

SPECIAL SECTION: MUSIC & MORE

DanceTeacher

WWW.DANCE-TEACHER.COM

JULY/AUGUST 2000

BALANCED STRENGTH

On Her Company's 25th Anniversary, Choreographer Jennifer Muller Shares Her Partnering Technique

TEACHERS' CHOICE

Top Music Picks For Class & Performance

MONEY TALKS

Negotiating Your Salary

ROBERT SWINSTON IS

THE MAN BEHIND
MERCE

\$4.95 USA/\$5.95 CAN Display until August 21
\$4.95US \$5.95CAN



Reading the book *Tuesdays With Morrie*, the theme was quite apparent; you learn to live by learning how to die or perhaps vice versa. Either way, it is a powerful, poignant and emotional message. The Tuesdays I've spent with my tap teacher Maggie Dennis have revealed a slightly different but equally potent message: You learn how to live by really living, by "pushing the envelope" of your own, self-imposed limits. The result of my dance experience was a dance/life/attitude extension that I hadn't bargained for when I embarked on the adventure of taking tap classes.

In a major decision to "scratch a 68-year-old itch," I decided I would take tap

dance lessons. All of the 40s and 50s dance movies with Astaire, Kelly, Champion, Nelson, O'Connor, Daily and Bolger had made a powerful impression on me. I went out and bought a pair of \$80 shoes and ventured to The Dance Extension in New London, CT. After pushing my way through all of the little girls in tights, I finally saw two little guys and felt great camaraderie—until

I saw them dance. Then the camaraderie quickly morphed into inferiority, as the little suckers could really move their feet. The woman at the desk said that the Tuesday night adult beginner's class would be best for me. So I showed up for my first class on the second Tuesday of September, 1998.

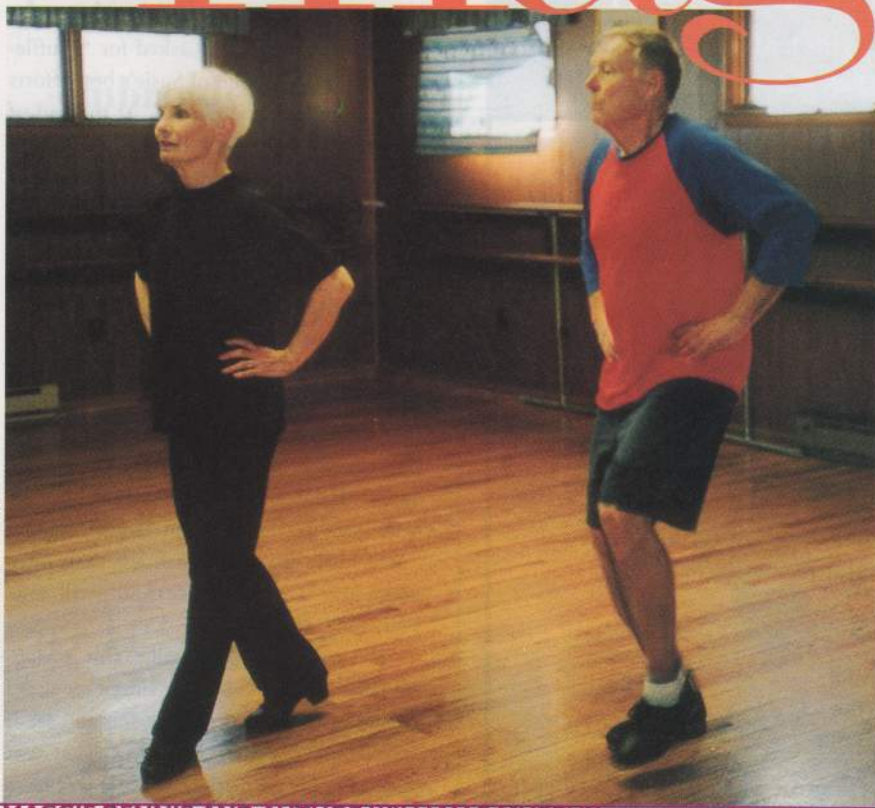
After the previous class left the studio, Maggie's voice called "come on in." I was

tuesdays with maggie

An adult student learns life lessons through the study of tap.

happy to see three male types among the many females. Clearly, I was the senior citizen of the crowd. We sort of milked around until issued the directive, "Go to the bar." Given my Irish background and my connection with bars, I conjured up a mental picture of myself sitting at a bar. It might have been a more reasonable activity than what ensued. Instead, I followed everyone else and grabbed onto a railing between Susie and Martha, who immediately identified me as somebody who didn't "have a clue."

Maggie—who is petite, attractive and ageless, with short silver white hair and a well-toned physique—turned on a CD, which told us to "shuffle." I really didn't have a clue but Susie and Martha said, "do it this way," so I did. The class wasn't even



MAGGIE DENNIS AND AUTHOR WILLIAM F. MURPHY



MAGGIE TAPPING

10 minutes old and already I had taken more orders than I had since leaving the military. The rest of the class did shuffle, a hop and some other equally mysterious steps. That was bad enough, but then Maggie and that stupid CD asked for “shuffle-ball change.” In spite of Susie’s best efforts to help me, nothing clicked. At the end of class I thought to myself: “Thank God it’s over, get me out of here.” If in the beginner’s class all the feet but mine could dance in time, I was in trouble. But somehow Susie and Martha convinced me that I could really do it, so I returned the next Tuesday.

In the next class, I suffered through an hour of humiliation in a room full of feet—I never looked up at any faces. When I left that class, neither Susan, Martha nor anyone else was going to get me back there again. The following day I hung a “for sale” sign on the bulletin board, reading “used men’s tap shoes with less than three hours use. Original price \$80—will take best offer.”

The same day I got a call. “This is Maggie. Can we talk?” She convinced me that I should come for a private lesson and see if “we couldn’t work things out.” That was the beginning of a trip I could never have predicted.

my view



MAGGIE'S EVALUATION LOOK

During the next few months, I had a private lesson each Tuesday morning and tried the regular class Tuesday evening. I learned “ball change, ball change” and found that it came up a zillion times each lesson. The maxie ford was the next step I was convinced I’d never learn, but I did. At times Maggie would say, “keep that left foot on the ground,” and I’d feel her holding it down with both hands.

Maggie was relentless. “You will learn this,” she’d tell me. “You will develop muscle memory so that you won’t even think, you’ll just do the step.” I said to myself and often to Maggie, “I am hopeless.” Maggie’s response would be to give a step that I could do, just to prove her point. How could I quit when she wouldn’t? She even laughed at some of my antics on the floor. Because she was laughing with, rather than at me, I actually learned to laugh at this evolving bit of life drama, which was, in fact, humorous. Seeing humor in myself was a totally new experience. One of the many ironies in this evolving teacher-student relationship was that she never once raised her voice. Given my Irish background, that was the equivalent of “fighting dirty;” she left me defenseless.

In November I suggested that I would like to dance and not just do steps. Out came the “Sweet Rosie O’Grady” CD. This woman really did know how to fight dirty: She knew I wouldn’t quit on that song. Wonder of wonders, I actually learned to do some steps that went with the music. Even though I had to use a cheat sheet to remember the steps, I could execute them—in rhythm. I could really do one dance. A highlight of that first year took place in May when Maggie and I started and finished the piece together—given her tap skills, this was a real thrill. All of that “you can do it, muscle memory, you will learn,” had come to pass.

Just when I thought I had reached a comfort zone, Maggie came up with a new spin. Now she thought it would be “nice” if I participated in her annual show. I am convinced that she asked my classmates to say, “Come on Bill, you can do it.” Maggie would use any tool in her arsenal to continue her ongoing lesson that there is always more you can do and that age need not be a deterrent.

I agreed to go to rehearsals for the spring show, even though I was still convinced that I would not take part. The first two had about 25 people, mostly familiar faces. The next two had about 100 and were real mob scenes. With three weeks to go before show time, the rehearsal had nearly 345 dancers of all ages in the studio. The logistics matched what Dwight D. Eisenhower must have encountered on D-Day.

As I held my spot in the far back row, stage right, I looked at the other dancers. Everyone was doing what I was doing—stretching their limits—and all had their own strengths and weaknesses to deal with. Looking at them, I realized that Maggie seemed to know each person’s limits and how to help them push past them. My awe

and respect for her took another incremental leap forward and I agreed to participate in the show.

Tuesdays with Maggie have been an experience that I never could have predicted. I know Maggie respects me, even though she's never said so. Instead, she has accorded me the honor of expecting things of me—not demanding them (she understands the Irish male very well). Not once has she ever mentioned my age, which is hard to ignore, as I am clearly the oldest and one of the few males in the class. She simply treats me as a student.



MAGGIE IN CLASS

Morrie said that it is love that ties all things together. From these classes, I have come to believe that it is learning (which perhaps is a form of love) that ties things together. Like Morrie, I will have to learn the final lesson of dying, onstage if Maggie has her way, but Tuesdays with Maggie have extended me through dance, taught me to enjoy the ride and chase the dreams, no matter how impractical, and that things will probably get tied together just the way they're supposed to. **DT**

William F. Murphy has taught in public schools around the U.S. and is currently an adjunct professor at Connecticut College as well as a freelance writer.