

By Jack Anderson
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NEW YORK — For a dance form that only recently was thought to be dead, tap is proving to be a lively, rickety ghost.

These days, on Broadway, tap-dancers are clattering in *My One and Only* and *42nd Street*. The City Center engagement of Montreal's Les Grands Ballets Canadiens included *Astaire*, a ballet with tap sequences choreographed by Brydon Paige and John Stanek. Over at the New York City Ballet, Jerome Robbins is preparing his own tribute to Fred Astaire and, although its technical vocabulary is classical, Robbins says it will contain references to the Astaire style.

Small tap-dance companies also appear to be thriving. This season, groups headed by Andrea Levine and Gail Conrad have given programs of interest and, more recently, two other worthy groups, the Jerry Ames Tap Dance Company and Jane Goldberg's Changing Times Tap Dance Company, came to the Theater of the Riverside Church. Ames presented a fast-paced variety show and Goldberg offered *The Depression's Back* and *So Is Tap*, a little musical comedy in which, just as in *My One and Only*, tap-dancing was the favored choreographic form of locomotion. Both groups contained competent dancers and, in addition, Goldberg's musical featured two prominent tap artists, Charles "Cookie" Cook and Leon Collins.

Goldberg's deliberately silly plot concerned dancers seeking jobs on the moon. However, at one point a character made the provocative statement that, during periods of economic depression when lots of people are out of work, tap-dancers usually seem to find work.

Now I don't know just how seriously that remark was intended or whether Goldberg can support it with facts and figures. Yet it is worth noting that tap flourished during the troubled '30s. One of its most recent revivals came during the late '60s and early '70s, a period of political upheaval. And it's popular again in our own uncertain times.

Therefore, it is fascinating to speculate on just why people like tap-dancing. Perhaps one reason for its appeal is its ability to make the ordinary extraordinary. Almost anyone — young or old, tall or short, fat or thin — can learn tap. Many of its steps derive from something as basic as walking itself. Moreover, tap-dancers can be unusually amiable theatrical presences. Even when they put on top hat and tails, they still do not look as intimidating as, say, financiers or munitions makers do in such outfits. Worn by tap-dancers, formal attire can represent the fulfillment of dreams of glory: top hat and tails show that one's come up in the world to be a carefree man or woman about town. Yet, when worn by plutocrats, these same clothes symbolize entrenched power and snobbery.

As for tap shoes, they very much resemble everyday shoes but with a difference: the taps that make all those merry sounds. And that difference transforms tap-dancers from just plain folks into the most insouciant people in the world. No wonder then that in times of woe, tap can momentarily drive the blues away.

HOOFING IT: Toes tapping again on New York stages



Lawrence Ko/Republic

might contend that tap is an art essentially frozen in time. Its forms can be perpetuated but not developed or expanded very far.

In this respect, it is interesting to compare tap with Duncan dancing, the style developed by Isadora Duncan, the early 20th century's great dance reformer. As preserved by Duncan's disciples and the disciples of those disciples, Duncan dances still look very beautiful and they are

good as those of Duncan herself or of her earliest associates.

Duncan technique appears to be incapable of further development. (Of course, the key phrase here is "appears to be," for a genius may conceivably arise and change this whole state of affairs.)

Over the years, choreographers have attempted to put tap to fresh uses. Some transfer steps related to tap to

make almost fastidiously delicate sounds by dancing on sand. Sandman Sims has established himself as one of the masters of this art, and Cook did a particularly deft sand dance in Goldberg's show.

Instead of using pop songs, there are those tap-dancers who use classical music or discard all accompaniment, one of the most famous tap numbers without music being Paul Draper's *Sonata for Tap Dancer*, in which the sound of tapping serves as the equivalent of a traditionally structured sonata for a solo musical instrument. Other choreographers have treated a tap-dancer as a soloist in a concerto. For instance, back in 1952, Danny Daniels, the dancer, and Morton Gould, the composer, collaborated on *Tap Dance Concerto* for dancer and symphony orchestra.

Because of its rhythmic verve and contrapuntal complexity, the music of Bach seems especially beloved by tap-dancers. Ames' company danced to Bach's Italian Concerto and, on Goldberg's program, Collins did a solo to a Bach prelude and fugue. Collins also tapped to Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebee*. At times, his tapping accentuated the rhythm of the score; at other times, like the improvisations of a jazz musician or the trills and ornaments that a soloist may add to the cadenzas of a baroque concerto, his tapping went off on fantastic obbligatos of its own. And when, without pause, the *Flight of the Bumblebee* gave way to *Begin the Beguine*, that was a reminder that all sorts of music and dance can swing.

Yet performing on unusual surfaces or to unusual music may contribute to the variety of tap without necessarily expanding its emotional or dramatic range. Of course, when tap sequences are parts of musical comedies or films, then plot developments may invest them with all sorts of implied emotional significance.

However, there have been those tap artists, both in the past and at present, who have attempted to introduce characterization and dramatic situations directly into their dances. In one of Draper's well-known solos, he played a demagogic politician and his tapping signified the oratorical flourishes of that politician's speech.

At Riverside, Ames' company in one number indicated changing moods by constantly altering the intensity of their tapping. In another, seated dancers portrayed secretaries and the sounds of their tapping feet corresponded to those of the imaginary typewriters they pretended were before them. More daringly and controversially, Conrad has tried to tell elaborate stories entirely by means of tap-dancing.

Where, if anywhere, tap-dancers will go next in their explorations, only the future will reveal. But, at present, it's impossible to doubt tap's ability to beguile. As evidence, during the finale of her program, Goldberg invited members of the audience to dance along with the cast and three people went on stage and did so. Two were widely known tap artists, Buster Brown and Ernest Brown. But the third was a woman who later told me that she