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Tap dancing at Harvard

Remember the Shirley Temple generation when every other child on the block seemed to be taking tap-dancing lessons? There Shirley was on the silver screen tapping it out with the gifted Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Jane Goldberg wasn't born then. But now, putting her political science degree on ice, Miss Goldberg has spent five or six years learning how to tap. Last week she went to Harvard with a company including three elder statesmen of tap in the Bojangles tradition. They brought down the house at the university's Sanders Theater, whose venerable stage is more accustomed to Phi Beta Kappa exercises than to educated heels and toes. It was only the latest evidence of what appears to be something of a tap-dancing revival in America — performances at dance festivals, grants from the government, people taking lessons, a hidden population of "closet tap dancers" in researcher-teacher-dancer Goldberg's phrase.

Frankly, we're delighted. The performers at Harvard were reminders of the rare combination that this humble popular art can be. It's like the old definition of a good comedy — having all the attributes of a serious play, and laughs, too. Good tap dancing has all the qualities of dance, and tapping, too. Or so a partisan of tap will argue. Note that the all-time favorite dancer of the current ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov is none other than Fred Astaire — who, of course, adds to everything else a superb sense of style.

Tap dancing gives the pleasure of seeing hard things look easy. Or easier things made to look spectacular. Geniality goes with the grace. The hush-a-hush of the sand dance has a place along with the explosive accents heightening a jazz beat.

The ultimate in relaxation, the ultimate in control, and laughs, too. Is this how tap captured a previous American generation and is working on the next one? Who cares? The Harvard audience's summa-cum-laude ovation was not for words but for rhythm.