



Turning On the Tap

At a West Village dance studio, young and old celebrate a distinctly American art form

By Tracey Harden

It's Saturday morning at the American Tap Dance Center, and the joint is jumping — especially the four-year-olds. They've got their tap shoes on and they're stomping to the music, reveling in the sheer joy of moving and making noise, as a teacher tries (good-naturedly, and not too hard) to keep order.

In another room, the five-to-seven year-olds are focusing more on their steps, but they, too, resemble jumping beans. That's fine with Brandy Blaha, their teacher. "You have to let that natural energy come out," she says. "You don't want to make it like school."

In the African Percussion dance class, a group of boys and girls, aged nine to 11, perform a barefoot Congolese "Broom Dance" for their delighted parents.

"Tap is so much fun" says Tony Waag, the Artistic/Executive Director of the American Tap Dance Foundation, which encompasses the Center, at 154 Christopher Street, in one of the Archive Building's spaces set aside for non-profit organizations.

Tap, in fact, originated in the 19th century not far from here — in the notorious Five Points of Lower Manhattan. There, in



TAPPING ALONG: Teacher Brandy Blaha with 5-to-7-year-old tap students, from left, Dorian Vaughn, Anl Desiderio, Andres Orbeozo, Palmira Mallino, Alexander Aney and Bryn Spender. Photo by Maggie Berkvist.

the original melting pot, the races mixed freely, and so did their cultural traditions. Irish jigs and English clog steps combined with the percussive African dancing of freed slaves to give us the uniquely American art of tap dancing.

From those distant beginnings come an art form that, says Waag, is for everybody: "You can be any shape, size, color, age, sex — it doesn't matter."

To that end, the Center offers evening

classes for adults who have never tap-danced before. "What bothers me most is snobbery," says Waag. "Yes, this is an intricate jazz form. But that doesn't mean that so-and-so can't get off work and put on a pair of tap shoes and make a bunch of noise."

At the other end of the talent spectrum are the advanced teenage dancers. On the Saturday we visited, a class performed intricate tap steps to "Sweet Georgia Brown,"

then finished up with the "Shim Sham," a famous tap dance routine.

The most dedicated of these students may move on to the Tap City Youth Ensemble, a group of about 40 highly accomplished dancers ages 12 to 19 from New York City and beyond. They meet weekly for practice, and have performed in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, and at a range of other venues, from the public schools to the Apollo Theater. They will perform May 16 at Symphony Space at "Tap 25," the annual Tap Dance Foundation benefit that supports the Gregory Hines Youth Scholarship Fund.

"There are a lot of tap addicts here," says Susan Hebach, director of the Tap City Youth Ensemble. "Tap is like their favorite thing. We give them a chance to take their tap further than they would other places." But the beauty of the American Tap Dance Center is that nobody has to take it any further than they want to. As Waag says, "It's not a scary New York dance studio. It can just be a place to do something communal and physical and have fun."

American Tap Dance Center, 154 Christopher Street #2B (between Greenwich and Washington Streets); (646) 230-9564; www.atdf.org. The Center offers a comprehensive curriculum for kids, teens and adults from the beginning level to the advanced, including the professional dancer. Prices start at \$15 for a single drop-in adult class; youth classes average \$900 for a 33-week program.