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LEISURE & ARTS

Tapping the Art of the Old-Time Hoofers

By PAULA SPAN

New York

The dancer on the left, in a rain hat and black patent tap shoes cracked at the creases, is Charles "Cookie" Cook, at 65 years old one of the senior hoofers who've survived the long dormancy between vaudeville's dissipation and the current tap dance boomlet. Ballet dancers customarily hang up their shoes before midlife, but tap is "like sex—you keep doing it, you can do it forever," Mr. Cook grins. "I want to see that wing," he says to his partner. "Bop be da, bop be da. . ."

The dancer on the right, in the red satin Capezio and purple harem pants, is Jane Goldberg, nearly 30 years younger, both a disciple of the black tap masters and a rescuator of their careers. Like anyone who runs a dance company, she now spends much of her time pursuing grants and choreographing, but what she craves is this, the dancing. Rehearsing in a vacant storefront on a block of East Fourth Street where gentrification is roundly denounced but still invisible, Mr. Cook and Ms. Goldberg whistle and hum a syncopated "Humoresque," their steps echoing off the tin ceiling. It is, she beams, "almost like hearing your heart beat."

Postwar tap teachers (such as Miss Maxine of Washington, who first dazzled the four-year-old Jane Goldberg with scarlet capes and silver shoes) intone phrases such as "slap, shuffle, ball change," but Mr. Cook's coaching is more like singing scat. The break goes "ba be de bah, ba be

de bah" and the slide is "zoo zah." Ms. Goldberg, after a decade spent coaxing the old pros out of semi-retirement for lessons and performances, has come to understand this uniquely American language—black street-corner jazz at some point cross-pollinated with Irish clogging and perhaps a dash of fast-stepping Mexican folk dance. She has, in the tap vernacular, learned "time." She has "feet."

Forty blocks north of here, Broadway has been rediscovering tap for several years, starting with "No, No Nanette" and progressing through "42nd Street" to "My One and Only" (in which the ever-suave Charles "Honi" Coles does a Tony-winning soft-shoe) to this season's entry, "The Tap Dance Kid."

And some of that interest trickles down to East Fourth: Ms. Goldberg's nonprofit company wins modest state and federal arts grants; her Changing Times Tap Revue, a small troupe of black veterans and white reinterpreters, has been enthusiastically received on its stateside tours and is performing at a Vienna dance festival this month.

But only once since 1972, when Ms. Goldberg first saw Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in "Carefree" and enlisted for serious tap instruction, has she earned more than \$15,000 in a year. She has been known to supplement her dance income by donning a tux and delivering "Tap-A-Grams" at parties. Headquarters for Changing Times, across the street from this temporarily donated rehearsal space, is a cramped fifth-floor walk-up with multi-

ple layers of paint flecking off a skewed floor.

Ms. Goldberg's office has an ancient bathtub in the kitchen, the prototypical Lower East Side flat, but it also has archives, "the history of tap-dancing. One day these things will be in the Smithsonian." Shelves hold videotapes of her two



"By Word of Foot" festivals (a third is planned for the fall), where legendary dancers show and tell for novices and newcomers. She collects audio tapes from which a tapper can reconstruct old-timers' steps. Hours of oral histories from the likes of John Bubbles (the Father of Rhythm now uses a wheelchair, but instructed Ms. Goldberg by tapping his fingers while she tapped her feet) are stored in safe-deposit vaults. Cabinets are stuffed with black-and-white photographs of old tappers, many of whom Ms. Goldberg has met on her self-styled "crusade."

"They'd become these proud but lost souls," she says, leafing through photo albums. "Big bands went out and so did they. Fortunately for me, no one much was interested 10 years ago. These guys didn't have much choice except to teach. I'd just say to people, 'Is so-and-so still alive?' And I was very persistent. I knew I was mining gold."

After her Astaire revelation, Ms. Goldberg began tapping in Boston with Stanley Brown, one part of the Brazilian Nuts; when she left for New York, he blessed her with Honi Coles's phone number. Mr. Coles was managing the Apollo Theater in Harlem then, but she persuaded him ("once he saw that I had feet") to give her a lesson and some other names, such as Mr. Cook's, her teacher and partner for the past seven years. She crashed the Copasetics Ball, a Harlem society event, and while fox-trotting wangled a phone number for Sandman Sims, famous for the delicate sound of shuffling on sand. "He taught me a great paddle 'n' roll." Her lessons with Leon Collins took place in his dining room. "He was working as an auto mechanic, but he had the most amazing feet in the world." Leslie "Bubba" Gaines taught her his specialty from the act called the Aristocrats of Rhythm; now Ms. Goldberg, too, can tap across suitcases.

"I wasn't one of them. Sometimes I felt

like Snow White with the Seven Dwarfs," says Ms. Goldberg, a Jewish woman in a field dominated by black jazzmen. But after initial skepticism—"they thought I wanted to be Shirley Temple"—the elders seemed pleased to hand the tradition on. And once Ms. Goldberg began to attract a few bookings and reviews, she returned the favor: "I put these guys in my shows, and people see them and want to study with them." She now draws apprentices of her own.

Like anyone with "feet," Ms. Goldberg's concerns about art and history frequently yield to pragmatic matters, such as floors. "Great floors are real hard, not too slow or so fast that you slip," she lectures. Honi Coles actually kept a notebook and discounted his fees for theaters with superior floors. Ms. Goldberg doesn't put her assessments in writing, but she remembers distinctly how wonderful Jacob's Pillow sounded and refused to teach at a painfully cement-floored school in East Harlem.

Tappers also search, ceaselessly, for the perfect shoe. Ms. Goldberg eschews high heels ("Your legs look great but your sound stinks") and has experimented with hand-carved wooden taps ("a wonderful sound; it's what Bill Robinson used"). The future, she speculates, may see microchip synthesizers on her toes and heels, magnifying her tapping like an electric bass.

Ms. Goldberg sees herself as more than "a walking encyclopedia of steps and anecdotes. I want to work out my own statement, concentrate on what makes tap live now." Her "Topical Tap" show at the Village Gate earlier this month unveiled Ms. Goldberg's tapped attack on foreign policy.

To demonstrate, Ms. Goldberg straps on a pair of aquamarine shoes and launches into a soft-shoe sung to the tune of "Maria" from "West Side Story":

Gre-nay-da (tappa-tappa-tap)

Oh, how could you let them invade yah? (tappa-tap)

Now all your hopes and dreams (bah dum)

Are lost to the Marines. . .

The guitar-backed commentary becomes a paddle 'n' roll rhyming "Guatemala" and "Nicaragua," incorporates exploding caps flung onto the dance floor to simulate small-arms fire and winds up "Shave and a haircut, two bits."

Not precisely Astaire and Rogers, "I still wear top hats sometimes," Ms. Goldberg says. "That's what got me onto the floor. But somewhere along the line I went off onto a whole different track."

Ms. Span is a free-lance writer based in New York.