

PREVIEW: Emerging Tap Dance Choreographers Showcase

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Lisa Swenton-Eppard Keeps on Tapping

Emerging Tap Dance Choreographers Showcase

July 13 at 8:00 p.m., July 14 at 7:00 p.m.

Dance Place, Washington, D.C.

By Nanda Srikantiah

JUNE 2018: It is the day of the show, and one of the Capitol Tap dancers is out with a swollen ankle, demanding a last-minute reshuffle of the second act. Six youthful tap dancers position themselves in the middle of the stage, while Lisa Swenton-Eppard, director of Capitol Tap, and her co-director Bakaari Wilder watch intently.

To her credit, Swenton-Eppard needs to do very little to get her dancers to adapt to the change. Despite the diverse age ranges from 9 to 25 of the dancers in Capitol Tap and fellow company

District Tap (25 years and up), the dancers work together seamlessly. Only when they reshuffle the Finale— featuring the classic tap curtain call, with each dancer improvising a final flourish – do things get tricky. “Relax,” Wilder says to the group as they start to speed through the last few dancers. “It’s not a race, right?”

Once again Swenton-Eppard and Wilder are in the midst of costume fittings, rehearsals, and last-minute changes for what has become an annual showcase of some of the brightest rising young tap artists in the metropolitan Washington, D.C. region. This year’s show, this Saturday and Sunday at Dance Place, features work by former Broadway tap dancer Baakari Wilder, along with pieces by pros Emily Crews and Shannon Dunne plus works by members and alums of Capital Tap, including Miles Brown, Katharine Manor, Justin Lewis, and tap dancing twin brothers Sam and Max Heimowitz.

The rhythm tap favored in D.C. often has to overcome most people’s perception of tap as a Broadway-style dance form, accompanied by music. Tap is a percussive dance that requires a special stage floor, which makes it difficult for tap artists to be featured in generic dance showcases. “There was a wall,” Swenton-Eppard says. “Choreographers’ showcases [in D.C.] are usually for contemporary dance, and not for tap ... so we thought, maybe we’ll take our ball and play over here.”

What started as a reaction to tap being excluded from mainstream dance showcases rapidly became an exercise in inclusion. This weekend’s *Emerging Tap Dance Choreographers Showcase* at Dance Place will feature D.C. area tap choreographers who Swenton-Eppard believes deserve a bigger audience. The dancers in the two tap ensembles will be divided and work across companies with different choreographers on the nearly dozen pieces. “We wanted to force dancers to jump around and work with people they haven’t,” Swenton-Eppard says. “It worked!”

In the eyes of many tap dancers, artists, and educators, tap always seems to be a step behind the attention given to other dance forms. Unlike contemporary dance or classical ballet, which have an abundance of teachers and a relatively steady stream of funding in dance education, Swenton-Eppard said she struggled to get second-level tap courses funded at Bowie State University in Maryland, where she teaches introductory tap. “[Bowie State University] respects it. But it’s still a struggle. One semester I didn’t teach because they didn’t have the funding,” she says. Swenton-Eppard fought to make tap classes a priority, and her efforts paid off – Bowie State plans to offer a second-level tap class in Spring of 2020. But, she points out, the fight never ends. “Between getting the right floors, education, and funding, we’re always up against something!”

Raised by a single mother who ran a dance studio in Southern Maryland, Swenton-Eppard grew up surrounded by tap and other dance forms, but didn’t expect to follow her mother’s footsteps. “I never thought dance would be my bread and butter,” Swenton-Eppard says. “When I went to college, I didn’t pursue it.” Instead, she studied psychology, and later worked with adolescents with mental health issues.

Still, she couldn’t get tap dance – and tap education – out of her system. She taught tap on the side, and eventually the local youth tap ensemble, Tappers with Attitude, asked her to come on full-time as artistic director.

In 2010, Tappers with Attitude closed its doors and Swenton-Eppard founded Capitol Tap, featuring 25 dancers from TWA; Wilder came on as her co-director. In 2016, she created District Tap, for tap artists above the age of 25, who have outgrown Capital Tap. Many of these dancers have full-time, quintessentially D.C. jobs as lawyers or health professionals, but devote themselves to tap dance after hours.

Swenton-Eppard's role as a tap educator is increasingly in demand. On top of her work as an adjunct professor, she teaches technique, competition, and senior dance at two studios in Maryland. It's a sign, she points out, that tap is growing in the D.C. area. It also means that tap artists in region are solidifying their niche.

Swenton-Eppard approaches tap as both a musical and movement-based art form. She also stresses the importance of tap history in her teaching, calling the local D.C. community a "tap family" and always asking her students, "What's your tap lineage?"

"Tap is a uniquely American art form Our [form of] tap comes from a place of studying the history, approaching it as a musical art form," she says. "A lot of people have not [learned] the type of tap that we are teaching." Swenton-Eppard's approach to tap involves, at its most basic, honoring elders – respecting the tap "holders of knowledge," the choreographers of a particular repertoire, and its uniquely American traditions.

Nowhere was this clearer than in the company's *Leather, Sand, Metal* program last year at Dance Place. That show explored forms of rhythm and tap in non-traditional ways that simultaneously paid homage to tap lineage and contemporary style. In the first half of the show, barefoot dancers created rhythms with their bodies and the soles of their feet. Later they shuffled in sneakers, then in small sand boxes like the famous tap dancer Howard "Sandman" Sims, who cultivated the sandbox technique to distinguish himself from other dancers during tap dancing's heyday in the mid-20th century.

Her students often get inspired by a particular tap artist as they work on their own performance and choreography. Zoe Killbourn, a member of District Tap, says: "I like [Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson] ... so smooth and light. The D.C. tap community emphasizes the old style of tap, not the Broadway rhythm." Allie Bohm, who tapped in New York and now performs with District Tap, agrees: "I think we're dedicated to historical precedent, but we're also advancing the art [here in D.C.]."

It's clear that Swenton-Eppard has encouraged valuing tap artistry in her students and artists-in-residence. "You have to be a part of the past, listen to [the historical tap dancers], listen to the tone of their feet," she says earnestly. "My teenage students, they start to connect the dots when they study history in school." Their tap education ages "like a fine wine," she says. It might take time, but eventually they understand that tap is part of a bigger picture of music and dance. "From a director's perspective, it's like, 'They get it! They get it!'" she exclaims.

A cohort of Swenton-Eppard's talented teenage students have graduated high school and are heading to college or, in the case of Miles Brown, taking a gap year to do a tap residency in Europe. Max and Sam Heimowitz, Capitol Tap's dedicated twin brother choreographers, are headed to Yale University. All three choreographed pieces for this weekend's showcase. Swenton-Eppard, though sad to see them move on, is excited for their next steps. "They're ready They're headed into more growth," she says. Most importantly, "They have a good base of tap history!"

"My hope is that tap continues to exist, that it becomes part of the landscape in the dance community, on an equal footing with other dance forms," Swenton-Eppard says. "That only comes from education, and that's why we are here today."

Emerging Tap Choreographers Showcase, featuring innovative new works by D.C. area percussive choreographers danced by Capital Tap and District Tap, July 13 at 8:00 p.m., July 14 at 7:00 p.m. Dance Place, 3225 8th Street, NE, Washington, D.C. Tickets: www.danceplace.org or 202-269-1600.

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