

Fancy footwork The Philadelphia Inquirer

Changing Times tap revue high-steps into town

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Tap dancing?

The words call up images of Shirley Temple and patent leather shoes with wide black ribbons, models for a couple of generations of little girls. It evokes Fred Astaire strutting across the ceiling and over the sofa, and Bojangles grinning out of a film.

To a growing body of dancers and preservationists, the receding sound of taps is a sound worth saving. It is a native sound, indigenous to ways and locales that so far defy scholarly analysis. It was the sound of American speech and thought and the physical expression of jazz in the early part of this century. It was the dance of the street corners — particularly in Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York.

It was the dance of the television variety shows until ballet swept all that aside. Now it is the concern of the dancers, and one of those, Jane Goldberg, will bring her Changing Times tap revue to the Walnut Street Theater today and tomorrow in three performances designed to show what all the foot tapping was about.

For Miss Goldberg, tap was an accidental enthusiasm. "Oh, well, I started tap dancing at 4, but my mother looked at that and took me right out," she laughs now. "After that I took modern dance at Boston University and became a dance critic for the Boston Phoenix. I was never a closet hooper; I just wanted to be a journalist.

"I got turned on to tap about seven years ago by a few films I saw — I used to dream about having Astaire as my partner — and while I was in Boston I hunted up Stanley Brown. He used to dance with a bunch called the Brazilian Nuts, and he had a studio on Massachusetts Avenue. I tried to learn what he did.

"I was still working as a critic, so I went to New York for a month, and managed to see one of those tap happenings. That did it. I was sort of auditioning New York as a place to live, and I went to some of the dancers I had seen to try to get them to teach me. Tap wasn't my *crusade* at the time, but it sure is now. I guess then, it was the people in tap who interested me.

"I found that each of these old-time dancers had his own secret steps, trademark steps, and that each was very proud of what he did. I've tried to see as many dancers as I could.

"One of the things that came out of this was my discovery that several of the great jazz drummers were dancers first. Buddy Rich is one, and Charlie Mingus' drummer was a dancer. I found others.

"It began to occur to me that tap and jazz were so related that when the musical fashions changed, tap dropped out, too. Now that jazz is coming back, I think tap will, too. I still don't know if tap should have been such a big thing in Philadelphia and Baltimore, and why not in some other cities, but some of the best dancers came from Philadelphia's street corners.

"Anyway, I'm interested now in the history of tap, and I asked for a choreographic fellowship in 1978 to do a show, *It's About Time*. I think people were interested in the dance they saw in that show. It raised the question of why no more great tap dancers followed Astaire. It seemed to me that one of the reasons is that tap is too hard. You see, a dancer needs to develop his own sound. Tap is an aural form, and the dancer has to be able to improvise. Dancers now are caught up in ballet and the strict forms.

"I'm not sure many musicians understand



Bubba Gaines, Cookie Cook and Jane Goldberg show what toe tapping is all about in the revue at the Walnut Theater

Dance

now what a tap dancer needs, either. I have found that it is possible to tap to music other than jazz. Some rock will do (although a lot of it simply drowns out the tap), and in my program, I bring a poet who reads, it's great to dance to words. To me, the tap dancer is another instrument, and I'm always looking for musicians who can understand that.

"It's odd about tap. People think of it as nostalgia, and expect to hear 'Singing in the Rain.' But if you play Ellington music, nobody thinks of that as nostalgia."

Miss Goldberg has taken her crusade a step farther this year. She organized a week-long series of workshops and performances in New York — *By Word of Foot* — and had Peg Leg Bates and other historic dancers showing their stuff and talking about the mind-set of a dancer.

"I'm still trying to balance the books for that," she says a little ruefully, "but I think everybody enjoyed talking to these dancers. This shouldn't be a dead art. I discovered that the best of these dancers don't really take what

they do seriously. They laugh when they dance.

"I remember seeing a dance happening one night at a church around 60th Street and Columbus Avenue, and the audience would call to a dancer, 'Talk to me!' Tap is conversational; it has that nice folk quality."

Finding support for her preservation work is a consuming activity for Miss Goldberg. "Tap is in a state of transition," she says. "It's hard to get funding, but audiences love it. Tap has the music going for it, and it is an American form. I guess we can think of it as ethnic. It will probably take a generation of dancers to bring it back."

In her program at the Walnut, Leslie (Bubba) Gaines and Charles (Cookie) Cook will show their dance. Cook was Miss Goldberg's key teacher.

"Most of the dancers I went to just weren't interested in teaching," she says. "But Cookie showed me the whole tradition in a SoHo loft. He showed black time versus white time, and made me dream all over again about having a partner — not somebody like Shirley Temple or Bill Robinson.

"I guess my goal now is to save what's around, but still to do our thing. Tap lives; it is the art of composing with your feet," she says.



Goldberg says the sound's the thing