

Tap Attack

by Kiera Feldman

In the Hope High Optimized pamphlet, "Tap Attack!" is advertised as such: "Tap into some fun! Join Liz for an introduction to tap dancing. Learn how to shim sham shimmy, paddle and roll and much more! Tuesday and Thursday, 4:00-5:30." Liz denies involvement in blurb writing. "I swear, that was not my doing," she tells me a little too defensively, and then adds, "And I didn't name the class, either."

Hope High Optimized--H20 in its catchy form--is run through a larger program called Volunteers in Providence. It offers after-school tutoring along with classes such as mock trial, breakdancing, CD production, and 7am yoga. Before the creation of H20 at the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year, theater was Hope High School's only, yet much prized, after-school program. A banner reading "Congratulations Hope High School Theater Company, American High School Theater Festival Winners, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Scotland, August, 2004" still hangs on the outside of Hope's stately brick building. It joins permanent brass lettering nearby that reads, "Giving of yourself to others is the greatest achievement of all."

Liz does not dress her volunteerism in such rhetoric. "Teaching," Liz says, "is all about the anecdotes." She doesn't share any stories about her students with me. Liz does, however, tell anecdotes about herself. One year she taught American History, a class unlikely to sport the blurb "tap into fun!"--nor any blurb, for that matter. At the school talent show, Liz and another teacher performed a routine that included matching fedoras. Somehow the image of Liz tapping while wearing a fedora is both funny and fabulous: she is tall, lean, could easily be mistaken for shy, and spends a lot of her time thinking, talking, and reading about baseball. She has the look of someone who used to be gangly in high school. Since then, she has grown into being a 27-year-old tomboy who wears peacoats and tight jeans and has taken sports fandom to the next level: PhD dissertation ("A Cultural History of Baseball").

As today is a Tuesday or a Thursday between 4:00 and 5:30, Liz is getting ready to tap into some fun. Melcris, hefty and talkative, volunteers to unlock the tap classroom. Melcris will not be tapping into some fun with us today, though she is a big fan of H20. She is enrolled in Pop Media Art, Newspaper, and Mock Trial. A much quieter girl interested in trying Liz's tap class enters the room. Melcris pounces, almost overpowering Cassie, the small, 14-year-old new girl. "Oooo I like your charm bracelet! I had one just like it once it was a cross do you wear the cross? I don't know some people don't like to wear the cross I used to wear one my ex-boyfriend made it for me it meant something to me once I'll bring it in to show you because you like charms." The reply is tolerant yet less than enthusiastic.

Liz puts an old boombox and a stack of boxes full of tap dancing shoes on the desk. "No one ever likes my music," she says as she turns on tinny-sounding hip hop. For now the classroom is a tap studio, though by day it is both an English and a History room. Rhode Island trivia ("DO NOT ERASE!") is written on one chalkboard and a miniature American flag hangs above it. The opposite wall is filled with family trees and assorted Venn diagrams. As veteran tap class attendee Hilary has joined us, the group now consists of Liz, Cassie, Hilary, and a girl in overalls and big hoop earrings on a computer at the teacher's desk. Today is a relatively quiet day, though not for long.

Cassie tries on spare tap shoes while talking about her other H20 classes-smoothies and self-esteem in Girl Power, booties and ponchos in Knitting (she is a pro at casting off and has mastered purling). None of the shoes fit. Liz says to her, "Maybe you could knit some tap shoes?" This gets a little smile. Encouraged, Liz asks if Cassie has tapped before. "Yeah, with my mom," Cassie says. "Oh, cool," Liz responds, and then adds, part jokingly and part seriously, "or does that make it uncool?" Then, she moves over to the chalkboard. The tapping is about to begin.

Using the chalkboard ledge as a railing, Liz leads Cassie and Hilary through eight counts of toe taps to the front, side, back, side, and then close. Next, shuffle-ball-change, shuffle-ball-change. Ball-change ball-change ball-change. Cassie is dressed down in workout clothes, whereas Hilary is dressed up in khakis, a white collared shirt, and a maroon sweater. Liz is somewhere in the middle with jeans. Hilary talks excitedly about an extravagant combined tap-breakdancing show at the end of the year. "I know these guys-they're real cool-they do breakdancing, you know the kind where they flip off the wall and everything? We'd be tap dancing for a little while and then out of nowhere these breakdancers come and join us and everybody be going crazy and the music all loud and we'd be tapping all over the place." As she talks, a curly ringlet of hair bounces on each side of her beaming face. "People would be like wow they're real cool," and she repeats, "Wow they're cool." There's something sad, too, in how she says it, as if she knows this production, if it takes place, wouldn't happen quite as she imagines it. She is large enough that an airline would require her to buy two seats. Here it is hard not to notice that her size limits what she can do, both physically and socially. "Yeah, they'd be so amazed," she says with a shuffle and a tap.

As I watch Liz and the other students tap, I realize that what I am witnessing is an intersection of many things. A white Jew from Long Island is teaching tap dancing to lower-class students of color. In this classroom, white/black, high school/university, student/teacher, privileged/underprivileged, book learning/kinetic learning are all coming together. This is appropriate as tap itself is an intersection-a fusion of African and Irish dance. It is a dance form that developed in the 19th century immigrant slums of New York City before making its way onto Broadway in the 20th century. Liz is tapping into a long legacy of border crossing.

The border between teacher and student is blurred when Liz learns from her students. Recently two nationally competitive step dancers passed Liz's classroom, heard all the clicking, and came in to see what was happening. The two boys performed their routine, quickly picked up tap basics, and taught Liz some step. Step, Liz explains, is a dance form that combines elements from African and hip hop traditions. "They were like, 'Hey, we can teach this smart, old

person something!" Liz tells me. Unfortunately, Liz has yet to fully master the necessary coordination. "The whole 'lifting my knees and clapping under them in succession thing was tough,'" she laments.

Cassie successfully completes a series of step-ball-heels from one end of the chalkboard to another, shoulders back and eyes looking at the ceiling as per Liz's directions, which are given more like suggestions than commands. Liz lets her students do most of the talking, interrupting only with little side comments like, "Little more on the toe," and, "remember those bent knees or you'll be feeling it tomorrow." Liz demonstrates each move at the chalkboard, and then steps away so that it is Cassie and Hilary's space. Even though there are only two students, it is their classroom.

It follows that Liz doesn't object to her students including goofing off in the lesson plan. Hilary does a little dance, to which Cassie calls out, "Shake your booty!" Hilary replies, "Yeah, shake that moneymaker!" It is a large moneymaker-lucrative, if you will. Suddenly, the girl on the computer calls out to Cassie, "You know who you remind me of? The power rangers!" Hilary agrees with her assessment, pointing to Cassie's pink tank top, matching pink sweatpants, pink socks, and pink scarf-which she nabs and uses to prance around the classroom. "Alright, loca," Cassie says. Hilary responds, "You know us Spanish people!"

Liz senses a shift in her class' tapping desires and asks, "How does a movie sound now?" It is a genuine question. Hilary wants to know if it's that movie with that guy who broke up with that girl. Descriptive as that is, Liz responds kindly, "No, I don't think so..." While Cassie and Hilary make a bathroom trip, Liz pops the video in the machine on the roller cart and explains that we're about to see "lots of old people." "I figure if they can suffer through this, then we can get to the recent stuff. Like that guy who taps on Sesame Street." Suffer doesn't quite describe the class' response to the video; they are engrossed. The prospect of building their way up to Sesame Street doesn't even need to be mentioned.

The first segment is simply amazing. Rows and rows of men in tuxedos tap synchronously while their female counterparts spin and twirl in what amount to sequined bathing suits. In black and white, their smiling faces look identical. Sammy Davis Jr. does a voice over pronouncing the obvious. "Dancing," he says, "is a sort of art form." The entire cast lines up in two rows and does what looks to be a tapping wave-perhaps the graceful predecessor to the lackluster wave found at football games. Hilary chimes in, "That's hot. That's hot!" Cassie adds, "They do it with mad style." Liz smiles. The movie continues on, covering Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly and Ginger Rogers, Shirley Temple and an elderly black sidekick, Eleanor Powell breaking tap dancing history by wearing pants and non-high heels ("Girl you know you out of breath!" Hilary says after a particularly impressive segment), and a pre-husband abuse Liza Minelli talking of the glories of Broadway. "Ms., were you ever on Broadway?" Hilary asks earnestly. We end watching the tin man from The Wizard of Oz, with Hilary singing "If I only had a brain, if I only had a brain..." In a devious aside, Cassie suggests Hilary's song is autobiographical.

Suddenly, everyone is scrambling to make the last bus home.

"Isn't it funny how all high schools look the same?" Liz says to me as we walk through the long halls, past blue lockers, trophy display cases, study skills and nutrition posters, and murals of surfers and motorcycles. Hope may look like every other high school, but it is quite different than the vast majority of the high schools attended by Liz's other students just a few blocks away at Brown. "I always have kids missing class because their brother got arrested or their family is moving or any number of reasons," Liz says to me, and then adds, "Life is a transient thing for a lot of these kids."

Although I attend Brown, just a few blocks away, I was unaware that Hope was on the verge of being shut down in February. Amazingly, there is a 52% dropout rate at this high school atop College Hill-the most affluent neighborhood in Providence. Of the senior class only twenty-eight are headed to a four-year college. Furthermore, with a student body of 1500 students, each day about 300 are truant.

Mostly non-border crossers, many Brown students see their neighborhood public school students as failing or dangerous. However, several exchange opportunities do exist. Through programs such as H2O, members of the Brown community can realize their membership in the larger Providence community--however transient that membership may be. However, there are far fewer programs for Hope students to come to Brown. Indeed, part of Brown students' privilege is being able to border cross. For example, is there a program for Hope students to teach a step class at Brown? Perhaps a more productive question would be to ask what Brown as an institution can do to make the border between itself and Hope more permeable and less defined.

Flipping through the H2O booklet again, I think how Tap Attack doesn't self-describe as "Tap into Lowering the Drop-Out Rate!" or "Tap into a College Education!" Likewise, Hope High Optimized isn't named Hope High Overhauled, and Volunteers in Providence isn't named Revolutionaries in Providence. The brochure for Liz's class reads, "Tap into Fun!" and some days there are just two eager students.