

Making Connections through Tap Dance

Tap dancer Lily brings cheer to people of all ages through his classes, workshops and performances.

SAWAJI OSAMU

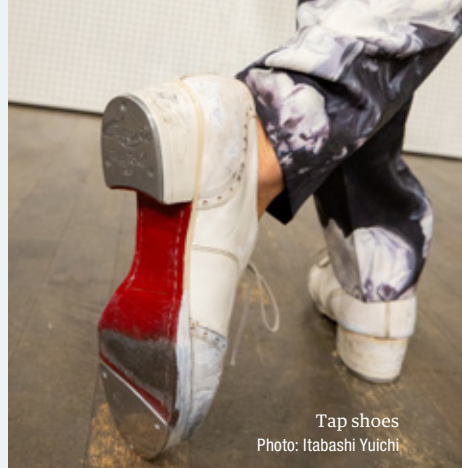
TAP dancing is a type of dance in which performers strike out a rhythm on the floor wearing shoes fitted with metal “taps” on the heel and toe. It is a highly improvisatory style of dance, combining a variety of steps such as the “stomp,” in which the performer steps with the entire shoe, and the “heel,” where the dancer taps with the heel of the shoe while keeping the toe on the floor. It is said that various dances that trace their roots to Africa and Europe were combined in the United States to create tap dancing around the middle of the eighteenth century, and by the twentieth century the dance form had spread throughout the world via the stage and movies.

Tap dancer Lily, who is based in Tokyo and is active in Japan and abroad, says, “The charm of tap dancing is the fact that it is both dance and music. The timbre of this music depends on the steps. The dancer becomes an instrument.”

Born and raised in Okayama Prefecture, Lily became interested in tap dancing

Tap dancer Lily in his Tokyo studio
Photo: Itabashi Yuichi

A chair tap dance workshop in
Kesennuma City, Miyagi Prefecture
Photo: Courtesy of Tap Dance Company Freiheit



Tap shoes
Photo: Itabashi Yuichi

after watching the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics on TV as a junior high school student. He was inspired by the powerful performance of the Australian dance team as they performed in the packed stadium.

After graduating high school and entering a university in Tokyo, he began tap dancing and instantly became enthralled. Seeing a performance by the internationally-active Japanese dancer Kumagai Kazunori increased Lily's passion for dance. He was drawn in by the free and unrestricted dancing of Kumagai's performance as he moved with ever-changing steps to match the mood of the venue and the performance of the various instruments. In his second year at university, Lily started his own dance group called Freiheit, which means "freedom" or "liberty" in German, gaining stage experience while learning more about dance. Lily had studied to become a professor, researching regional revitalization, but in his fourth year at university, he decided to embark on a path to become a professional dancer.


He says, "I thought tap dancing was a worthy cause for my life. I felt like there was the potential to contribute to society while interacting with various people through dance."

After graduating from university, Lily visited New York, the home of tap dancing, many times, earnestly learning about dance techniques and history under many instructors. Soon, he was able to perform at famous clubs and live music clubs in Harlem and Broadway, and received great acclaim there. He also expanded his range of activities in Japan, collaboratively performing with a variety of artists, appearing at fashion shows and hotel parties, and more, while also teaching dance at his own studio and at universities.

While doing so, the Great East Japan Earthquake struck Japan in 2011. Lily offered his support by clearing debris in affected areas together with his university students, and after receiving requests to create an opportunity for exercise for the affected people living in shelters and temporary housing, he hosted a popular chair tap dancing workshop that anyone could enjoy while seated, in Kesennuma City, Miyagi Prefecture. He has visited temporary housing, community centers, elementary schools and other venues in Kesennuma City every year since then, teaching chair tap dancing to more than 500 people in approximately thirty locations so far. At the workshops, he helps participants to easily communicate with one another by having them dance while divided into small groups and using familiar folk songs for music.

Lily says, "I have heard from many people that they have become more cheerful through moving their bodies and talking with other people. I will continue these activities while drawing close to the earthquake victims."

Lily is also engaged in support activities in areas affected by the Kumamoto Earthquake of 2016 and the Heavy Rain Event in Western Japan of 2018, holding dance workshops in many locations, such as elementary and junior high schools, and facilities for persons with disabilities and senior citizens. Teaching more and more students at universities in Tokyo and his own studio, he is passing on the joy of tap dancing to more than 300 people, from age 3 to 80, including students from Europe and other parts of Asia.

"I believe that tap dancing has the power to connect people and bring about happiness. I want to expand my activities to other countries in Asia where tap dancing isn't so well known," says Lily. 



Video by Tanaka Satoshi