

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER!

An Interview with William F. Lett, December 2011

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Perhaps more than any other single course, tap for musical theatre has the potential to integrate dance, voice, and acting skills succinctly and efficiently in performance. William F. Lett is a Master Teacher of musical theatre and a tap specialist in the Department of Theatre and Dance at California State University, Fullerton.

For nearly 12 years, Bill Lett and I regularly coached on the same shows at CSUF. Yet, it was only after I began free-lancing again that we sat down to talk about voice and dance and how they connect. Following is a conversation we recorded late on a December afternoon, immediately after a Tap I class, which I was privileged to observe.

JM: How is tap different from other genres of dance? Where do you begin?

WL: On the first day of class I focus on physical alignment. I have the students lie on the floor, feet on the ground, knees up about six – seven inches apart, and I talk them through a physical inventory of their body: feeling their body on the floor, heels in alignment with their sit bones, the vertebrae stacked.

When we stand and bring the body to a vertical position, our feet stay apart. This becomes our neutral position—weight evenly distributed on the balls of our feet with our heels off the ground [wearing shoes]. Once standing we try to keep the torso stable, lifted, and full.

Our body is divided into three sections: the head is referred to as the intellect, the torso [including arms] is the aesthetic, and then the pelvis [including the legs] is the vital. I encourage the students to keep their aesthetic plane open, which assists them to feel their breath and, hopefully, reminds them not to slouch over like a broken candy cane. It's all about finding that sense of center and of lift.

Then we'll experience that physical alignment in motion. For example, that locomotor combination we did today (Flap, Heel, Back Flap, Back Flap, Irish step, Gallop, step): novice tappers with no vital or core connection tend to bend over and their body breaks in half, which for me would obstruct the line of the body and ultimately have an adverse effect on sound, or on the ability to produce sound. Aesthetically, I'm looking for that lengthened position, which ultimately allows for a more even absorption of impact by the knee.

One thing with tap that makes it very different from other dance genres is the *tap break*. Dancers are going to tap their feet off during a designated musical section, demonstrating intricate rhythms and tricks that would be challenging to the most seasoned performers if they were singing while they're tapping. In the classroom combination you saw today, "Doin' the Production Code" from *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine*, they're tapping syllabically, so accenting certain syllables both physically and verbally: "**N**udity will **n**ever be **p**er**m**itted, as being **n**ecessary **f**or the **p**lot," which requires a bit more core support while singing.

Aha, and after you told them not to make everything the same, we began to understand what they were saying—they were using operative words. We do it all the time when we speak, but often lose that when we're reading.

Because they're new, they're still learning the musicality of tap—they think it's just a piece of metal on a shoe. But if you hit it with your big toe or your little toe or the tip or the ball, it will make a different sound; it's a musical instrument. So you have to understand that you are accompanying yourself. There are different sounds that can be made with the shoe, as opposed to sounds with the words themselves.

And all of this is part of the composition.

Absolutely it is. That applies to most tap musicals. It's the same with the song "Anything Goes." They're going to flap heel flap heel flap heel flap ball change: All simple steps are used to mark time and introduce the dance vocabulary of the musical number. They're not going to do anything really difficult; they're just going to keep time while they're singing, until they have that dance break. Then they cut loose and it's a different beast.

On the genealogy tree of Tap, there are many branches, but there are two strong, identifiable *roots*. We have Broadway Tap, which I teach here, and we have

Rhythm Tap, which is *Jelly's Last Jam*, *Tap Dogs*, *The Tap Dance Kid*, *Stomp*, etc., which has a more urban, rhythmic feel, and is often done *a capella*, as in the work of the Nicholas Brothers, Savion Glover and Gregory Hines. I often refer to Rhythm Tap, as rapping with metal; it feels more like a jam session. I don't know if you've seen the movie *Tap*. It stars Gregory Hines, Sammy Davis Jr., Jimmy Slyde, Bill Anagnos, Sandman Sims, Bunny Briggs—a lot of the founding fathers of Tap. There's a scene in the movie where tap becomes a form of communication, a percussive challenge against the piano or against each other. They were really creating rhythms for themselves, versus creating rhythms to support a text; the rhythm *was* their text. In essence, they were sending an action with their feet. It was a contest of one-upmanship. "What is that tap step?" "Well look at this..." "Well, I can add on and make it that." "Where does that go?" Hence a challenge. So unless you're doing a show that calls for that kind of fast, furious, intricate, rhythmic melody of Rhythm Tap, the most common form encountered onstage is Broadway Tap.

In the past I've brought in a couple of rhythm tappers to teach a master class in Tap II, but other than that, I think the students here really need to have those 45 - 50 real, true, basic Broadway tap steps they're going to need for every production of *Anything Goes*, *Dames at Sea*, *42nd Street*, etc.

One of the challenges for a tapper who must sing simultaneously is the absorption of the shock waves that go up the body from the impact on the ground—they have the potential to complicate the [singer's] ability to produce an esthetically pleasing sound. For example, I can flap, "In olden days a glimpse of stocking..." and still produce a sound that is unobstructed by my tapping, by engaging my core in addition to my plié. But as soon as I release my core or increase my impact on the ground, I'm bouncing to the point where my sound is distorting. There are always ways around this. Some Broadway shows enhance the tap sounds with tracks so performers still have the ability to produce a supported sound, accompanied by intricate rhythms and fancy footwork. On the other side of the coin, some shows use microphones on the tap shoe itself to augment the tap sound, which in turn allows the dancer not to have to increase the impact, thus reducing the intrusion on the ability to produce clear vocal sound.

Another option is to have separate singing and tapping choruses. So while it's a challenge, choreographers and musical directors *can* accomplish a great vocal sound while tapping. And that's really the hardest part, because your body serves simultaneously as a percussion (tap) *and* string/wind (vocals) instrument.

Tap/singing is like a tremor really. It's like you're holding a note while your body is bouncing. The secret is in that plié. You have to plié, you have to absorb that impact, you have to engage your core and stay lifted. The harder you tap, the more obstructive you're going to be to the body as an instrument. That's why I always say if you don't plié, you're going to get shin splints—a term used loosely to describe an *overuse injury* characterized by a dull aching pain brought on by exercise. The pain is felt on either the inside or outside of the shinbone (tibia). Repetitive loading of the front lower leg commonly causes shin splints. This is often a result of overtraining.

Do you say anything about breath?

I try to remind them to breathe. Young dancers tend to hold themselves together and they (sucks breath in noisily to demonstrate) and they hold their breath. They have not discovered the concept that breath can *help* you in dance. Use the breath in pirouettes, leaps, lifts, jumps. It forms a conjunction within the body...breath gives you energy.

It's the same thing in tap. You have to find that sense of breath or it becomes stale, rigid; it doesn't have any sense of flow or cyclical nature to it. Without breath the body is not really *living* per se; it's just *there*, and it's held tight. It becomes what I often see in competition dance. I had a young dancer who was a professional and she could have assessed right into Tap II. However, as a result of a conversation I had with her, she decided to take Tap I. She made it through four weeks of class and then wanted out. The reason [for wanting out] was different from the reality, which was that she had no breath in her movement. She was technically very gifted, but so stoic and so strong and so stern, and there was no sense of breath, and it was, "This – is – the – trick – that - I - do – real - ly - well." I have one of those in the class you saw: a brilliant, gifted tapper, but there's no breath there. And as a result, she looks angry, and I told her, "You need to engage a sense of breath, and there's going to be a re-nutrient, so to speak, of oxygen in your brain, and you're going to have to find that place to take a breath and it's going to look like you enjoy what you are doing." When they're not breathing, it looks like they're not enjoying it.

This makes so much sense.

It crosses all genres. Find that breath, use the body's momentum to inhale and exhale every time you move, and when you fight it, you're fighting the movement.

This is what I'm hearing, even from people who teach ballet.

Breath and release, absolutely.... I have observed some pedagogy classes where the use of breath becomes a good tool but it also becomes a crutch, being used as a cue. In a dance we may arrive at a section where there is no music and we're dancing in the silence and it's [demonstrates noisy inhalation and exhalation], so now we're using that inhalation as a cue. We can still accomplish the same breath at that same exact moment, but it's the quality in which it's approached that makes the difference.

Yes, the noisy breath is inefficient, as well as ungraceful.

What about range, resonance, articulation, the acting dimension? Do those figure into dance training, or are there different components, for example, spatial awareness?

Spatial awareness is so very important in all forms of dance and all visual art. In my class we have a lack of that right now. You saw when they went across the floor, they have no spatial awareness, they're going to dance right on top of you and they don't care. I think part of that is their being in and out of that moment, and whether they're making it as a collective/group or just as an individual. They need to take in more of the room instead of their own little bubble.

Resonance, I would say it's going to be easier to get a skull or chest [vocal] resonance out of a tap dancer because the lower the sound, the more reverberation from the tap itself because it happens from bottom up. So [sings] "I Can't Be Bothered Now," from *Crazy for You*, is all up in the chest while he is dancing, because it's lifted here [upper torso] and he's tapping down here, and this [lower torso] stays stable.

You say stable, but it's still working.

Oh, it's still moving.

That's all you need.

It's a *degree* of release or a degree of holding onto the abdominals. If you completely release, from my perspective, you're going to look like you're nine months pregnant.

Right.

So you still stay upright in the torso, and you drop the pelvic floor without completely releasing the abdominals. I think of releasing the pelvic floor as down though your *hoo hoo*, through your business, just letting-go down below versus letting go forward, because if you let go forward you lose your core, and if you lose your core you have no sense of support, whether breath or physical. But I think you do have to hold your core and drop your pelvic floor.

I'd be fascinated with ultrasound to see what happens with different modalities of movement and sound. Specifically tap, because I'm of the belief that even though the torso is still stationary, there should be less movement in your vital area than there would be in a modern dancer or a ballet dancer. Because in a *balancé* we're here [demonstrates] or *port de bras*, and dropping and breathing and releasing, so we're engaging in the spine...

But that's not what you're doing...

Right, it's not liquid. In tap we're still connected, we're still engaged, but there's enough room to take that breath. We're not collapsing in the spine; we're staying lifted.

Over the past few years there has been a surfacing of a vocal technique that I absolutely find undesirable, and I know you do as well, which is that audible inhale in singers. It drives me absolutely crazy, and I want them to understand that for me, if you're going to go [demonstrates gasp breath in], it better be exciting or painful, because that's what you're telling me. But it happens a lot now, and I guess it's part of the new culture of pop sounds. Well, I don't necessarily enjoy it.

Neither do I!

And it bothers me because I think they're defeating the purpose of using breath to drive emotions forward; they're just throwing it out there like an obstacle that has nothing to do with the given circumstances.

Exactly. They're interrupting.

Well, you're gasping, and if you're not dying or it's not a discovery, don't gasp.

What about range?

Range, yes, if I was to choreograph and create a production number, I would say, "Please arrange it so it's bright and lifted in sound. Don't put the vocal line in the bottom range," because if it's going to be a dark, full, heavy sound, most likely it won't be choreographed; the lead melody line has got to be in the top half of the vocal range. Otherwise, it's going to be obstructed by dance.

Articulation. Someone mentioned hands, how everything else can be great but if you've got funky hands there's something wrong with your articulation.

I'm going to say funky hands, or external gestures that are not choreographed, are tension, because they don't know where to place tension. So in tap, I see a lot of beautiful lines, but then I see a lot of hand flicking. Or you watch the dancers lose their core engagement and then they start to bend, or their arms lose length and start to collapse and they start to look like Thanksgiving turkeys on a table.

In tap dancing you have to be loose in the ankle. If you're not loose, if there's tension, you're going to have articulation issues. And if you're thinking about it you're going to be tense. So you have to just physically know what you're doing, where you are going, and you have to remember to breathe.

A lot of students have problems with their left foot, like a piano player will have problems with the left hand, that non-dominant hand, non-dominant foot issue.

I used to practice twice as much with my left hand!

What about the acting...

One of the things that I'm passionate about now is the fact that I think dancers have to be the best actors, because when Laurie and Curly can't *say* that they're in love they *sing*, "People will say we're in love;" and when they can't *sing* it, they do the dream ballet—and in that dream ballet you still have to act. You can't just go through the movement and the gestures with this veneered, botoxed face. It defeats the purpose of moving the story and action forward. And we're hearing an excuse quite a bit that is applied to musical theatre actors..."Oh,

you're musical theatre." So, maybe your choice is too big, or maybe it's not connected or not grounded to a true moment, maybe it's a little bit more theatricalized than it needs to be, or maybe it's just too theme park, too cheesy. But you know what? That exaggerated, expressive life is a style of theatre itself. I guarantee you it's really hard to be pageant perfect for 45 minutes of a review show, and to keep that smile throughout, your vocal and physical technique in place, and stay connected moment to moment. We need to stop the segregation of dramatic actors and musical theatre actors; we have too many things in common under the umbrella of *actor* to start separating the herd.

But yes, I think it's so important to act. The *Day in Hollywood/Night Ukraine* combination you saw, if they just spoke the lyrics, "Nudity will never be permitted as being necessary for the plot" — which is just nothing but metered prose—it's boring. They need to make sure that they're telling me the story of the Hollywood Production Code, and their tap is secondary. It's text that drives the plot forward.

On another thread, I think it's time we acknowledged that performers use their bodies in different ways to get what they want, and that there's more than one valid approach to vocal technique.

When was the last time you saw a Hambone routine on a Broadway stage [demonstrates]? We haven't seen that for a long, long time... maybe since *The Will Rodgers Follies* (1991). But all of a sudden *The Scottsboro Boys* arrives on Broadway, the actors are sitting on the edge of a rail car and they are starting to Hambone, and the audience response was overwhelming. This harks back to the Minstrel Show and Vaudeville. It's nothing new, but it's using your body in a different way to create percussive sounds and intricate rhythms.

I think every university dance program should have a voice component, not so much for the world of ballet, but I think in modern it's absolutely imperative. It doesn't have to be spoken word—it can just be sound. Dancers don't understand how to use their voice and how to connect to sound. Adding a vocal component challenges and intimidates most concert dancers, [yet] most are going to work for companies that go into schools and theatres: they bring in kids and they teach them a combination or they do a demonstration; they lecture about the style of dance or the company namesake. They have to *project*, they have to engage the audience, and young children have a very short attention span...so connected sound should be very important to a dancer.

When I was in grad school we had a pedagogy class, and it was my only opportunity to teach anything related to musical theatre, so I taught "Once a Year Day," from *Pajama Game*, and made them sing it, and I made them do a polka. In a matter of 10 minutes they were dying. They didn't know how I was able to have the stamina to sing and dance. How do you do this? When your body is your instrument, anything is possible with practice.

Voice teachers need this perspective!

Absolutely, when your body's the instrument, it can't be compartmentalized. My voice is my voice, but if I do this [movement], it's going to change the sound that I produce. Everything affects something.

Thank you so much, Bill!

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