

## TAP DANCE DAYS

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National Tap Dance Day doesn't exactly rank with the Fourth of July in the national consciousness. It's only existed since 1989, when the US congress passed a joint resolution designating May 25 as a day to celebrate this uniquely American art form.

This May I celebrated my first National Tap Dance Day. I'm a pretty new tapper, especially for a pretty old person. About a year ago, at age fifty-four, I opened the blue door of the Leon Collins Studio in Brookline Massachusetts and descended the stairs under a sign that read: "Tappers' Paradise." For years I had known about this little studio, founded by one of the original African American masters, and had said to myself, "Carolyn, get off your duff and learn to tap." I knew I'd love it. I'm the shake-it-up queen of the dance floor at the odd wedding, and when my roving radio dial hits Fats Waller I let it stay there, not to mention that my husband is a serious jazz musician himself. So the raw materials were there, but somehow I never made that trip to tappers' paradise. I was much too busy with my growing daughter, graduate school, my house, my career.

Until last year, when a friend's urging finally propelled that duff through the blue door. Mind you, my only previous dance lesson was at age six (unless you count the torture of seventh grade ball room dance classes). Perhaps prophetically, that lesson was in tap. I remember standing in a line with other little girls who seemed to shuffle-step much better than I. I never went back.

In the Leon Collins studio I became that child again, feeling exposed and awkward as I struggled to get my shuffle-ball-changes clean and off the beat—remember, this is jazz! My teacher, Judythe Lokich, told the class that tap dancing is all about repetition. That helped. It's also all about humility. After years building my skills and reputation as a psychologist, there I was with no identity but as a plump and graying little woman in tidy black shoes with bits of metal on their bottoms. The little girls in the line had weathered a bit, but they still seemed better than I. This time, though, I stayed with it, and Judythe took her ingenues step-by-step into the land of dance.

We got so good that Judythe signed us up for a student showcase on National Tap Dance Day. Thelma Goldberg, who runs a dance studio in Lexington, Massachusetts, organized a National Tap Dance Day extravaganza, including student performances, master classes, and an improvisation jamfest to top it all off. This would be our debut.

My class sweated and toiled over our two minute dance. It took months of once-a-week classes to get the steps, then weeks of drill, drill, drill not to forget them. Judythe devised "Plan A" and "Plan B." Plan A was to do the whole dance through together. Plan B was to break into small groups, with each group dancing only one of three choruses, coming together in a grand finale. When it became clear that we could dance all the choruses some of the time, some choruses all of the time, but not all the choruses all of the time (to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln), Judythe adopted plan B.

National Tap Dance Day started with a parade and the anxiously anticipated student showcase at the Lexington town auditorium. After much overventilation and one tushy-whomping slip in the marble foyer, we did fine. We felt slightly upstaged by the spirited tappers from the Lexington senior center. Clearly, age was not to be our excuse.

Of the whole day, it was the evening jamfest that for me was the most important. By that time, the hundreds of dancers had melted down to about twenty or so. These included some of Boston's greats: the beautiful Sue Ronson, who danced with Agnes DeMille on Broadway; the formidable Josh Hilberman in yellow tap shoes and matching shorts; and an assortment of dance teachers. We also numbered the platinum blond 77 year old who performed in fringe and sequins, an irrepressible eight-year-old boy who had mastered a fancy turn that he spun endlessly and joyously when his turn to improvise came around, high-school girls who flashed the fanciest steps of all, and a few duffers like me, frozen with panic before we launched into the endless space of those empty bars that were ours to bring to life. The democracy was breathtaking.

We traded twos and fours, passed fragments of moves to each other, and broke loose together in cacophonies of taps to boogie-woogie beats. When my solo turns came, I felt like I was leaping off the edge of a cliff, grasping for branches to break my fall. Once in a while my blank and frightened mind would conjure up a fragment of a step that would rescue me; other times I couldn't find a beat or a step to save my life. Those moments felt like total humiliation, but I survived. Nobody hooted or motioned me out of the room, and my disgrace quickly dissolved in the next dancer's four bar beats.

Just once my mind and spirit and feet came together, and I tapped out the musical idea that was in my head. I spoke with my feet. I said something that I could say no other way. I felt transcendent. This was the heart of tap, with all its terrors and promise. I only felt that pulse for a moment, but it's a start. I intend to keep practicing and to knock 'em dead on National Tap Dance Day in 1997.