

'Connecting with Jazz' – Exploring tap as a percussive art form

Finzi Scholarship 2008

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Considering that I am the first dancer to ever receive a Finzi fellowship, I naturally felt very honored. Tap dance is more than just a form of dance, and it was this proposal that I put forward to the trust when applying.

Tap is percussive and my instrument is my shoes. Tap dance's main developments have historically happened largely in America, it was here that all the various styles fused into "Tap" after immigrants from England, Ireland and Africa met. It was also in America that tap dance and jazz music developed in unison.

Compared to the UK, Tap dancers have many more opportunities to work with jazz musicians in America, and so my proposal was broken in to 2 parts. My first trip was designed to develop me as an artist come musician, performer and choreographer and enabled me to attend classes designed for dancers and musicians to collaborate.

As a large part of my professional life is spent teaching rhythm and that I feel that it is imperative that what I learn is disseminated to as many of my pupils as possible, my second trip was designed to give me the opportunity to learn how the teaching styles in America impacts upon and gives American Tap dancers that extra dynamic in terms of rhythm and musical appreciation. I wanted to learn about the developments in American teaching methods and if there was any correlation between the ages that rhythm tap is taught to an individual and their acceleration as a tap dancer.

My first trip as a Finzi scholar started on the June 29th 2008. Having travelled to America on numerous occasions in recent years to continue studying tap dance, it became apparent very early on in my trip that none of these trips had previously had anywhere near the level of purpose as this one would. Other recent trips had only been to develop me as a dancer and keep up with trends. This time however it felt much more purposeful and had more to do with than merely learning new steps.

Arriving in the steaming heat of a New York summer I immediately felt at ease. I was fortunate to be staying in the same apartment I had previously stayed in on a trip 2 years previous. Knowing where everything is and how to get around makes quite a big difference when travelling over time zones!

I was in New York to attend the Manhattan Tap's summer intensive and Tap City's annual dance festival. Manhattan Tap was founded in 1986; the company is formed of individual dancers who blend tap dance, music, choreography and improvisation. The company has performed worldwide and is led by artistic director Heather Cornell. Heather has collaborated with artists such as Ray Brown, Leon Parker, Keith Terry, Bob Telson, and Keith Saunders on original jazz and world music compositions for tap. She has also been commissioned by Lincoln Centre, Meet the Composer, PBS, The Tap Company (Switzerland), and Decidedly Jazz Danceworks (Canada), among others. I have been privileged to be able to work with Heather on different occasions both in the UK, America and France and had attended the same summer intensive held in 2006.

At the age of 28, Heather had been the first teacher I had ever had to make me aware of tap dance as not just a dance form, I had watched her perform on numerous occasions and she is very much part of the jazz band she performs with, more than that she is their conductor. Her intensive course appealed to me so much as it gives you the chance to work with live musicians as opposed to pre-recorded tracks.

The days were structured so that during the morning sessions we would spend our time learning repertoire of Eddie Brown (a mentor of Heather's), who had a very unique style and rhythmic qualities. He was famed as a master of rhythm tap improvisation, playing along with the band he would improvise rhythmical steps in the same way the musician would improvise the tune. Heather was fortunate to spend much time with Eddie, now to preserve his repertoire she has choreographed several routines using steps that had been recorded in private sessions with him.

Mid day through to the early afternoon we would have music class, where we spent our time doing different poly rhythms and claves. It was also an opportunity to play different instruments and also the chance to talk through any questions with our "musician" teacher Andy Alguire.

The afternoon and evening sessions were spent creating a piece and collaborating with Andy. This proved to be a somewhat fascinating if not difficult process at first. Although I have created what must be hundreds of dances previously, whereby you are given or choose a track which you create to using a CD or an iPod, which you eventually perform with a live band or orchestra but very often not meeting them until a dress or final rehearsal, I have never had the opportunity to create with a musician right there at my disposal. It certainly made my piece develop in a different and much faster way.



The Manhattan Tap summer intensive is attended by dancers from all over the world including, Finland, Mexico, Ireland and obviously by American tap dancers. Getting the opportunity to work alongside many different dancers and musicians and the chance to experience instruments from electric bass to African balafon makes this a very unique course.

As the weekend drew closer the time with Manhattan Tap ended and it was time to move studios and onto Tap City.

This was a world away from the week before; you are able to choose how you work. Options include residencies, short courses and master classes enabling dancers to work with many varying teachers.

Tap City is run by The American Tap Dance Foundation (ATDF) which is a non-profit organization that aims to preserve tap dance as well as being able to educate and present tap. Now with a base in New York, tap dancers from all over the world travel to Chelsea Studios to attend Tap City and yearlong classes.

With so many classes to choose from I had opted to attend the four day residency hosted by Barbara Duffy, as well as a combination of master classes. Barbara's approach was again very different to anything I had experienced in the UK, but still it was something that made complete sense and more importantly filled a missing link for me.

Barbara's teaching method is so full of vitality and is very precise in what rhythms you should experiment with and how they should be played differently by getting different accent from your shoes depending on what part of your foot you hit the floor with. She had chosen to work on a new piece that we would get to perform at Symphony Space on Broadway later in the week. Barbara had wanted to take a different approach to creating and had decided unusually that we would play exactly the same as the piano's melody. This proved to be quite tricky initially as a tap dancer I would usually try and compliment the other rhythms and feed off of them.

Amongst what little spare time I had, I also managed to attend open classes at the dance studio Steps on Broadway. Again I was able to get a full range of a variety of teachers, all of whom worked on something different, and all having a slightly different teaching method to get their rhythm across to their students.

As the second week progressed we performed our pieces at Symphony Space and then continued until the end of the week with individual master classes. Amongst these master classes was an improvisation class with Max Pollak, whose approach to improvisation was both challenging and unique, approaching it vocally rather than just dancing. It opened up even more ideas on how to tackle improvisation within a class and by being vocal broke down barriers quicker than just tap shoes. Often dancers can feel intimidated when improvising within a class as sometimes the musical interpretation is not there and it becomes merely flash steps. We learnt about approaching the rhythm vocally and then transferring it to your shoes.

All too quickly the week ended and as 1 class finished I had to dash back to the apartment to get my case to fly home to finalise the details of my second trip.

Getting all the details together for the second trip was not as easy, not being based in one place this time, and effectively "wasting" time taking internal flights, I wanted to make sure that when I was not travelling that I was making the most of my time and ensured that I timed everything with almost military precision.

I had planned to go to New York to continue with open classes and to also observe various programmes, but having also met and kept in contact with one of the professors of Oklahoma City University, Patricia Oplotnik, at a residency I attended in France with Heather Cornell in 2007, I was keen to take her up on her offer to visit the university and observe the teaching methods used in their dance program, as it was one of the first in the US to feature tap dance.

Patricia and I had overlapped by a few days when in residency with Heather, where we would work individually with her. Thankfully however, Heather thought it would be interesting for us to meet. We both come from fairly similar backgrounds, training initially with a syllabus and hit it off immediately comparing the different methods from our countries as well as terminology and Patricia felt I would find the teaching at the university interesting to observe.

Timing my trip however to coincide with the universities semesters was looking as though it might make the overall trip to somewhat restricting. This was eventually why I opted to return in January 2009 as opposed to going again in 2008. By returning the following year not only meant I was able to attend the University during term time, my time there was all that more purposeful compared to having had I gone in the September or October of 2008 when their semester was only just starting and the students all very new to the University, Imagine their horror if only a few weeks into University life had they had a lady from England in all their classes observing teaching methods and see how a wide age range of students were taught rhythmically and asking them questions about their development. Ultimately this opened other avenues in New York that would not normally be available to me in the summer.

I travelled back to New York on 22nd January 2009, arriving in snow this was something I would have to get used to! I had planned to use the first 2 days attending classes. Straight away I realised how much more beneficial it was going to be for me going at this time as every dancer flocks to New York for the summer, but this time some of the classes I attended only had 4 in including me!

The rationale was to get a range of classes this time, I took all the usual rhythm tap classes but also this time included theatre and Broadway tap. This was what I felt would be closest to the style that most people will start with in England and it was important therefore to see a style we are already used to at home but to find out whether it is taught completely differently or was it only rhythm tap that had a different approach?

After spending many years concentrating on rhythm tap, attending Broadway tap was quite challenging for me! Although taught with more musical intent than some of the classes I have attended in England, I was surprised that the style of teaching was not much different to classes at home. It did feel as if there was not much individuality in style as everyone danced the same and concentration was on the technique of the step execution rather than rhythmical quality. I did enjoy dancing in a different style and I found the class fun but it's not the style I would choose to pursue full time. The only other difference in the rhythm and Broadway classes was the Broadway class was fully subscribed, compared to the rhythm classes (I later discovered that the teacher is involved with a Broadway show so this may have influenced some people into attending in the hope of being spotted!).

For the Sunday I had arranged to travel back to Chelsea studios which American Tap Dance Foundation (who organise Tap City) use for their regular programs. I was particularly excited by this as I wanted to understand how the children train at a young age.

I had arranged for an opportunity to observe 3 different teachers and also watch their youth companies' rehearsal and later on their performance of a workshop they are planning for a school tour. The ATDF classes focus on the fundamentals of rhythm tap. Technique, repertory and improvisation are all important to the classes. Also included in the classes is history and music appreciation. The children and teenager programs follow a structured approach that allows the teachers to evaluate each student and assess when they are ready to move to the next level. Within their course they will learn about tempo, bars, swing and accent, jazz standards, down beats. This becomes more complex as they progress.



I had wanted to observe a variety of age groups and their development. I began observing the 4-5 year olds class with teacher Courtney Runft. Watching the enthusiasm of these young dancers was a joy. Courtney had a way of achieving many things with them in such a way that they were not aware of how much they had learnt. Structured in a very fun way that captured the children's imagination they learnt about phrasing and bars of music. They even improvised for different lengths of bars at the end of class.

Going up the age groups was equally interesting seeing the development. It was very clear where the basic development had begun and how it gave the stepping stones to the technique the dancers achieved as they got older. Watching the 5-6 age group with Courtney and then the 6-7 with Toni Noblett, it was clear that more steps were established but always with the same rhythmical intent as in the very first class. The dancer's vocabulary was expanded as they began to learn and understand about accents within the music, different time signatures and also becoming familiar with jazz standards. They were also beginning to learn the Shim Sham (one of the most famous tap dances).



I remained observing Toni as she took the 7-9 age group. Toni has a great manner with the children, she questions them about things they had previously talked about and it was really inspiring to see dancers so young grasping musical concepts. Again their vocabulary expanded and their steps were beginning to get more complex. The class I watched next was 11-14 with Claudia Rahardjanoto. At this level the dancers were technically proficient. The class now included more steps across the floor and more complex rhythms.

Finally I went to observe rehearsals of The Tap City Youth Ensemble. Dancers audition to become part of the company. Designed for intermediate and advanced tap dancers aged 11-19, it gives them opportunity to train weekly with director Susan Hebach. They work with professional choreographers learning classic and contemporary repertory. The dancers have chance to deepen their knowledge of tap history by working with guest artists, history lessons and video showings. They perform in New York City and were currently working on a workshop they would take out to schools in New York City.

Watching the rehearsal was really interesting to me. I currently run The Tap Attack Youth Company for dancers aged 10-21. Despite being in different countries it became clear that both of our sets of young dancers have the same passion for tap dance. Their enthusiasm was infectious and they all reminded me very much of my dancers at home.

As the dancers were preparing for their school workshop I didn't stay for the entire rehearsal. I returned a couple of hours later though to see the performance. The youth ensemble had put together a half hour show suitable for children. It gave much information on tap's history particularly the developments that happened in New York. It was very informative and I am sure when they do tour local schools it will be very well received.

Monday 26th January I packed up my things and set off for Oklahoma. Looking forward to the next part of my journey it was unfortunately brought to a standstill when I arrived at Newark airport. Trying to check in I was greeted with the news that my flight had been cancelled. Not too worried I asked to be transferred to the next one to be met with the news that Oklahoma airport was closed as they were experiencing ice storms. Once I realised I was going nowhere I located to a hotel nearby to keep an eye on the travel news in the hope the storms would pass. I phoned Patricia who was due to meet me. In the first time in the university's history she had been sent home due to the weather.

Tuesday arrived and I crossed my fingers and checked in at the airport, it still wasn't clear if we would travel but now I was hoping to leave New York as quick as possible as the storms were heading straight there. We managed to take off and go via Houston to land in 70 degrees, after the mad dash to the next plane and just 1 hour later we landed in Oklahoma. In contrast it was covered in snow. Apparently this had been one of the worst storms in years and had even been declared an emergency by the state. Unfortunately it meant that the university was closed (which had never happened!).

Thankfully I still managed to make good use of my time. Patricia had asked me to teach and judge at Dance Masters of America for the Oklahoma branch. Dance Masters of America is an organisation that offers certifications for dance teachers in all genres. It educates teachers and dancers throughout America and Canada.



The country is divided into chapters; these provide regional workshops, seminars and performance opportunities. Throughout the chapters competitions and conventions are also held, giving dancers the chance to win scholarships to train at intensive courses.

Being from a syllabus background, I felt fairly familiar with how they worked. We do not offer competitions on the same level but generally it was the same apart from the names of steps. Being snowed in gave me the perfect chance to brush up on Dance Masters of America syllabi. I wasn't too surprised at different names as when I began travelling to America to tap I was immediately thrown by the name changes to steps. Now however it is second nature and quite often I will give my students every name for the step just in case.

What was surprising was I count differently. With my accent it made it harder but more use of vowels was used, for example I would count 1 & & a (saying "one and and a) whereas the dancers were used to 1 i e & (using the vowel sounds), very different for me and I know I confused many dancers at the convention.

Finally the university opened again. What had drawn me to visiting after meeting Patricia was how well known the course had become. In 1981 Oklahoma City University created a musical theatre dance program. It gave equal focus on all American dance forms of tap, jazz and theatre dance. It was designed to train performers for careers in the American entertainment industry. Founded by Professor Jo Rowan, the course became one of the first to focus on dance disciplines other than ballet and modern dance.

At that time, university and college dance programs uniformly focused on ballet and modern dance. Now renamed The Ann Lacy School of American Dance and Arts Management offers the following courses - Dance Performance, Dance Management, Entertainment Business, American Dance Pedagogy (all degree level). Within all courses students are required to take tap. Depending on the course will vary the amount of tap the student takes. The school has 10 levels of tap, jazz and ballet. Even today in comparison to some universities OCU still has the most. Jazz and tap are still taken as minor subjects rather than a major.



In 2007 the school was relocated to a brand new purpose building, including 8 extremely spacious dance studios, teaching studios that have 2 way glass for observations, wardrobe for costumes, admin offices. The facilities are first class and I felt very privileged to be there. Within 1 of the studios you could fit 4 studios from where I work in London.

The great thing about the tap course was the students rotate their teachers after a few weeks. All of the teachers complement each other by having different styles and a different focus in class. I observed Patricia's classes as well as Jay Fagan and Jeremy Kiesman. Rhythm was still a very strong element but also other aspects such as tone and dynamics featured. Jay Fagan's advanced class learnt a complex shuffle combination that continued to change accent and rhythm whilst next door Patricia's class were doing complex turning combinations.

With my time at the university complete, I moved upstate and onto Missouri for Dance Masters of America. The weekend consisted of workshops and a completion and I felt very honoured to be a guest there. I taught class to 3 different age groups.

With the snow now gone I flew back to New York, I still had a few days left of class and also some private lessons scheduled with Barbara Duffy (who I did residency with in the summer). I arrived back to my room and had enough time to swap bags and travel down town to meet Barbara. After my positive experience in the summer I was very much looking forward to seeing her again.

We worked through technical combinations and then focused on rhythmic combinations and playing them in the exact tone they should be. We also began to touch on improvisation which we would continue the following day.

The next day Barbara's approach got tougher. She made me take different approaches to things until she got what she wanted. All the time though I found it inspiring and that it was like a jigsaw slotting together. It was almost like finding something you didn't realise you were looking for.

We worked with a variety of music from jazz classics - Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk to Stevie Wonder. I left armed with lists of ideas to keep progressing. Between privates I managed to squeeze a few last lessons in at Steps. After a whirlwind 2 weeks it was time to head home and assess what this had done for me.

There is something about being in America which inspires and motivates me. It is nice to be around like minded people and who appreciate my art form. This time I have covered so many different aspects of my life and all that are so beneficial to me as a tap dancer.

The information I took on board is still taking time to settle as I go about everyday life here but these are skills I know I now have. The trip gave me insights into how I can develop myself in all areas I work in. They all overlap as becoming a better artist is going to make my choreography better as new fresh ideas emerge, and these skills will transfer to my teaching work.

I am more passionate now than ever in getting people learn about tap dance and that it is as much a musical instrument as a form of dance.

Since completing my application for the Finzi Fellowship I have set up The Tap Attack Youth Company. This is giving opportunity to talented young dancers that want to train at a serious level and learn about their art form, they have also been fortunate to be the first England tap team to represent our country at The World Championships. Visiting Tap City Youth Ensemble gave me reassurance that our dancers have the same opportunity as other countries. We are developing young musicians that will hopefully go on to share this with others.

Within Tap Attack I am now developing educational workshops aimed at state school delivery. By creating educational workshops we will be able to give young people the chance to explore rhythm and ways to express themselves. Working alongside other professional tap dancers (from the faculty) and the Head of Music from a local school, we will shortly begin developing our ideas and structure. We also currently hold workshops around the UK for dancers to experience different styles. The workshops are for children and adult's of all levels and gives them opportunity to work with many different tap teachers.

There are so many areas that I am planning and moving forwards, and the fellowship has given me the vision to do just that. Further possibilities would be to collaborate with musicians more, even if only for class. It would also be invaluable to create a piece together taking a dancer and musicians point of view.

I do believe that this is the beginning and hopefully this opportunity will open doors to others, but one thing I am 100% certain of is that my art form is as much a form of music as it is of dance, and I will be eternally grateful to the Finzi Trust for the opportunities they have given me.