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Jefferson Dance Program Taps On

Jefferson High School for the Performing Arts is a hulking, nearly windowless building in a Portland, Oregon neighborhood that's trying to make an urban renewal comeback. As I walk the halls, noisy groups of African American teenagers bounce into lockers, burst into song, and playfully mock each other. I ask a boy for directions to "The Dungeon" and he points me to the bowels of the building, saying "Just follow the tap noise."

I go down the stairs and ease through a heavy door into a high-ceilinged room, with tap-scarred oak floor, where tap teacher DeDe Priest is directing a motley group in a Lane Alexander-inspired hand jive routine. Priest is yelling and using sign language, trying to communicate over the chit chat, tap clattering and general goofing off of the boisterous bunch.

"OK, group one start here, group two go over there!" she commands. The music begins and the rag tag crew starts to dance, beating out the beginnings of another hip tap number.

Here in "The Dungeon," Jefferson's dedicated tap studio, the sound bounces off the walls and joins the collective echo of the millions of taps smacked out in this room over the past 30 years. If a place can be called a prep school for teenaged tap dancers, this is it.

Tap thrives in this unique institution that has inspired generations of performers and launched a number of professional careers. Offering world-class training to a racially diverse populace, Jefferson continues to turn out dancers prepared for the rigors of a professional career. Some students commute from other area high schools for the dance classes, while others take their academics at Jefferson as well.

The program is the lasting legacy of its founder Mary Vinton Folberg, an Oregon native who came to Jefferson in 1969 after teaching English and Dance in Oakland, California public schools.

"I started at Jefferson teaching basic dance and drill team," she recalls. Soon the program expanded to include jazz and modern and ballet; and even though tap was lagging in popularity at the time, Folberg knew that its rhythmic discipline and precision were a must for the well-rounded dancer. "As soon as I could I hired Bev Mellum and Deb Brzoska to teach tap," she says.

Brzoska had trained and performed with Folberg in Portland dancer Emery Clay's dance company. "He was a musician and was all about rhythm, not just hats and hands." Teaching tap at Jefferson from 1978-'89, she established the Jefferson outreach program which, "at its peak in the '80s we taught tap and jazz at all 17 of Portland's public middle schools."

In addition to solid tap technique, Folberg also exposed students to the tap masters "In the late '70s I was running a small presenting organization and we brought people like Honi Coles and the Copasetics, and Brenda Bufalino to town." The Jefferson students of the time were treated to workshops from reemerging legends and new stars alike.

Until she left the program in 1994 to start her own private arts school, Folberg inspired many future professionals. Randy Davis ('84) still dances on Broadway, brother and sister Ron and Kitten Smith ('86 and '87) operated a Portland dance studio; Dawn Stopiello ('84) has her own dance company; Aaron Wheeler Kay ('94) teaches and dances with local Portland company Do Jump and Cam Corbett ('91) currently lives and dances in Iceland.

Terry Brock, a veteran performer whose credits include a stint with Jazz Tap Ensemble and performances with Gregory Hines and Sam Weber, taught tap in the Jefferson program from 1990-1998. She remembers Folberg as a dedicated perfectionist.

"It was an excellent, all-encompassing training program. Mary was brilliant. She had a vision and knew educationally how to make it happen and to measure it academically." Brock recalled, "Our expectations were high for the students and we tried not to compromise."

Jefferson found a worthy successor to Folberg when long time staff teacher Julane Stites took over the program in 1994. In Stites' five years at the helm, she battled budget cuts and dwindling administrative support, while trying to maintain the high standards students expected of the program. Stites has since moved on to develop a dance program at a suburban high school, Beaverton Arts and Communications

In 1999 Jefferson got a shot of renewed enthusiasm when Steve Gonzalez became artistic director. Gonzalez, a former J.D. ('83 - '87) had found professional success touring the world with MOMIX dance company. He continues the commitment to tap as part of Jefferson's multi-disciplined program. "Tap develops rhythm and a sense of timing which all dances need," he says.

The company, which started with nine members in 1976 now numbers 25. Tap dancers have been treated by residencies from such tap luminaries as Linda Sohl-Donnell, Josh Hilberman, Van Porter and Heather Cornell. In the golden 1980s the troupe traveled as far as Russia, and still finds the funds to travel to Washington D.C., Florida, and even France.

Recent graduates of the program continue to reflect the high quality of Jefferson's training. Sisters Kasia and Sadie Wilhelmi ('02 and 04) both spent four years in the company. Kasia was accepted into UC Irvine's dance major program, one of 75 dancers chosen from a field of 270. She said "Steve is an incredible dancer himself and so inspiring. He put so much energy into us" Kasia noted that in the groups travels to Florida and Washington D.C, their company's cross-training of tap, jazz, ballet and African helped them stand out from other schools' dancers.

Her sister Sadie is at Fordham University's Ailey Ailey program in New York. She remembers Jefferson's rich roster of guest teachers: "We were so lucky to experience people like Leonard Reed, Savion, Linda Sohl-Donnell, Josh Hilberman and Van Porter." Fellow dancer Ty Cheung, who recently began performing with MOMIX, applauds Jefferson's own indigenous teachers, "My experience with Annie Ellett (tap teacher since 1981) was great because I had no prior experience and she helped me develop as a tapper."

Ellett herself said, "I love teaching at Jefferson because of the diversity and the staff."

Although today the number of students is lower than the golden years of the late 80s-early 90s, when enrollment reached 350, the Jefferson program still draws talented students from every corner of Portland, and produces word-class dancers.

Portland bursts with pride over the Jefferson Dancers. Every spring, the city turns out for a four-night sold out concert run in a downtown theater. The performances are reviewed by all of the local newspaper with the same criterion reserved for professional companies.

Every show features tap, jazz, ballet, and modern, and traditionally ends with the crowd on their feet clapping to the rhythms of African drummers. The dancers fling their heads, spring into the air and dance with sheer joy, knowing that their Jefferson experience can be a springboard to the world stage.