



MR. TAPS

Teacher Notes

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE

The program traces the history of tap dance from the days of vaudeville to the present day with demonstrations of vaudeville, soft shoe, the dance styles of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and the Nicholas Brothers, and tap to today's music. "Tea for Two" from the musical No No Nanette. The performer teaches a short routine for the audience to do standing in place and in the finale, Mr. Taps and the audience all dances together.

ABOUT THE PERFORMER

Ayrie King III, better known as "Mr. Taps" has been captivating and thrilling audiences for most of his life. Mr. Taps has performed at such places as The Apollo Theater in New York, The Cotton Club Review, and on ABC Television, and in the Warner Brothers Motion Picture "The Fugitive". Mr. Taps was the opening act for Patti Page at the Harborside Convention Hall in Fort Myers Florida. His appearances also include the Arie Crown Theater in Chicago Illinois and special solo performances for Sammy Davis Jr. and his family, and also at the Chicago Bulls Pre-game.

Mr. Taps defines a style uniquely his own, as he showcases the innovative flair of Fred Astaire, the quick action of Ann Miller and the classical flash of the Nicholas Brothers. From the jumps of Bojangles to the fancy footwork of Gregory Hines... Mr. Taps' charismatic, high-energy delivery creates an infectious current of excitement, always leaving the audience wanting more.

Mr. Taps has displayed his unique talent in schools, colleges, conventions, theaters, charities, corporate events and more!

SHOWS INCLUDE:

History of Tap Origin
American Folk History in Dance (Ireland)
Vaudeville to Harlem (Slapstick & Hoofers Club)
Rhythmic moves to tap (African Dance, Swing Era to Rap Music)

THE HISTORY OF TAP DANCE

Tap dance is the most American of all folk dances in this country. Its history is steeped in both purpose and entertainment. Combining a special mix of rhythmic sound and movement, it hails from elements of the Irish jig and African dance and drum rhythms.

In Ireland, around the year 1466 AD, factory workers wore heavy wooden shoes to work. Their steps on the cobblestone streets produced a rhythmic clicking sound. The Irish jig resulted from experimentation with this sound, incorporated into high-stepping dances. Rhythm has always been an important mode of expression throughout the history of the continent of Africa. Drumming and dance play central roles in many of Africa's tribal rituals celebrating marriage, death, rain, the harvest, and so on. These forms of expression were forbidden for the African slaves on the ships bound for America, yet this was a form of communicating, so ingrained into the people that it could not be completely extinguished. Members of different tribes would send messages to each other by "tapping" their feet on the floors and walls of the ship. These tapping sounds eventually developed into a new communicative language used by people who sometimes did not even speak the same language.

Tap dancing in the United States first appeared in urban ghettos of the 1840's where free blacks and poor Irish immigrants intermingled. The advent of the vaudeville show in their country in the 1860's put tap on stage for the first time. From there, tap dance went on to play a major role in the Great Revues and musical comedies of the turn of the century and 1920's.

During this time of flowering black culture known as the "Harlem Renaissance", the Famous Hooper's Club on 131st Street and 7th Avenue in Harlem (an area of New York) hosted such tap greats as Bojangles, John Bubbles, King Rastus Brown, Bunny Briggs, and Baby Laurence. There were no formal tap schools, so the only way dancers could learn was to improvise and exchange their discoveries with other dancers.

In the 1930's and 1940's Hollywood blended two uniquely American inventions – tap dance and the motion pictures. Such dancers as Bojangles, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Shirley Temple, the Nicholas Brothers, Eleanor Powell and Ann Miller tap-danced their way across the silver screen. Today, a movie called "That's Entertainment" (MGM 1973) features the best scenes of many Hollywood favorites. This same movie often appears on television today.

SKILLS OF TAP DANCING

Tap dancing remains a highly skilled art form with technically proficient dancers rehearsing and training constantly in order to retain and develop complicated dance steps. As in many dance forms, the dancer must manage to keep "count" of the beats, but because tapping moves to such a fast beat, tappers must have a fantastic sense of rhythm and an ability to always keep count.

Tap dance shoes have special flat metal cleats on the soles which click whenever they hit the floor, and which make a scrape if the dancer knows how to move his foot across the floor with the proper pressure. Originally wooden shoes clicked against the cobblestones, but eventually the Irish miners wedged pennies in to the soles of their shoes to improve the clicking sound. In modern times dancers have worked to embellish their "sound".

Sound became so important, as a matter of fact, for some contests during the "Golden Age" special stages were built with a compartment underneath. In this compartment, an "ear judge" would sit and listen to the dancers, making sure no steps were missed and even without being able to see the contestants!

Tap provides its own music, but an accompanying orchestra often gives the pattern that the tappers enhance. Tap can be done to many different kinds of music from the big band sound of Count Basie and Duke Ellington, to the classical music of Bach and Mozart, to the popular music of today. Classic tap songs (those written to be set to tap dance) include "Once in Love with Amy", "Pennies from Heaven", and one of the songs in the performance, "Tea for Two".

VOCABULARY

CLOGGING: Traditional American country dance with rhythmic steps done in boots or hard shoes to make loud sounds – one of the precursors to tap dancing.

ROUTINE: A combination of steps that make a complete dance.

SOFT-SHOE: A very gentle, smooth tap form usually performed slowly, using taps for only quiet noises. Originally, it was performed with sand on the floor.

VAUDEVILLE: Begun in France, and coming to the United States in the 1840's these variety shows included juggling, comedy, singing, animal acts and of course tap dancing. The shows toured the country up until the 1920's when their popularity transferred to moving pictures. Mr. Bojangles was a vaudeville favorite.

TAP DANCE TERMS

BRUSH: Barely touching the floor by sweeping one foot past it to make a scraping sound.

HEEL: A step striking the floor with the heel first.

SHUFFLE: A two-tap noise made by brushing the foot forward and then back in one quick motion.

STAMP: A single tap sound made by placing the whole foot firmly on the floor – by stamping.

STEP: Placing the whole foot down lightly.

TAP (TOUCH): A single tap sound made by touching the ball of the foot to the floor and then lifting it, all the while keeping the weight on the other foot.

WING: A three-tap noise made on a single foot by scraping the side of the foot out, then brushing it in, then stepping on the ball of the foot.

DOUBLE WING: A wing done on both feet at the same time. Very tricky!

MUSICAL TERMS RELATED TO TAP DANCE

Rhythm: The regular beat behind music, with regular accented and unaccented beats. Tap steps are designed to “play” the rhythm and then expand on it and fill in the gaps with rhythmic taps.

SYNCOPIATION: Shifting the normal accents of a rhythm to the beats and are usually unaccented.

TEMPO: The speed at which a piece of music or dance is performed.

PEOPLE IN TAP DANCE

FRED ASTAIRE: One of the all time great dancers, tap and otherwise, in the films of the 1930’s and 1940’s. He was known for his graceful, ballroom flair approach with his famous partner Ginger Rogers. “Top Hat” may be his most famous movie.

BUSTER BROWN: Feature tap dancer with Duke Ellington’s band.

JOAN CRAWFORD: A famous movie actress of the 1930’s and 1940’s who was the first ever to tap to music on film in “Hollywood Revue” (1929).

PAUL DRAPER: A great concert tap dancer who tried to raise tap to a classical form of art like ballet. He often danced to Bach and Mozart.

GENE KELLY: After Fred Astaire and Bojangles, one of America’s best known movie tappers. Some of his movies included “For Me and My Gal” (1942) and “Singing in the Rain” (1952).

THE NICHOLAS BROTHERS: One of the great acrobatic tap teams of Hollywood. They opened at the Cotton Club in Harlem when Fayard Nicholas was 14 and Harold Nicholas was 8. Their first movie was “Kid Millions” (1934) and they toured the world tapping.

ELEANOR POWELL: The champion of women tappers on film, she combined a balletic style with fast footwork, like Fred Astaire. Eleanor was one of the few tap dancers to do all of her own choreography.

BILL BOJANGLES ROBINSON: This legendary dancer was one of the major figures of the tap's Golden Age and a tremendous influence on all tappers up to the present. He is best remembered for his dances with Shirley Temple in the movies "The Little Colonel" and "The Littlest Rebel". Robinson was a legend in vaudeville before entering the movies in the 1930's and becoming Hollywood's first black superstar.

SHIRLEY TEMPLE: A child star of the 1930's. This four year-old sang and tap-danced her way into America's hearts.

II. ACTIVITIES

Before the Performance:

1. Introduce the class to the materials in Section I. Be sure to go over the dance and musical vocabulary lists so that the students can watch for these elements in the performance.
2. Rhythm is very important to tap dance. Have the students experiment with handclaps. One student demonstrates a rhythm he creates and the rest of the class imitates it. Often a tap dance routine is done in twos, with one performer "demonstrating" a routine and the other repeating it. Have the students do hand clapping duets. Discuss how the sounds fit together, or how they don't. What could be changed to make better routines?
3. Play some of Count Basie's music of the Big Band Era for the class. Talk about how this was the pop music of the 1930's & 1940's as well as the music Bojangles, Astaire, Kelly and Powell danced to in the movies. How does it compare with the music of today? What kind of music goes with the dancing we see on television and in the movies today? Who are the famous dancers of today's movies? What rock and pop stars are noted for their dancing? Where do we see dancing nowadays?
4. At the Hooper's Club in Harlem in the 1920's, tappers met and exchanged tap steps. What do you share and exchange with your friends? What kinds of things do you teach each other? What does it mean to exchange knowledge?

AFTER THE PERFORMANCE:

1. How was it different when the performer tapped to "Bad" then when he tapped to Count Basie? Do you think tap can be done to any kind of music?
2. Tap dancers make sound with their feet and sometimes their hands – talk about how these sounds relate to the music. Fast taps can go with fast music, but can they go with slow music, and vice versa?
3. How was the vaudeville piece funny? Discuss the costumes and how the performer moved. This form of humor (like what the Three Stooges perform) is

called "slapstick" because it uses a lot of slapping and sticking. How can you make someone laugh just with your body? Just with your voice? With both?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Look up Harlem Renaissance. It was a time of art's blossoming. What were some of the musical and literary accomplishments of the artists of the Harlem Renaissance? What was it like in Harlem during that time? What is it like now? Why did the Renaissance end?
2. Practice the routine you learned with the whole class. Try it to different kinds of music, at different tempos. Play a tap record to do some of the steps with the class.
3. Make up your own routine, using movements you make up as well as movements you've learned from these educational materials and from the performance. Try to communicate it to another student so that he or she can perform it without ever seeing it.

What is the easiest way to remember and communicate the movements? Through written and spoken word? Or through movements? What are the advantages of writing down a dance piece? What are the disadvantages? What other ways of recording a dance can you think of (videotaping, Laban notation – a new way of writing it down, or just having a whole company memorize a dance?)

III. RESOURCES BIBLIOGRAPHY

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