



# Shuffles and Chassés

Tap meets ballet at Thomas Armour Youth Ballet, and the results are anything but mixed

By Ryan P. Casey

You wouldn't expect to find tap among the offerings at Thomas Armour Youth Ballet, a Miami studio rooted in ballet since 1951. But today this classical ballet school, formerly called The Miami Conservatory, encourages students ages 7 and up to study tap and ballet; for the members of its Tap Team, both forms of dance are required. The result? A win-win scenario.

## Tap takes root

According to Miami native and TAYB teacher (and alum) Natasha Williams, 27, the birth of the tap team marked the beginning of a stronger tap presence in her home city. "There were lots of opportunities for dancers who studied modern or ballet," she says, "but no groups or companies doing tap performances. I wanted my students to have something to work for besides the annual recital. And, as they get older, maybe someday I'll have my own company."

TAYB's expansion into tap happened in 2007, when Williams stopped in to take a ballet class at her former studio. Unbeknownst to her, she was walking into a new job

opportunity. The studio's director, Ruth Wiesen, wanted to diversify the curriculum, and she asked Williams, who had studied tap, jazz, and ballet since childhood, to teach tap.

Williams chose to focus on tap after graduating from New World School of the Arts and studying business at Florida International University; she subsequently attended the inaugural tap program at The School at Jacob's Pillow in 2010.

## Mutual benefits

Now TAYB's sole tap instructor, Williams says ballet is a boon to her students. "Ballet helps them learn to use their upper body and arms, which is essential for tap. They develop proper alignment and balance, they're able to turn, and they know more terminology." That allows her to "incorporate traditional dance moves and basic jazz steps into choreography, not just tap footwork," she says. And there are more benefits: the students' "attention to detail improves," Williams says. And, she adds, "tap helps them musically in ballet. They can figure out the timing of the steps, or identify whether they're dancing in waltz or 4/4 time."

This page and opposite photos by Jeff Schweiger

Ballet teacher Rosalyn Deshauters agrees. For ballet students, the benefits of tap include “understanding of rhythms,” she says. “My students really get excited by challenging rhythms and quick movement, so I remind them of the steps they’ve learned in tap.” Plus, Deshauters points out, “Many tap steps can be related to ballet steps—like the shuffle, for instance. The in-and-out movement of the leg bending at the knee is like a frappé, as one of my third-grade students pointed out one day.”

“A lot of young ballet students sit back in their heels; tap forces them to be more forward on their feet,” Wiesen adds. “Tap also gives them instant gratification because they can make sounds, and they move across the floor sooner. And it’s a safer choice for male students who are struggling with sexual identity, or who might have fathers or uncles who don’t approve of dance. If I can hook them with tap, maybe I can get them into ballet.”

### Tap Team advances

Since 2010, TAYB has offered tap in three levels. Due to space and time constraints at the main studio, all tap classes are held at the school’s satellite locations.

By 2011, some tappers had progressed to an advanced level—but there were no youth companies or performance opportunities for them in the city. So Williams pitched the idea of the Tap Team, which would give the studio’s most

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BELOW AND OPPOSITE: Thomas Armour Youth Ballet’s Tap Team, led by teacher Natasha Williams (second from left in both photos), boasts 23 members who perform at events such as the TEDxYouth@Miami empowerment program.





skilled hoofers more training and additional shows, including those for which they could earn community-service hours for their academic schools. With Wiesen's blessing, an eight-member team was formed and quickly flourished; it now boasts 23 members, most of whom are scholarship students. In 2012, Williams and the ensemble performed at a TEDx event; at the countywide Young Talent Big Dreams competition they nabbed a win in the group dance category. Several professional tappers, including Chloe Arnold, Sarah Reich, and Jason Holley, have taught master classes at TAYB.

### Through history's lens

The studio's curriculum is designed around a framework that incorporates the history of music, art, and dance. Each year all classes explore influences from a certain time period. Last season's focus was the 1900s through the 1950s: in ballet class, students read about dancers like Margot Fonteyn and choreographer Michel Fokine and watched films of ballets such as *Les Sylphides* and *The Prodigal Son*. Tappers studied jazz of the period, from the ragtime of Scott Joplin to the swing of Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson, and other legends.

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Thomas Amour tappers keep the beat at the Betty T. Ferguson Recreation Complex in Miami Gardens, one of four outreach sites.

Photo courtesy Thomas Amour Youth Ballet Tap Team

emperors," Wiesen says. "I decided to take that holistic approach with our students, to show them how art has reflected what has happened in the world, and how world events have affected art."

Students recently finished their study of the period from the 1950s to the present. Deshauters enlightened her dancers on Alvin Ailey and his most famous piece, *Revelations*, while Williams challenged students to watch footage of famous tap dancers and try to re-create some of their steps. Other classes listened to Motown music and read books on Martin Luther King Jr. and segregation.

Students have also completed art projects: collages inspired by the study of Matisse, flowered headpieces influenced by Frida Kahlo, and murals in the style of iconic 1980s artist Keith Haring, to name a few.

"They learn about history and the world through dance," Williams says. "And since all the teachers follow the same curriculum for technique and history, a student who switches classes won't be confused or study something radically different from what they are used to. It makes the studio more cohesive."

### Team TAYB

Ballet and tap work together onstage as well as in the curriculum. For the past two years, TAYB has collaborated in performances with the Greater Miami Youth Symphony, a community-based orchestra program that provides students ages 5 to 18 with professional training and performance experience. In 2012, two ballet dancers and two tap dancers presented a piece to "Summer" from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

"Seeing the ballet dancers perform their steps and then the tappers perform their steps to the same music shows the diversity of movement and music interpretation," Deshauters says. "It's good for the kids to see that there is more than one way to interpret music, and anyone can do it. You don't have to label yourself as a tap dancer or ballet dancer. Even though a piece of music sounds a certain way, you can dance to it however you want."

Last year, a rendition of the Benny Goodman classic "Sing, Sing, Sing" combined ballet, tap, jazz, and modern (offered only to older, advanced students). All of the performers were Tap Team members, whose versatility Williams attributes to their strong cross-training.

"People think tappers can only dance fast and staccato, and ballet can only be allegro or adagio," Wiesen says. "They're surprised to learn otherwise. The dancers and the musicians have a real connection. They all work as a team."

It's a team effort that keeps TAYB's award-winning programs running year after year for more than 1,100 students in five locations.

"We do our very best to help kids all around," Williams says. "Whatever it takes to get kids to class, we'll do it."

"I've always felt that tap would be a good partner with ballet," Wiesen says. "They enhance each other. And my students benefit from a more well-rounded dance education." ♦

TAYB's Tap Team could not exist without the aid of the studio's scholarship program, which owner Ruth Wiesen, then a relatively new instructor, founded in 1988 as a way to help more students access Miami's magnet programs in the arts. Funded largely by The Children's Trust, a property tax-driven funding source that serves the children of Miami-Dade County, the scholarships ensure high-quality dance training for nearly 600 students from low-income families, who are charged only an annual fee of \$10. The dancers also receive leotards, tights, and dance shoes.

"Quality classical dance training is not within reach for a majority of children in our community," Wiesen says. "Classes are expensive, and the schools are located in the most advantaged areas of the community."

Along with their dance education, TAYB scholarship students receive assistance through The Children's Trust with issues that affect them and their families and their success beyond the classroom, including tutoring, medical and dental care, lunch money, legal fees, bus fare, and audition coaching for middle and high school arts programs. TAYB also serves as a conduit to agencies that can intervene in situations such as immigration, domestic violence, drug or alcohol abuse, and sexual identity crises. The program once helped seek housing for a family whose home was condemned and demolished following extensive damage from Hurricane Irene.

Initially the scholarships helped only kids who lived close to the studio; with working parents or no family vehicle, many students could not attend until they were old enough to take public transportation.

If the kids couldn't come to the studio, Wiesen reasoned, the studio had to go to them. In 2000, she approached the principal of Morningside Elementary School in the neighborhood of Little Haiti, whom she knew to be an arts enthusiast, and learned that there was an unused classroom. It became the program's first outreach site, the fourth and most recent of which opened at the Betty T. Ferguson Recreation Complex in Miami Gardens in 2011. TAYB pays no rent for these sites and provides the same teachers and curriculums as at the main studio.

"The long-term goal of the program is to ensure a college education for all students by laying a foundation of a strong work ethic, social skills, discipline, consistency, focus, and the ability to delay gratification," says Wiesen.

All scholarship students graduate from high school: 98 percent of them attend college, while 2 percent pursue professional dance careers, according to Wiesen. In 2013, one graduating high school senior was admitted to The Juilliard School. Alumni of the scholarship program include Robert Battle, artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and several current and former members of Martha Graham Dance Company.