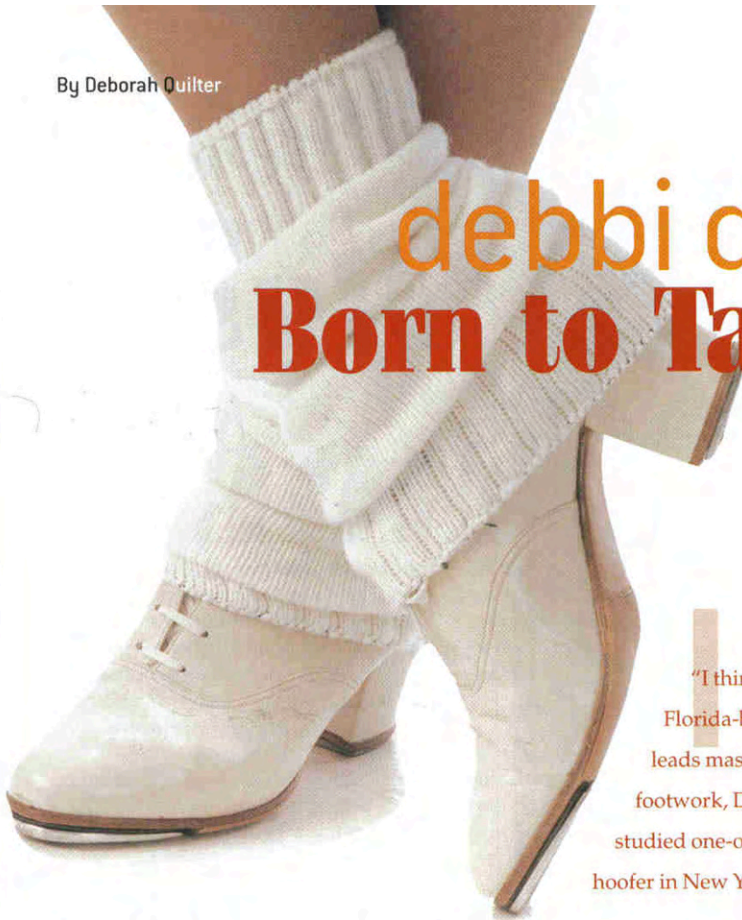


By Deborah Quilter

choreographer's corner

debbi dee Born to Tap



"I think I was a drummer in another lifetime," laughs Florida-based tap choreographer Debbi Dee. Although she leads master classes in her style of fast, close-to-the-floor footwork, Debbi has never taken a class herself; she always studied one-on-one. "I think I went to every vaudeville hooper in New York," she recalls.

Unlike many performers, Debbi started out as a teacher. She owned a dance school in Rochester, New York, and was spotted while teaching at a convention. There she met two people who would be pivotal in her future: Grace Wakefield, co-director of Starpower, who expanded her teaching horizons; and dance master Harry LeTang, who helped her launch her performing career.

Debbi's performance credits include solo turns on stages from Lincoln Center to Las Vegas; she is currently a guest choreographer and master teacher for Walt Disney World, Dance Masters of America and Dance Olympus/Danceamerica, among others. With over 500 pieces to her credit, chances are you've seen Debbi Dee's choreography.

Debbi is known for her ability to take a tap step

apart: "I dissect it to the most minute detail. It helps create speed automatically," she explains. She also emphasizes the importance of shading in her technique: A tap dancer lacking this quality is like a singer who only uses one note—boring! (After all, tap is the only dance form you can enjoy with your eyes closed.)

When it comes to creating choreography, Debbi starts with the music. "I listen to every single sound, accent, speed change. I know it inside-out," she says. She'll list 20 ideas, but waits until she's with the dancers to set a piece. "I choreograph on the spot with the dancer, at that minute...I want the choreography to be the best for that dancer.



I don't want her to be a carbon copy of me. I have to take advantage of that dancer's talent. [Also,] you might have eight dancers. Four are great tap dancers, four are not. We want all of them to look like they've been tapping all their lives." Therefore, the choreography must be something they all can do well. She gets a hint of this during auditions: "I say, 'Show me your most fabulous tap step.' I know their level right off the bat."

Debbi once set a piece with 21 dancers, only three of whom could tap. "I had three days to come up with a big production number," she recalls. She accomplished this miracle by giving them the equivalent of two eight-

hour master classes, teaching them the basics and more advanced tricks, then putting together a routine that showcased what they did best.

At conventions, Debbi tries to instill three important concepts in students. First, dance because you love it. If you win the championship, that's icing on the cake.

Second, don't be afraid to make a mistake. "If you can't make a mistake in class, where can you?" she asks. If you goof, learn from it and move on.

Last, put your heart into it from the start. "When I'm holding an audition, I'm not looking for the person who's perfect—I'm looking for the person who can perform," says Debbi. Don't spend months perfecting a routine and leave the smile for the last week—dance from your gut right off the bat, she adds. ♦