manhattan based company. We tour all over the world. I formed a group generally in the area that performs. We are Regional based in the Northeast and I am the choreographer for the ensemble.
I met Dianne Walker, better known as “Lady Di”, at the St. Louis tap festival in 2004. She taught an advanced tap class and although I had never seen her teach before, I took the class with hopes of getting to know her as a person. I heard her name many times while I was tap dancing with M.A.D.D. Rhythms, a professional tap company based in Chicago. Walker is not just a tap dancer, she is an educator. As indicated in my interview with her, she believes that anybody can tap dance, but not everybody is a tap dancer. It takes knowledge and heart to truly consider oneself as a tap dancer. While teaching at the festival, she continued to spread her wisdom to other students through conversation and classes. Although she was teaching a tap technique class, she made sure that we knew exactly what we were learning and where it came from. She is a wonderful artist and I continued to take her classes and network with her off of the dance floor. I had numerous conversations with her and she would always tell me how important it is to know the history of tap dance if you want to be a tap dancer. We would sit for hours in the hotel lobbies and talk about tap’s history. Days and weeks after my talk with Dianne Walker, I was still curious about what happened next in tap’s history. I started to look into it more as I got older and continued talking to professors of tap and legends in the tap industry. I attended festivals in Los Angeles, St. Louis, and Chicago where I received so much vital information from many artists in the field.
Once in college, I never stopped tap dancing although it was not offered as a class. I used spare time between classes and weekends to practice my craft. In 2007, I took a trip to New York with the School of Dance for the American College Dance Festival. I ran into Dianne Walker and we decided to have lunch together. We sat down and talked for a while and then she gave me her card that included her email address and phone number. Over the years, we have kept in contact via email. When I decided to use my interest in the history of tap dance, I knew I wanted to interview her. After receiving her permission, we set a time and date for the interview to take place. I knew that this interview would help me to further my research because Walker had so much knowledge about this art form. And I was excited that she allowed me to speak with her about what she knows. Dianne Walker’s career includes Broadway productions, television, film, and concerts both National and International. Her name is one of the biggest names in the tap industry. This dynamic woman agreed to do an interview for me and I took advantage of every words of wisdom she gave me.

Interview Transcribed

Cala: Do you feel that tap dance is a lost art form in the majority of higher educated dance programs?

Dianne: Yea definitely, the way you posed the question. Do I feel it’s a lost dance form in the realm of higher education; I’d have to say yes. But if you were to ask me in general, I would have to say no. Because I think the last thirty years sort of defined that point. So I’d like to think that it’s not lost today, from where it was thirty years ago. But, it certainly is lost in the context of higher education.

Cala: Would you suggest implementing tap programs into the curriculum?
Dianne: Yea and I have been working on that diligently for the last twenty years. I spent a lot of time visiting universities and working with people in the dance department. And I just don’t understand, I still don’t understand why the administrators have not embraced tap dancing, in the way that they have embraced ballet and modern. I understand that, in terms of numbers, the numbers of people that are studying ballet and modern are higher at this point than tap dance. But I think that those numbers will change significantly if the programs were offered. It’s just that simple.

Cala: I read in an article and interview that you did that television came and killed tap in the earlier years. Can you elaborate on that?

Dianne: Well yea that actually comes out of a conversation that I had with Honi Coles and Buster Brown and it was their belief that during that period, stage tap lost its presence because of television. I mean people can turn the television on and you can reach massive audiences with one performance. As opposed to going to see these acts that went from city to city so that a lot of the work started to slow down. The stage shows and club acts tended to become less popular because people could see these people on television and so that had something to do with it. You know, Honi also said, in that same conversation that Agnus De Ville, in that show Oklahoma, which was a fabulous, fantastic show on Broadway, he said that also helped to kill tap dancing because Oklahoma came in and everybody gravitated towards that style of dance. And prior to that, just about every show on Broadway was a musical major and had tap dance, some sort of tap dance, some style of tap dance. And when Agnus De Ville came in with Oklahoma, things really changed on Broadway, dance wise. He attributes that to being sort of a marker in history in when tap dance started to decline. He said it very lovingly toward Agnus De Ville. I don’t think he holds her personally responsible but certainly defines her work as part of the reason he felt was responsible for killing the dance. He made it clear that they were really good friends.

Cala: How do you think it made a comeback?

Dianne: Well I think that in the 70s, there were lots of people that came together and decided to bring tap back to popularity. One of them was the television industry started to rerun all of the old movie musicals of the 40s and 50s. So based on television, u could turn your television on late at night and see some fabulous movie musical dance production. Right in the middle of some mediocre film. The films were not so great but the dancing in these films was fabulous. And I think that people, dancers of all kind and people of all walks, kind of took to that information coming back across the screen. For me, it was seeing parts of my life as a kid because I grew
up watching those movies. And in the 70s, I was in my 20’s and I was revisiting parts of my childhood. And that was happening with a lot of people across the country. I had taking tap dance as a kid, as many people did going back to what we said, that people thought that tap dancing was all about just taking it in dance school. Well, there’s truth to that and that many people did take tap dancing as a kid. And they stopped because it wasn’t encouraged or it wasn’t taken seriously by the powers that be. As one drifted away from it in the 60s to the 70s, you now have people that are in their 20’s, in some cases people in their 30’s who were revisiting part of their childhood experiences that was memorable, that was a wonderful memory. So a lot of people, like myself, gravitated towards the movies that were reruns. And also, you start to see cats revisiting Broadway in a form of shows like No No Nanette. And the discovery in the search for more information about this dance form, we uncover people like Coles and the Copasetics, and The Hoofer. All of the great tap dancers whose visibility had become less popular during that period of years, from the 60s to the 70s. So all of those things were going on, it was a combination of a lot of different things. Bubble and Brown Sugar came to the table as a movie musical that put Honi Coles out there in a way that a lot of people got to see him. And some people saw him and said “Hey, I remember this guy” and some people saw him for the first time and said “Wow, this guy is fantastic”. And so all of those things were happening, all around the country with many people. I’m using Honi as an example but in New York, it was Honi and Buster, in Florida, it was Steve Condos coming out of… I hate to say retirement because these guys never retired. They were less popular or less in demand, but they never retired, they continued to dance all through the mean years. But now, in the 70s, because of all these elements coming together, these guys were now surfacing and new audiences were becoming familiar with them and old audiences, like myself, were getting back in touch with a period of our lives that was wonderful. That was my case, as was Lynn Dally and a lot of the people that were in my contemporaries. We had all danced as young people and kind of revisited the dance. But, this time got really close to the roots of the dance. At this point, I started dancing when I was two and I danced till I was about 13 and now I’m 27 and I wasn’t looking for the local dance teacher. I was looking for the originator, the pioneers. I was looking for a mentor. I was really looking for someone who I could learn more about this dance. I really wanted to know about the dance. And of course, you can’t learn this dance without learning the history. It is so much a part of it. If you don’t know the history, then you don’t know the dance. I think that not everybody with a pair of tap shoes is a tap dancer. I think there are some people that tap dance because they like it and it’s hard and it’s exercise and it feels good and it’s just a fun thing to do. People do that for 20 years of their life and some people emerge themselves in the dance, they understand the dance, they take from the dance and give back to the dance. Those
people are tap dancers. The other people are people who tap dance. So, the 70s sort of brought all of the different people to the table and it started a resurgent or renaissance of the dance that’s continued today. The footwork has gone from the 70s to you. But I think a lot of what was happening from the 70s to 2010, was a very productive period. So going back to your very first question, I think that even though we still have many pitfalls and we have much more work to do, there is still a great deal of work to do, a lot of continuum and strengthening this dance form. But, we have certainly done a lot of work to bring it to where it is now. And that’s a good thing. I don’t know, did I answer the question.

Cala: Yes, you did. How strongly do you agree with the statement, “Tap’s history is extremely important to the world of dance and its development?”

Dianne: First off, it’s an American dance form, which I can’t even…I mean it stops right there for me. I don’t even understand how it is not first and foremost in a dance history curriculum because it is the dance that grew alongside jazz in this country, on these shores. And was developed here. It’s an American dance. And on that basis of note, I don’t understand why it isn’t the most, first and foremost, the most important aspect of dance history. What was the question again?

Cala: I just asked do you strongly agree with the statement.

Dianne: Yes I do!

Cala: And the next question is, can you tell me some reason why you think it’s important? You kind of answered just now.

Dianne: Well, almost anything that is learning, if you don’t know what is was, it is hard for you to understand what it is, and then it’s impossible for you to develop what it could be. And I don’t know what I just said, but I…. It’s just so important. There are some dancers that I know that are currently out there and they are some good dancers. I mean they can really lay it down, their technique is there, they got it really together. But, they don’t have their heads together. They don’t understand that this dance is not about being able to tap fast, quickly and be better than the next person. It isn’t about that. That’s an aspect of it because it is a competitive form but there’s a level of competitiveness in the form. But, it’s really not what it’s about. So I just shake my head when I come across a dancer who has so much potential, so much to offer, but they can offer nothing outside of their self because they don’t even know what they’re doing. They don’t have a clue what it is or what it even is about for them. It baffles me when I get into that situation and then I have to say to myself, okay do I want to step in and say something, do I want to pull this kids coat, do I want to pull this kid by the
ear and say sit down youngster, let’s talk. Or do I let it go. And I just say to myself you got to let it go. But I can’t do that. So unfortunately, I think I’ve been known to insult myself into other people’s tap dance lives. It kind of answers those questions. It gives youngsters like that something to think about because I can’t afford to let those dancer’s go by. Because I have spent too much of my own life at this point. I need those kids to understand what they’re doing because I need them to continue to perpetuate this art form. They have to continue the work that many of us have so tirelessly put into this. So yes, I have to step in and say to anyone that I feel is off track, I have to try and pull them on track. Not for my own sake, but for the sake of dance and for the sake of the future of the dance. And for the sake of what we invested in all of us has put into this. We’re all working towards the same thing so in a sense, whether we realize it or not, we’re all part of one big dance family. And that family encompasses males, females, whites, blacks, the tall ones, the short ones, everybody. But, we are all on the same page. We’re all moving in the same direction. Cause it’s really not about any of us… It’s really about the dance and the joy that we get from that dance and how we transcend or share that with others, or even communicate that with others. It is not their intention to share it, some people it is their intention to communicate it. And that’s good, that’s okay. Not everybody is going to take the role or the responsibility of sharing the dance. Some people, it’s more personal for them and they want to communicate it. But, in a way that’s their way of sharing, perhaps being an educator is my way of sharing and for somebody else, being a performer may be their way of sharing. It boils down to the same thing. We’re all on the same page.

Cala: Many books credit Irish dancing as being a main contributor to tap. Do you agree with this or is it more to it?

Dianne: Well I think there’s a little more to it, but I do think of Irish dancing as a cousin dance. It’s sort of a cousin dance. Certainly, the Blacks and Irish met long before they came to this country. You see the people, when they talk about the Irish and the Blacks, they usually talk about that out of a five-point area in New York City or something like that. But, Blacks and Irish met over in Ireland and European countries and African countries way before they meet here on these shores. So I think that the mixture with the music as well as the dance sort of began long before tap dance began here. I think that they met each other long before what we know today as tap dance, which developed here in this country. But I think that there are precursors to that. It’s all about rhythm. Tap dance is about rhythm and the rhythms of each place are distinguishable, easily distinguishable. You hear music and you know that this music is Chinese music and when you hear some music, you know that the music is Irish or African. And when you here jazz, you know that it’s jazz. I mean rhythm is
the thing that distinguishes the cultures because every culture has its own very distinct rhythm that they use to express their culture and their way of communicating. So, I think that the thing that really distinguishes American dances from Irish dances are the rhythms. They are both percussive dances, you know there are many percussive dances, there’s flamenco and even the Asian people have dances that are rhythmically based where they do the sticks and there is jumping. I don’t know what it is called, but most cultures have rhythmic forms of dance that are used to express their culture. And I think that the difference between Irish dancing and tap dancing is rhythm, period. That’s the thing that most distinguishes it because down the line, you know when you’re listening to the rhythms that these rhythms are characteristics of Irish culture and when you listen to other rhythms, they are characteristics of Black culture. I think that, yes, they certainly came together and they have shared in their development but it is very distinguishable…one from the other when you listen to the rhythms.

Cala: I did a lot of research, but could not find it. Do you know if there was one person who started using taps on the bottom of the shoes?

Dianne: Well I’ll tell you the story that I got in researching this because I asked everybody about the taps. In the early 20s, there were black shows on Broadway produced or directed by people like Miller and Miles, Eubie Blake. Lew Leslie had a show, I think it was the Blackbirds of 1925 or 1928 or something like that. So I tried to find somebody of that period to ask this question, because the person that I found was Olivette Miller, married to Bunny Briggs. She was the daughter of Miller from the team “Miller and Miles.” So Olivette lived a very privileged life as a young black lady, growing up in the 20s. She had every privilege. She traveled to Europe and was back and forth to Japan. They were in show business and did quite well during that period. There are pictures of her in fur coats and having her hands in muffins and traveling to Paris when she was just a little girl and she told me that one of the shows that her father had done was a show that used the first taps in this country, but he got them from London. And the taps were already used by chorus dancers in London and that her father brought those taps over to his show and he got them from London. Now that’s what I heard from Olivette that the taps came from the show girls in the London production and came into this country in the early 20s. But, I haven’t had that confirmed. Now I need to look that up because I bet in Constance’s book, and even though I wrote the forward to the book, I haven’t read every page yet. But, I think there is something in there about the taps. She was very thorough in her research about all of the early history, which I think is why that book is so important and I recommend it so highly to everybody because I can tell you about the history from the day I stepped on the scene in 1977. And from 1953 to 1962, I can tell you about what
was going on in that period. But that period in between when I was not dancing and not really in the world of dance, I was taking lessons and stuff like that. And I revisited the dance in 1977. Though I can talk history from the periods that I was there, I am still trying to be in research and be clear about the earlier times in history. And the thing that I’m most thankful for is this book, *Tap Dancing America* by Constance Valis Hill. The thing that is most exciting for me is that she is a scholar, she is a research person and she has done the research on all of the early periods that we talk about. That we sit around late night trying to understand and imagine whose contribution was….But she is a scholar and has done the research to put together in this book. I have it with me and I am excited to have an opportunity to read it while I am here. You definitely want to get this one, it’s a book to have. I actually wrote the forward to the book and I was really proud to do it. I was thrilled that Constance has put so much work and heart into this history. This starts in the 1900s and she comes forward till today, so the parts that I can speak to her about or the parts where she references me have to do with the year that I was kind of front and center, but the book begins in the 1900s. And that information, for me, will be fascinating to sit there and go through because I trust her as a research analyst. Over the years, she has done a lot of work. She has been working on this book for a long time. So the answer about the taps is probably in there. I probably discussed this, and off the top of my head, it’s not coming to my memory. So, I can only reference the story that I know from Olivette about those taps that she said her father imported from London for one of the Black musical shows he was working on in the early 20’s.

Cala: If you can sum up your entire career in one sentence, what would it be?

Dianne: A shuffle is a shuffle is a shuffle.

Cala: I like it

Dianne: That’s what it is. It is what it is. A shuffle is a shuffle is a shuffle.

Cala: Anything else that you would like to tell me or you think I should know?

Dianne: I just thought of something else, you know I say this all the time. This has been my theme for the past years. If it’s not right, what is it? It’s wrong! Period. I said that to a kid in class. I said if it's not right, what is it? He said it’s left. I smacked him upside his head.

Cala: I was going to say wrong, but it sounded like a trick question.
Epilogue

Over the past two quarters, I not only gained a better understanding of the history of tap, I understand how important tap is to the dances that I perform every day. Through this thesis, I was able to personally reflect on why I want to become an educator. I realized that the only way to truly become an artist is to know where art comes from. It is not possible to carry on a legacy if you are unaware of where it began. After interviewing Dianne Walker and listening to the dancers that came to Athens for my workshops, my interest in Tap dance and dance in general became even greater. Tap dance has always played a role in my life and this thesis has helped me to set even higher goals for myself through education. I am more competent in my area of study and I plan to continue my research after college. The thrill of creating my own workshops and performance has prepared me for a future in the arts.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Conner, Edmon. The New York Times 5 June 1881


Liebling, A.J. New York World Telegram. 9 November 1932


