Tappers' Moment of Glory

Margaret Bentley
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1989/iss1/53
The dressing room is getting crowded. In front of the big mirror wall four girls in purple costumes, sexy, one shoulder bare, line up and do a few kicks. A mother next to me is kneeling on the floor, trying to get her two-year-old into a pair of yellow tights. All of us in costume have two things in common: we all have on tap shoes and we’re all nervous. Me more than the others.

My sister comes into the dressing room, from her fourth trip to the bathroom. “Feeling better now?” I ask.

“I didn’t think it would bother me this much,” Beth says. She thinks she shouldn’t be as nervous as me because she’s ten months older.

“Whaddaya expect...it’s our first one.” My strap is giving me trouble again. It is just a little bit too wide for the buckle. I put my foot up on a chair and force the strap through.

“If Mom had let us start lessons at that age,” Beth points at the yellow tights, “we’d have some confidence now.”

“We’ll do O.K.” I say, and smile at Beth.

I want to say, “Let’s leave. I can’t go through with this,” but I can’t say that to Sis. I talked her into taking tap, semi-private lessons so we could learn faster. Fun lessons. Lots of fun. But performing? In front of 500 people? 

The makeup mirror stretches from wall to wall but not from floor to ceiling. Bare bulbs are across the top. Beth and I stand beside me and we put our top hats on at the same angle. Mine’s white; hers is black. They match our tuxedos. I fluff up my bangs. The more of my red hair I can get on my forehead, the better my hat looks.

We decide to loosen up our feet with one of our easiest steps, the soft shoe front essence. We look pretty good in the mirror wall, smooth, in sync. If only we can do as good on stage. The worst things about our routine, arranged to the old song, Me and My Shadow, is keeping our movements together. Our arms have to be at the same level on our swings, and our toes have to reach the same height on our kicks.

I remember our practices at the tennis court—plenty of room there and plenty of privacy early in the mornings. Tap shoes, tape recorder. Everything but costumes...and audience. Dancing’s fun at the tennis court.

“Line up in the hall, girls.” The dance teacher checks us off her list as we move into place behind eight little preschool girls dressed as strawberries. Another dance teacher (you can tell them because they are in pink costumes with pink feathers around their necks in front and down to their waists in back) comes along and gives each of us redder cheeks from her rouge case. We can’t talk in the hall because it is too near the stage. I grab Beth’s hand. We squeeze at the same time. We look at each other and smile...together. Hey, maybe we can add this to our routine.

The little strawberries file out on stage. I give a final check to the elastic bandages wrapped around my knees. Don’t want them slipping down to my ankles like one of them did at dress rehearsal. Ever since I missed three weeks of lessons because of my tennis knees, I haven’t dared dance without the wrappings. That’s why we aren’t wearing the skimpy costumes Miss Vail first picked out for us. I have to wear long pants to cover up my wrapped knees.

The little strawberries are almost done. Beth and I are next. We’re the last act, except for a number by the pink teachers. I close my eyes, try to remember Miss Vail’s instructions from last night; “Move out onto the stage, a third of the way, while the lights are out. don’t stop if you make a mistake. Keep smiling. Look like you’re having fun.”

Applause. I open my eyes. The strawberries are running off the other side of the stage. The M.C.’s voice is loud. I can hear him introducing us.
"The next act...Well, what can I say? Two sisters...their very first year..." The lights go down. We take our places. I want to sparkle, but all I can do is keep the set grin in place while I look out into the huge dark auditorium where over a thousand eyes are staring at us. As Beth and I move forward together, perfectly in time with our music, unseen hands begin to clap. Encouraged, I lick my lips and reset the grin. Near the end, when we do our jumps—feet out and in fast, arms circling like propellers—the applause is louder yet. We finish and take our bow together. The crowd keeps on clapping, clapping.

Backstage we hug each other, too out of breath to talk. Our teacher hugs us too.

"Great job! You two were the hit of the show," she says.

The audience is still clapping. The M.C. calls out to take another bow. We're the only act that is called back all night. I take off my hat and bow low to all the nice people. I don't know what Beth does. We never practiced a curtain call.

In the dressing room we hug again. I throw my hat in the air, try to catch it, like in the movies, but my aim is off. It falls to the floor. With a Gene Kelly kick I sail it into the corner. Then I let out a loud whoop—of relaxation, of triumph. 

I grab Beth’s hands and we do face-to-face-and-back-to-back around the room. Exhausted, she flops into a chair. I go around once alone. Then I pull her up for another hug.

"Hey, Sis," I say, "we did it. We can do anything. I've always wanted to learn how to sing right. Let's sign up for voice lessons in the fall." 

"You're crazy," Beth says.

"Crazy? Hm-m-m." I laugh, gloating, tickled at the memory. "Isn't that what Miss Vail said when I registered us two sixty-year-olds for tap dancing lessons?"

Margret Bentley
Oldenburg Winner