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Bringing Back the Rhythm

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The pitter-patter of tapping feet is music to the ears for Julie Pentz, Kansas State University's dance program director and associate professor in the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance.

Pictures of tap dancers — those Pentz has trained and her idols — cover the walls of her office and visitors can almost hear the distinctive toe-tapping beat come alive. Pentz toured nationally as a professional tap dancer, but became involved in higher education to research choreography techniques and pass her passion for the rhythmic dance on to the next generation.

Considering it her obligation to bring tap dance to academia, Pentz started Kansas State University’s tap program and the K-State Tap Ensemble. She creates tap dance pieces and sees her work come alive with the feet of her dancers.

“I tell my dancers, ‘You are a dancer, but you are also a musician, a singer,’” Pentz said. “All dance is musical, but tap is so different. With tap dancing, it’s not about the spoken word, it’s about what you do that is expressive.”

Popular during the 1930s and 1940s, tap dance declined compared with other dance forms until recently when entertainment like the movie “Happy Feet” brought it back into the national spotlight. Tap dancers across the nation are using new beats and making new steps to bring tap dance back to the mainstream, Pentz said.

“My approach to doing choreography changes from piece to piece,” she said, “Because it is tap dance, noises from everywhere inspire me. It may be a rhythm I hear outside, a beat in a song or dancing in another style.”

Pentz choreographs all of the ensemble’s tap dances, which range from funk tap using popular modern music, to a classical tap piece set to the 1930’s song “Puttin’ on the Ritz” in which her female dancers tap in high heels.

“My tap dancers always continue to amaze me when I see them on stage,” Pentz said. “I can always count on them to handle the performance and to dance with professionalism and energy stronger than the prior performance.”

The ensemble has performed at retirement communities, parades and elementary schools, and started Tap-A Grams, where a group of dancers travel with a portable tap dance floor to perform a short routine for the recipient. Pentz tailors performances to fit the audience. At a retirement community, the dancers will perform to music from the ’50s and ’60s, while at local schools the dancers might break out in funk tap to the latest music craze on the radio and teach the children a few steps.

“We strongly believe no one should be denied tap,” Pentz said.

Pentz considers herself a hoofer tap dancer, which means she can find rhythm almost anywhere and enjoys improv tap dancing.

“I tell my dancers, ‘I’ll tap dance till I die,’” she said.