

## Tap Dance in America: UK Perspective

I started tapping at the age of 7, working through the normal system in the UK, which consists of syllabus exams. I qualified as a tap teacher at the age of 18 and once again continued working my way through the various teaching examinations whilst working as a dancer and choreographer. I am now Fellowship status within the ISTD (Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing). A point at for many would complete their learning as there are no other exams. For me it was the completion of one system and a stepping stone to what I really want to achieve.

Having learnt both syllabus and freestyle tap in the UK I've felt that I had good exposure to different styles in tap, and teaching my own classes has given me good opportunity to experiment and play around with new steps.

So my initial thoughts on planning my trip to the USA was how different could it be? We're all trying to do similar things. I have wanted to study in the USA for the last 6 years but unfortunately something always gets in the way and there was never a good time. Knowing I would complete my exams with the ISTD in May 2005 and have nothing to work on seemed to give me the perfect reason to come this year. Hoping to gain new inspirations and have an opportunity to learn from people I have admired for as long as I can remember, I set about planning my trip. Initially I planned just to travel to Los Angeles for the tap fest but then I found out Las Vegas wasn't too far away so maybe I could go there too! My week turned to 3 weeks with a family holiday in between.

On Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August, my day to leave, when I woke all I could think was what a good idea it all seemed in January! The panic set in, I was going to travel on my own over 5000 miles to a country I'd never been to, not knowing anyone and leaving my 2 1/2 year old son at home. I must be insane! Having been pushed through the gates at Heathrow by my husband who reassured me I'd be fine I realised I had to get on with it. I even managed to relax on the plane, which continued until I got to immigration in the USA and then realised the air stewards had counted me as part of the nice family I was sat by and now I didn't have any forms to get me through customs! Once into the hotel and settled decided I should try and sleep, unfortunately I didn't realise how hard that was going to be when you're on a different time zone!



Arriving at the Debbie Allen Dance Academy the next morning (feeling very tired), I was immediately struck by how welcoming everyone was, I quickly registered and got stuck in to class. I was gently guided into rhythm tap by Cyd Glover; she had such a fantastic way of teaching and a great manner. I had to concentrate quite a bit on moving my feet differently (in the UK we tend not to use ball of foot that much), but generally I thought this is fine, I was right its not too hard. Then it was either combination of jet lag or it suddenly got hard!

L to R Back Reggio "The Hooper", Jason Samuels Smith, Dick Van Dyke, Chloe Arnold and Elka Samuels  
Front , Harold Cromer, Brownie, Arthur Duncan, Diane Walker and Robert Reed JR

I had Jason Samuels-Smith next whom I had recently met in London when he danced in a show there. How can he make it all look so easy but yet its actually really hard! From here I think I noticed most differences. Firstly methods of

teaching were different to what I was used to, we tend to break everything down a lot more and say exactly what we are doing step wise. In America the important thing is the rhythm and that is how you know what steps you are doing. The intricacy and speed of steps initially fazed me. In

the UK we dance fast but in comparison we dance at a snails pace! The use of foot was quite tricky for me at first. For instance I had never taken a shuffle across the back of the other leg or worked my shins so intensely by doing continual ball movements. All the things that are probably taken for granted in America I noticed.

Firstly was the mixture of ages within a class (this may have been just because of the festival), and after initial panic of being outshone by a 12 year old I thought how cool it was that tap brings everyone together. Very rarely in England do you take a class where children and adults are mixed. What struck me the most was there was no animosity. Everyone accepted everyone for who they were regardless of age, ability, gender or colour. One other thing that I was aware of (but not until I spoke to someone at home) was we didn't need music. I think I only took 2 classes in the week that had music for the combination. At home we always tend to use music whatever we are doing!

After getting used to these changes and getting over my jetlag by the Wednesday it was all making sense to me. I felt much more comfortable and able to do it. My legs were doing what I wanted! Before it had felt a bit like I was starting at the beginning again.



As well as having the most amazing classes I also had a chance to meet some fantastic people. I had never realised there was such a tap community, just meeting dancers that share your views and understand you was so rewarding. The encouragement from the teachers was incredible. To hear them talk of their stories and what an honour it is to be able to pass their experiences and repertoire on. Previously for me I have been part of quite a guarded community where you don't tend to pass knowledge on,

people have not understood why I would want to continue to study and perform. So to be surrounded by people who understood me was very special.

Brownie performs at the LA Tap Fest



As well as great classes the evenings were also packed, a chance to listen to the panel, have talks on the business, watch cutting contests and showcases (I will be brave next time!) was great. As well as participating in the show and meet some of my heroes- Fayard Nicholas, Arthur Duncan, Dick Van Dyke and Brownie. It was a really amazing week. Topping that was going to be hard!

My husband and son met me at LAX on the Sunday and we set of to our next hotel with the plan of doing the tourist stuff! Unfortunately for them, I had spoken to Jim Taylor in the festival week and learnt in his repertoire was "Moses Supposes" & "Begin the Beguine". Luckily I have a husband who is supportive, has lots

of patience and also loves tap!

The ultimate – me and Henry Le Tang

One of my all time favourite pieces of dance on film is Moses supposes & to have opportunity to learn it really was an honour and also lots of fun. The rest of the week flew by and before I knew it we were arriving in Las Vegas where I had planned to see Bunny Briggs and Henry Le Tang. I am very grateful to have experienced the tap fest before meeting these two masters as I think I would have been too much in awe to even shuffle!

I met Bunny first and I learnt what you can never learn from a book. To hear him speak of his experiences and see his video collection was truly amazing. I was very glad to have the support of my friend Stephanie who I had met at tap fest as being told by Bunny Briggs to show him my steps was really scary for me. Reading about these people for so long and then having to show your stuff takes a bit of getting used to! To end my trip was my all time dream a chance to work with Henry Le Tang. Wow! I have never met someone who is 90 who still has so much vitality. I worked so hard and knew I couldn't stop as if Henry was still dancing and playing the piano then I had to keep going! Thankfully I'd got over any nerves by now and I truly loved every minute. Being in a studio surrounded by photos of your heroes and being taught by someone who has taught them was something I will always treasure.

So what did I learn from these experiences? Much more than I ever thought possible. My initial feeling was to change everything I had done and move to the USA! But not really practical at present, I would have to just try and do as much as I could to make people in the UK understand how much there is to tap and how important the history is. Already in my classes I am seeing the benefits. The students are responding well. The groups I teach are the advanced sets so they have already had a good grounding, I think for them it will increase their technique immensely. I am using less music, and have been surprised how much we have relied on music, now they have to listen more and not rely on the beat of the music. For the groups that are not as advanced I think they may struggle, if they have studied syllabus tap I think it could take them longer to get used to rhythm tap. It is hard for a syllabus dancer to get used to moving the foot differently and dancing a different style.

The UK system does work but I personally think for part time students (who attend for fun) or full time students combining this with rhythm tap. Looking how our country works with the academic system the dance exams do work well, and I am sure if we did not have this then there would be a lot of questioning regarding standards. Talking to parents of dancers attending the tap fest it was interesting to hear their amazement at what we do. They seemed to think it was a great idea to have more standardisation and students having to achieve certain exam levels before moving up. For me I find it hard to imagine a country as large as America doesn't have a similar situation, otherwise are there no regulations on dance teachers and surely parents don't know what they're getting? Personally I feel getting a balance seems to be the best option, the discipline of having to do an exam but the freedom and expression of rhythm tap.



And what happens to me from here? Already I have plans to return to continuing studying and am already thinking about which tap festivals to attend next year. Gaining such a positive vibe and encouragement from teachers in the USA has really inspired me to do more and make me want to keep tap alive as much as I can in the UK.

Great friends - Me with Stephanie Minarchan (Left) and Jessie Sawyers (Right) outside The Norman J Pattiz Concert Hall