

DANCE

Tip top tap

By BRUCE INGRAM
ASSISTANT EDITOR



Joe Cyganowski/Pioneer Press

Reggio: "Shoot me while I'm happy."

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Teachin’

“Reggie’s really cool,” says Leslie Shalabi of Evanston, who hasn’t taken tap lessons since she was a child. “The great thing about him as a teacher is, well, he’s just really cool.”

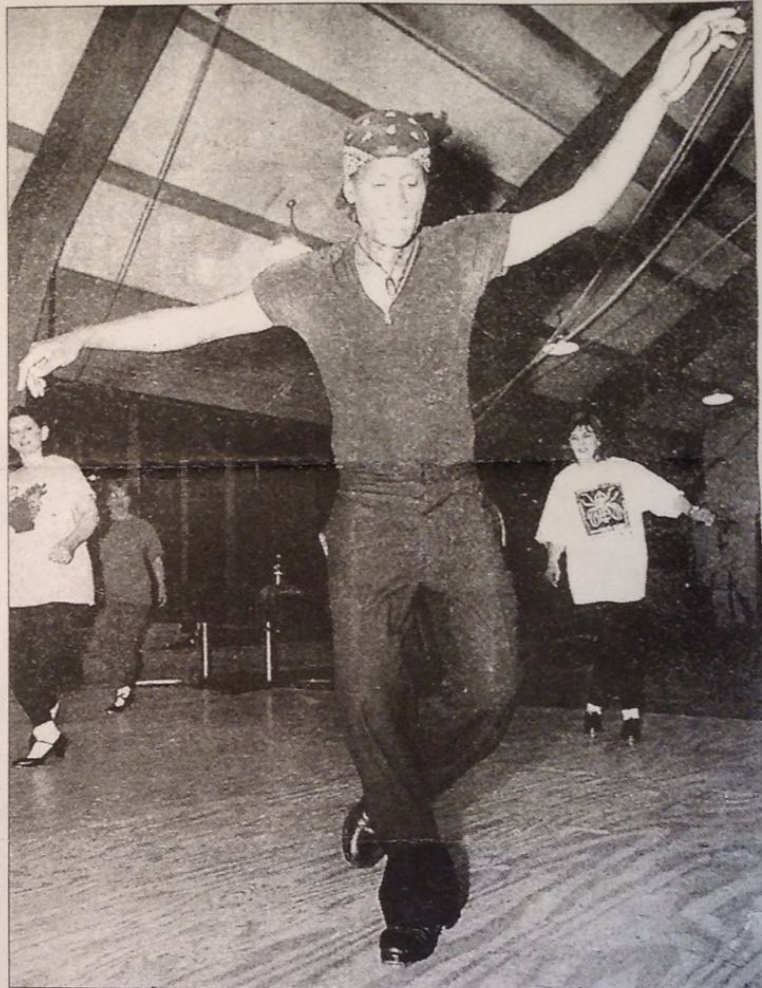
She laughs. “He doesn’t get too scientific about teaching. He really stresses going out there and having a good time and letting the steps come to you naturally.”

Reggio himself never thought of himself as a teacher and only accepted the role gradually, even grudgingly, one teaching job leading unexpectedly to another.

“I started out as a performer and that’s how I thought of myself,” he said. “I didn’t really get into teaching. But after a while I started liking it. The people you teach show you so much love, it’s hard not to.”

Reggio himself didn’t learn to tap by taking classes. At least, not the sort of classes he teaches.

He learned through the personal instruction of veteran performers like the now-deceased Jimmy Payne and Ernest “Brownie” Brown, now 81, who started teaching young Reggio when he was in high school with Brown’s granddaughter. Now the pair occasionally dance together as a team.



Joe Cyganowski/Pioneer Press

Oh, Suzie Q: Reginald McLaughlin (a.k.a. Reggio the Hooper) struts his stuff while leading a tap dancing class at the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston.

Gettin’ the feeling

Why he started learning tap as a high school student in the early ’80s, when break dancing was a whole lot more popular, is a little mysterious.

“Once I saw it; that was it,” he said. “The moves of tap dancing sent a thrill through me. It was something I could see myself doing and *feel* myself doing. It’s always been a feeling to me.”

At the time, the only outlet for Reggio’s dancing were Chicago subway stations, where he became a popular street performer.

“At the time, I never saw a real opportunity for myself with tap,” he said, adding that he’s “shocked” that he’s been able to turn his passion into a profession. “But it made me happy. And I saw the effect my dancing had on other people. I tap to make people happy.”

After he learned all he could from his teachers here in Chicago, Reggio moved to New York and sought out other older performers, who could pass along more of the art of traditional tap. While he was there, he continued to make his living as a street performer, sometimes with the older dancers he was studying.

As a result, he knows what it’s like to want to learn.

Back in the Actors Gymnasium, he stops the class for a minute to slow down and demonstrate the Suzie Q to a new student: “Stomp, heel, stomp, heel, stomp, heel, clap,” he says, repeating the move several times. When she gets the move down, she breaks into a big smile.

“I focus on each individual and what I feel tap is worth to them,” said Reggio. “Some people do it because it’s something they’ve always wanted to try. Some people want to go farther and even consider some sort of career and I’ll try to help them with that. If they’re in it for recreation, I’ll try to make it fun for them.”

He goes to the tape player, snaps on “The Shim Sham Shimmy” and starts leading the students through their combinations again, guiding them through casually elegant transitions.

“It’s like singing a song,” he said. “What you’re really doing with your feet is singing a song with them.”

A new tap dance class with Reggio the Hooper begins at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and continues weekly through Jan. 20 at the Actors Gymnasium in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes St., Evanston. Call 328-2795.

Reginald McLaughlin is always on the move — and in the groove.

When he’s not winning stand-out notices for tap dancing in musicals like Duke Ellington’s “Beggar’s Holiday” and “Jump for Joy” or the Black Ensemble Theatre’s “Sammy,” or for his performances in showcases like the Chicago Rhythm Project and Chicago’s Next Dance Festival, McLaughlin, a.k.a. Reggio the Hooper, is generally teaching tap in Chicago public schools, at the Old Town School of Folk Music, Maggie Daley’s after-school dance program for high school kids at Chicago’s Gallery 37, The Ballet, Tap and All That Jazz studio in Burnside and The Actors Gymnasium in Evanston.

It’s a schedule that literally keeps him on his toes.

At least part of the time.

“My style is a combination of toe-tap and flat-foot,” he said, explaining that he calls himself the Hooper because his dancing emphasizes footwork. (He calls himself Reggio because it sounds “a little more flamboyant” than Reginald.) “But I like flat-foot better because it’s more powerful when you hit the floor.”

Struttin’

Wham! Wham! Wham!

Reggio is bent over facing the floor, slamming down one foot, then the other and banking his outstretched arms in counterpoint, demonstrating The Airplane step to a class of six ladies at the Actors Gymnasium.

The students follow his lead, flat-footing and vamping with their outstretched arms like a vaudeville chorus line.

“All right, let’s kick it,” says Reggio, snapping on a tape of a brassy tune called “The Shim Sham Shimmy. He leads them through a combination of dance steps incorporating The Shim Sham, The Walk, The Suzie Q and The Airplane, the students starting to sound like an army on the march with its synchronized tap, click, stomp and slide, some of them struggling a bit, a few really swinging.

Reggio, looking easy, relaxed and fluid, slips into the rhythm and seems to be enjoying himself immensely: “Put a little spice in there,” he calls, clapping his hands in time and punctuating the tune with “Salt Peanuts! Salt Peanuts!” The class follows his lead. Finally, the routine ends with a big, stomping finish.

“Who!” Reggio shouts, smiling. “Shoot me while I’m happy!” Everyone in the class shouts “Shoot me while I’m happy!” and laughs. Everybody’s happy. Fortunately, no one is standing by with a gun.