

Is tap dance still a relevant dance style?

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Throughout this essay the question that will be explored will be whether tap dance is still a relevant style of dance. The rationale for this research was driven by the conceptions of the art form; tap dance is often seen as an old fashion style of dance confined to Musical Theatre stages, with questions over its popularity compared to other dance styles within dance education and across contemporary society such as ballet, hip-hop and contemporary. While conducting the research into the current relevance of tap dance I have studied its origins and how it has been used in early cinematic productions, starring the likes of Gene Kelly through to current day productions and artists such as Michelle Dorrance. The research has also examined how tap dance was taught in the past, the challenges faced with its present-day teaching and how the methods of teaching have evolved. Case studies of various prominent tap dancers were examined, for example Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson and The Nicholas Brothers; highlighting how tap artists have used the style for both entertainment, cultural commentary and self-expression. The research also discusses the past and present challenges and present and future opportunities for the art of tap dance, creating opportunity for us to assess, reflect and question its relevance. As a part of this research methodology, it was important to filter sources for clarity and relevance. Sources which demonstrate or showed tap dance at different peaks and moments in its history felt important to ensure a broader overview of the art form. This helps us to truly understand its origins to where the art form is in modern day.

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Chapter 1

Tap dance in contemporary society

In this first chapter, I will discuss how tap dance is portrayed in contemporary society. The way that I will be discussing this is by exploring it in three points which will be the history of tap dance, mainly focusing on African American social and political activism, how tap dance is shown in films between the 30s and 50s and how it is portrayed in big ensemble groups that represent community and an entertainment value. When looking at the origins of tap and where the style came from, we see that it was a form of social and political activism, born from African American culture. Below is a brief history on where the style originated from and how it evolved throughout history.

Even though no two people can agree where tap dance started, everyone's side of the story starts in the same place, which is West Africa. In many cultures especially African one's dance and music are intertwined into one art form. In West Africa in the 12th century, dance and drumming were central to cultural expression. Movements are synchronized with polyrhythmic drum patterns where multiple rhythms interweave to create a layered and complex sound. "African drummers learn to both hear and play more than one rhythm at the same time. The rhythms they play together may be very different from one another.

Polyrhythm, more than one rhythm, takes a lot of practice to play and understand "Johnson, A.E. (1999). This quote shows how African drummers learnt how to play more than one rhythm. Footwork, stomping and body percussion (using the body as an instrument) are essential to many West African dance traditions and these elements strongly resemble the rhythmic and percussive qualities that became central to tap dance.

The rhythms travelled with the enslaved Africans who were forcibly taken to America to be sold as slaves during the transatlantic slave trade which began in 1526 and ended in 1838. The tribes were unable to use drums to make rhythms due to the restrictions of the slave owners, they adapted and used their bodies by stomping their feet and clapping their hands to create the rhythms. Most of the slaves that were from the African tribes went to America, their shipboard voyage to America was called the Middle Passage and it was a horrible journey which was long and dangerous, lasting anywhere from fifteen days to four months. Once they arrived in the plantations or large farms in America, the African slaves took up dancing, drumming and singing again but many protestant slave owners believed that dancing was wrong. They were against it and in 1740 slave owners banned the slaves from using drums, so they had to use what they had. They clicked spoons together in fast and rhythmic patterns and they made rhythms using their mouths by chanting words or using syllables which related to the sound of a drumbeat, most importantly they used their feet. “African dancers weave long leaves into tiny baskets. They fill these baskets with pebbles and then tie them to their legs or wrists. Every time they step, the rattles shake. The Igbo sometimes cover their dance costumes with a dried grass called raffia. Every moment makes a shushush sound” Johnson, A.E. (1999). Now that the drums were outlawed their feet needed to make the music as well as dance.

Over the next century dancers began to think about the sounds their feet made while they danced, and they learned how to change the rhythms in many ways. Dancers knew that wooden shoes made a different sound to leather ones, and the sound of a clean floor was different to a sandy floor. By 1865 when the civil war ended it brought an end to slavery and tap dance was starting to look like what it is today and the best dancers could move their feet

as fast as a good drummer could move his hands, learning to tap dance on the streets became a part of growing up for African American children. They would watch dancers challenge each other on street corners and learn from them and some children were able to supplement the income of their families by dancing, however many parents couldn't afford to buy the shoes but that didn't stop children from dancing they would put bottle caps between their toes to make the sound of tap shoes.

“Travelling shows would include both Black and White dancers. Early wooden shoes allowed performers to combine fancy footwork with sounds that transfixed audiences. At these events, dancers would showcase their skills and learn techniques from other dancers” (2021).

Minstrel shows were a form of entertainment that formed in the early 19th century in America, they became one of the first distinctly American entertainment forms, but they are deeply tied to racist stereotypes and practices. The performances typically involved white actors in blackface (a form of makeup that exaggerates racial features) performing caricatured representation of African Americans and these shows were often presented as comedic, musical and dance filled spectacles. The shows featured a mix of music played on banjos and songs based on African American musical traditions and dance acts that exaggerated and often mocked African American dance styles. The shows began in the 1820s and gained popularity by the 1830s and the performances emerged in urban areas such as New York.

Tap dance draws a rich tapestry of influences including European dance traditions. These European contributions played a big role in shaping tap dance alongside African rhythms and movements, one of the most direct European influences on tap dance is Irish step dancing. The Irish had their own distinctive form of dance, even though it has a completely different

style than tap its fast footwork is similar. English clog dancing characterized by wooden-soled shoes that create rhythmic sounds also influenced tap, the focus on the percussive footwork became a foundational element of tap dance. Early clogging emphasized patterns and beats which were adapted and expanded into tap dance. Ballet and classical dance traditions contributed to tap dance's form and sculpture, these styles brought a sense of poise, posture and theatrical presentation to tap and the influence of stagecraft including operettas and vaudeville traditions helped shape the performance aspects of tap dance. In America European influences met African traditions which emphasizes syncopation, polyrhythm and improvisation and this fusion created a dynamic and unique form of dance that was both expressive and rhythmic.

Tap dance is featured in a wide variety of films from *Singing in the Rain* directed by Kelly.G and Donen.S (1952) and *Swing Time* directed by Stevens.G (1935) to more modern-day films such as *Billy Elliot* directed by Daldry.S (2000) and *happy feet* directed by Miller.G (2006). A significant number of films featuring tap dance existed between the 1930s and the 1950s, whereas nowadays there are not that many examples of films that feature the style of dance in many films from the 30's - 50's we see the direct influence of blues jazz music affecting our interpretation and connection to tap dance

In the film 'singing in the rain' (Kelly, G & Donen, S, 1952.) Tap dance is featured in several key scenes throughout the film. Gene Kelly's solo number "singing in the rain" incorporates rhythmic footwork and precise tap technique whilst blending with the joyful atmosphere of the song. The music within the film features jazz-inflected orchestrations with syncopated rhythms which mirror the rhythms used in tap dance. The lively and upbeat nature of the score compliments the tap choreography and emphasizes the connection between the two.

Even though Singin' in the Rain is generally more upbeat, the slower and more blues-infused number like "you were meant for me" reflects a connection to the slow, moody side of jazz music where there is a sense of longing and heartbreak that is expressed through pacing and rhythm.

In the film *Swing Time* (Stevens, G, 1935) Fred Astaire's iconic tap performances represents the technical aspect of tap dance at a high level. In numbers such as "Pick Yourself Up" and "Never Gonna Dance" his footwork is smooth and intricate which shows a perfect fusion of tap and ballet and the emphasis on the timing, rhythm and fluidity is essential to the style of tap dance. In some sequences like "Never Gonna Dance" there is an element of a melancholy and emotional depth that evokes the feeling of a slow blues and this contrast between tap and blues works to show the emotional complexity of the narrative and the characters. The score in *Swing Time* incorporates elements of swing, jazz and blues and the melodies often have a laid-back rhythm that aligns closely with jazz improvisation. Songs like "The Way You Look Tonight" evoke the blues element in a relaxed but expressive phrasing whilst the upbeat "Pick Yourself Up" captures the energy and syncopation of jazz and Fred Astaire's tap dancing in the film often draws on rhythms and movement patterns of jazz swing.

In *An American in Paris* (Minnelli, V, 1951). It is more known by its ballet and contemporary dance influences, Gene Kelly's dancing still prominently features tap dance and his performance in the film especially in numbers such as "I Got Rhythm" shows how jazz and tap dance can be fluidly integrated into more theatrical and ballet-based routines. The slow blues influence in *An American in Paris* is evident in the atmospheric score by George Gershwin. Gershwin's ability to blend blues, jazz and classical music which creates an emotional depth that mirrors the slow blues rhythms and the use of blues in the film's score

rolls with the emotional and slow phrasing which is often found in blues songs. The film reflects how jazz and blues music were central to post-war American culture and the Parisian setting in the film helps to serve a backdrop for the fusion of American jazz with European influence, which therefore highlights the global impact of jazz music which often included slow blues rhythms. The dance numbers are often accompanied by jazz music that incorporates both slow and fast tempos and shows the range that jazz music can create throughout the film.

In comparison to tap dance in films, tap dance in musicals feel much more current and during shows such as *Anything Goes* which was directed and choreographed by Kathleen Marshall and released in 2021 and *Newsies* which was directed by Matt Cole and was released in 2022 and during these musicals there are large tap ensemble numbers that represent a community and have an entertainment value,

The large ensemble tap dance numbers, such as the iconic ‘*Anything Goes*’ (Ridley, S, 1934) represents the joy and the carefree attitude of the passengers aboard on the ship, with tap dance serving as an expression of exuberance and unity and the intricate tap choreography enhances the story’s sense of escapism and fun. The ensembles tap routines especially in the ships setting depict a wide range of characters who despite their different backgrounds they all come together through dance and the choreography highlights the shared experience amongst the characters on the ship and the way they find a connection in a fun and celebratory environment. The large tap numbers in the show mirror the escapist, lighthearted nature of the musical by incorporating tap, the ensemble brings humor and joy, engaging the audience with enhancing and the lighthearted, comedic tone of the show. The tap numbers in *anything goes* are designed to entertain and captivate the audience, offering a spectacle through

choreography and execution and the footwork entertains whilst also providing a sense of shared joy and communal celebration, in this context tap dance symbolises freedom and collective joy, reflecting the escapist themes of the musical. The ensemble uses tap as an expression of liberation from the constraints of society, providing entertainment that allows for self-expression, the tap numbers in the show are complemented by the musical's classic 1930s big band sound and the tap choreography seamlessly integrates with the upbeat music which enhances the show's overall energy and appeal. The large ensemble tap numbers in the musical create a stunning visual spectacle with dozens of dancers moving in unison, the choreography fills the stage and makes the tap not just a dance but a visual treat that adds a sense of impressiveness to the performance. As evidence we see that tap dance represented in modern musicals like *Anything Goes* suggests that the style is still as relevant as ever.

In the musical 'Newsies' (Calhoun, J, 2012) tap serves as an expression of the newsboys' community in a fight for a better life, the numbers in the show this is "King of New York" and "Seize the Day" and these show the camaraderie between the boys and the synchronization of the steps emphasizes their teamwork and collective goal of gaining freedom and justice, the tap choreography is integral in showing the unity of the working-class characters and the rhythm and precision in the tap sequences underscore the resilience and determination as the boy's face the tough odds. Their tap dancing is not just for entertainment but it conveys a fight for change, the tap numbers in *Newsies* particularly those with large groups engage with the audience with the rhythm and synchronized precision, the entertainment value comes from the combination of athleticism and musicality which draws the audience into the newsboys' world through the dynamic tap choreography. In *Newsies* tap is symbolic for the freedom and empowerment that the boys are for, in numbers like 'seize

the day' tap is used to represent the fight for their voices to be heard and the desire for better conditions and offers a sense of release and celebration during adversity. This parallels the origins of the form, reflecting a sense of political and social activism which birthed tap dance as a part of its early African American heritage.

As we can see from the points above tap dance has played an important role across various areas throughout contemporary culture and society. Throughout the styles history we can see that tap originated from African tribes and after the slave trade ended European countries helped create the style what it is today by interpreting what the African Americans did. In film tap dance had the most visibility across the 30s to the 50s and it echoed some of its heritage combined with slower rhythms of blues jazz music. Compare that to modern day musicals which see large ensemble representing a sense of community and a sense of togetherness, again this is further evidence of the dance forms origins including how it exists in the modern day. Using this we can see an argument for the fact that tap dance is still relevant based on its existence across contemporary society.

Chapter 2

Tap dance in education and training

In this second chapter I will be discussing tap dance in education and training. The way that I will be portraying this is by talking about the brief history of tap in education from the early 20th century to now, the current trends in tap education, the way teachers approach teaching the style, the challenges the style faces in modern education and provide examples of innovative tap dance program.

Vaudeville is a masquerade with music. In the United States the term connotes a light entertainment show which was popular from the mid-1890s until the 1930s and it consisted of 10 to 15 individual unrelated acts which included magicians, acrobats, comedians, jugglers, singers and dancers. “In the early decades of the 20th century, tap dance was taught primarily as a form of entertainment, often in the context of vaudeville and Broadway. Its connection to popular culture ensured it was a vital part of the curriculum in American dance schools.”– Ann Barzel, “Tap Dance in America: A History,” 1981. This quote establishes the historical role of tap in the American dance education landscape, as a foundational genre in vaudeville, Broadway, and early film musicals. Tap dancers began collaborating with jazz musicians and incorporated improvisation and complicated and syncopated rhythms into their movements. The modern tap shoe featured metal plates (called taps) on the heel and on the sole of the shoe, this comes into widespread use at the time, although vaudeville and Broadway brought performance opportunities to African American people, although racism was very present because during performances white and black performers were separated by performing at separate shows and to segregated audiences. Tap dance became very popular and became a part of Broadway/musical theatre which was taking over vaudeville, also

musical comedies were a Hollywood film craze in the 1930s and tap fitted into these films perfectly because it was a style of dance that you could not only see but hear at the same time. From the 1930s to the 1950s, tap dance sequences became a key part of movies and tv shows, however the style declined in popularity during the second part of the 20th century, but it regained its popularity in the 80s due to shows such as ‘42nd Street’ Bacon. L (1933) and ‘The Tap Dance Kid’ Matalon. V (1933). Today tap dance can be mainly seen in musicals in the West End and on Broadway but it can be seen being taught in many dance schools to young children.

“While tap is often relegated to a niche position in many dance studios, its continued presence in conservatories and university programs suggests that it remains a significant, though sometimes underappreciated, component of a well-rounded dancer’s training.”

McCready A. L. , (2020). This quote highlights how tap continues to be part of professional training but may sometimes struggle for mainstream recognition in the face of more contemporary dance genres. Online dance classes have been gaining popularity in recent years and continues to grow in the coming years. The covid 19 pandemic has accelerated this trend as dance schools and studios were forced to pivot over to online classes due to social distance measures, however after the pandemic was lifted online dance classes remain popular as it provides flexibility and convenience for people who are unable to attend the class in person. The use of technology has been a trend in teaching tap as teachers can upload videos in which people can learn from in between weekly classes to practice. In some universities tap dance isn’t taught on the main curriculum so people go to tap classes in clubs or societies that range from beginner to advanced levels and often the classes follow structured syllabuses such as ISTD (Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing) which outlines

different levels of proficiency however some tap dance clubs focus on teaching technical skills as well as choreography to a multitude of different music styles from jazz and pop to classical rock. In universities that focus more on performance subjects such as dance or musical theatre tap is taught on the curriculum, in these classes' students are taught skills that are made into exercises, and they also taught small routines which are then shown during assessments or performances.

Historically tap dance was taught in an apprenticeship style setting with students learning directly from seasoned dance teachers, one traditional method that was used to teach was call and response where the teacher demonstrated steps and then the students would mimic and refine the steps through repetition. Another method that was used to teach tap was improvisation and oral tradition, in the early days of tap the style wasn't taught in studios and children were taught in informal settings such as clubs, street performances and on street corners learning from other people picking up different moves and making them their own showing creativity. Throughout the 20th century structured lessons emerged and they were led by master tap dancers, maintaining focus on a live demonstration, rhythm drilling and personalized feedback. Even though these methods of teaching preserved a cultural authenticity and emphasized the dancer's musical interpretation, it often lacked technique breakdown and theatrical frameworks.

“Pedagogy in tap dance today is shifting away from strictly formalized, step-based training to a more holistic approach that includes improvisation, rhythm exploration, and a deeper connection to music and sound.” McManus T,G , (2018). This quote supports the idea that modern tap pedagogy is moving away from pure technicality towards creativity and personal

expression, integrating rhythm exploration and improvisation. Today tap dance education has incorporated modern teaching techniques that enhances accessibility, technical refinement and theoretical understanding, one of the techniques that is used in teaching tap is learning the style online through videos this method allows people to learn either steps or choreography digitally from international professionals through recorded or live sessions and virtual workshops, another way teachers incorporate modern techniques into their teaching is inclusivity and diversity. “A new generation of tap dancers is increasingly committed to breaking down barriers of accessibility and inclusivity. Programs that emphasize cultural diversity, gender inclusivity, and adaptive techniques are gaining traction in dance studios and conservatories.” Davis, T.L (2021). This quote discusses the increasing efforts within the tap community to create inclusive spaces for dancers from all backgrounds, addressing the intersection of race, gender, and ability.

Tap dance in modern education face many challenges but it also holds significant opportunities for future development. In most schools and universities that teach dance and performance tap dance is not often the prioritized style and often focus on teaching on classical dance styles such as ballet and contemporary as these styles generally have a more structured and a visual framework for assessing technique, whereas with tap the style heavily relies on precise footwork and rhythm which makes it harder to identify mistakes and correct mistakes, especially for beginners who may not have a strong sense of musicality yet.

Another challenge tap dance faces is funding, many educational institutions struggle with funding for the arts and often that means cutting dance programs or reducing resources, which affects tap’s accessibility. “Despite its rich history and significant contributions to the broader dance world, tap dance often faces challenges in terms of funding and institutional

support. Dance programs that include tap often find themselves in competition with more popular or mainstream dance forms. Horne, L.A (2020). This quote directly addresses some of the challenges tap dance faces in terms of institutional support and funding, which can hinder its expansion and integration into broader dance education programs. On the other hand, tap dance has significant opportunities for future development of the style and one example of this is that it can be blended with different contemporary styles such as hip hop, jazz and even electronic music which makes it more exciting for younger generations to learn the style. Another example of an opportunity for the future development of tap dance is the revival of the style through social media, with people posting tap videos and tutorials on social media, dance competitions showcasing the style and tap dance being seen in movies and musicals can boost interest and inspire people to want to learn the style.

Tap dance is integrated into today's curriculum in a variety of different ways, one way is through dance academies and performing arts schools. Many specialized schools and dance academies include tap dance as part of their curriculum and in these schools, students learn rhythm, musicality and the historical context of tap dance. Colleges and university programmes that focus on performance courses such as musical theatre or dance feature tap dance as part of their curriculum this is because some dance jobs such as some theatre shows or performances on cruise ship require tap dance, and some schools provide tap dance history classes as a part of dance theory. Tap dance instructions have evolved significantly changed over the years due to advances in technology, changes in teaching techniques and shifts in culture. One traditional tap dance teaching method is in person learning where students primarily learnt in dance studios, often through small group classes whereas today students can access tap instruction via online classes, YouTube tutorials and virtual private classes. The opportunities that tap dance faces is its adaptability to different styles of music, which

allows the style to be stay modern and relevant and another opportunity tap dance faces is diversity and cultural expansion. Tap is gaining popularity all over the globe, with new talent emerging from different countries such as Brazil, Japan and Australia. After asking David Schönthal (the teacher of rhythm tap Cardiff) is tap dance is relevant, he said “and tap is still absolutely relevant. Tap is rhythm, and rhythm is music, and music is everywhere - it is also a form of exercise that allows people to switch off completely and to challenge their brains to learn new patterns of moving, which is beneficial for mental health, cognition, and the prevention of dementia”. Schönthal, D. (2025)

“Tap dance is far from a forgotten art form. It continues to thrive in diverse educational settings, with new generations of dancers embracing both its rich tradition and its evolving, innovative potential”. Parker J.S, (2023). This concluding quote encapsulates the idea that, despite challenges, tap remains a relevant and evolving form of dance in contemporary education, providing both historical depth and creative potential. As we can see from the points made above tap dance is and continues to be relevant in tap education from where it started in vaudeville back in the 1890s-1930s and where the only way you could learn the style was in a studio in person, to now where music and technology has helped in the teaching the style as people can learn it by attending online classes or learning it from a video tutorial. From an educational perspective, tap dance enhances motor skills, coordination, and musicality while promoting discipline and creativity and it also supports cognitive development, as students must engage in complex rhythmic patterns and syncopation, which can improve math thinking and problem-solving skills. Another indication of tap’s continued relevance is its minimal equipment requirements compared to other dance forms, this makes tap a practical choice for schools with limited resources and supports better accessibility for

those communities to still gain from it as a result. While some would say that tap dance has lost its popularity its presence in musical theatre and films ensures its continued relevance. Educational performance programs such as musical theatre and dance courses that integrate tap dance help preserve its rich tradition while preparing students for careers in the performing arts industry. Overall, tap dance remains a vital educational discipline, offering a blend of artistic, historical, and cognitive benefits that contribute to a well-rounded arts curriculum.

Chapter 3

Case studies

“Tap dance, like all art forms, thrives through its continuous evolution and the exchange of ideas across generations. Case studies of individual artists and performances provide insights into how tap has adapted to modern times while remaining true to its roots”

Smith,J. (2019). In this third chapter I am going to be discussing the importance of case studies in tap dance and how it is it is relevant to the style today. The way that will be portraying this topic is by closely examining the careers and contributions of tap dance artists such as Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, The Nicholas Brothers, Gene Kelly and Michelle Dorrance, this essay will highlight the ways in which tap dance has served not only as entertainment but also as a vehicle for cultural commentary and personal expression. These case studies also reveal how race, class, gender, and media have influenced the visibility and evolution of tap over time.

Before Robinson, tap existed as a rough-and-ready folk form, rooted in African American vernacular dance, and was shaped by historical cultural and vaudeville traditions. Robinson introduced a level of elegance, clarity and precision which elevated the style into a high-performance art and his trademark was the use of the upright stance rather than a stooped, shuffling posture associated with earlier forms of tap dance. This upright style gave tap a more dignified, polished and stage ready presence which was suitable for a range of audiences. Robinson was a master of clean and sharp sounds, emphasizing the clarity of each tap and incorporating intricate rhythms and his famous “stair dance”, in which he danced up and down a short flight of stairs and during the routine Robinson highlighted his unique

ability to blend talented footwork with theatrical flair. Robinson became one of the first African American performers to successfully cross over into mainstream American entertainment. “Bill Robinson was more than just a tap dancer; he was a cultural icon who made tap dance an expression of joy, resilience, and individuality, elevating it from the vaudeville stage to the mainstream American consciousness” Evans, D. (2004). This quote shows us that Robinsons performances in Vaudeville, Broadway and Hollywood exposed wide audiences to tap and helped to cement its popularity across racial and class lines. Bill Robinson’s innovations both stylistic and structural, set the stage for tap’s innovation into the 20th century and his technical precision became a benchmark for inspiring upcoming tap dancers such as the Nicholas Brothers, Gregory Hines, Savion Glover and mentoring younger dancers by passing along his techniques and values to the younger generation. Moreover, his insistence on dignity and professionalism in performance laid the groundwork for tap to be respected as a serious art form.

Gene Kelly’s impact on Hollywood musicals was profound particularly through his performances in ‘Singin in the rain’ Stonen.D (1952) and ‘An American in Paris’, Minnelli.V (1951). He defined the role of dance in film by integrating tap with styles such as ballet, jazz and athletic movement, creating a uniquely American dance style that was both sophisticated and accessible. One of Kelly's defining contributions was his fusion of tap with ballet and jazz in the film ‘An American in Paris’ and his collaboration with ballet dancer Leslie Caron led to a cinematic 17-minute ballet sequence that blended both classical ballet and modern jazz inspired movement. Kelly’s tap sequences often included elements of ballet, such as sweeping arm movements and extended leg lines, which gave his routines theatrical depth. In ‘Singin in the Rain,’ Kelly displayed his ability to blend multiple styles seamlessly and one

example of this is the iconic “Singin in the Rain” sequence. This sequence redefined tap as a vehicle for storytelling and emotional expression, where his energetic yet relaxed movements conveyed joy and spontaneity, meanwhile in “Moses Supposes” Kelly and Donald O’Connor executed a rapid-fire tap duet which Intergrated jazz influenced syncopation and rhythmic complexity, pushing tap beyond its traditional boundaries. Kelly expanded the visual and cinematic possibilities of tap dancing. Rather than confining to stage like spaces, he used innovative camera techniques and dynamic settings. In ‘Singin in the Rain’ he did not just dance on a studio floor but also in the rain with water splashing beneath his feet, adding a new visual and sensory element to tap and he often used long takes with wide shots which allowed audiences to fully appreciate the physicality and precision of his choreography. Kelly played a crucial role in popularizing tap for mainstream audiences. His on-screen persona was relatable as he often played ordinary men who danced in realistic, everyday environments rather than in grand ballrooms and this approach made dance feel less elite and more like a natural form of self-expression. Moreover, Kelly's work as a choreographer and director influenced generations of dancers and filmmakers. His use of storytelling through movement set a precedent for later musical films, and his emphasis on merging styles laid the groundwork for future dance evolutions in films. By merging tap with ballet, jazz, and cinematic innovation, “Gene Kelly transformed tap dance in Hollywood, combining his classical training with jazz and tap rhythms to create a style that was both athletic and expressive. His performances were a revolution, pushing the boundaries of dance on film” Schwartz, P. (2012). This quote tells us that Kelly not only redefined tap dance for the silver screen but also made it an essential part of Hollywood's musical legacy.

The Nicholas Brothers, Fayard and Harold were amongst the most extraordinary and influential tap dancers of the 20th century. Their unique style, blending tap dance with acrobatics revolutionized dance in a film and live performances and one of the brothers most iconic routines came from the film ‘Stormy Weather’ Stone, A.L(1943) which remains a defining example of their athleticism, technical mastery, and innovation. The brothers were known for their combination of high-speed rhythm tap with gravity defying ariel stunts, making their style distinct from the more traditional tap dance contemporaries. Their routine in ‘Stormy Weather’ is often regarded as one of the greatest dance sequences ever filmed, the key elements that set them apart include, split based acrobatics and ariel tricks. One of their most legendary moves in ‘Stormy Weather’ was their decent down a flight of stairs using consecutive leaps over each other and landing into splits on the next step down and then rebounding with seamlessly impossible ease. The brothers seamlessly incorporate flips, barrel turns and no handed somersaults into their tap routines which really set them apart from other dancers. Unlike many dancers who focused solely on rhythm or soft sole techniques, “The Nicholas Brothers fused acrobatics with tap in a way that had never been done before. Their performances were marked by extraordinary speed, precision, and fearlessness, highlighting an energy that transformed the way tap was perceived in the entertainment world” Harrison, L. (2010). Their fluidity made these incredibly movements appear effortless, a testament to their unparalleled skills. Despite their immense, the Nicholas Brothers faced racial barriers in the entertainment industry, during the golden age of Hollywood, black performers were often relegated to stereotypical roles, but the Nicholas Brothers undeniable artistry allowed them to carve out a space in major motion picture. Unlike many black entertainers of the era, they were often featured as sophisticated, well-dressed gentlemen rather than in subservient roles. The brothers influence extended far beyond Hollywood because people such as Fred Astaire,

Gene Kelly, and Michael Jackson, all cited them as inspirations. The brother's fusion of tap and athleticism paved the way for modern dance styles such as hip hop and even breakdancing.

Michelle Dorrance is a transformative figure in contemporary tap dance, renowned for her ability to bridge the gap between tap's historical legacy and its modern evolution. As a dancer, choreographer, and founder of Dorrance dance, she has pushed the boundaries of the form, expanding tap's artistic reach while remaining deeply committed to its cultural roots. Dorrance's work is grounded in the rhythmic complexity and improvisational essence of traditional tap dance. She frequently pays homage to tap legends such as Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, Gregory Hines and her mentor Gene Medler. At the same time, she reinterprets tap for contemporary audiences, incorporating nontraditional elements like electronic music, experimental structures and collaborations with other dance forms. One of Dorrance's groundbreaking works, *ETM: Double Down*, exemplifies her innovative approach. Created in collaboration with Nicholas Van Young, the piece introduces electronic tap boards that trigger sound and manipulate acoustics in real time. This fusion of movement of technology transforms the dancers into live musicians, broadening the auditory and visual dimensions of tap. By integrating looping techniques and percussive layering, Dorrance reimagines tap as an avant-garde performance art, proving that it's not just a nostalgic form, but one capable of continuous reinvention. "Michelle Dorrance's work pushes tap dance into the contemporary realm, incorporating elements of modern dance and technology, while retaining a deep respect for its rhythmic roots. She exemplifies how the art form can evolve without losing its identity" Walker, R. (2016). This quote shows that Michelle Dorrance often fused tap with contemporary dance and street styles, creating hybrid works that speak to both tap's past and

its future, one of her pieces called 'Myelination' highlight her intricate phrasing and polyrhythmic structures which demonstrates how she pushes tap beyond its traditional framework. Through her work Michelle Dorrance situates tap within the broader landscape of modern dance, asserting its relevance in contemporary performance while ensuring its historical integrity. Her contributions to tap dance has put the style into a position of an evolving and boundary pushing art form.

In conclusion "The case studies explored show that tap dance, far from being a forgotten art, continues to innovate and inspire. Through figures like Kelly, the Nicholas Brothers, Dorrance, and the global reach of digital platforms, tap dance remains a vibrant and relevant form of artistic expression" Davis, M. (2018). This quote shows that tap dance has had many amazing examples of artists such as Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, the Nicholas Brothers and Michelle Dorrance. These incredibly talented dancers have shaped tap dance to what it is today by making the style their own such as the Nicholas Brothers including acrobatics into their routines to showcase flare and Gene Kelly incorporating different styles such as ballet and jazz so showcase versatility. These case studies highlight tap dance's remarkable adaptability and continued cultural significance and across different historical periods and artistic contexts tap dance has evolved by incorporating new styles from jazz and hip hop to contemporary electronic compositions, another way that tap dance has evolved is by engaging with diverse social movements. Many case studies demonstrate tap's role as a vehicle for cultural identity, protest and storytelling particularly within marginalized communities. These case studies listed above collectively illustrate that tap dance is far from a static art form instead it continues to evolve by engaging in new trends, technological advancements and social movements.

Chapter 4

The future of tap dance

In this fourth and final chapter I will be discussing the challenges and opportunities that tap dance will face in the future. The way I will be discussing this topic is by talking about the challenges facing tap dances future such as maintaining its popularity and relevance when other dance styles are gaining popularity, financial and institutional support such as funding for tap projects and the way tap dance is portrayed in festivals and dance competitions.

However, there are opportunities for the style such as the role of social media and technology such as online learning and innovations in performance technology, and innovations in tap dance performance with how tap dance is fusing with other styles such as hip hop and contemporary dance. "The future of tap dance lies in balancing its rich history with contemporary expressions, while ensuring its preservation as an art form for future generations". Green, S. (2019). Reflecting on the challenges and opportunities in tap dance is essential as the art form continues to evolve and it helps preserves its rich cultural history, especially its African American roots, while guiding meaningful innovation. By acknowledging past and present struggles such as lack of recognition or access, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for future dancers. This reflection also inspires creativity by welcoming a diversity of perspectives and experiences, we can see how this will inspire greater creativity which ensures the relevance of tap in modern contexts and empowers the next generation to carry the tradition forward with purpose and passion.

"Tap dance has struggled to capture the public's imagination in an era dominated by more mainstream dance styles, leading to a decline in both visibility and engagement". Carter, M. (2017). Tap dance, once a staple of vaudeville, Hollywood musicals and jazz culture has seen

a gradual decline in mainstream visibility. Unlike contemporary styles such as hip-hop, ballet, or contemporary dance, tap dance is often perceived as a niche or nostalgic form and this decline is partly due to shifting entertainment mediums. Fewer musical films, less tap-centric programming and a focus on viral choreography that favours visual flare over intricate sound-based rhythm and as a result younger generations may lack exposure to tap as a vibrant, evolving art form, moreover limited funding for the arts education in schools disproportionately affects forms like tap dance which require not only skilled instructors but also specific flooring and shoes which makes access more difficult than other dance styles. Tap dancers today face a unique creative tension: "The challenge of tap dance lies in preserving its traditional forms while embracing innovation that keeps it relevant in the modern performance world." Johnson, E. (2020). The legacy of figures such as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers and Gregory Hines are huge icons in the world of tap and their rhythmic vocabularies are seen as foundational, however in an ever-changing cultural landscape younger dancers are fusing tap with elements of hip hop, jazz and even electronic music. While this fusion can breathe new life into the form and attract broader audiences, it can also spark debate within the tap community about what constitutes "authentic" tap. Dancers often navigate a tightrope and honours the rhythmic discipline and improvisational core of traditional tap while seeking innovative ways to express modern identities and concerns. This leads us to question whose voices still inform and shape the style. Do we still see elements of its history or is it moving into entirely new territory? "The history of tap dance, with its roots deeply embedded in African American culture, raises questions about cultural appropriation and the authenticity of performances in predominantly white spaces." Brown, L. (2016). This quote shows that tap dance primarily originated within African American communities as a form of resistance, expression, cultural storytelling,

drawing on African rhythmic traditions and Irish step dancing. However much of this context has historically been erased or overlooked particularly when tap is taught or performed in mainly white institutions or commercial settings and in these environments the art form is sometimes presented as a stripped form of its cultural roots leading to accusations of appropriation. Authenticity in this case involves more than technical skill, it requires acknowledgment of the art form's lineage, the history surrounding the style's evolution and a commitment to uplifting voices from the communities that credited it. This includes giving proper credit which supports black tap artists, and contextualizing performances within the broader historical narrative.

Despite its significant contributions to musical and cultural heritage, particularly within the African American tradition, tap dance remains largely underfunded when compared to other genres of dance and performance arts. Public arts councils, private foundations and institutional grant makers often prioritise classical ballet, contemporary and modern dance which are genres of dance that closely align with Eurocentric frameworks of 'high art', in contrast tap dance is frequently overlooked and perceived instead as either commercial or purely entertainment based. This disparity in funding stems not only from cultural bias but also from the structural framework used to evaluate artistic value and innovation, the style's improvisational nature, rhythmic complexity and roots in marginalised communities do not always translate well within these evaluative systems and as a consequence artists and companies that specialise in tap must often rely on self-funding, community fundraising or smaller scale local grants which limits their ability to create, tour or archive work at a sustainable level. "The lack of funding for tap dance projects, especially in comparison to more mainstream forms of dance, remains a significant barrier to the growth of the art form.

"Turner, S. (2021). This quote shows us that tap dance has always been thrown to the side when it comes to funding which therefore hinders the growth of tap classes and projects. Mainstream dance institutions such as repertory companies and national theatres rarely commission or programme tap dance works, this absence from major stages not only limits professional opportunities but also perpetuates the notion that tap lacks depth seriousness of other genres and additionally, scholarly literature on tap dance remains comparatively sparse. Academic engagement with the form is frequently confined to historical retrospectives or biographical studies, with little critical discourse on technique, aesthetics or paedology. In the face of institutional support festivals and competition and grassroots initiatives have become crucial in sustaining and developing the tap dance community. International events serve as vital platforms for performance, education and innovation, however in the UK while similar platforms are fewer initiatives and workshops led by British based artists help maintain visibility and fosters a sense of community among practitioners. "Tap dance festivals and competitions play a vital role in bringing attention to the form but can also place undue pressure on performers to conform to particular styles." Lee, J. (2020). While festivals and competitions are invaluable in cultivating interest and skill, they cannot fully substitute for the institutional infrastructure required to legitimise and sustain a dance form in the long run but nonetheless they remain essential spaces where tap continues to thrive, evolve and assert its place within the broader dance and performing arts landscape.

"Social media has democratized dance, enabling tap dancers to showcase their craft and engage with a global audience, while also transforming how tap is taught and shared." Patel, A. (2022). Social media platforms have become instrumental in elevating the profile of tap dance on a global scale. YouTube for instance offers an expansive archive of performances,

tutorials and interviews, serving both as an educational resource and a stage for international exposure, meanwhile visual first platforms like Instagram and TikTok allow dancers to share short form content that is rhythmically engaging and easily consumable by a wide audience. The immediacy and accessibility of these platforms have made tap dance more visible to younger generations who may not have encountered the form in traditional settings. High profile artists such as Chloe Arnold and Sarah Reich have utilised these platforms to promote new interpretations of the form, making tap more contemporary, inclusive and appealing to diverse audiences. "Emerging performance technologies, such as interactive sound systems, allow tap dancers to explore new ways of integrating rhythm and sound in their performances." Morgan, L. (2023). Beyond education and community, technology is revolutionising the performance of tap dance itself and advances in sound and stage technology are allowing dancers to manipulate audio outputs in real time. For example, tap shoes embedded with microphones or sensor equipped floors can amplify or alter the sounds produced by each step, effectively turning the dancer into a live musical instrument. The integration of multimedia elements further expands the expressive possibilities of tap, performances may now include digital projections, virtual environments or augmented reality components that respond to the dancers' movements. These technological enhancements open up new narrative and aesthetic dimensions, positioning tap not just as a art form but as a multidisciplinary performance art capable of engaging with contemporary themes and audiences.

Choreographers such as Michelle Dorrance are redefining tap not merely as a percussive form, but as a vehicle for narrative, identity and artistic experimentation and the result is choreography that feels like a series of 'numbers' and more like rhythmic essays and

emotional dialogues, often interwoven with multimedia or live music. This innovation signals a shift from purely entertainment-based routines to deeply artistic, concept driven works. Tap is gaining new ground in theatre, film and interdisciplinary performance, West end Broadway revivals such as *Shuffle Along* and original productions like *Bring in 'da Noise* have reignited interest in tap as a storytelling medium on stage. In film and digital media tap is being rediscovered both as a nostalgic art form and a contemporary means of expression- evident in viral performances and artistic short films. there is a growing trend of incorporating tap in avant-garde performances and multimedia installations, where rhythm becomes a form of dialogue between the performer, space and audience, these venues are proving tap can be just as potent in dramatic or abstract contexts as it is in traditional showcase settings. Although tap originated in the United States, it has become a global phenomenon, and countries such as Brazil, Japan and Sweden have developed vibrant tap scenes, often blending the dance with their own musical traditions like samba and folk rhythms. International tap festivals and online platforms have accelerated cross cultural exchange, enabling dancers from around the world to collaborate, share techniques and co create. This global evolution not only preserves tap's legacy but also transforms it into a living, breathing and culturally adaptive art form. "The increasing diversity of tap dancers is bringing new voices and styles to the forefront, challenging and enriching the genre's traditional norms." Gomez, C. (2023). Tap is increasingly becoming a space for underrepresented voices to be heard, historically rooted in African American culture tap is now embracing a wider range of narratives, including those from LGBTQ+ communities, women and global majority artists from diverse backgrounds. This inclusivity is reflected in the music chosen and the styles being developed from flamenco influences to South Asian

rhythmic traditions, tap dance is no longer confined to a singular cultural identity-it is becoming a global mosaic of footwork and rhythm.

Overall, it's because of both the tensions and innovations in the evolution of tap dance, that we see opportunities for promise. New voices, digital impact, fusion with new styles, all point to the style making its case for survival. Whilst we can also see clear challenge, questions of authenticity and funding, there is recognition through dedicated platforms and events that this art form is here to stay. We can see across the evidence that tap dance is perhaps arguably a relevant dance style still and whilst it may have changed its appearance and even the spaces that we engage with it, tap dance is still a relevant style of dance because of its rich cultural history, rhythmic complexity and adaptability. Originating from African American traditions and evolving through jazz and theatre, it combines movement with music making dancers both uniquely performers and percussionists and its ability to blend with other styles such as hip hop and classical music keeps it current, while its presence in theatre and media maintains public interest. Tap is also widely accessible, helping dancers develop musicality and coordination thus improving balance and posture, it is a dance form which can be adapted for all ages to participate and enjoy. It provides the dancer with scope for individual interpretation and personality. Tap should be put on an equal platform to other dance styles to its benefits and not be demoted to an optional subject within a dance curriculum. The traditional teaching of tap is essential for the student to gain an understanding of the fundamentals of the style, however the student should also be encouraged to explore and develop their own style. This may lead to innovation within the dance. Students of tap dance should be encouraged to view works by modern contemporary artists and not limit themselves to the traditional styles Contemporary artists continue to

innovate within the style, ensuring its ongoing cultural and artistic significance. Social media platforms such as Tik Tok and Instagram make viewing of such work readily accessible. This could create exciting possibilities for tap dance as we look toward the future; more people engaging with the form to boost its visibility and thinking about the surprising spaces which tap dance could be a part of. Whilst the traditional tap routines of musical theatre shows such as '42nd Street' continue to draw large crowds with ease, there may be a need to widely promote the modern contemporary style shows to a wider and potentially newer audience. Social media platforms advertising such shows may prove beneficial reaching potentially new audiences. Tap dance remains as a relevant dance style because it continues to evolve and inspire, making it a vibrant and enduring part of the dance world and as new generations of dancers incorporate their own styles and influences, tap will continue to evolve as new generations of dancers such as Michelle Dorrance are moving the traditional tap dance style forward creating performances that are not only entertaining but also reflective of contemporary culture. The modern era and the future of tap is about innovation, experimentation and expression.

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