

Jacob's Pillow to Offer The Tap Founder Hated

By JENNIFER DUNNING

THE SCOURGE of the dance world today is tap dancing. It is an invention of the devil, bequeathed to us by St. Vitus." The writer was Ted Shawn, the founder of the Jacob's Pillow dance training and performing complex in Becket, Mass., and a formative figure in American modern dance. The year was 1937.

But tomorrow tap will be performed on the Pillow stage when Jane Goldberg joins Charles (Cookie) Cook and Leslie (Bubba) Gaines for a jam session during the fourth week of the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. (Martine van Hamel and Clark Tippet and the Jacob's Pillow Dancers will also share the program.)

Miss Goldberg insists that Mr. Shawn's hostility to tap should be seen in the context of his struggle to win approval for modern dance. "It was a question of survival at that time," Jess Meeker, Mr. Shawn's long time accompanist, added. "He felt tap was not yet an art form." It is one of those ironies of history that, while modern dance has flourished, tap has ended by struggling for its very existence.

Tap is a peculiarly American form of dance though its antecedents may be traced to such folk forms as Irish clog dancing. Its heyday was the 1920's, 30's and 40's, when the legendary Hoofers Club was in existence in Harlem and such practitioners as Bill (Bojangles) Robinson spread the message to film audiences. Tap began to die out later and despite sporadic revivals such as the 1969 "Tap Happening" show in New York City, it is difficult today to encounter that intricate dance style in performance.

Miss Goldberg, a 30-year-old dancer and writer, is one of the people who has been attempting to change that. "I was doing modern dance and writing about dance in Boston five years ago when I came across a book by Arlene Croce about Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers," Miss Goldberg said in a recent interview.

"I started seeing the films and, like everyone, I wanted a partner like Astaire! I began to study tap with Stanley Brown, a protégé of John Bubbles, and went off the deep end." She came to New York a year later, saw a revival of "Tap Happening," with such venerable hoofers as Chuck Green and Rhythm Red, and set out to learn their art. "They weren't really teaching, though," she recalled. "They didn't see the point of it. It's really an individual art form. And I'm white and middle class. I think they just didn't believe I was serious."

After she'd conducted a two-month telephone campaign, tapper Honi Coles relented and took her on as a pupil. Lessons with Mr. Cook and Bert Gibson followed.

"They were so special. They passed it on to me for very little money." In the process Miss Goldberg became immersed in tap's rich and little-known history. "They were all so incredibly generous to me. Bert was crippled. Part of the 'eccentric' dancing he'd done years ago were knee drops from theater balconies, and his knees had gone. So he'd teach me from his chair, telling me things like, 'Here's a 1935 rhythm for you.'"

The careers of her Pillow co-stars alone give some idea of tap's spangled lore. "Cookie" started out with Ernest Brown in an act called Cook and Brown. They had begun as children,



Lois Greenfield

Charles Cook
Joins performance on Pillow stage
in Beckett, Mass.

around 1929. As kids they performed with Garbage and His Two Cans, they being the two cans. But they became one of the most highly regarded comedy-acrobatic teams and worked steadily. They worked with Hanya Holm, too, in "Kiss Me, Kate."

"Bubba" was a member of The Three Dukes ("The Aristocrats of Rhythm") a specialty rhythm tap act that did synchronized jump-rope tapping in the 1930's. He was once a boxer, dancing on street corners and in carnivals the way most of them started. They just liked jamming with each other and began to work as acts. "Bubba" worked the London Palladium, all the big European houses. After tap started losing out he did U.S.O. bookings and managed to work into the 1960's.

Miss Goldberg now teaches tap herself and performs, usually with Mr. Cook. "I'm finally living out that fantasy of dancing with my teachers," she said, laughing.

Miss Goldberg was invited to teach tap at the Pillow two years ago. "I was part of the Bicentennial, a sort of ethnic outcast," she said, cheerfully. This year she's back and one of the things she's happiest about is that, due to the Pillow's invitation to her to replace a previously scheduled dance group that was unable to appear, her students will have a chance to take master classes with Mr. Cook and Mr. Gaines. The students will appear in a final "shimsham" and "und."

Miss Goldberg is trying to raise money to establish a performing center in Becket. She and her students may one day follow the example of the Stearns, the author of "The Story of Tap Dance," in their book. "But I don't think I am not a revivalist. I'm just a tap dancer."