

Abstract

Tap dance is an American dance form that, even today, continues to evolve and reinvent itself. This MFA thesis project is a thirteen-minute dance film with original music and choreography that examines and explores tap dance through the lens of Afrocentric and Eurocentric dance and cultural aesthetics, and how they have intermixed and been reinvented throughout tap dance's history and evolution. I conducted research on Africanist and Eurocentric cultural aesthetics, tap dance history with a focus on America's underlying racial relationships represented in the dance form's development, cultural contexts of the various styles and sub-genres of tap dance, and technology used in producing creative content in the era of digital media. As an artistic response that is both highly engaging and entertaining, the film successfully represents and celebrates tap dance's cultural diversity and promotes the cultural common ground found in the art form. In doing so, I aspire to generate a deeper understanding of tap dance's cultural significance to a broader audience, and showcase how tap dance represents American dance culture.

Montclair State University

TAP DANCE: THE HEARTBEAT OF AMERICAN DANCE CULTURE

by

John Scacchetti

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

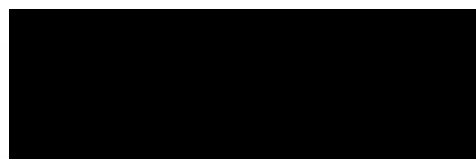
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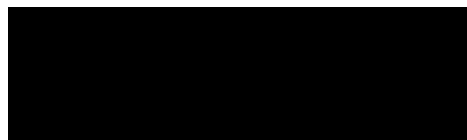
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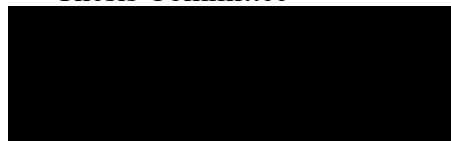
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A THESIS

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Project Introduction

Tap dance is an American dance form that, even today, continues to evolve and reinvent itself. Tap dance first came into form as a result of mixing together African and Irish cultures in an impoverished neighborhood in New York City called Five Points during the 1890s. It was here that African Americans and Irish immigrants shared their dance traditions in taverns and on the streets, synthesizing them into something new that eventually came to be known as tap dance (Knowles 65). Since then, tap dance has taken many forms and styles, and has been seen on the vaudeville stage and minstrelsy circuits, Broadway and movie musicals, and even the concert stage.

My MFA thesis project is a twelve-minute dance film with original music and choreography. The film examines and explores tap dance through the lens of Afrocentric and Eurocentric dance and cultural aesthetics, and how they have intermixed and been reinvented throughout tap dance's history and evolution. The film begins by showcasing each culture individually, focusing on each culture's dance aesthetics as the basis of their choreography. As the film progresses, the cultures mix, which is paralleled in the choreography by reinventing the rhythms and footwork from each contributing culture into a new homogenous style and form.

Hip-hop music was created in a cultural climate very similar to that of tap dance, and my film draws comparisons between the two art forms. Hip-hop music reinvented previously recorded pieces of music by sampling phrases and beats in an effort to make a new composition; this resulted in a new form of music. The soundtrack to my film is composed in this nature, taking samples from pieces of original music in the style of African and Irish music, jazz and ragtime music, showtunes, and even music of today to blend them into something new. The filming and editing styles also correlate with this

concept by looping and intertwining video clips to take bits and pieces from separate choreographic ideas and create a streamlined visual composition.

My interest in intertwining tap dance's history with the composition structure of hip-hop music lies in an effort to draw attention to how certain social and cultural situations continue to create new and inventive representative art forms. In doing so, I aspire to generate a deeper understanding of tap dance's cultural significance to a broader audience and showcase how tap dance represents American dance culture.

Rationale

The rationale for pursuing this project is multi-layered. First and foremost, I wanted to introduce tap dance, and tell its story, to a new generation in a way that would capture their attention and pique their interest. Making a film seemed the ideal way to do so, as it would be published on YouTube and/or Vimeo, and therefore accessible to anyone with an Internet connection and/or smart device. I am passionate about keeping tap dance's traditions alive, and doing so in an artful and entertaining way will help educate and inspire the film's viewing audience to share in this passion.

This project served as a platform for me to further develop my skills as a dance filmmaker and choreographer. I took on multiple roles in the creation of this project: producer, director, choreographer, performer, audio designer and technician, and musician. Doing so helped me develop and display my creative and leadership skills, as well as raise my proficiency in using digital platforms such as Logic Pro and Adobe Premiere.

Most importantly, this project showcases how tap dance is a truly American art form worthy of respect and notoriety beyond that of being classified as entertainment

and/or nostalgia, that tap dance represents the complex cultural composition of American society, and as such deserves greater inclusion within higher education dance curriculum. Tap dance is too often excluded from the narrative of American dance taught in higher education, and as a result is mostly not a priority or requirement within collegiate dance training (though it is traditionally a requirement of dance training for Musical Theatre majors). Through this film, I engage with tap's history and evolution within the context of America's socio-cultural landscape. By contributing to the genre and explicitly engaging the historical context of tap, this project serves as a catalyst to discuss tap dance's cultural importance and significance.

My long-term professional plan is to develop a higher education dance program that focuses primarily on tap dance. This film will aid me in showcasing the need and importance of doing so. Part of my planned curriculum will be a series of courses specific to tap dance history, and will focus on the cultural context of tap dance as a representation of cultures intersecting in the United States, framing tap dance as a bona fide example of American dance.

Upon completion of this project I define myself as an artist working at the forefront of contemporary tap, with expertise in tap dance's technique, history, styles, and creative application. This expertise will hopefully set me up as a leading candidate for a position in higher education.

Research

Research for this thesis project took place throughout my entire graduate school experience. My first *Special Projects* course with Professor Lori Katterhenry was

dedicated towards researching the origins of tap dance with an emphasis on the cultures that contributed to its creation and evolution, how tap dance has evolved over time, and how tap dance has fought for respect and survival. The main components of my research for this term consisted of reading two books: *Tap Roots* by Mark Knowles, and *Tap Dancing America* by Constance Valis Hill.

Research Methods

Written Sources

Tap Roots, which details tap's early history from the late 1700's to the early 1900's, begins by identifying tap's main cultural contributors as Irish step dance, English clog, and African dance. Each of these entities is then explained in great detail with emphasis on specific qualities that found their way into tap dance. This book also talks in detail of how these cultures came together in the United States during the 1800's, and gives great in-depth biographical information of tap's early pioneers.

Tap Dancing America includes all of this information, but continues telling tap's story all the way to the present time in immense detail. This book is organized chronologically; I began my reading of this book where *Tap Roots* left off — the beginning of the 20-Century. I consider *Tap Dancing America* to be the most comprehensive text on tap, and will someday use it as the textbook when teaching a semester long course on tap dance history.

Video Sources

My research also consisted of watching several documentaries about tap dance. I first watched the 1979 film, *No Maps on My Taps*, which chronicles the lives and career of three of the last great tap dancers from the vaudeville era, and their struggle to keep tap

alive in the eyes of mainstream entertainment. In the film, Bunny Briggs, Harold “Sandman” Simms, and Chuck Green put on a tap challenge show at a club in Harlem called Small’s Paradise, and in doing so recount the struggles and successes of their careers. This documentary itself is a key piece of tap dance history. It was produced at a time when tap dance was thought to be near its death, yet this film rekindled public interest in tap and sparked a tap renaissance in the 1980s (Hill 220).

Practical Sources

I also sought out dance classes specific to traditional/rhythm tap. I began this search to no avail; these classes are very difficult to find because they, just like the art form itself, are mostly an underground entity. These classes are not offered at the normal dance studio centers such as Steps on Broadway or Broadway Dance Center. Instead, the leading artists in this field simply rent studio space around town for themselves to teach classes. If you want to take these classes, you have to be “in the know” of when and where they are. Thanks to social media, however, I found a month-long workshop series with female rhythm tap icon Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards. This was a five-part workshop with a three-hour weekly class. I discovered that following dancers such as Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards on social media is the best way to find these classes.

Creative Research

I continued researching various styles of tap dance by next focusing on a sub-genre of tap dance known as flatfooting, which is specific to the Appalachian region. I created a project that spanned the requirements for two courses, *Special Projects II* focusing on collaboration, and *Application of Digital Media* for which I expanded my knowledge of the music editing software Logic Pro X. I collaborated with musical theater

lyricists and composers Edward Plough and Steven Clark in the creation of an original bluegrass-styled musical theatre composition which I used to create a short film entitled, *The Ballad of Curtis McGurkis and his Sweetheart Deedee Dooley*. I also played the title role in the film, recorded the main vocal track, and served as the sound engineer – recording, editing, and mixing the tap sounds.

First, I conducted research on flatfooting's history and culture by reading *Talking Feet: Buck Flatfoot, and Tap: Solo Southern Dance of the Appalachian, Piedmont, and Blue Ridge Mountain Regions* by Mike Seeger, and watching its complementary documentary of the same title. I then learned some of the basic steps of flatfooting, and used them as the basis of creating, developing, and shaping choreographic ideas for the short film.

More often than not in musical theatre, all of the plot points, character development and relationships, and musical structures are already established for a choreographer. Building this production number from the ground up put the responsibility of establishing these details onto my (and my collaborators') shoulders. According to Seeger, each flatfoot dancer has his or her own favorite instrument to dance to; most commonly it is either a fiddle, banjo, bass, or guitar (Seeger 28). This informed what I brought to the brainstorming sessions with my collaborators. This notion resulted in the introduction of a new instrument into the orchestration whenever a new dancer (or group of dancers) entered into the choreography.

Throughout all of this research, one common theme emerged: tap dance was/is as much a musical endeavor as it was/is a physical expression. From its early inception and across all cultures, tap dance was created out of the necessity to supply a percussion

section to a musical composition. This could have been in a tavern in the Five Points neighborhood of New York City during the mid-to-late 1800's, on a street corner in New Orleans during the early 1900's, or on a front porch in the Appalachian mountain range during the 1960's and 1970's. Emphasis on rhythm was paramount across all stages of tap dance's history. However, there are many varying classifications and sub-genres of tap, each with their own physical aesthetic relevant to the dominant culture from which the style has derived.

Cultural Studies

One question I sought to answer was how did tap come to have two main genres – traditional (aka hoofing/rhythm tap) and classical (Broadway/theatre tap). Traditional tap is performed very low to the ground, often flatfooted, with little attention paid to the upper body, and is performed mostly in one spot. Classical tap dance is the opposite; it is uplifted, performed mostly on the ball of the foot, has great emphasis placed on the upper body, and travels about the dance area. This question fueled my research for Professor Elizabeth McPherson's course, *Dance in the United States*. This research sought to uncover the cultural contexts behind each of these style's aesthetics. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and other Contexts* by Brenda Dixon Gottschild, and *Step Dancing in Ireland: Culture and History* by Catherine E. Foley served as the main research materials for this inquiry. In addition, *America Dancing: from the Cakewalk to the Moonwalk* by Megan Pugh provided information on how these cultures mixed, and at times clashed, in the realm of American popular dance forms, presentations, and crazes.

Africanist Cultural Aesthetics

According to Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “the Africanist presence in American culture has shaped a New World legacy that sets American culture apart from that of Western Europe” (Gottschild 1). In Africa, almost every aspect of daily life was somehow related to and represented by dancing as a form of expression and communication. Repetition is a valued component of African dance and music, which is seen as a representation of daily activities such as pounding grain, planting seeds, and kneading dough (Gottschild 8). As such, dancing equated to a kinship with the Earth (Knowles 22). Furthermore, Africanist dancing bodies employ a “democratic equality of body parts;” which means that each part of the body can be used to represent significance and value.

The most dominant aesthetic of Africanist expression is referred to as “the aesthetic of the cool,” which combines composure with vitality (Gottschild 16). Examples of this African contrariety are: awkward yet smooth, detached yet threatening, innocent yet seductive (14). Africanist expression is further described as containing: polycentrism (movement may come from any part of the body, and often from more than one at a time), high-affect juxtaposition (overlapping and co-existing moods or movements, often without any transitions between them), and ephebism (powerful vitality and attack attributed to youthfulness) (13-16).

African dance can be further examined by its physical attributes. In an effort to foster a kinship to the Earth, African dance is performed barefoot, flatfooted, close to the ground, and performed in a crouching position with a relaxed body. It is highly improvisational using propulsive rhythms to support swinging movements emanating

outward from the hips and pelvis, and incorporates polyrhythmic body rhythms. Oftentimes animal mimicry, such as imitating a bird as seen in the step ‘cutting the pigeon wing’ (now known simply as ‘wings’), and satire are employed, but the emphasis is always on what is felt (Knowles 23-24).

Eurocentric Cultural Aesthetics

Contrary to the Africanist aesthetics are attitudes toward centeredness, control, and linearity – all highly desired in Western European dance forms (Gottschild 17). Gottschild describes the traditional European dance aesthetic as valuing an upright torso where the spine is the hierarchical center from which all movement generates (8). The desired physical attributes of European dance forms in addition to an upright body included throwing out the chest, holding in the waist, lowering the shoulders, raising the head, controlling movement via the torso, and executing accurate footwork with grace and elegance (Foley 47-48). Value was also placed on transitions between movements, and as such, the movement existed to produce a finished work (Gottschild 9).

Whereas African dance served as a means of personal expression, dance in Western Europe was used as a means to cultivate the “civilization process” in which order and respectability were valued aesthetics (Knowles 22; Foley 48). As such, a standardization of steps and patterns was established, and dance became a social art. Through dance, one attained grace of movement and the etiquette of polite society. Therefore, dance training from dancing masters was considered a prerequisite for consideration as a person of quality (Foley 46). Dancing masters developed a codified “system of education” that emphasized keeping time with music, memory of sequencing of steps, spatial awareness, manner of movement, and ornamentation (36-37, 65).

Itinerant, bottom-tier, dancing masters brought the court dances of continental Europe to Ireland throughout the eighteenth century, where lesson plans and aesthetics were adapted to fit the local culture (35, 45). Jeremiah Molyneux (1881-1965) was one such dancing master who brought an attitude of nobility to the indigenous Irish culture, and in doing so created a dance aesthetic that referenced both classes that became known as Step Dancing (89). Molyneux's step dancing aesthetic favored turned out feet, an upright upper body, arms held loosely at the sides, and emphasized (and prioritized) accurate execution of footwork in time with the music (82). Molyneux also placed importance on small detailed rhythmic movements performed in a confined space. It was said that a good step dancer had the ability to perform in an area of only four square feet (97).

To the Irish, step dancing was viewed as a skill to be mastered in an effort to show that they, as a culture, could also be in control of their minds and bodies, and as such become "civilized" (75). Even though the lower-class Irish were not able to improve their financial status in comparison to European colonizers, through studying dance they were at least able to improve upon their education and experience within society (63). Step dancing continued to develop throughout the nineteenth century to provide the Irish lower class a culturally expressive voice (76). This voice would soon find itself in close contact with that of the African American expressive voice.

Cultural Imbalance

The African-Irish fusion shaped and formulated what is now known as tap dance by sharing and reinventing each other's dance culture aesthetics. However, both are not always used equally, nor are they equally acknowledged. The African American body

served as a template for the dominant white cultures to present mimetic theatrical representations in what was known as minstrelsy, and in doing so denied African American ownership of their own somatic expressions (Gottschild 9). White performers embodied the look and body language of African Americans, and became a repository for internalizing differing cultural aesthetics. As a result, cultural appropriation became commonplace in popular culture (24, 37).

Popular theatre provided the perfect venue for the white washing of the Africanist aesthetic via blackface performances of the minstrelsy. Through these minstrel performances, the Africanist aesthetic of mimicry turned into a means for the dominant white culture to gain social control over African Americans (31, 26). What ensued was a “merry-go-round” of cultural appropriation and mimicry. African American performers also took to the minstrel stage, but were “restricted in how much they could modify the white-created [African American] stereotypes they had inherited” from white minstrel performers (Knowles 117). As a result, African Americans were imitating a whitewashed imitation of themselves.

Similarly, the Cakewalk, America’s first popular dance craze, also combined African American and Euro-American cultures through imitation (Pugh 11, 26). Created by enslaved African Americans who mockingly mimicked the grand fashion of European dances such as the minuet, the Cakewalk was a form of parody described as a cross between a shamle and a strut (17). This dance grew in popularity, and was performed by members of white society, who according to Mark Knowles, “seemed to have missed the subtle sarcasm of [the Cakewalk’s] satirical pantomime” (45). As a result, white performers were also imitating an affected imitation of themselves.

This examination of Africanist and Eurocentric aesthetics, how they combined to create tap dance, provided the basis and choreographic framework for my thesis film. Studying the proportional balance and imbalance of these cultural aesthetics found in the work of key figures from tap dance's history such as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Fred Astaire, and Savion Glover provided deeper context into developing my film's storyline and choreography.

Significant Tap Dance Artists

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (1877-1949) was tap dance's first African American star to cross racial lines, which is possibly because his style incorporated Eurocentric qualities. Robinson's style is said to have elevated tap dance – both literally and figuratively – by relying on English and Irish jig and clog techniques, dancing up on his toes with an upright torso (Pugh 29; Hill, *Tap Dancing America* 65). While his appearance represented upright and uplifted European influences, his rhythms were ragtime syncopations of African influence, which rendered his style the perfect embodiment of the African-Irish fusions found in American tap dance (Hill, *Tap Dancing America* 66). Megan Pugh writes in *America Dancing* that Robinson's tap sounds "were clear and sharp; the tiniest movements of his feet emitted clean, loud sounds.... His left foot and right foot were perfectly balanced" (30). This balance of right versus left foot is a reference to the valued symmetry of Irish dancing, which was most evident in Robinson's lilting time steps performed on one side and then the other as the basis for his stair dance that catapulted him into stardom (Hill, *Tap Dancing America* 65).

While the aforementioned Irish aesthetics, grace, and command that were central to Robinson's dancing may have helped him reach the top, his dancing style still had many underlying African aesthetics in addition to his syncopated rhythms. His high-affect juxtaposition of contained explosiveness prompted critic John Martin in 1936 to describe Robinson's dancing by saying, "what the eye sees is tawdry American convention; what the ear hears is priceless African heritage" (Seibert 166). Furthermore, Constance Valis Hill outlines the African qualities of his performances as: using correct entrances and exits, cutting the body line, having a percussive attack, using multiple rhythmic meters (polyrhythms), and relying on the "aesthetic of the cool" (Hill, "Tap Dancing America" 66). Robinson's protégé Bunny Briggs explains, "[African American] dancers were expected to get hot... but Bill came up [on stage] all calm...dressed like a gentleman walking down Fifth Avenue" (Seibert 325).

Robinson's success on the stage garnered him a reputation as an artist capable of surpassing even highbrow artists, and in doing so ushered in a new era in African American entertainment (Pugh 45- 46). Megan Pugh writes, "[Robinson] inspired a generation of dancers on both sides of the color line, and helped audiences and critics alike recognize tap dance as a modern American art form – a recognition... that the American identity was itself part [African American]" (30). However, Robinson's headlining star status from vaudeville and Broadway didn't translate well onto the Hollywood screen; his work in films was limited to playing servant characters of low social status. Although his characters escaped the stereotypical self-demeaning nature of the minstrelsy in order to humanize African American servants, by the late 1930's the African American community accused him of debasing his own race at the expense of

making white audiences laugh (Hill, *Tap Dancing America* 122; Pugh 71). For young African American dancers, Robinson represented “Uncle Tom” (Seibert 312). His career symbolized the tension between what was possible and what was allowed, which speaks to the history of African American culture (Pugh 74).

Fred Astaire

In contrast, Fred Astaire was a white vaudeville and Broadway dancer who eventually found great success starring as a leading man in Hollywood films. Brian Seibert explains this contrast by saying, “If Bill Robinson came in at the right time, so did Astaire, but Astaire was white” (Seibert 227). Known for infusing ballet and ballroom dances with tap dance, Astaire successfully combined European and African dance aesthetics. Megan Pugh writes, “Fred Astaire syncopates his way into ballet’s *entrechat-trois*... and inflicts European tradition with the rhythms of [African Americans]” (Pugh 5). Astaire commonly performed with lifted torso and arms as a ballet dancer would, however he would rarely ever set his arms into a fixed position. “Ever so slightly, the flail, conveying naturalness” describes Seibert, regarding Astaire’s relaxed use of arms in order to convey a sense of Africanist nonchalance (Seibert 239). Regarding the African qualities of his footwork, Brian Seibert states that Astaire “loved nothing more than to stamp the flat foot,” and further supports this notion by quoting Astaire’s co-choreographer, Hermes Pan, who said of Astaire’s use of syncopation that he was a “master of the broken rhythm” (Seibert 240).

Savion Glover

Starting with the death of Bill Robinson on November 25th, 1949, and continuing through the 1960’s, tap dance mostly vanished from view. In an era of civil rights

activism, the African American communities viewed the dance form as an unacceptable practice because of how it promoted a racially insensitive stereotype. Bruce Weber writes, “Young African Americans ... turned away from [tap dance]; they felt it to be reminiscent of a time when racial stereotyping was acceptable in popular culture.” This generation considered it unacceptable to “shuff[le] on a stage for the appreciation of a white audience” (Glover and Weber 31). This point of view was aided by be-bop jazz musicians’ philosophical aesthetic that concerned itself with self-exploration rather than entertaining an audience. According to Constance Valis Hill, leading African American jazz musicians such as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie, viewed tap dance as “a form of Uncle Tomming – nothing more than a minstrel show of grinning-and-shuffling darkies” (*Tap Dancing America* 169). Thankfully, tap survived by temporarily going underground, and by the 1970’s and into the early 1980’s it was viewed and practiced under the guise of nostalgia.

This all changed when Savion Glover burst onto the tap dance scene, and brought tap back to its native roots. Savion Glover (1973-) is an African American tap dancer who has been described as “the artistic grandson of tap’s most revered [African American] figures, people like Jimmy Slyde, Honi Coles, Chuck Green, Lon Chaney, and Bunny Briggs, and the heir to the generation of dancers led by the Hines Brothers, Gregory and Maurice” (Glover and Weber 10). Gregory Hines (1946-2003), tap dance’s most beloved star of stage and screen during the second half of the twentieth century, said, “Glover redefined tap dancing. And it can never be the same again. Tap dance must move forward” (Hill *Tap Dancing America* 247-8; Glover and Weber 6). Glover’s tap dancing style is simultaneously in the past and in the moment; he brought tap dance back

into popularity by taking all he learned from his mentors and combined it with the music of his generation – hip-hop. In doing so, he found a way to honor the past while forging a new path for tap’s future by relying heavily on tap dance’s African influences, focusing intently on rhythm making (27).

Methodology

Introduction on Methodology

Savion Glover’s method of applying hip-hop music composition structures to tap dance served as inspiration towards crafting the soundtrack for my thesis film, which became the basis of my *Special Project III* course with Professor Christian von Howard.

Composing the soundtrack for my thesis dance film began with research into the realm of music copyright laws and licensing agreements. While I learned a great amount of valuable information, this endeavor was not without surprise, struggle, or reinvention. My plan of using pre-recorded music as the basis of sampling and looping was thwarted by the strictures of copyright laws and regulations; I did not have the time or financial resources necessary to gain proper clearance and permission to do so. I found myself in a position of reinventing my creative approach while still staying true to my original concept.

Music Copyrights

Music Rights Unveiled: A Filmmaker's Guide to Music Rights and Licensing by Brooke Wentz and Maryam Battaglia explains in great detail the history of music copyright laws, the laws currently in place, and the various types of licensing agreements available to use copyrighted music. In order to secure the rights to any particular song, one has to track down two licensing agreements as every recorded song has two sets of

copyrights – one for the songwriter(s), and one for the publisher of the recording of the song (Wentz and Battaglia 12). Additionally, there are various types of licensing that can be requested for use of music, and the one that pertains to using music along with TV/film is called a “Synchronization License,” in which a song is locked to a moving image (12). The process of obtaining this (and any) license is referred to as seeking “clearance” (1). In seeking clearance, one must take into account the: Term (length of time you plan to use the music), Territory (land/country the music will be used in), Use (how the song will be used in the production), and Media (Where the production will be exhibited) (97-98).

Of the various media types available to describe projects, my project best fits the realm of “Educational Exhibition” – the right to exhibit a production to audiences (whether or not admission is charged) in educational facilities such as high schools, universities, libraries, and museums (98). In discussing the parameters of my projects with representatives from BMI and ASCAP, and further discussion with Peter Davis (the Theatre and Dance Department’s copyright representative), it was determined that my original concept would be covered by the University’s standing copyright agreement as long as the project only lived on campus (Davis). However, since I intended to post my project to an online platform and potentially enter it in film festivals as per requirements of grants applications, it would no longer be covered by this agreement, and I would therefore need to acquire clearance.

Collaboration

With all of this in mind, I opted to collaborate with several musicians to create new music while still using originally planned compositional techniques; four sections of

music were created as a result. I collaborated with DJ SCAT (Michael Scacchetti – a cousin of mine) to create the first and fourth sections of the soundtrack. These sections were created from scratch using an Akai Pro MIDI synthesizer keyboard in combination with virtual studio technology (VST) plug-ins to emulate Roland 808 and Korg drum machines used by early hip-hop innovators. I also collaborated with composers Edward Plough and Stephen Clark to create original music in the style of Dixieland and ragtime music, which accounts for the second and third sections. The end result is something more detailed and nuanced than I ever could have expected, and still holds true to my original concept of mixing, remixing, and reinventing what was done by previous generations.

Creative Structure

Part 1: *Bloodlines*

The formulation of the music soundtrack for the thesis film provided the basis for its choreographic structure. The first section, entitled *Bloodlines*, explores African and Irish cultures via music and dance aesthetics, and how these cultures came together during the mid-to-late 1800's to create a new dance form now known as tap dance. This section showcases each culture individually, then moves to a tête-à-tête during which each culture shares with and adapts from the other, and finally moves into a ragtime unison ensemble, aptly performed to 'The Black and White Rag,' a public domain ragtime song by George Botsford.

Research into African and Irish dance and cultural aesthetics provided further insight into creating the choreography for the first section, which I then reshaped and reinvented as the basis for the next sections. African dance aesthetic is centered upon

individuality, and the individual's relationship to the Earth/ground. African dance rituals celebrate the individual human connection to the Earth during which polyrhythms create a cohesive musical whole. I created a series of short steps to mimic the rhythms of the drums in the soundtrack, and each dancer was tasked with interpreting each step however he or she felt suitable. I designed each step with rhythms that can be layered upon each other in order to create a polyrhythmic whole. I then showcased this by layering video clips of each step next to each other to create a visual mosaic. This not only features each dancer's individuality, but also shows how each rhythm fits with the others in order to produce a cohesive composition.

In contrast, Irish (and Eurocentric) dance and cultural aesthetics favor a different approach in which a unified ensemble performs in an uplifted manner. Additionally, Irish/Eurocentric dance patterns are balanced – what is performed to the right must then be performed to the left – in order to symbolize societal order and civility (Foley 48, 75). My choreography for the dancers representing this culture has a balanced structure, and is filmed with all the dancers performing in unison. Even the editing is balanced, with cuts between clips showing the dancers from the front, followed by a right angle, then a left angle, and then a return to the front view as the dancers perform a step on the right and then the left.

I introduce the concept of these contrasting cultures sharing each other's aesthetics in a call and response exchange within the first section. The African-section cast of dancers performs a step with African cultural aesthetics, and then follows it with another step that implements an uplifted use of the body. This is followed by the Irish cast doing the opposite. They begin a step uplifted and poised and balanced, which then

transforms to something grounded, syncopated, and free. The first section culminates with both casts performing together in unison to the ‘Black and White Rag,’ symbolizing the cultural cohesion found in tap dance. My choreography blends the two aesthetics physically, rhythmically, and structurally. I allowed the cast the freedom to explore which aesthetic they wanted to favor while performing this section, and encouraged them to explore switching back and forth between the two.

Part 2: *Arrhythmia*

The second section, entitled *Arrhythmia*, explores how cultures borrowed from each other during the early 1900’s in a less than respectful way. With original music by Edward Plough and Steven Clark, this begins with a Cakewalk – America’s first popular dance craze, which was based on cultural borrowing and appropriation. Filmed by having the dancers circle around the camera as the camera slowly tracks and pans from left to right, this interlude puts the viewer into the perspective of being stationed at the center of a clock as time passes by. What results is a transition from the 1890’s to the 1920’s where cultural borrowing via dance took on a different meaning. White performers stole dances from African and African American performers, and used them as the basis for creating grotesque characterizations in the form of the minstrelsy.

I represent this by introducing myself into the film as a character who learns how to do a series of steps from the feature member of the African cast, professional Broadway dancer Rashaan James II. For this interlude, named ‘The Dance Lesson,’ Rashaan and I had a work session during which he created the series of steps, and I simply learned them from him – life imitating art imitating life. This series of seven steps

served as the basis for the following portion representing cultural borrowing and appropriation on the professional Vaudeville and minstrel stage.

The music for the vaudeville section is formulated upon the dissonance between even and syncopated rhythms. The music has an even driving rhythm pattern onto which the tap dancers layer strong syncopated rhythms, which is symbolic of the clashing of cultures evident in tap dance's use in Vaudeville and minstrelsy performances. The second section's big feature is a Vaudeville trio, which is inter-spliced by a fantasy-like solo. The trio of dancers represents how white performers stole steps and aesthetics from African and African American dancers. Each phrase of choreography is based on the progression of steps performed in 'The Dance Lesson,' and is performed with overexaggerated facial expressions and embodiment symbolic of the grotesque characterizations used during the minstrelsy. The costuming and backdrop for this section symbolizes the cultural construct of this era. The backdrop is black, and the dancers are wearing suits with three specific shades of grey. Additionally, the dress shirts, ties, and accessories of the costumes are unique to each performer and are specifically vibrant colors and patterns reminiscent of African individualism and freedom of expression, which serve as a cultural undercurrent. This symbolizes how the choreography is surrounded in African aesthetics (vibrant colors) yet presented in a dark manner (grey suits).

The fantasy-like solo of this section strips away all color and affectation, and presents itself as an authentic remixing of cultures void of disrespect or misuse. I based the choreography, once again, on the phrases from 'The Dance Lesson,' but in a more contemporary application with more complex rhythm patterns and phrasing construction.

This shows how ideas can continue to evolve and reinvent themselves, and serves as a moment of foreshadowing towards tap's return to its authentic roots in the 1990's. Additionally, this solo uses "stripped down" music, leaving only the main wind organ instrumentation and a heartbeat pulse. This draws the viewer (and listener) closer to the rhythms produced by the tap dancer, and shows how tap dancing is as much of a musical endeavor as it is movement based.

Part 3: *In the Same Vein*

The third section, entitled *In the Same Vein*, is a deconstruction and reinvention of the Shim Sham Shimmy, tap dance's national anthem. Normally a 32-bar phrase containing four distinct sections, I deconstructed each phrase to expand upon each theme. The Shim Sham Shimmy, originally named The Goofus, was a standardized tap routine composed of stock vernacular dance steps in a logical progression that was simple enough for any dancer at any skill level to execute (Hill, *Tap Dancing America* 80). In other words, it was and still is an all-inclusive routine. With dancers in pairs of opposite cultural backgrounds, this section serves as a way of showcasing the common ground found between the two cultures via tap dance.

This third section is performed to an original piece of music written by Edward Plough and Steven Clark, and is inspired by the song 'Turkey in the Straw' to which the Shim Sham was first performed (80). The main instrumentation for this section is a mouth trumpet performed by Steven Clark, which is an homage to Bill "Bojangles" Robinson played the mouth trumpet while dancing in his iconic stair dance adaptation with Shirley Temple in the 1935 film *The Littlest Colonel*, which was the only instrumentation used for the entire performance. This performance between Robinson

and Temple was the first time an African American male danced with a Caucasian female partner in cinematic history (121).

Cinematography for this section blends the cultural aesthetic approach from the African and Irish portions of this project's first section. Camera angles show the group of dancers from the front, right, and left angles. There are also moments that showcase individuals performing solos, as well as close-ups on footwork.

Part 4: *The Heart Is in the Groove or Tapper's Delight*

The fourth section, entitled *The Heart Is in the Groove or Tapper's Delight*, uses samples of music from the first two sections in order to compose a Hip-Hop inspired music track. Tap dance almost disappeared during the 1960's and 1970's because no one tap danced to the music of those generations (Glover and Weber 31). However, thanks to the emergence of Savion Glover's approach of using Hip-Hop music rhythm structures as the basis for his tap dance choreography, tap dance was once again associated with the music of the current generation during the 1990's (10). This section of my film brings the past to the present by reinventing music styles from previous generations into something that appeals to the current generation.

The construction of the fourth section has three methods of showcasing tap dance's cultural mixing and return to cultural roots – each in 16, 32, or 64-bar segments that are streamlined together. First, I crafted variations on themes from all of the previous choreographic material for the dancers to perform. Second, I did the same for myself to perform as several solos, which are a continuation of the fantasy-like foreshadowing solo from section two. I based my choreography for these on material found throughout the entire film. Third, I took small video clips, two or four counts long, from throughout the

first two sections, and used them to create new phrases that present the similarities, differences, and evolution of several choreographic themes present throughout the entire project. Furthermore, the video editing of this section resembles that of hip-hop music videos of the late 1980's and early 1990's as a way of bridging the generational gap.

Creative Process

My previous creative endeavors of producing dance films, such as *The Ballad of Curtis McGurkis and his Sweetheart Dee Dee Dooley*, proved to be valuable experiences in terms of bringing this thesis production to fruition; they provided me the opportunity to learn from my mistakes and shortcomings. Specifically, sound engineering for recording tap sounds has always been a struggle for me, but thankfully, I have learned to accomplish this with much more effectiveness and ease.

I began by storyboarding each section, which not only led to developing the choreography, but also gave rise to what type of dancers I needed, and how many. As a well-respected member of the New York City Broadway and tap dance communities, I was easily able to recruit a dozen highly qualified tap dancers for this project. Production of the project took place through three cycles. Each cycle included phases of development, rehearsals, tap sounds recording, filming, and editing. This proved to be a successful approach because it enabled me to focus deeply on one section of the project at a time.

I choreographed a rough sketch of each section on my own before working with other dancers. Each cycle began with a developmental workshop session during which I taught the rough sketch to other dancers, then made adjustments, modifications, and alterations. I was able to play around with ideas, which led to the discovery of exactly

what I wanted out of the choreography. Then I had between three and five rehearsal sessions, 3 hours each, to fully teach the choreography, set spacing specifics, and rehearse camera choreography with the videography team. I filmed each rehearsal and uploaded the videos for the dancers to access and practice on their own time in between rehearsals. This was an effective way to manage everyone's time, and allow each dancer the time and space to practice on their own before the next rehearsal while still having access to the information necessary to guide them.

Before filming, tap sounds needed to be recorded separately, which was done using a compressor microphone and Logic Pro X music editing software. Dancers wore studio headphones connected to an amp/mixing board supplying each headphone set with the music track. They then tap danced around the microphone imputing the content into Logic Pro X. This was done in small segments of either 2, 4, or 8 counts of 8 at a time instead of the entire section from start to finish, which helped ensure quality control. This approach also made editing quite easy and efficient. Each step had its own track on the software, and each take was properly labeled. I then edited and mixed the tap sounds, and applied them to the master soundtrack mix, which was then used on filming day. This was also a huge success as I was able to increase my skill level of Logic Pro X. I have become well versed in using the software to edit together sound clips, and I enhanced my skills even further by finally understanding what needs to be done in order to mix the sound quality of the tap sounds so they sound as if they are live – not pre-recorded in a studio.

Filming days went very smoothly thanks to preparedness and organization from everyone involved. There was an established shot list detailing exactly what angles were

needed, and for exactly what portion of the choreography, and which order to shoot them in. This also made editing very simple to sort through as we knew exactly what each video clip was, and how it was to fit into the overall puzzle. The videographer, Rebecca Phillips, gave me an external hard drive with all of the footage on it, and I made notes for her that detailed which parts of which clip pertained to which section of the music. A rough assemblage was put together, and small notes were given on smoothing out several transitions, but the overall structure was for the most part exactly what I had in mind thanks to the organization and effective communication. This was all made possible by having a specific vision of what I wanted before we even began filming or editing.

Results

Through this project I have grown as an artist, choreographer, historian, teacher, audio technician, and producer. Through extensive research into tap's history I have learned how to view and experience tap dance as more than just an entertaining dance form, but rather to see and live the diverse cultural background embedded in every step, phrase, and routine by being a part of it. This has inspired me as a choreographer to produce content that speaks to tap's rich history, and that aims to educate the viewing audience with this information in a way that sparks a dialogue of how tap dance represents the cultural construct of the United States.

One aspect of this project that I was continually conscious of was making sure my work spoke specifically to cultural expression, and never crossed a line into the realm of cultural stereotyping. My main tactic for achieving this standard was to always maintain authenticity. As a director/choreographer this was most present when working with the African-section cast. During the first rehearsal with this cast, after beginning to describe

some of the historical research content motivating this section, one of the dancers asked, “so, are we playing slaves?” The answer was and still is a resounding “no!” I was asking them instead to embody specific Africanist cultural aesthetics and explore these aesthetics through the choreography.

The concept for this section was to explore cultural aesthetics that were important to the creation of tap dance, and that are still found in tap dance today. I did not prescribe any exacting details for the African-section dancers, but rather presented them with a rhythmic template and aspects of the Africanist dance aesthetics I was most interested in having them explore through this template. Africanist aesthetics of most interest to me for this film were to dance close to the ground in a crouched position, movements swinging outward from the hips, freedom of self-expression through movement with a polycentric emphasis on various and multiple body parts, and animal mimicry. Beyond that I allowed them to discover for themselves how to physically interpret the rhythms while applying any or all of these qualities. As such, the end result was an authentic and individual-based representation of Africanist cultural aesthetics.

As a cinematographer, my biggest challenge regarding this topic was how to visually represent vaudeville and the minstrelsy. How to go about respectfully representing something so inherently vile and disrespectful was no easy task. I chose symbolism in design, as opposed to realism in performance, as the solution. From a director/choreographer’s point of view, I informed and discussed with dancers in this portion about the specific aspects of Africanist cultural aesthetics and expression that were the focus of the first section. I asked them to enjoy performing the choreography through them as a lens, and to do so with authenticity – not as a means of mockery or

grotesque characterization. Additionally, this challenge was also present in the Hip-hop section of the film while exploring special effects. My editor, Rebecca Phillips, and I took great care not to use any visual effects that cast dark shadows across anyone's face, even to the slightest degree, therefore ensuring that no one was ever in any sort of blackface – real (i.e. makeup) or synthetic (i.e. CGI).

To this effect, one online viewer of the film commented on its ability to successfully navigate this delicate balance. Diana Brainard wrote:

I thought this was a really wonderful film. First I watched it, then I listened to the talkback, and then I enjoyed watching it a second time even more! I danced in Matthew Wagner's thesis which explored our local history of Vaudeville. It is a delicate balance to honor the skill of the performers who created the technique foundations of today with the often dark and ugly history that went along with it. John, I thought you very respectfully and enjoyably represented the history of tap. (Brainard)

I am proud to say that the end result of the entire film succeeded in successfully and respectfully representing each culture (African and Irish) individually, as well as how they integrated throughout tap dance's history. The contrasting aesthetics established in the first section were clearly identifiable, as was how they progressively mixed throughout the film. This was due to how the dancers were able to authentically explore and embody these aesthetics. For example, the dancers in the African section exuded an essence of cool while allowing their entire body to move freely as they danced as individuals. The dancers in the Irish section, contrastingly, maintained an uplifted posture while dancing as a uniform ensemble.

Little by little, these parameters began to reshape and take on the form of the other. In a call and response portion of the first section, African-section dancers performed a step with what we had identified as African aesthetics, then immediately shifted mid-phrase to more Irish dance aesthetics. The Irish-section dancers then followed with the same structure. In the Vaudeville section, the Caucasian dancers performed with form and style specific to those present in the African portion of the first section: low to the ground, movement stemming from the hips, and each with their own sense of freedom and physical interpretation of the choreography. In the Shim Sham section, dancers shifted seamlessly between the two opposing aesthetics to the effect that doing so was noticeable. And finally, in the Hip-hop section, dancers embodied both cultural aesthetics in various proportions, but always with an underlying sense of “cool.”

The film was originally set to have an in-person free public screening and talkback session, but due to the restrictions of the Covid-19 quarantine, this was altered to the effect that the film was released via YouTube and Facebook with a virtual streaming talkback session via Facebook Live. The event was a huge success, reaching a much wider initial audience than it would have had it been an in-person screening. In a 24-hour period after the premiere event, the film has been viewed over 1,000 times, and has amassed many complementary and insightful comments from viewers all across the country.

The virtual talkback session functioned with viewers from all over typing in comments and asking questions. Topics covered included: research methods and choreographic process; how I avoided using stereotypes and clichés; production details including how much time was spent on each aspect of production, and who all was

involved behind the scenes; music creation and collaboration; tap sound recording engineering; how I went about gathering and rehearsing the dancers, what inspired the Hip-hop music video portion of the film; how I went about representing cultural aesthetics physically and cinematography-wise; how choreographing for film is different than choreographing for the stage; what is next for the film; and what is next for my research and creative work.

Moving forward I intend to promote this project by submitting it to film festivals, library archives, and cultural centers to gain further feedback. I will also use the film as the basis for applying for grants to produce future works. I aspire to continue producing tap dance films pertaining to the cultural context behind tap's history with a focus on themes such as: how certain tap steps attained their vocabulary names, who stole steps from whom, who were tap's unsung innovators, and why tap almost disappeared. I will also expand my research to a global scale to uncover and learn about other cultures that have contributed to tap's development. While doing so, I will continue to further my exploration into the use of digital technology as a means of making my work more appealing and accessible to the current generation.

Conclusion

Savion Glover, in response to being asked if tap dance gets the respect it deserves as an art form, stated, "We are, because of the history of tap dance, not yet at the pinnacle that we should be ... but there's still hope for the dance." The history Glover refers to is one filled with racism and classism, often due to critics who favor European aesthetics over African aesthetics. Constance Valis Hill writes that tap dance continues to be dismissed by elite critics as an art form not worthy of serious attention, and that "tap dance has been

‘invisible’ in the scholarly canon because it continues to be characterized as a constantly dying art form” (Hill, “On National Tap Dance Day”). Yet, tap dance is not dying, but rather constantly reinventing itself through the work of tap dance innovators and modern day pioneers. As tap moves forward and expands worldwide it continues to adopt new cultural aesthetics into its mix, as does America itself.

The research into tap dance history conducted to produce this thesis project is of utmost importance to the field of tap dance, and dance in general. Tap dance is too often allocated to the ranks of entertainment in the dance world, and has for far too long been thought of as a dying art form. While normally a required area of study in Musical Theatre programs, tap dance is mostly offered as an elective class in Dance program curricula, if at all. However, studying the history and cultural context behind tap dance as well as the dance form itself sheds light onto the depth and breadth of cultures that came together to create it, and would enhance any curriculum by including it as a requirement. In a society and a field steeped in celebrating the artistic and cultural diversity of our nation, tap dance can easily be placed as a prioritized area of study.

My hope is that this project inspires tap dancers and aspiring tap dancers to investigate the authentic story of tap dance, and how it signifies the cultural common ground and represents the beautiful diversity of our nation. I want it to break the ice on difficult conversations about tap’s prominence in the minstrelsy, explore why it is that tap nearly died off during the civil rights movement era, and challenge the notion that tap is a low-brow form of dance while advocating for its inclusion in higher education dance curriculum.

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Appendix

Program (attached starting next page)

**John Scacchetti
&
Films by Phillips**

Present

Tap Dance

The Heartbeat of American Dance Culture

An MFA Thesis Dance Film

Friday, April 10, 2020

A Facebook Live Streaming Event

Production Credits

Producers.....John A. and Diane Scacchetti
Director/Choreographer.....John Scacchetti
Videographer/Editor.....Rebecca Phillips
Videographer/Electrician.....Anthony Filis
Production Manager/Assistant Director.....Emily Jeanne Phillips
Sound Engineer.....John Scacchetti
Musicians.....Mike Scacchetti/DJ SCAT,
Vincent Scacchetti, Scott Burns, Joseph Kromholz, Edward Plough, Steven Clark
Dancers.....John Scacchetti,
Danny Gardner, Brent McBeth, Tyler McKenzie, Jody Renard, Becca Fox,
Darrell T. Joe, Rashaan James II, Edward Tolve, Oren Korenblum, Sean Bell, Michael
Motkowski, Jonah Hale, Jessica Wockenfuss, Michael J Verre, Jason Rath, Marthaluz
Velez, Lily Lewis

Directors Notes

This film, along with a related written thesis document, serves as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance from Montclair State University. This MFA thesis project is a thirteen-minute long dance film with original music and choreography that examines and explores tap dance through the lens of Afrocentric and Eurocentric dance and cultural aesthetics, and how they have intermixed and reinvented throughout tap dance's history and evolution.

The film begins by showcasing each culture individually, and as the film progresses the cultures mix by reinventing the rhythms and footwork from each contributing culture into a new homogenous style and form. The soundtrack to my film is composed in this nature, taking samples from pieces of original music in the style of African and Irish music, jazz and ragtime music, showtunes, and even music of today to blend them into something new. The filming and editing style also correlate with this concept by looping and intertwining video clips to take bits and pieces from separate choreographic ideas and create a streamlined visual composition. In doing so, I aspire to generate a broader audience for tap dance by informing them of the cultural significance of the dance form, and by showcasing how it represents the true nature of the American spirit.

Tap Dance: The Heartbeat of American Dance Culture

I. *Bloodlines*

A study of Africanist and Eurocentric cultural and dance aesthetics as contributing components to the creation of tap dance during the mid-to-late 1800's.

Musicians: Mike Scacchetti/DJ SCAT, Vincent Scacchetti, Scott Burns, Joseph Kromholz

Dancers: Tyler McKenzie, Jody Reynard, Becca Fox, Darrell T. Joe, Rashaan James II, Edward Tolve, Oren Korenblum, Sean Bell, Michael Motkowski, Jonah Hale

II. *Arrhythmia*

An exploration of cultural borrowing, sharing, assimilation, and appropriation found in American mainstream dances of the early 1900's,

Musicians: Edward Plough and Steven Clark

Dancers: John Scacchetti, Danny Gardner, Brent McBeth, Tyler McKenzie, Jody Renard, Becca Fox, Darrell T. Joe, Rashaan James II, Edward Tolve, Oren Korenblum, Sean Bell, Michael Motkowski, Jonah Hale

III. *In the Same Vein*

A deconstruction and reinvention of the Shim Sham Shimmy, a standard tap routine considered to be the national anthem of tap dance.

Musicians: Edward Plough and Steven Clark

Dancers: Jonah Hale, Jessica Wockenfuss, Michael Motkowski, Jody Reynard, Becca Fox, Rashaan James II, Michael J Verre, Oren Korenblum, Darrell T. Joe, Jason Rath, Marthaluz Velez, Lily Lewis

IV. *The Heart Is in the Groove*

An ode to the cultural connections between tap dance and hip-hop music in the form of a 1990's music video.

Musicians: Mike Scacchetti/DJ SCAT, John Scacchetti, Vincent Scacchetti, Scott Burns, Joseph Kromholz, Edward Plough, Steven Clark

Dancers: John Scacchetti, Danny Gardner, Brent McBeth, Tyler McKenzie, Jody Renard, Becca Fox, Darrell T. Joe, Rashaan James II, Edward Tolve, Oren Korenblum, Sean Bell, Michael Motkowski, Jonah Hale, Jessica Wockenfuss, Michael J Verre, Jason Rath, Marthaluz Velez, Lily Lewis

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