



Photo by Debbie Dee

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A TEACHER OF LIFE.
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DR. HENRY LETANG

What can you say about Henry LeTang that hasn't already been said? He has countless awards, articles written about his accomplishments, cover stories and honors – a man so deserving yet so humble in accepting his rewards.

Last May, during New York City's National Tap Dance Day celebrations, Henry received yet another honor – the "Tradition in Tap Award," created in order to recognize those people who have influenced the creation and tradition of tap. The award was bestowed upon him during a special weekend seminar held in his honor called *The Dr. Henry LeTang Tap Experience*. This high energy, non-stop event was presented by Traditions in Tap, co-founded by Avi Miller and Ofer Ben. In addition to a film presentation on Henry's remarkable life and contributions to tap, the weekend included classes taught by Avi, Ofer, Germaine Salsberg, Mercedes Ellington, Shea Sullivan, and I – and of course the master himself, Dr. Henry LeTang.

Maurice Hines, one of Henry's students and a long time friend, presented the award. His speech brought so much emotion to the event as he spoke elegantly about his teacher and his memories of his brother Gregory and himself, growing and learning under Henry's direction.

I've known Henry LeTang for 30 years. I met him early during my teaching career when I was an owner of my own school in upstate New York while still performing professionally. Henry took me under his wing, and so it began. He was my teacher, my choreographer in shows and my friend. When I call myself one of his protégés, I do not take the title lightly. I share it with others with much honor. His student list is a *Who's Who* in the world of entertainment, yet I want you to know the man through my eyes. To see him today, at 88 years young, he is still loving his craft and still passing it on.

Henry's life's work is that of a teacher – a teacher of dance, a teacher of life. He is the king of rhythm tap and a creator of pieces that are unsurpassed. He teaches you to master your craft. He teaches you to sell a step. He teaches you to explore yourself and take chances. Most of all, he teaches you to love your work and have fun with the art form.

I spoke to him after the seminar and asked him about the event, its importance, and how it felt to have such a remarkable weekend dedicated to him.

Doing His Thing... His Way!

by debbie dee

Debbi Dee: Henry, in May you were honored in New York through *Tradition in Tap* as well as having a weekend of classes known as *The Dr. Henry LeTang Tap Experience*. How did that make you feel, to have an event as spectacular as this dedicated to you?

Henry is a man of few words, he prefers to speak with his feet and through his creations. He lets his work speak for itself.

One of the greatest influences in Henry's life was his wife, Ellie. Ellie was Henry's backbone. She was by his side through all the ups and downs. She would shine when she watched Henry at work, and she was an inspiration to all who knew her. Sadly, Ellie passed away ten months ago after a long illness.

When I look back at my 30-year association with Henry, I can't help but smile at all the hours we spent working one on one, the shows in which I had the pleasure of dancing under his direction and then later as a teacher in his New York studio. My memories of him are still growing every day. Each one is a gem with a special place in my heart. He continues to be an inspiration to me and to others.

Henry is still teaching at his private studio in Las Vegas, still loving his work. When so many of his age are retired, Henry is looking for the next project, living life and, as always, he's doing his "thing" – his way.



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NEXT "THING." YOU
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Henry can be reached through Debbi Dee (561.736.3052) or at his Vegas studio (702.877.6627). For information on Tradition in Tap seminars in New York, call 718.486.5947 or visit www.JazzTapCenter.com.



Debbie Dee and Henry LeTang



"Wall in Henry's Studio," photo courtesy of Peter Petronio, *Footprints*



Dr. Henry LeTang with Avi Miller (L) and Ofer Ben (R), photo courtesy of Tradition in Tap – Miller & Ben

Henry LeTang: It made me feel honored and excited to be able to teach my peers, choreographers and teachers from around the world in New York. In our business that is a wonderful feeling.

DD: Why do you think seminars like "Tradition in Tap" are so important in preserving styles in tap?

HLT: I think it is so important to remember styles of the creators in our business and to preserve them for future generations.

DD: What do you think your greatest contribution to tap has been?

HLT: The various shows I've done – *Eubie*, *Sophisticated Ladies*, *Black and Blue* [for which he won a Tony award] and the films I've done – *Tap*, *Bojangles*, etc. These will be preserved and will live on. It is a body of work.

DD: You've done everything – movies, Broadway, nightclubs, teaching. Do you favor working in one venue over another? If so why?

HLT: No, not really. They're pretty much the same. I like to develop the talent of the future, like we did with Gregory Hines, Maurice Hines, Savion Glover and others. I like to help develop their growth and see them become the entertainers they are today.

DD: As a teacher, what gives you the most satisfaction in knowing your work lives in so many of us?

HLT: The fact that I teach teachers from all over the world, like Debbi Dee [thanks, Henry], who are carrying on my technique. My work is in Germany, Japan – so many places and it is a good feeling to know that it is reaching everyone.

DD: What are your thoughts on the future of tap?

HLT: The fact that tap is coming back, even though I never thought it left, and is reaching dancers in other fields. Ballet dancers, acrobatic teachers, they're all doing tap now, and teaching it and understanding its importance.

DD: You have done so much and have received so many accolades. Where do you go from here? What's next for Henry LeTang?

Henry LeTang HARD AT WORK

HLT: I'm looking forward to the next Broadway show, the next movie that I'm called to do. I'm always looking for the next "thing." You never know what's around the next corner.

DD: If you could give one piece of advice to the dancers out there, what would you say to them so that their career can have the same longevity that yours has had?

HLT: The main thing is to love what you're doing. If you love what you're doing, it will give you the will to go on with your craft. Success doesn't come overnight. If someone is looking to be an overnight sensation, or is looking for money as a reward, then they are in the wrong business. They have to work! That's what it's all about – the work.

DD: Early on you chose to be a teacher over a performer. Why?

HLT: I prefer to teach because of the creativity. Today you could choreograph a duo or trio. Tomorrow it could be an ensemble number for a big show. It's all creative. It's in the process.

DD: When you are choreographing a new piece, what comes first? The idea of steps or the music?

HLT: If the music is original, not a standard piece like "Tea For Two" or "I've Got Rhythm," you find yourself creating to that music. Therefore, in that case, the music would come first. Any music that really swings, that really builds, you can create that number that will get the audience on its feet. That type of music inspires me.

DD: If there is one thing you want to be remembered for, one contribution, what would that be?

HLT: I love doing it all, so it would have to be a body of work.

Knowing Henry, he's looking forward to the next project he can sink his talent into. He told me he hates Sundays because it's a day off. "I'm happiest doing my thing."

One of the greatest honors for me was to be called to Oklahoma City University, under the direction of Professor Jo Rowan, and present Henry with his honorary doctorate degree.



Class with Dr. Henry Le Tang, photo courtesy of Tradition in Tap