



Tap dancing lessons bring on a little polish, a little poise

By LORRAINE McCLISH

Youngsters who have taken tap dancing lessons in Farmington Community Center through the summer are in rehearsals now to go on the Michigan State Fair stage at 12:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 1.

"If any dance teachers read that I'm putting kids on the stage after only eight weeks of lessons, they'd probably crack up," said Shirley St. Mary. "But I've got four of them here that have had nothing to do all summer but dance and practice and I think they'll do all right by themselves."

Getting the dancers on stage, no matter what level of expertise, is part fun, part reward for work well done, and the support system to go on to bigger and better things, according to Mrs. St. Mary, who says she wishes she had "a nickel for every shuffle" she's taught in the past 20 years.

Since coming to the Farmington Community Center, Mrs. St. Mary holds a pretty steady enrollment of 200 who come into classes every fall and the enrollment in her Redford studio is likewise steady. So she counters the cry of the revival of tap dancing coming from recent Broadway shows.

"People have always liked to dance. Maybe for exercise, maybe for a career, but mostly just for fun," she said.

THE BIG REASON most parents bring their children into dance classes, Mrs. St. Mary said, is "because they think their kid is clumsy or awkward, and sometimes they are, but more often not. Parents don't give their kids enough credit. They always seem surprised at what the kid is learning."

Recent surveys that have proved that dancing makes for better physical and eye coordination, and that dancers are able to read faster and better than those not given such discipline was no surprise to Mrs. St. Mary.

"If a kid can memorize a two-chorus dance he can sure memorize the Gettysburg Address," she said.

"If he can stand up and dance before 1,000 people, he can sure stand up and recite before the class."

She continued by saying that other parents choose to bring their youngsters to class in the community center.

"Because I run these classes just like a dance school and they are getting a better deal (money-wise)."

She offers one end-of-the-season recital, which is guaranteed, but interim stage performances, in convalescent homes, shopping malls, the Founders' Festival or the dancers' appearance at Michigan State Fair next month is not unusual.

A BOOST FOR the Farmington Community Center classes came from Mrs. Hazen Karp who said, "I have never paid more than \$10 for a costume for my daughter and I know dance schools that have charged as high as \$32 for almost the same thing."

Susan Gunderson became enamored with tap dancing after she saw dancer Dorlisa LaMarra win the Miss Farmington title in 1977.

"That was in July," her mother said, "and Susan was enrolled in a class that August."

Other mothers bring their youngsters to the center just because it's close, or because they want to support the center's classes.

Other mothers stated they wanted to give their children a little polish, a little polish, bring them out of their shyness, or just expose them to a new experience.

Whatever the reason, Mrs. St. Mary does not hold to the philosophy that a child get "one year of dance, one year of piano, one year of whatever."

"I've run into that and I don't understand it. The kid is always a beginner. He's just scratching the surface forever. Ann Miller sure wouldn't be Ann Miller if she'd held to that theory."

"I'm interested in turning out dancers," Mrs. St. Mary said.

SHE IS AS proud of her dance line that has been taking lessons from her for 20 years as she is of "the grandmas and grandpas I have who keep coming back for more and the kids I taught who are now in Vegas," she said.

Staff photos by Randy Borst

Clad in blue satin, sequins and lace, the quartet that dances to "Dancing Doll" are in front from left, Kelly Cosgriff and Susan Gunderson; in back, Stephanie Karp and Melaine Hacker.

Steve and Dave Markham, both students at East Junior High School, have two sisters who are also dancers, who will be appearing at Michigan State Fair.

Veterans of Shirley St. Mary's "Baby Tap" classes Michael McKnight in rehearsals now for their performance at Michigan State Fair.

Registration begins Thursday, Sept. 6, in the center, and continues until all class loads are filled.

Mrs. St. Mary will take inquiries by calling her at her Novi home, 349-4612, or her Redford studio, 533-1400.

There is no minimum for my classes," she said. "There is plenty space and plenty time."

"If any one isn't sure of what class they should be in they can call me. And if the right class isn't listed we'll make one."

She explained that high school girls, for example, with varying levels of expertise, might want to take a class together.

Or middle-aged housewives living in the same subdivision, might want a class of their own.

"That can be arranged," she said.

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