

The Series of India, Mumbai
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'Madam, no dance please, only strike'

By Meenakshi Shedde

MUMBAI: It was as unlikely a venue for tap dancing as Jane Goldberg could ever have dreamt of. So there they were, scores of Malayalees on strike outside the secretariat in the heart of Thiruvananthapuram, hot and bothered, eyes and veins bulging as slogans, abuses and red flags rent the air.

Suddenly and without warning, Ms Goldberg, primed by the charged air, broke into a tap dance. A cheery, swiny, tippity-tappity-ta-ti-tap thing it was. Soon, banners and slogans were forgotten and everyone was rolling up their *mundus* and tapping too, giggling and feeling hugely sheepish.

This went on until there was such a godawful traffic jam, that a so-and-so from the secretariat landed up and said sternly, "Madam, no dance please, only *samaram* (strike)."

Even so, it was quite something, getting Communists to tap-dance. "It was one of the great moments of my improvised life with the rhythm. The papers were full of it and I became a household name in Kerala for a week," Ms Goldberg grins. "But the reason I loved it is because tap-dancing is really for the people."

We are unable to ascertain Chairman Mao's views on the subject for the moment, but the locals didn't seem to care terribly. "The essence of tap is fun. After years of tapping and doing gigs in clubs and dance floors and colleges, it felt good to dance on the streets for the people who might otherwise never get to see tap. Now I always carry my shoes around."

That seems to be a sensible idea for someone who is in India on a Fulbright scholarship, studying 'foot cultures of the world'. As Ms Goldberg, who is Associate Professor of Dance at New York University, writes in her forthcoming memoir, *Shoot Me While I'm Happy*, "We dancers who 'have feet' — be it tap, flamenco, kathak, clog or Irish step dancing — have always had an affinity with each other, if not historically, at least culturally. Our bodies are musical instruments



SUNDAY BRUNCH
WITH JANE GOLDBERG

and we 'play our feet'."

She was already pursuing foot cultures in India in 1994 on an Indo-American fellowship, studying the dialogue between kathak and tap, "but this trip is more to have lecture-demonstrations on what I do". She has performed in Calcutta, Pune, Thiruvananthapuram, Goa and Ahmedabad and will perform 'Talking Tap' at the NCPA in Mumbai on April 13.

Although tap for most people begins and ends with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Ms Goldberg makes a distinction between the stereotype of tap ("happy people with happy feet") and her own situation ("I've been tapping for 18 years and I'm still depressed.") As she talks about her heroes and mentors, who seem largely black and male — Charles (Cookie) Cook, Chuck Green, Honi Coles and John Bubbles (who, when they met, was

paralyzed, so he taught her some steps using the first two fingers of his hand) — it becomes increasingly clear there is a world of tap in which Fred Astaire is not exactly a central figure. "What I like about tap is not just the dancing, but what the people represent — tap as a sensibility," she says.

Following the Great Depression, tap flourished in the 1930s and 1940s "when a black boy could be either an elevator operator, a Pullman porter, a boxer or a tap dancer". It went out of fashion after the 40s, only to be revived in the 70s with the likes of Gregory Hines and Sammy Davis Jr — with whom Ms Goldberg has danced — Brenda Bufalino and Jackie Raven.

One of the ways Ms Goldberg uses to sustain tap so that it doesn't run on pure nostalgia is to 'talk tap', which sets the words and feet sparring. Along with her dancing, she keeps up a bittersweet rap about race relations, feminism, politics, addictions, jazz, the etiquette of the one-night stand and the history of tap dancing.

In Mumbai, she weaves in a slide show along with her "vocal and feetal rhythms". We might even get a tap-a-gram sent by George Bush to Saddam Hussein, sung to the tune of *Bei Mir Bist Du Schon*.

Life's tough for a single woman tap dancer and that's why Ms Goldberg adores Ginger Rogers. "What I've come to like about Ginger is that her character was always an equal of Fred Astaire's. She could spar with him," she sighs.

Since her personal journey into tap — partly to get out of a clinical depression — Ms Goldberg has discovered a number of closet tappers. While tap first became popular after the Great Depression, does she see economic reasons sustaining its current revival once more?

"Yeah," she nods. "Hard times for the country are high times for tappers." One last personal question. She had talked of tap bringing people together. Has it worked for her? "Oh no," she shrugs. "I've never been married, I just have a main squeeze."