



Dorrance Dance

VIRGINIA ARTS FESTIVAL 2026

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Dorrance Dance



Dorrance Dance is an award-winning tap dance company based in New York City. Founded in 2011 by Artistic Director and 2015 MacArthur Fellow Michelle Dorrance, the company shares the incredibly dynamic range that tap dance has to offer through performance and education. Dorrance Dance’s goal is to engage with audiences on a musical and emotional level, and to share the complex history and powerful legacy of this Black American art form throughout the country and the world.

Michelle Dorrance writes, “Both of my parents, along with my tap dance mentor, Gene Medler, are master educators. One of the powerful lessons they taught me was to always work to better myself, to always remain a student.” Beyond their electrifying dance performances, Dorrance Dance is dedicated to community engagement and educating the next generation of tap dancers, offering lecture demonstrations and workshops for students at all levels as well as an annual tap dance intensive program for pre-professional dancers in NYC.

Sources: Description adapted from www.dorrancedance.com, choreography quotes from “Michelle Dorrance: Tapping into a Rhythmic Playground,” www.danceicons.org/pages/?p=180921105230

Try This!

- Michelle Dorrance is a choreographer, or a creator of dances. Of her creative process, she says “musical emphasis is behind everything.”
- Pick a song you like and identify the rhythm. Try acting as a choreographer and create a short dance that emphasizes the song’s rhythm, using your classmates as your dancers. You and your classmates don’t need to know any specific dance steps—any kind of movement can become a dance.
- Practice your sequence of steps a few times, listening to the rhythm of the music. Michelle Dorrance says, “Sometimes you have to let things see themselves through to the end. I really might not like it, but I’ll finish the phrase. And then I can see it slowly becomes something. Sometimes these parts I don’t like are the dancers’ favorite sections.”
- Have your group perform the dance for the class, before letting someone else try being the choreographer!

Shall We Dance?

People have always danced, historians believe. We can see representations of people dancing in prehistoric cave paintings!



Prehistoric cave pictographs. Kozarnika cave, Belogradchik, Daznaempoveche.

When people dance, they move their bodies to express emotions or ideas, usually accompanied by music. In this way, dance is like language, and the different steps and movements within each style of dance are the language's vocabulary. People can dance alone or with others. When people dance to entertain an audience, they often do so as part of a performing group called a dance company. Dance companies usually specialize in a certain type of dance, such as modern, jazz, tap, or ballet. Dorrance Dance specializes in tap dance.



Ancient Greek dance depiction. Painter of the Berlin Dancing Girl, ArchaiOptix.



Carved dancing figure in 13th century Hindu temple. Ramappa temple, Rudresvara, Palampet Telangana India, Sarah Welch.

Choreography is the art of creating dances. A choreographer imagines how a dance will look and arranges steps and movements to tell a story or express a particular feeling or idea. Choreographers must be knowledgeable in their chosen dance form and its particular vocabulary to effectively convey their message to the audience. They also select the music that will accompany the dance and work with set, lighting, and costume designers so that all elements of the performance work together to express the dance's story or idea. Choreographers are usually dancers or former dancers too, like Michelle Dorrance of Dorrance Dance.

• Research & Reflect

- Think of types of dancing people do in social settings, such as disco, moshing, break dancing, hip-hop, line dancing, waltz, salsa, swing... Pick one style and research its origins. How does this dance style reflect the culture or cultures from which it emerged?
- How does it use elements of dance? What does this dance style's language—its movement vocabulary—communicate to others?

ELEMENTS OF DANCE

All forms of dance can be broken down into its most basic parts. The acronym BASTE can help you remember these dance building blocks. As you watch the performance, keep these elements in mind. How do the dancers use these elements to tell a story?



Body

A dancer uses parts of the body or the entire body to dance.

Example: A dancer might use their arms, legs, hands, or feet, or even their neck and head.

Ask yourself: How did the dancers use their bodies? What shapes did their bodies make?



Action

A dancer performs particular actions.

Example: A dancer might bend, sway, or leap.

Ask yourself: What actions or movements did the dancers make?



Space

A dancer moves through space in various ways.

Example: A dancer might move forward, backward, diagonally, up, or down.

Ask yourself: What patterns in space did the dancers use?



Time

A dancer moves in relation to time in different ways.

Example: A dancer might move at a quick tempo or in a certain rhythm.

Ask yourself: What aspects of time—speed, rhythm, accent—did the dancers use?



Energy

A dancer moves with varied energy.

Example: A dancer might move smoothly or suddenly.

Ask yourself: What kind of energy did the dancers use?



Source: Adapted from *The Elements of Dance*, www.elementsofdance.org.

Tap Dance: An American Art Form

Tap dance is a unique form of dance that originated right here in the United States. The style that would go on to become modern tap dance arose in the 1700s out of a fusion of West African and Irish dance traditions. Michelle Dorrance writes, “Tap dance was born on the slave plantation in horrific circumstances. To learn the heritage of tap dance is to learn the history of racial inequality in America—and how that inequality was transcended. To learn the legacy of tap dance is to also learn of the responsibility to pass down that legacy, an oral tradition, and a Black form.”

In the 17th and 18th centuries, enslaved people from West Africa and indentured servants from Ireland both worked on farms and plantations in Britain’s colonies across the Americas, before plantations shifted towards using only enslaved people’s labor. Their cultures influenced each other, contributing to new customs and styles of dance.

When drumming was banned by plantation owners, enslaved Africans developed different ways of creating percussion with the body through dance. Kongo people from West Africa had brought the gioube or djouba, a sacred step dance, to the Americas. In the Americas, this grew into a dance style called juba, in which people stamped their feet and struck their arms and legs to create complicated rhythms, kind of like the style of step dancing in African-American fraternities and sororities today. The jigs Irish indentured servants had danced in Ireland developed into a new American jig style in the colonies. “Jigging” became the term used to describe a new type of rhythmic dancing with elements of jig and juba—a precursor to modern tap dance. Plantation owners staged jigging contests, but contests also sprang up spontaneously among Black and Irish communities as entertainment and to show off dancers’ skills. In the 19th century, immigrants from northern England to the United States brought with them the Lancashire Clog dance, developed in industrial Lancashire cotton mills, which also contributed to the developing style of tap dance.



Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.



Modern tap shoes

Although modern tap shoes have metal “taps” underneath the shoe on the toe and heel which make a distinctive bright sound when they strike the floor, the earliest forms of tap dance didn’t use these. Instead, dancers wore hard-soled shoes or wooden clogs to make

sounds against the floor. Sometimes pennies were stuck to the shoes so they would make more noise, which later inspired tap shoes’ metal “taps”.

Over the course of the 19th century, tap dance developed socially—in the streets and at clubs and dance halls. From its origins on the plantations, it grew into an urban style of dance. Dancers frequently copied moves from each other and invented new ones, experimenting and riffing off of each other. Challenges between dancers continued, from street showdowns to contests embedded in elaborate staged performances.

The 19th century also saw the development of the minstrel show—a type of performance where mostly white performers, wearing blackface makeup, sang, danced, and generally acted out crude stereotypes of Black people. By 1840, this kind of performance had become well-established as a genre and was immensely popular across the United States. Minstrel shows typically included versions of the jigging dance style, along with adaptations of other African-American social dances.

William Henry Lane, a free Black man who lived from about 1825 to 1852, was immensely influential to the development of the tap genre. Lane grew up in a poor

neighborhood in Lower Manhattan in New York City, where he began his career dancing in saloons and dance halls. He was an extremely skilled tap dancer and could perform steps so complex and quick that no one could copy them. Lane challenged and defeated the best white tap dancers of the era. After winning a famous contest with a renowned Irish-American minstrel performer, John Diamond, Lane was called the “King of All Dancers” and “Master Juba.” The latter became his stage name. Lane joined a touring minstrel show troupe that had until then been all-white. He was listed on playbills above white performers, which was unheard of at the time, and even performed with the troupe in London for the Queen of England—wearing his natural face and not the blackface makeup typical of minstrel shows.



William Henry Lane.

Lane was an innovator who contributed to developing tap dance by infusing the jiggling techniques that had become stale and artificial in minstrel shows with fresh rhythms and influences from his Black urban community as well as his own creativity as a dancer, improviser, and choreographer. He mastered many different dancers’ techniques but also performed his own original tap style, which no one else

could successfully imitate. Unfortunately, Lane’s popularity onstage never made him enough money to live comfortably. He passed away at a young age due to illness, probably exacerbated by his incredibly demanding performance schedule.

After the Civil War, Black performers gained more access to the stage. All-Black Broadway musicals at the turn of the 20th century featured tap dance prominently, while staged contests between dancers remained popular. Aida Overton Walker, an incredible Black dancer, created musicals and vaudeville performances that featured graceful, flawlessly executed versions of African-American social dances, including early tap dance. The new music genres of ragtime and jazz grew hand-in-hand with tap dance. Tap dance shares many elements with jazz music, like swing and improvisation.

As tap dance continued to flourish organically in mostly-Black social settings, like the Hoofers Club in Harlem, it became increasingly popular with audiences and performers of all races on the musical theater stage. A sleekly elegant, modern form of tap dance soon emerged on Broadway and on the silver screen. You might have heard of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, a world-famous dancing duo from the Golden Age of Hollywood, who were masters of tap dance among other styles. Or seen the classic movie *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), with its exciting tap dance numbers!

Though tap dance’s popularity declined in the 1950s, it experienced a resurgence during the 1960s, charged by the spirit of student activism, women’s activism, and the Black Power movement. Tap dance became popular among students and dancers, many of whom were women who had first studied modern dance professionally, then learned tap dance techniques from the “hoofers” of the previous generation’s social clubs and dance halls. Tap as a genre continued to evolve across the 20th century, absorbing Caribbean and Latin American rhythms as well as elements from hip-hop.

Today, tap dance is revered as an American art form enjoyed and performed by people from all walks of life. Famous tap dancers and choreographers like Michelle Dorrance innovate with the tap dance style and energize tap techniques with creative new influences, but also look back to honor tap dance’s historical legacy of creativity and resilience.

• Try This!

- Do some research online or at the school library to locate a famous tap dancer—one not mentioned in the summary above. Then dig deeper into that person’s life story.
- What led them to tap dancing? What was their influence and legacy regarding tap dance as a style? What kind of impact did they have on broader American culture?
- Are there any existing videos of their performances, or surviving images of playbills advertising their dancing?
- Compare notes with your classmates to get a broader picture of tap’s history and diversity!

Sources: Constance Valis Hill, “Tap Dance in America: A Short History,” Library of Congress www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200217630; Michelle Dorrance quotes from www.dorrancedance.com

Tap Dance Glossary

Tap dance has its own unique set of movements, which choreographers and dancers arrange to form dances with rhythmic patterns. They are like the vocabulary of tap's dance language!

Here are a few moves to watch for in Dorrance Dance's performance:

Ball Change: A quick transfer of weight from the ball of one foot to the ball of the other foot

Brush: A forward or backward swing of the foot, making contact with the floor using the ball of the foot

Chug: A slide forward on the balls of the feet, followed by a drop of the heels

Dig: A sharp tap made by striking the back edge of the heel into the floor

Heel Drop: Dropping the heel to the floor while keeping the ball of the foot on the ground

Pullback: A movement where both feet leave the ground and brush backward simultaneously

Scuff: A forward brush with the heel instead of the ball of the foot

Shuffle: A combination of a forward brush and a backward brush with the ball of the foot

Slap: A brush forward with the ball of the foot followed by a step, but without the weight transfer

Spank: A backward brush with the ball of the foot

Stomp: A forceful step on the whole foot, with the foot immediately lifting off of the floor

Tap: A quick, sharp sound made by striking the floor with the ball or heel of the foot while wearing a hard-soled tap shoe

Tick Tock: A movement where the feet swing in a pendulum motion, hitting the floor with the toes

Toe Drop: Dropping the toe to the floor while keeping the heel on the ground

Toe Stand: Balancing on the tips of the toes

Wing: A movement where the dancer scrapes the outside edge of the foot outward before brushing inward and stepping



Try a couple of these basic tap steps out! How do they feel to perform? What words could you use to describe the movement?

Simpler tap steps can be combined into more complicated moves, like these ones below:

Bombershay: A step involving a heel dig, brush, and step

Buffalo: A combination step consisting of a leap, a shuffle, and a small leap

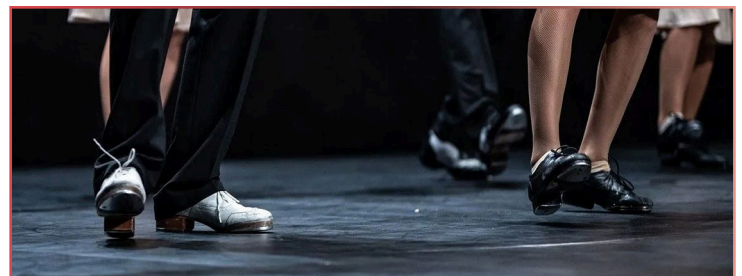
Cramp Roll: A four-sound step made up of two steps (one for each foot) followed by two heel drops

Drawback: A step that consists of a spank, a heel drop, and a step

Maxie Ford: A combination of a step, shuffle, leap, and a toe tap behind the standing leg

Paradiddle: A four-part step consisting of a dig, spank, step, and heel drop

Suzy Q: A step involving a cross step, a side step, and a slide



Pick one of these combination steps and try it out, using the descriptions of the basic moves from the first list to help you figure out what to do. Then look it up online on the Free Tap Dance Dictionary [<https://tapdancedictionary.com>] and watch tap dancers demonstrate the step!

Source: Steps and definitions from Carina Jaramillo, "Tap Dance Glossary," www.theaterseatstore.com/blog/tap-dance-glossary

Resources for Further Reading

Constance Valis Hill, "Tap Dance in America: A Short History," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200217630>
Detailed overview of tap dance from its origins to the present day by an expert in the field, including spotlights on key figures and developments.

"From Margins to Mainstream: A Brief Tap Dance History," UMS, <https://ums.org/2019/06/21/from-margins-to-mainstream-tap-dance-history>

Briefer overview of tap dance's history, highlighting major dancers.

Free Tap Dance Dictionary, <https://tapdancedictionary.com>

This online resource lets students explore tap moves and try them out at home or in the classroom, with demonstration videos.

Constance Valis Hill, ***Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*** (Oxford University Press, 2014)

Academic history book exploring tap's development and impact, suitable for high school students interested in exploring the subject more deeply!

Rusty Frank, ***TAP! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and Their Stories***, 1900-1955 (Da Capo, 1995)

This book includes memories, stories, and insights from different famous tap dancers, offering a snapshot into the heyday of tap dance on stage and screen.

Savion Glover, ***Savion!: My Life in Tap*** (Collins, 2000)

Illustrated autobiography of Savion Glover, an incredible dancer and choreographer who incorporated hip-hop elements into tap dance, suitable for middle school readers.

Leo Dillon and Diane Dillon, ***Rap a Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles—Think of That!*** (The Blue Sky Press, 2002)

Engaging picture book for younger audiences about the life of famous African-American tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, suitable for elementary schoolers.



Virginia Standards of Learning

Dance: K.1, 3, 5-8, 11, 15, 18; 1.3-6, 11, 18; 2.3-6, 11, 18; 3.3-6; 4.3, 6; 5.3-7; 6.3-7, 11, 15; 7.3-7, 11, 16; 8.3-6, 16; DI.3-6; DII.3-4, 6; DIII.3-4, 6; DIV.3, 6

Music: K.3-7, 9, 11; 1.3-4, 6, 10; 2.6, 9, 11; 3.6-7; 4.6-7, 11; 5.6-7, 10-11; HM.11

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Event: _____

How did your students respond to the performance?

How did you prepare your students for this performance? Did you use the Education Guide? If so, how?
Did students enjoy the materials?

How did this performance contribute to experiential learning in your classroom?

What role do the arts play in your school? In your classroom?

If you could change one thing about this experience, what would it be?

Please include quotes and comments from your students as well!

(Optional)

Name: _____

School: _____ City: _____

Would you like to be part of our database? Yes No