

TAP IN UNIVERSITIES: PART 5

Tap Dancing Can Flourish in a Liberal Arts College

By Shelley Oliver

In 1991, after leaving Manhattan and my life as a New York City-based tap choreographer and performer, I settled in the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania and started teaching tap dance at Muhlenberg College, a small liberal arts college of about 2,300 students located in Allentown. I began by teaching a beginner tap class for the continuing education department, but another opportunity arose earlier a year later when the college decided to add a dance major to their four-year bachelor of arts degree program. The director of the Department of Theater and Dance, Karen Dearborn, worked toward a vision of a dance program that provided specialist teaching in all dance disciplines, with ample performance and growth opportunities for students. Fortunately she was highly supportive of adding a tap dance component to the curriculum.

Initially I taught a beginning tap course only, but as the department grew over the years (40 freshman entered as declared dance majors last year), and enthusiasm for tap classes built, the tap dance curriculum exploded. Now, every semester students can enroll in beginning, intermediate, or advanced tap technique courses as well as audition for a credited tap ensemble performance group. Dance thrives in the surrounding Lehigh Valley as well, and so I continue to teach three levels of tap technique for community students. Dearborn, who supports and recognizes the value of a comprehensive tap program in the dance department, has kindly written, “[Oliver] is a serious artist teaching in a serious art form.” Support of this nature in an academic setting has enabled me to function and thrive as a tap teacher, choreographer, and performer in the college.

Tap dance is an elective at Muhlenberg College, and students from all academic majors may take any dance classes and actively participate in performances and productions. As a liberal arts institution, the school’s mandate is “to serve a wide-ranging population, from beginner’s interested in broadening their education to advanced students pursuing careers in the performing arts.”

There is a progressive approach to learning at Muhlenberg that’s liberating for both students and teachers. Students can individualize their program to

satisfy their creative and intellectual goals. This creates a dynamic classroom environment that is comprised of skilled and serious tap dancers from various majors - not just dance – looking for a challenging experience. Although many tap students have professional aspirations, some study tap as a fun and creative outlet that balances the stress of the academic courses. Focused tap students attend tap class every semester for four years, taking class two to three times a week in addition to rehearsals. My job is to provide a classroom experience of tap dance that challenges students with professional goals and serves the liberal arts goal of “educating the whole person.”

The tap classes I teach include level specific technique, musical form, composition, improvisation, and tap dance history. In addition to attending class, students are required to review films and readings (often articles from *On Tap*), attend dance performances on and off campus, and prepare choreography and music assignments. Every semester jazz pianist David Leonhardt (my musical director and partner) conducts jazz music workshops in the classroom. Together we have produced a series of tap dance CDs, *Tap Music for Tap Dancers*, that the students use in class as a tool to develop their musical and rhythmic understanding further.

One of the most important aspects of the tap technique course is the ongoing self-evaluation students write. It promotes self-awareness and enables me to understand each student’s learning process. I strive to design a comprehensive course so that participants are learning and practicing, creating and improvising, experiencing tap in theaters, viewing historical footage, listening to jazz music, reading about tap, and then writing about it all. Grades are based not only on each student’s technical tap dance progress and creative and written work, but on their self-awareness as students to the form. For example, do they recognize their personal strengths and weaknesses? Do they know if they are visual or auditory learners? Do they self-correct?

If I was just teaching technique in class, I believe that the tap program would not be flourishing in this environment and that tap dancing would be marginalized. In my opinion, students in a liberal arts college need to study tap dance on multiple levels. They need to use the steps and combinations to learn

how to create variations in structure and rhythm, explore musical form, assemble improvisations, as well as learn how to evaluate their learning process. These components help to make tap technique relevant to other classes the students attend – both dance and academic. The dance department has well-rounded goals for students and high expectations of teachers. I have to use a vocabulary to teach how to assemble, create, problem solve, improvise, and ultimately express oneself rhythmically. It is this focus that allows the form to flourish in a liberal arts setting. In almost every tap class I include group work and problem solving. This in turn helps to establish a supportive and relaxed environment, and reduces the tension that is sometimes created by teacher-centered classes. A relaxed and highly functional classroom not only enhances learning, but is essential for successful improvisational activities and true growth as tap dance improvisers.

An advantage to studying tap dance in a college environment is having the opportunity to work and perform with other creative individuals. Plus, being part of a thriving campus theater and dance scene provides an ongoing stream of performing events. Every year students audition to perform in the faculty dance concert, and I create a work that is performed on stage with David Leonhardt Jazz Trio. Tap students can audition for the Muhlenberg Jazz Tap Ensemble, a credited course that tours an interactive tap show. Geared for elementary school students, the show involves the audience in activities such as call and response, scatting rhythms, and imagination games. The Ensemble provides community outreach for the Allentown area as well as professional performance opportunities for the students. (For example, they have performed with Buster Brown, did a preshow for *Tap Dogs*, danced at Windows on the World, and have appeared in various jazz venues and theaters with my professional tap company.) Additional performing opportunities for students include an on-campus tap group called The Copasetics, and numerous student-choreographed concerts every semester open for tap choreographers, improvisers, and dancers.

Through the tap program we also interact with other departments on campus, which is very valuable. The Muhlenberg Jazz Band often invites tap dancers to join them in their spring concert, and I structure a work that is highly improvisational to allow them to jam with student musicians. Dance students also have extensive performing opportunities in an ongoing array of musical theatre productions, and every year tap dances are featured. I have been told by many students that the deciding factor in choosing

Muhlenberg College was the tap program. After graduation, some talented theater and dance majors have gone on to a variety of performing careers on and off Broadway, and in national and regional touring companies. Others pursue teaching careers, dance therapy, or medicine. A few tap dancers have found work with my touring company, The Shelley Oliver Tap Dancers.

With the growth of the Department of Theater and Dance in the 1990s, a new building was built on campus: the Trexler Pavilion for Performing Arts. It houses studios, performance spaces, and intimate theater. In 1999, Gregory Hines was the artist invited to perform at the opening gala for the Baker Theater and, in true form, he generously invited the Muhlenberg Jazz Tap Ensemble to join him on stage. What an honor to have him there, and what shoes to fill for those aspiring to the great and unique traditions of tap. I think of his spirit and generosity every time my students get on that stage with metal on the bottom of their shoes. For more information, www.muhlenbergcollege.com and www.shellyoliver.com.

Shelley Oliver, Canadian-born tap dancer, choreographer, and educator, has appeared internationally with some of the legends of the tap world. She is the artistic director of The Shelley Oliver Tap Dancers, performing with the David Leonhardt Jazz Group, both of which tour jazz festivals and concerts worldwide, and had produced a series of *Tap Music for Tap Dancers* CDs.