

thoughts on trick steps

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They are everywhere. Fancy pullback combinations, 5 count wings, triple over the tops, toe stands. I don't know a single tap dancer today (including myself) who has never had any aspiration to do these things. And it's not surprising, since trick steps are not only displaying a great amount of body control, but also catch everyone's eye. I remember after accomplishing my very first pullback I felt like "Now I'm an advanced tap dancer!"

And many tap students feel the same way, which is why they specifically take classes that focus on trick steps; oftentimes when asking students what they are working on right now, a great amount of answers will include something that has to do with pullbacks or wings. And there is nothing wrong about that. Trick steps are a great way to practice stamina, speed, and weight shifts. Anything that happens with both feet in the air makes you really aware of where the center of your body has to be, and the necessity to really go for it (you can't fake jumping - either you do it or you don't) promotes a good work ethic. Plus it sounds very wild.

But there wouldn't be a point in writing this article if there weren't some aspects of trick steps that have a bitter taste to me.

First of all, I have the impression that an excessive use of trick steps is common in certain circles that approach tap dancing more as a sport than an art form, and the quest for more and more athleticism might cause the musicality and artistry to suffer. Of course everything has the right to exist, and I don't want to sow seeds of discord here.

However, the approach that I have been taught and am following now, is about putting musicality above trickery. If the exorbitant use of trick steps results in forgetting about the higher artistic purpose of what is being done, and losing oneself in technique, there is not much of a connection to the actual art form itself anymore.

Technique should serve an artist in a sense that he or she eventually won't have to think about it anymore. We should not think about the steps, but about the music we want to make. Technique should make it easier, not harder, I believe. Performing trick steps in the wrong places is an inefficient use of our energy, and this energy will be lacking somewhere else. If thinking about technique gets in the way, it is probably impossible to get in the zone. Yet that is where art is made.

The ever-increasing complexity of trick steps is probably a natural phenomenon of changing times. Tap dancers love to challenge themselves and others (challenge!!), and so the trick steps (or flash steps, to use a different word) are rising further and further into the dimensions of insanity. When tap dance was young, it started out with over the tops or Frank Condos' 5-count-wings¹. Today the madness doesn't end with inward wings, under the tops, or multiple-count pullbacks in all variations. That itself is definitely not a bad thing. It's important to keep pushing.

But - I think that there is a distinction between pushing the technical vocabulary on the one hand and keeping the art form growing on the other hand. Technique is one thing. But it's not everything. There is musicality, expression, artistry, originality. It is not what we do, it's how we do it. And all these things together create the art form. If we focus on the steps only, some of the the most important aspects get lost, and the dancing becomes incomprehensible.

Speaking of which, it is very interesting that "old" flash steps such as over the tops and trenches were *not only* steps - they meant to imitate exactly what their names suggested: going *over the top*² and *in the trenches*³ during World War I.

1 <http://www.danceadvantage.net/5-count-wings/>

2 <http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/glossaryofmilitaryterms/g/overthetop.htm>

3 <http://www.danceadvantage.net/toots-davis/>

Think about that for a second.

People can be brilliant at trick steps, but that alone doesn't make them good tap dancers. In my opinion, the mastery of trick steps is not about knowing and doing as many of them as possible (because that is something that many people can do), but knowing *when* to use them. Everything should make sense, and the basic technique should never get lost. Pullbacks and wings don't mean a thing if we don't have our flaps and shuffles together. There has to be a basis from which we can take off to the heights of trickery when it's necessary. And there has to be a dynamic. Being easy all the time can just be as boring as being flashy all the time. The only thing that counts is clarity and the musical and artistic quality. A fancy technique is just the cherry on top. That said, a person who only knows shuffles, steps, and heels has the same potential to express themselves as someone who uses a good amount of trick steps (if not sometimes more). Trick steps cannot exist without the fundamental technique.

Of course technique is a prerequisite for practicing any art form there is. I like to compare technique with tools. In order to place a nail into the wall, you will have to know how to use a hammer and a nail. In order to tap dance, you will have to know the basic elements such as toes, heels, shuffles, and flaps. In both cases, these tools make up the essence of the subject matter. You won't be able to go anywhere without these inevitable basics.

In that sense, I feel that having fancy tools, but not knowing how to use them, is a very materialistic thing. Many people have the ability to buy a posh drilling machine (i.e. to acquire a huge repertory of trick steps), but the mere having doesn't imply you're a master of drilling (screws or taps). Just like in our materialistic society, for many of those who *have* but don't *make*, the tendency to show off the tools as a facade to cover the emptiness within themselves is fairly high.

Following this thought, in my opinion an unnecessary use of trick steps means dancing from the ego. Why? Because due to their visual component trick steps are often used to wow the audience. Which is fine depending on the context. But if this becomes a habit in every setting, this might be an egoistic approach. The saying goes "dance to express, not to impress". Everything we do should be for the sake of artistry, not based on the desires of our ego, such as fame, popularity, or being liked by people. Artists should be as neutral of a medium as possible so that the art can flow through them freely. This doesn't mean being "blank". It means that we have to work on and find ourselves in order to realize when we are in touch with our true self and when we are stuck in our ego. In doing so, we develop the ability to take the ego away from our creational process and allow our higher selves to create the most genuine art possible.

In conclusion I would say that the key for trick steps is mindfulness. Trick steps are a great tool to have if you want to create a certain visual or audible effect, to practice stamina and weight shifts, to push the boundaries of technique, and sometimes simply because it's fun to work yourself up with tricky stuff. However, these things should be used in the right place and time, and the ego should not interfere with the actual artistic purpose of what we are doing. And now my higher self is going to practice some single foot five count wings.