THE TALK OF THE TOWN

JANE GOLDBERG has been tap-dancing in front of paying audiences since the mid-nineteen-seventies. Lately, she has started to practice comedy while she taps. She often performs in theatres or cabarets, but she also does a lot of work in what she calls non-traditional venues, like the Marxist School, which appeals to her because it happens to have one of New York City's brightest-sounding wooden floors for tap dancing. As tap dancers go, Ms. Goldberg is site specific. She likes to know in advance who her audience is, so she can tailor her material accordingly. When Ms. Goldberg draws a distinction between the stereotype of tap ("happy people with happy feet") and the reality of her own situation ("I've been tapping for eighteen years and I'm still depressed"), you know that she has given some thought to what you need to hear. For example, some people need to hear funny stories about Ms. Goldberg's problems with her boyfriend, some need to hear one-liners about her affiliation with Weight Watchers, and some need to hear extended riffs about safe sex. Along the way, Ms. Goldberg will also talk about things like paddling, which is the name of a step that makes you look as if you were walking through jello in motorized shoes.

At the moment, Ms. Goldberg's steadiest gig is a Monday-and-Wednesday-night class on the technique and history of tap, which she teaches at N.Y.U., and that's where we caught up with her recently. When the semester began, her students' knowledge of tap as an art form seemed to open and close with Fred Astaire. By now, they know a lot more. For instance, when they tuned in to the telecast of the Kennedy Center Honors, on December 26th, and saw Gregory Hines perform a tap dance for the Nicholas Brothers (the tap masters being honored this year), the class knew that Mr. Hines is a good friend of Ms. Goldberg's, and that he wasn't born with those pecs: they'd seen a snapshot of him hugging Ms. Goldberg before he started working out with weights. They knew that the Nicholas Brothers, Mr. Hines, and Ms. Goldberg count themselves part of a distinct tradition, in which Astaire is not considered central, and that there is an intramural dispute over what that tradition should be called. (Mr. Hines hates the term "hoofer," but nearly every tap dancer from the older generation yells at him, "Hoofers! That's what we are.") Ms. Goldberg's students also know that for Thanksgiving this year Mr. Hines received a Tap-A-Gram from Ms. Goldberg, which she delivered in person. Tap-A-Grams are singing telegrams with tap dancing, too. A Tap-A-Gram that Ms. Goldberg will not easily forget was one that she was engaged to perform at the fiftieth-birthday party of an Argentine corned-beef princess. The party's hosts felt that it was high time for the princess to get married, and they suggested to Ms. Goldberg that if she stripped while she tapped, the wedding process would somehow be helped along. But Ms. Goldberg is a feminist who came of age during the late sixties. She replied that under no circumstances was she going to strip, and she didn't. She did bring along a student assistant, and he took off his shirt.

At the moment, there are loads of burning issues for women in tap dancing, and not least of them is what a woman should wear when she performs. For example, men's oxfords—the flat, clunky kind that make your feet look like pontoon boats—not only are the easiest kind of shoes to tap-dance in but also make for the most melodic tap sounds. As Ms. Goldberg will be the first to tell you, you're selling two things at once in tap: your image and your sound. So what goes with men's flat, clunky oxfords? One answer is men's clothes: stovepipe pants, vest, and tails. Ms. Goldberg respects that solution, but she doesn't espouse it. She likes to tap in swingy dresses, with décolletage and nipped-in waists. You can't wear pontoon boats with décolletage, of course, so Ms. Goldberg has nearly a dozen handmade pairs of shoes in different colors and with heels of different heights. They include a two-tone green pair based on a woman's flamenco shoe; a pair of sharp-looking white gillies; and a pair of classic little-girl-style tap shoes, encrusted with rhinestones. Her ideals in clothes come from the thirties, she told her class, when women used to wear dresses a lot like the dress that she was wearing at that moment, which had a low neckline, a fitted bodice, and a skirt cut on the bias. "But this dress doesn't come from the thirties," she added. "This is new: it's an *attitude*."

Role models for women tappers—that's something else on everybody's mind. Like Peggy Spina, Gail Conrad, and other young women who fell in love with tap dancing during the nineteen-seventies, Ms. Goldberg apprenticed herself to grandfatherly masters. Her principal mentors in New York were some of the most influential hoofers of the century: Charles (Cookie) Cook, Chuck Green, Honi Coles, and

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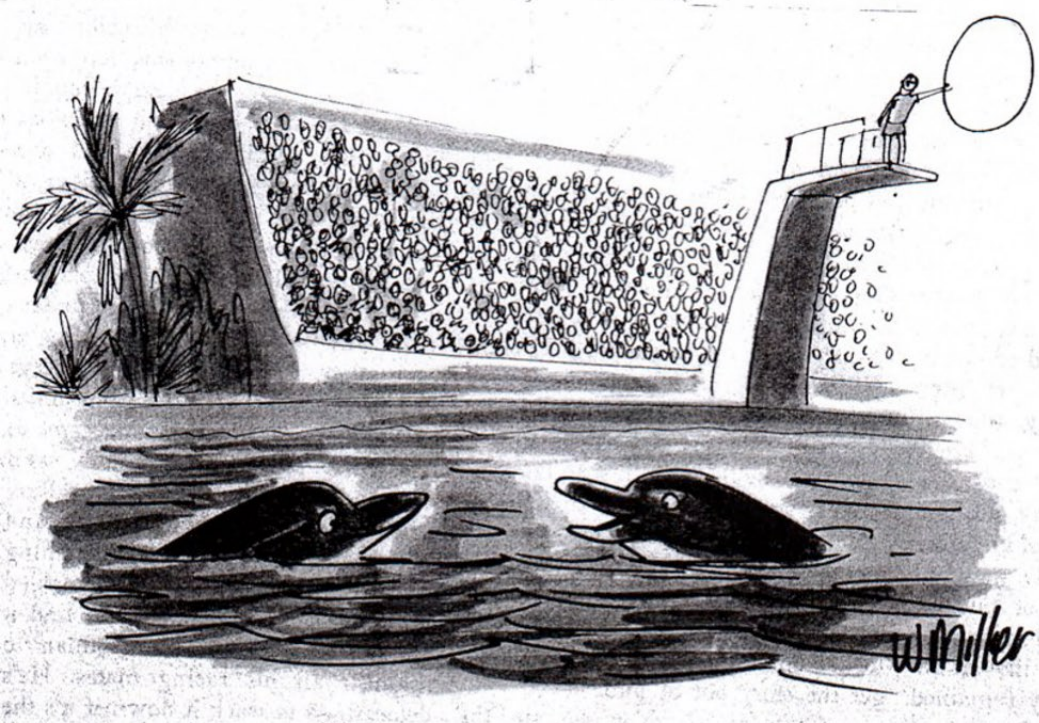
Sandman Sims. In California, she studied with the revered John Bubbles, who popularized the idea of dropping one's heels in syncopated patterns against the musical beat—a practice that came to be known as rhythm tap. When Ms. Goldberg met John Bubbles, he was paralyzed and was in a wheelchair; he taught her some steps using the first two fingers of one hand. But learning steps is one thing, and learning to be a woman performing steps quite another. Even the debonair Nicholas Brothers, expert as they are, can't teach that. In Ms. Goldberg's view, neither could Ann Miller, who was known for her rapid-fire feet, or Eleanor Powell, who was known for her tap technique; their performing personalities leave her cold. "Even though Eleanor Powell had great feet, she had a syrupy stage manner," Ms. Goldberg says. "What I like about tap is not just the dancing but what the people represent. That's what turned me on to the guys from the older tradition: they gave you the sense of tap as a sensibility. There's also some old footage of a dancer named Juanita Pitts, who conveys something of that. She's got the smoothness and humor of a star like Jimmy Slyde, plus she doesn't come out with a big Eleanor Powell grin. She was actually a very mysterious performer. She wore pants and flat shoes, and had a quality of quiet self-assertiveness. No hard sell—just made a statement and out she went."

The role model whom Ms. Goldberg keeps circling back to is Ginger Rogers, although Ms. Goldberg concedes that the pros do not consider Rogers a great tap dancer. "What I've come to like about Ginger is that her character was always an equal of Fred Astaire's," Ms. Goldberg says. "She could spar with him. It was unusual. Women in tap tend to be more secretive—they don't play the game the way the men do. Tapping in the thirties and forties was a man's game, and it was all about challenges: you had what were called challenge dances, and you traded steps, but you never gave away your specialty. As one of my teachers, Stanley Brown, told me, tap flourished at a time when a black boy growing up had limited options. You could be an elevator operator, a Pullman porter, a boxer, or a tap dancer." She added, with a smile, "Sandman Sims once said I danced like a little black boy."



"You're on next. Break a leg!"