

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Live Performance and Rediscovered Videos Honor Tap Greats

Ann Haskins · Monday, September 16th, 2024

Rediscovered interviews with iconic tap dancers from Broadway, movies, and television are unveiled for their first public viewing along with live performances in *Classic Tap! Rhythm and Style* on Sunday, Sept. 22 at 2 pm at the Moss Theatre in Santa Monica.

Produced by actress, tap dancer, and choreographer Diane Davisson, the interviews are part of a performance celebrating the art of Classic Tap dancing and honoring six tap masters. A post-performance reception offers more tap videos, refreshments, and chance to mingle.

The honored six made their mark as tap dancers, and then went on to add choreographing, producing, and writing, among other accomplishments, all the while continuing to teach and mentor tap dancers in Southern California.

Some of the six have diminished public profile now, but each in their time was considered a dancer's dancer:

Leonard Reed (1907-2004) who with his partner Willie Bryant is credited with creating tap's ubiquitous *shim sham*, had a long-term relationship with New York's Apollo Theatre, and chalked up Hollywood credits as a choreographer, writer, songwriter, and producer, among others;

Gene Nelson (1920-1996) forever to be known as the film *Oklahoma's* rope-twirling cowpoke Will Parker and as the hapless salesman Buddy in the original Broadway production of Stephen Sondheim's *Follies*, among more than 60 productions as a dancer, choreographer, dancer, and director;

Pat Rico (circa 1920-2000) a drummer turned dancer, known for his live performance, choreography, codification of tap steps in his 'high tech technique,' and work with actor-turned-tapper Tony Danza;

Louis DaPron (1913-1987) a dancer who became resident choreographer at Universal studios, often worked with actor/dancer Donald O'Connor, and whose dancers were regulars on television's *Perry Como Show*;

Miriam Nelson (1919-2018) dancer on Broadway, movies, and television, choreographer of movies, television and live performances including the Rockettes, the opening of Disneyland and Super Bowl half-time shows;

Danny Daniels (1924-2017) Broadway dancer, Tony Award winner, choreographer for movies and television, created *Tap Dance Concerto* with Morton Gould, and conducted the recently discovered interviews.



Danny Daniels. Photo courtesy of the artist

The show's producer Diane Davisson took time from the show's rehearsals to speak with LA Dance Chronicle's Ann Haskins about *Classic Tap! Rhythm and Style*. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

LADC: Who is this show for?

Davisson: We did this show for people who love tap whether in the movies or in musical theater or television, for people who tap, people who want to know more about tap history, and people who enjoy being with other people who love tap.

LADC: Why did you decide to focus on classic tap?

Davisson: I first started working on this in early 2020. I had often thought about how fortunate I have been to have had such wonderful teachers and mentors in my life. I'm aware of it all the time. Every time I teach a class, I employ some of the concepts and the philosophy of those dancers. I always attribute their steps and say the name of the teacher I learned those steps from. Every single week, I refer to my mentors. They played a very important part of my life and I wanted to honor them in some way.

Also, some people think tap is tap. But there are different styles or types. There is jazz tap which is more rhythm-based tap. There's hooking with a percussive emphasis. What we are honoring are masters of classic tap, although I sometimes hear it called Broadway-style tap. I noticed in recent years, that this style of classic tap, while not on the wane, is not the prominent kind of tap dancing seen now. You see fabulous dancing, but it's just an entirely different style.

I had started doing a few interviews in 2020, and then with Covid and the shutdown, I put the project on the back shelf, until last fall. Somehow in the interim, all sorts of pieces fell into place, starting with finding the forgotten Danny Daniels interviews that provide so much context to the tap of that time period.

LADC: Before we get to finding those interviews, tell me about the show.

Davisson: *Classic Tap! Rhythm and Style* is two hours paying tribute to six tap dancers, the mentors. Danny Daniels, Miriam Nelson, Gene Nelson, Louis DaPron, Pat Rico, and Leonard Reed were all classical tap greats on Broadway, early television and especially the movies of the 30's and 40's. They mentored a current generation of profession tap dancers and six of that generation will be performing live in works created by their mentors. The post-performance reception included in the ticket is emceed by Jason Kincaid and offers refreshments, more tap videos, and a dance floor for people if they want to dance.



Mark Marchillo. Photo courtesy of the artist

LADC: Who are the performers in the show?

Davisson: Mark Marchillo, Darrin Contessa, Joseph Narvaez, Dorothy Nichols, Karl Warkentienin, and Rusty Frank. Rusty, who authored a history of tap dance, has been enormous resource, and we are dancing one of Miriam Nelson's signature works. There also will be video tributes from actors including Steve Martin and Christopher Walken about how they were taught and coached for tap dancing in *Pennies from Heaven*. There is a tribute from Dick Van Dyke, who was discovered by Danny Daniels, and from Tony Danza who learned to tap dance with Pat Rico. Pat regularly toured and performed with Danza. And woven through are these astonishing, never before seen interviews that had been languishing in a New York library.



Rusty Frank and Miriam Nelson. Photo courtesy of the artists

LADC: Please tell me about these interviews and how you found them.

Davisson: In my research, I learned that one of my mentors, Danny Daniels, had received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts back in the late 1970s to conduct a series of interviews to document the history of tap dancing. This sounded important, but I had never heard about it. I asked Danny's daughter, Ann Giagni, and she confirmed the basic information that the interviews were never broadcast or seen, and eventually were donated to a library. With her help, we tracked down the interviews in the archives of the Performing Arts Library of the New York Public Library, and obtained copies. As it turns out, except for the people who participated in those interviews and Danny's family, no one knew about them, and the interviews have never been seen by the public, until now when they will begin being seen with our show.

LADC: Who did Danny Daniels interview?

Davisson: Fayard Nicholas of the Nicholas Brothers, Nanette Fabray, Hal Leroy, Fred Kelly, yes Gene Kelly's younger brother, Jack Williams, and Louis DaPron, one of our honorees. The total running time is maybe 10 or 11 hours. I tried to make selections for the program that extended our ability to honor and highlight the magnificent history of tap. In addition to what is in the show, extended interview clips and performance videos of the six honorees that I wasn't able to include

in the show, will be on view in the lobby at the post-show reception. After the show, the interviews will be part of a YouTube channel called Classic Tap, making Daniels Daniels' interviews with these iconic dancers available to everyone.



Fayard and Harold Nicholas, The Nicholas Brothers. Photo courtesy of the artists

LADC: How did you make choices about what to include in the show?

Davisson: I wanted to gather together, not only people who have always enjoyed tap dancing, but also people that used to work with some of our honorees. We could not include everything and everyone, so the two hour show offers a taste. The hour-long reception with expanded videos offers a chance to go deeper and to connect. Going forward, the YouTube channel will make the entirety of the interviews available.

LADC: What prompted the addition of the You Tube channel?

Davisson: Watching the videos, it was so important to Danny and to the people he interviewed to preserve tap, the history of tap, and how tap went from hard shoes without taps to tap shoes as we know them today. These videos should be seen.

In Daniel's interview with Fred Kelly in 1978, Kelly says "tap teachers today don't know how to use the language because they say hop, but they really mean shift your weight, which would not be a hop." On the other hand, you've got Fayard Nicholas saying, "I never call anything by any name, and I never count." That is how the interviews capture all the different ways that dancers refer to things, those who call them by name or something else or nothing at all. So there are these little tidbits, little precious tidbits from these comments. Some of them are very funny.

Another thing, Danny was fascinated by the time step which many assume every tap dancer knows as the same thing. In every single interview, Danny asked how the dancer did time steps. In her interview, Nanette Fabray, who was an amazing tap dancer, talks about how she learned the time step from Bill "Bojangles" Robinson on a film set. Also following every single interview, there is a little clip showing the interviewee doing their time step. In his interview, Jack Williams, who was a

big headliner in the 1930s, does this series of movements that is stunning. Then Danny turns to him and asks, “That’s a time step?” So there were variations. And not to give it away, but Fayard Nicolas has the last word on the time step. The interviews capture how the time step is not quite as cast in stone as it sometimes seems.

LADC: Are any of those interviewed still alive?

Davisson: I am sad to say that none of the people who were interviewed are still alive. However, the show includes people who worked with our honorees in the movies, in Broadway shows, and television. Danny Daniels had a tour, *Danny Daniels Dance America*. We have three of the dancers that did that tour and they talk about their experiences.



Diane Davisson. Photo courtesy of the artist

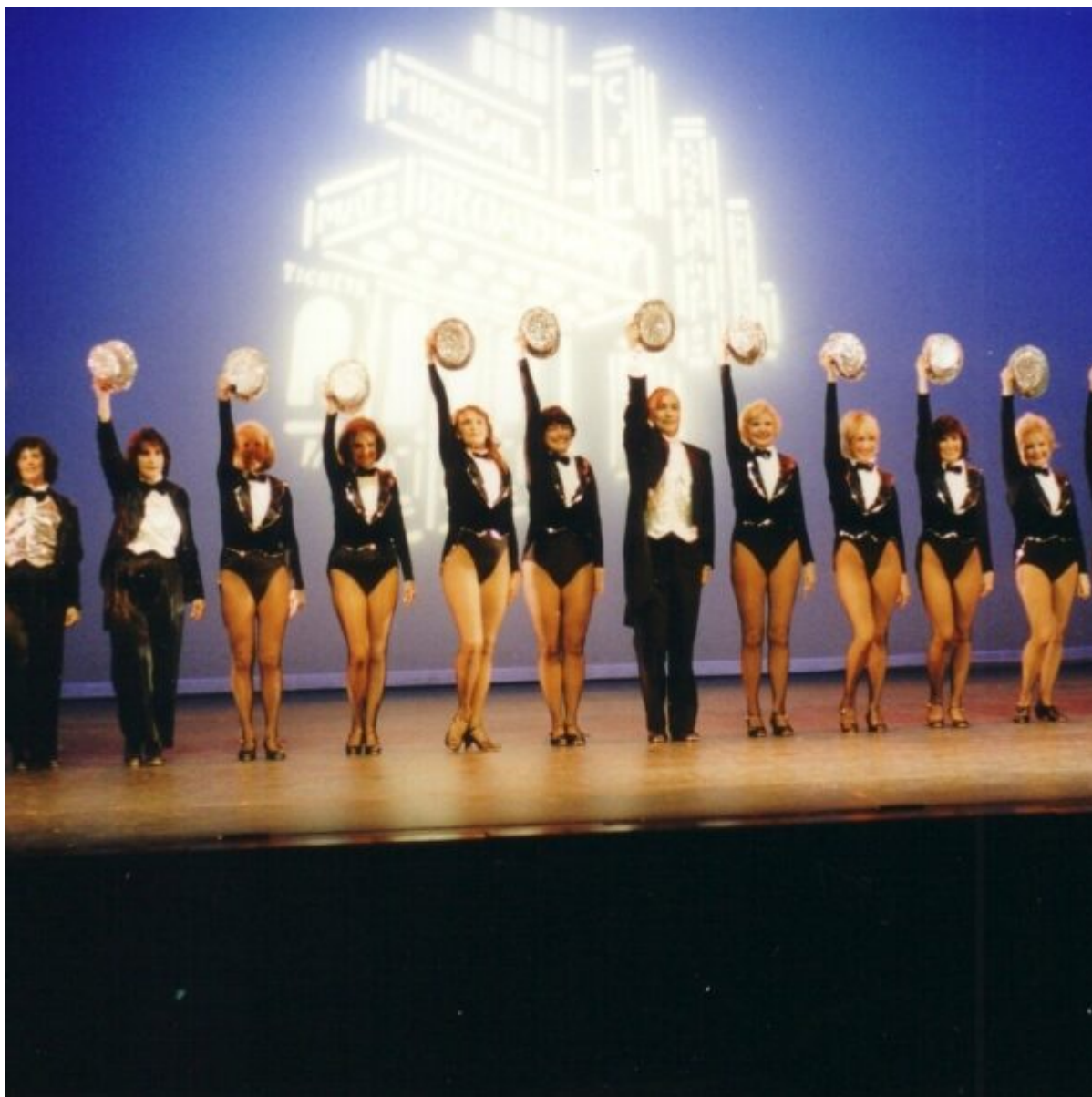
LADC: Of the six you are honoring, who did you work or study with?

Davisson: I studied and was mentored by four of the six. I worked extensively with Pat Rico, with

Miriam Nelson, with Gene Nelson, and with Danny Daniels. The two people that I did not work extensively with are Leonard Reed and Louis DaPron. I did take some classes from Louis DaPron, but he wasn't really a mentor. Leonard Reed and Louis DaPron were major mentors for Rusty Frank, a dancer and also a tap historian who was involved in developing the show. Many of the performance video clips of the six honorees were provided by Rusty from a series of videos called *Tapping with the Masters*. It's a wonderful history of the various iconic dancers and includes teaching some of the routines. Another of the performers, Darren Contessa, worked with Pat Rico, Danny Daniels and Gene Nelson. Darren has a company called Pro Media that puts together media for big conventions and events. He came on board despite his work demands and living in Arizona. Some of the video clips we have are from him.

LADC: So the program will move back and forth from the interviews, interview clips and the tributes, the video tributes, and then some live performances by current dancers who were mentored by the six who are the focus?

Davisson: Yes, but just to clarify. I really debated about how to go about doing this, and I finally ended up doing separate segments for each, for each one of the honorees, rather than just by topic. So I started with Leonard Reed. He was perhaps the oldest of them and then it goes in a chronological order, not 100% but to a certain extent. At the beginning of each one of these tribute sections, we start with a video montage. Then I have one or two, or in some cases, three people coming out to briefly share stories, a live performance of something the honoree choreographed or somebody who worked with the honoree and learned from their style. Then, a clip from these interviews, and in some cases, a second dance piece.



Diane Davisson Dancers. Photo courtesy of the artists

LADC: The press material also lists the Diane Davisson Dancers?

Davisson: We have mostly professional dancers performing, but also my group, Diane Davisson Dancers. They are professionals in other areas, and also excellent, dedicated tap dancers. They show the handing down to a new generation in a few of my dances. I hope that reflects how I, and those who helped put this show together, were influenced greatly by these six honorees.

Classic Tap! Rhythm and Style at the Moss Theatre, 3131 Olympic Blvd., Santa Monica; Sunday, Sept. 22, 2 pm show, 4 pm included reception. \$35, \$17.50 youth. Ample free parking next to the theater. [Eventbrite](#).

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