

Debbi
Dee



A PASSION FOR PEDAGOGY

Tap dance is currently in the middle of another renaissance where the art form is finding its place again in the ever changing scene of entertainment. As one of tap's main niches is in theatre and musicals, when one thinks of tap dancing, they often associate the genre with certain cities like New York and Chicago, and while those cities are truly alive with the spirit of tap, they aren't the only places to go. In fact, right here in the Sunshine State, tap has been alive and kicking, so to speak, for over thirty years thanks to teachers and dancers like Debbi Dee.

Debbi Dee is a nationally and internationally renowned tap teacher, having taught as a Master Teacher across the United States as well as various countries including Japan, France, and Canada. She is currently in her 42nd year of teaching, her 26th teaching in Florida, and she has been on the faculty of many esteemed studios in New York City such as Henry LeTang and Hines & Hatchett, more currently known as Broadway Dance Center as well as owning her own dance studios for twelve years upstate. She has many performance credits under her belt, including solo performances at Lincoln Center in New York City and in her own.

Las Vegas night club act, stated to be two of her favorite moments of her career as a dancer, though her true passion lies in the pedagogy of tap. She teaches classes, workshops, master classes and more to dancers of all ages and levels but her heart lies in teaching teachers and advanced tappers. "Teachers are so open to learn and experience what I'm offering; I relate to them, as I am one of them," says Dee. "For advanced dancers, I love watching them take on a new style and explore it with their gift."

Presently, Debbi Dee resides in Florida, endeavoring to spread her knowledge and passion for tap dance. While she teaches regularly around the country at various conventions and schools, she

is known for the workshops and teaching she conducts for dancers across the Sunshine State. This most esteemed tap educator was kind enough to sit with *The Dance Magazine Florida* for a personal interview and share her thoughts and insights with her fellow teachers and dancers.

TDMF: *What is the best part about being a tap teacher and tap dancer in Florida?*

DD: The best part about being a tap teacher is that I have been given this great opportunity to share this American art form with others. I am always learning, creating, exploring and trying to take my craft to new levels. The rhythms are endless. As for being in Florida, I have watched this state grow in all aspects of dance. There are so many wonderful teachers here, and I have had the pleasure of being at so many studios giving master classes and watching the students grow.



TDMF: *What would you say, if you had to categorize it, is your personal style of tap?*

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Dee teaching a class.

DD: I had a very unique upbringing with tap. I was taught under the “traditional” heading all my life. When I got to New York, I realized that there was even more out there, so I studied the “contemporary” heading. Under both of these are a multitude of styles. I have spent my teaching career blending these two headings and sharing the knowledge with teachers and students.

TDMF: *What are your teaching philosophies when it comes to tap dance?*

DD: I approach teaching as a true art form. It takes years to master this craft. I am always changing a way to put across a step because if one thing doesn't work, then you must have another way. It is all about a total understanding between teacher and student.

TDMF: *Do you have a different teaching style for adults than you do for children? If so, what is different?*

DD: I do have different philosophies when it comes to teaching students versus adults. You really have to look at the class you're teaching and have a strategy. For example, with students, you have

to look at what age group, how many times a week they come to class, and whether you're teaching a regular class of yours or a convention or master class. It is important to know their levels. As for adults, are they teachers, beginning or advanced dancers? I ask myself those questions before preparing a class. Once my homework is done, then the fun part begins...I teach.

TDMF: *Which conventions and workshops do you teach or perform at regionally and nationally?*

DD: I have worked for so many national and regional conventions as well as tap festivals and intensives, including Dance Olympus/Dance America, Dance Masters of America, Dance Educators of America, Dance Makers Inc., and more.

TDMF: *Do you have any upcoming conventions or workshops students can expect to find you at?*

DD: I am getting ready for the winter/spring workshops around the U.S. and especially in Florida. I will be doing master classes as well as choreography for them. This will keep me busy until around May, then a little break before the summer season starts.

TDMF: *Speaking of Florida tap workshops and conventions, it has been noted by many students and teachers that I have come across that there “isn't much tap in Florida.” What do you think of this statement?*

DD: Well, teachers in 95% of dance schools are teaching tap. I do think it starts in the studio. I feel it is the teachers' job to keep it alive and fun and challenging. We as teachers must keep this art form from fading. We must show our love for this craft. It is the true American art form, and we are letting it slip away. I do think the students are influenced by what they see on TV and in the movies, so our job becomes harder to keep tap as a major interest in our schools. With that said, I know teachers are trying, and some are succeeding. There are some fantastic tap teachers out there and right here in Florida.

TDMF: *If someone wanted to be a serious tap dancer, as in part of a tap ensemble or dance company that has strong tap foundations, do you think this is possible in Florida?*

I think anything is possible, but the company has to exist first. Some of the biggest dance companies in the United States have prob-



lems staying aloft from time to time. For the company, it is not just putting together the dancers, but also supporting the dancers with performances, teaching commitments, etc. I do think it is possible in Florida, we have some of the best technical teachers and dancers, but there is always the question of support and finance. I would love to do something along those lines myself one of these days.

TDMF: *How do you think tap fits into the entertainment industry today? Is there room for tap dancers in the professional entertainment world? How so?*

DD: I really don't know why this is, but tap always has its ups and downs when it comes to the industry. Sometimes when you go to Broadway, tap is alive and bringing the house down night after night, yet other times there can be years going by without any tap in a show. Even on reality shows like "So You Think You Can Dance," tap never seems to get the recognition it deserves. With all of this said, I do think there is a life for a tap dancer. I feel they should be a well rounded dancer, so they can do anything and everything. I would love to see more tap companies.

TDMF: *What advice can you give aspiring professional tap dancers in Florida?*

DD: Know your craft inside and out, whether you want to be a performer or a teacher. Understand that there are so many stylizations in tap. Respect them all. Classic tap has the same technique process as does street tap. You may

choose to stick with one style, but that doesn't mean that the other styles of tap shouldn't have the same importance. Learn how to hear, stylize and count a step, and know the true terminology. Do your homework. A shuffle is not just a shuffle.

TDMF: *Do you have anything else you would like to share about your studio, performances, workshops, upcoming events, etc.?*

DD: We just finished our own tap intensive here in Florida. This was our 5th year. I was inspired by the teachers and students and how much they shared their love of tap. We have had people join us from Alaska, Canada, and all over Florida and the U.S. It was my total honor to have this seminar, and I look forward to the next one. I would also love teachers

Pictures courtesy of Debbi Dee

to know that they could call on me for classes or just to chat about our craft.

TDMF: *Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences with our readers.*

Debbi Dee can be reached via her website at www.debbideetap.com for more information, general contact, or to schedule master classes and workshops.

Contributing Writer

JENNE VERMES

A resident of Tallahassee, Jenne Vermes is a professional dance teacher. Having danced for over twenty-two years, she teaches tap and other dance styles at various studios in Tallahassee, FL as well as master classes at national festivals and workshops. She is a freelance writer for DanceRegister.com, the FSView & Florida Flambeau and The Dance Magazine of Florida.

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