

# Dance

## DANCE VIEW

JACK ANDERSON

# Tap Makes Everyone Want to Dance

For a dance form that only recently was thought to be dead, tap is proving to be a lively, racy ghost. These days, on Broadway, tap dancers are clattering in "My One and Only" and "42nd St." The City Center engagement of Montreal's Les Grands Ballets Canadiens included "Astaire," a ballet with tap sequences choreographed by Brydon Paige and John Stanzel. Over at the New York City Ballet, Jerome Robbins is preparing his own tribute to Fred Astaire and, although its technical vocabulary is classical, Mr. 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 came to the Theater of the Riverside Church, the Jerry Ames Tap Dance Company and Jane Goldberg's Changing Times Tap Dance Company. Mr. Ames presented a fast-paced variety show and Miss 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, Miss Goldberg's musical featured two prominent tap artists, Charles "Cookie" Cook and Leon Collins.

Miss 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 Miss Goldberg can support it with facts and figures. Yet it is worth noting that tap flourished during the troubled 30's. One of its most recent revivals came during the late 60's and early 70's, 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



\*MGZR  
Charles "Cookie" Cook and Jane Goldberg appeared as a team in "The Depression's Back and So Is Tap," her most recent work.

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

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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.

Nevertheless, it is possible to ask what the future of tap may be. Since many tap productions, including "My One and Only" with its 20's settings and Gershwin songs, are studies in nostalgia, temperamentally gloomy observers 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 enjoying renewed acclaim. But despite their esthetic merits and the continuing relevance of some of Duncan's philosophical ideas, almost no one has managed to choreograph new dances in the Duncan mode that are as 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 other than ordinary dancing surfaces. Thus, at one point in "My One and Only," Twiggy and Tommy Tune dance their way through water. And there is a venerable tradition of what is known as sand dancing, dances in which performers make almost fastidiously delicate sounds by dancing on sand. Sandman Sims has established himself as one of the masters of this art and Mr. Cook did a partic-

ularly deft sand dance in Miss Goldberg's show.

Instead of using pop songs, there are those tap dancers who utilize 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 a "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. Mr. Ames's company danced to Bach's "Italian Concerto" and, on Miss Goldberg's program, Mr. Collins did a solo to a Bach prelude and fugue. Mr. Collins also tapped to Suppé's "Poet and Peasant Overture" and Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee." At times, his tapping accentuated the rhythm of the scores; 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 Mr. Draper's well-known solos, he played a demagogic politician and his tapping signified the oratorical flourishes of that politician's oratory. At Riverside, Mr. Ames's company in one number indicated constantly 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, Miss 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, Miss Goldberg invited members of the audience to dance along with the cast and three people went on stage and did so. Two were well-known tap artists, Buster Brown and Ernest Brown. But the third was a woman who later told me that her name was Annie Garrett and that she had never been on stage before, but that she had loved tap all her life.

Tap is magical indeed. It can make everyone want to get up and dance.