ArtSmarts

2002-2003 Wells Fargo School Matinee Series

# Urban Tap

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Mondavi Center, Jackson Hall

Dear Teachers:

We hope you will find this teacher's guide helpful in preparing your students for what they will experience at the Urban Tap matinee. The guide provides background information on the performance and the key performer, Herbin "Tamango" Van Cayseele. It also provides insight into the various cultural and artistic elements as well as an explanation of terms that define Urban Tap. Finally, included in the guide is a review of theater conventions and audience protocol.

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# URBAN TAP

Dance artist Herbin "Tamango" Van Cayseele mixes the rhythms of the urban street with tap, hip-hop, jazz, Brazilian capoeira, stilt dancing, African drumming, Indian singers, and more to create Urban Tap. Imagine a caravan traveling from place to place – North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa –for a non-stop tour de force driven by the lively interaction of the company's international musicians, dancers, and videographers. It's a dance show, jazz concert and festival – all wrapped up into one! And it's a way to introduce young audiences to the differences between set choreographic routines and improvisation.

# ABOUT THE ARTIST

Founder, producer and performer, Herbin "Tamango" Van Cayseele sees Urban Tap as a musical conversation. The musicians he collaborates with read his taps like musical notes, adding voices or beats. "If somebody has something to say, we say it together out loud. We dance it or say it in the music," Van Cayseele told the *New York Daily News*. He also opens the art of tap performance to wider world influences, both artistic and cultural, such as the capoeira from Brazil and stilt dancing from Africa. "I like music that opens your imagination and your mind," he said in a *Time Out New York* article.

Van Cayseele was born in Cayenne, French Guiana, and looks to his early childhood as the best time in his life. "I had freedom," he said. "It was another world; as a child I was never restricted." When he was 8, he left to live with his father in Paris to attend school, which brought him a more restrictive life – "a concrete world where I always felt pain," he said. But he spent the rest of his childhood in France nevertheless and studied art. In his early 20s, he began tap dancing at the American Center in Paris, which he left to travel throughout Europe with a band as a street performer. "For me, it was the best school," he said.

He was also influenced by tap dance legend Gregory Hines. "He inspired me, and I think that's the greatest thing that someone can give. He wasn't too commercial, and he created something that I could tell was really looking into the depth of personality. That made me feel good about finding my own vision and not caring about what other people thought about my dancing."

Though he's known pain, his concert is joyous. "Anger is not my thing," he said.

# THE URBAN TAP MIX

Urban Tap blends diverse elements, such as those listed here.

## Acrobatics

With its beginnings among eastern Europeans, acrobatics is the specialized and ancient art of jumping, tumbling, and balancing, often later with the use of such apparatus as poles, one-wheel cycles, ball, barrels, tight ropes, trampolines, and flying trapezes. Acrobatics is performed in fairgrounds, circuses, and theatres. It's also related to movements of modern gymnastics and of certain theatre genres. (source: Encyclopedia Britannica)

## Brazilian Capoeira (pronounced cop-o-air-a)

Brazilian Capoeira is a folk dance popular in the Brazilian northeast. It was brought to Brazil by slaves from Angola. Capoeira was originally a deadly sport in which the participants with blades strapped to their ankles, swung their legs high in attack, somersaulted, and passed within a hairsbreadth of their opponent's knees, head, groin, or stomach. Flexibility and rapidity of movement were more important than muscular strength. In the modern dance, the same quick, graceful movements are employed; usually two men face each other, emulating the blows and parries of "the fight" in time with the rhythms of the berimbau, or musical bow. Clubs in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro train dancers in the arts of precise kicking and passing.
(source: Encyclopedia Britannica)

## Hip-hop

Hip-hop is a cultural movement, which originated in the mostly African American, economically depressed South Bronx section of New York City in the late 1970s. It attained widespread popularity in the 1980s and 90s. It's also the backing music for rap, the musical style incorporating rhythmic and/or rhyming speech that became the movement's most lasting and influential art form. (source: Encyclopedia Britannica)

## Improvisation in Theatre

In theatre, improvisation is the playing of dramatic scenes without written dialogue and with minimal or no predetermined dramatic activity. The method has been used for different purposes in theatrical history. (source: Encyclopedia Britannica)

## Jazz and Improvisation

In the early decades of the 20th century, the word jazz was used to mean most of American popular and dance music. Since the 1920s, however, jazz has usually signified a tradition in African-American music that began as folk music in the South and developed gradually into a sophisticated modern art. While classical and rock music have often borrowed features of jazz, they remain outside the jazz tradition. Unique features of jazz are its sounds and its rhythms. As a basically improvised kind of music, jazz's goal has always been to express strongly felt emotions.

Jazz features syncopated rhythms – rhythms with stimulating offbeat accents. The several instruments in jazz groups are usually played in separate rhythms that unite to create an uplifting effect.

The jazz improviser creates and plays music simultaneously, unlike the composer who creates music at leisure and may never perform it. The improvised jazz solo may be variations on a theme, or it may consist of entirely new melodies. In either kind of solo, the player tries to create natural, flowing melodies. A solo, say jazz musicians, should "tell a little story." Typically jazz band compositions and arrangements leave many spaces for improvisation.
(source: Britannica Student Encyclopedia)

In Urban Tap, the jazz is performed by musicians playing instruments such as a trumpet, cello and bass, bongo, and percussion, and a djembe, an African drum.

## Stilts

Sometimes a child gets tired of being small. One of the inventions that children enjoyed for many centuries is a pair of stilts – long poles they can wear to feel tall and take giant steps. Stilts are usually made of strong wood with wooden blocks attached as footrests. Unlike the early forms of stilts used in Europe, children's stilts are not strapped to the legs. The upper halves of the stilts are held under arms, and usually the child mounts the stilts from a chair. With a little practice, a child

can move along at a good pace. (source: Britannica Student Encyclopedia)

In Urban Tap, an elaborately costumed and masked African stilt dancer interacts on stage with a Brazilian capoeira performer.

## Tap Dance

Tap dance is a style of theatrical dance characterized by precise, rhythmical patterns of foot movement and stomping on the floor. The main historical sources of tap dance appear in the traditional clog dance of northern England; in the jigs, reels, and flings of Ireland and Scotland; and in the rhythmic foot stomping of African dances. In 19th-century minstrel shows, American blacks and their white imitators stylized and fused these elements into a popular style of dance and satire.

In the late 19th century, two distinct techniques emerged, buck-and-wing and soft-shoe. Buck-and-wing was active and fast and was danced in wooden-soled shoes; soft-shoe was relaxed, smooth, and danced in soft-soled shoes. By 1925, the two varieties had largely merged, and metal taps were attached to heels and toes to produce a more audible tap. The foot technique remained much the same; a great variety of leg movement was added to the footwork.

Tap dancing after 1940 developed even more complex footwork and incorporated many of the sophisticated elements of ballet and modern dance. (source: Encyclopedia Britannica )

## Video Projection

Video projection adds another layer of texture to Urban Tap, this time visual.

## Vocals

Urban tap incorporates Indian singing in the form of "an astonishing barrage of sounds – something between an offbeat orchestra and an on-rushing locomotive. The singer taps the side of his throat and breathes into a microphone," wrote the *New York Times*.

# TERMS THAT DEFINE URBAN TAP

Eclectic - adj. Consisting of components selected from diverse sources. Caravan - n. A company of travelers journeying together, especially across a desert. A caravan interacts with the local culture as it goes.

Fusion - n. The merging of different elements into a union.

Improvisation - v. Composing in an impromptu way.

(Jazz) Jam - n. Jazz improvisations.

Staccato - adj. Composed of abrupt, distinct parts or sounds.

Tour de Force - n. An outstandingly skillful performance.

Urban - Pertaining to or characteristic of, occurring or taking place in, a city or town.

# THINK ABOUT IT!

Dear Students:

Talking with your teacher, friends, and family about a performance after attending is part of the experience. You can now compare ideas, ask questions and find out how to learn even more. Here are some questions to think about:

1. How would you describe Urban Tap to a friend? Use some new terms!

2. What did you like best about Urban Tap and why? Was it what you had expected?

3. What is the difference between a set, choreographed routine and improvisation? How did Urban Tap use improvisation?

4. Think about the elements of Urban Tap (i.e., tap, jazz, acrobatics, vocals). Which would you most enjoy performing and why?

5. Urban Tap is a fusion of world cultures. Which can you identify?

6. Did you notice how tap dance mixed with the music? Did the musicians follow the sound of tap, or did the dancer tap to the sounds of the music?

# ATTENDING THE THEATER

*What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:*

- Enter the auditorium quietly and take seats immediately *(note that all matinees now have reserved seating*);
- Show courtesy to the artist and other guests at all times;
- Demonstrate appreciation for the artist's work by applauding at the appropriate times;
- Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements;
- Please eat lunch before or after the performance to avoid disruption;
- Relate any information acquired from the pre-matinee discussion to the new information gained from the matinee;
- Please do not use flash photography.

*What you can expect of your experience in a performing arts theater:*

A theater is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theaters are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, rustling of papers, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these upset everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best work. The audience shows respect for the performers by watching attentively. Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. While the audience at a dance performance will sit quietly, other types of performance invite audience participation.

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