



Photographed by Matthew Karas

Tap out Loud

BY EMILY MACEL

The multitalented, multifaceted
Michelle Dorrance is stompin' up a storm.

it

takes a certain kind of person to be a plate spinner. You know, one of those people who

starts spinning one plate on a tall pole, then a second and a third before coming back to the first to make sure it's still going while spinning a fifth and a sixth. It requires an awareness of everything around you, of your audience, of each particular plate. And, of course, of yourself in the space so you don't accidentally knock a pole over.

Michelle Dorrance is the plate spinner of the tap world. She's got so many plates going at one time that it seems like the more she does, the more plates she can put in the air. "I like to think it's an organized chaos," says Dorrance. "The chaos fuels itself." A self-proclaimed extremist, she says, "Sometimes I'll prac-

tice one riff for an hour or I'll practice 700,000 things in an hour."

Dorrance speaks like she taps—fast and rhythmically, only pausing to interrupt herself with another thought, taking the conversation to a new tonality. One minute she's riffing on a great tap mentor, the next she slides into talking about a hip hop show she saw on Saturday night, then does a paddle roll about a collaborative music and dance project she's got brewing. It's the subtlety in her syncopation that keeps you tuned in.

She's tall and slender with a youthful face and a bright, toothy grin. It's rare to see her without big silver hoop

earrings and her hair in two messy pigtail buns. She may look young and delicate, but she's no waif. Power pulses through her body.

Though she's been tapping for nearly as long as she's been walking, she's branching out. You can now see her six times a week in the long-running off-Broadway show *Stomp*. In a cast of mainly men, Dorrance holds her own, and then some. The youngest and newest member to the *Stomp* family (she joined last November), Dorrance plays a role that's called "Bin Bitch." Her character's got a tough demeanor and wears a pissed off, unimpressed look on her face when the jokers of the cast try to show off. Though she's a newbie, she has the dance chops to stand up against the more experienced cast members. She's intense—her furiously fast

FOCUS on TAP



footwork alternates with beating out rhythms on trash can lids, hollow pipes, matchboxes, and Zippo lighters.

"I've always wanted to be a kit drummer, a guitarist, a b-girl. *Stomp* is a manifestation of that. It's a challenge I'm happy to indulge in. It's also helping my

timing and my ear for sound," she says. Trained for her role by Fritzlynn Hector, an original *Stomp* cast member, Dorrance says what she loves about the show is that it incorporates "the myriad styles that I've had the opportunity to connect with."

You could say Michelle was born with skilled feet. Her mother, M'Liss Dorrance, was a member of Eliot Feld's American Ballet Company. Her father, Anson Dorrance, is a soccer coach who led the Women's U.S. team to the World Cup in 1991. Growing up in North Carolina, Michelle was exposed to both of her parents' passions. She played soccer and grew up in her mother's ballet studio, the Ballet School of Chapel Hill. Michelle says she appreciates the skill and devotion it takes to make it in the ballet world, but it was never for her. "With tap, I was good immediately, which was part of why it was so rewarding," she says. "There was never anything that felt unnatural. In ballet there is a rigidity in the form and you need to have a close to perfect line, but I have flat feet. I didn't have my mother's flexibility and legs."

She began classes with Gene Medler in the early '90s and joined his company, the North Carolina Youth Tap Ensemble, or NCYTE. "He taught us to improvise at a young age. That's a landmark for my generation of dancers."

Medler says, "Michelle was on the front edge of that wave of my improvisational teaching." Though she was a member of his company, Medler says, "We learned side by side. It was obvious that



Dorrance with the crew of *Stomp*

Top: Matthew Karas. Bottom: Colin Fowler



she had a tremendous gift for tap. I tried to open doors for her and just get out of her way.”

Medler sought out dancers of different styles to set works on the group, including Josh Hilberman, Barbara Duffy, Savion Glover, Margaret Morrison, Brenda Bufalino, and Lane

attend New York University. Like most universities, NYU doesn't offer a tap-specific dance program, but that didn't stop her from making tap her focus. She graduated from the Gallatin program with a self-created major that focused on American democracy and race within the arts. “Tap is a true American art form

as a busker. She talks about the endurance you learn from performing on the street: “There is nothing as honest as a street crowd because they don't have to be there.”

A New Yorker for 10 years, Dorrance, 28, has dipped her toes into many of the pools of tap groups across

“She has monstrous technique and a funny, quirky view of the world.”

—Josh Hilberman

Alexander. “I couldn't ask for a better preprofessional experience,” says Dorrance. “We would go to schools and do ‘educationals’ and give the history of tap. It gave me a connection to the history of the form at a young age.”

Hilberman, who has been working with Dorrance for more than 15 years, says, “She has technical power that is huge. She has monstrous technique. She has a funny, quirky view of the world. She falls between the young killer women in high heels and the guys.” Hilberman calls Dorrance a pluralist for her ability to “galvanize influences from all over.”

Dorrance left North Carolina to

and what America is supposed to be,” she says. “Not the bastardized patriotism, but a real blending of cultures.”

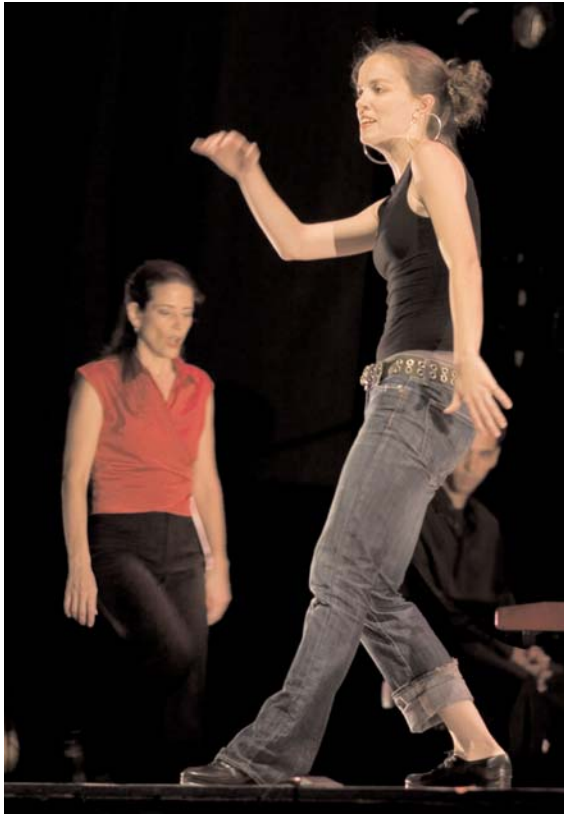
While Dorrance was in college, Savion Glover recruited her to work with him and eventually be a founding member of his company Ti Dii. “I have learned an infinite amount from him,” Dorrance says.

She met a lot of tappers at Buster Brown's tap jams, Swing 46, and felt immediately welcomed into the New York tap community. The accessibility and fast pace of the city intrigued her.

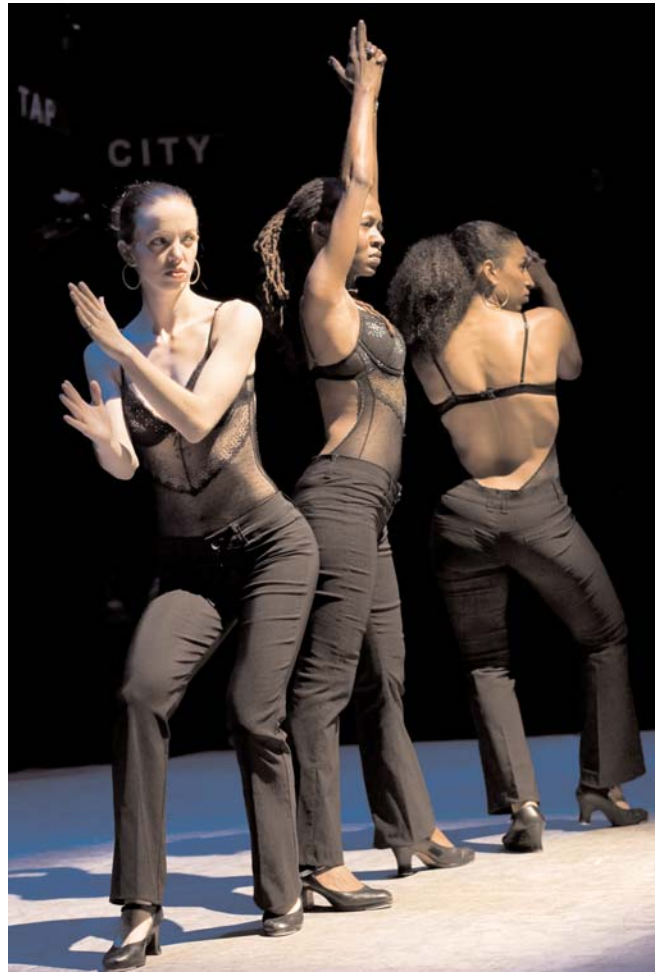
She has collaborated in other art forms—in theater, with musicians, and

the city. “I've had so many solid experiences with such a diverse blend of styles and approaches to the form. Tap dancers are such a small community.” She's worked on projects with Glover, Jimmy Slyde, Dianne Walker, Brenda Bufalino, Heather Cornell, Barbara Duffy, Max Pollack, and Marc Mendoca to name a few. In her generation of tappers, she's been a part of Ayodele Casel's *Diary of a Tap Dancer* and *Tappy Holidays!*, Derick Grant's *Imagine Tap!*, and Jason Samuels Smith's *Charlie's Angels*, which she performed last summer at Tap City.

For the sexy *Charlie's Angels* trio,



Above: Dorrance at the Celebration of Tap, NYC, last year. Right: Dorrance, Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards, and Chloe Arnold in *Charlie's Angels* at Tap City. Below: Dorrance with Mable Lee's *Dancing Ladies*.



Dorrance danced with Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards, a tapper she looks up to. "To me, she is the full package," she says, "from Anne Miller style to slamming down some funky syncopation into the floor. She's sophisticated and technically unbelievable. She's a very serious inspiration."

In the weekly class she teaches at Broadway Dance Center, Dorrance makes references to her mentors and colleagues, and gives mini-history lessons (a habit from her NYCYTE days). She also uses images to get her students to understand. "In tap the form follows function. You think, I need to get this wing over here, so you figure out a way to do that. It's like how a bird flies in the most efficient way possible," she says. "Or pterodactyls. I relate to pterodactyls."

Her love of music is obvious. She has her students work on heel dropping combinations to Michael Jackson songs, pick-

ups to Daft Punk and the Eurythmics, and a slide combination to Lauryn Hill. "Music drives so much of what I feel in my dancing."

Dorrance returns to her hometown now and then, setting works on NYCYTE. "She's come full circle," Medler says. "She comes back and is a tremendous influence, I continue to learn from her."

What's next for Dorrance? Audiences got a sneak peak of her choreographic suite to Regina Spektor's music last sum-

mer at Tap City. Dorrance performed to the Russian-born singer-songwriter's rhythmic ballad *Baobabs*, sung by Dorrance's friend and collaborator Miriam Chicurel. Dorrance and Spektor's "voices" are well-matched—both have a rhythmic, sweet yet mischievous quality to them.

And goals? Yeah, she's got those. Many of her grand plans involve learning to be a musician not only with her feet. In the mornings, Dorrance plays a song on her ukulele. And, "I'm a wannabe guitar player, bass player, and claw hammer banjo player. I'm a nonpracticing wannabe harmonica player." Adding a few more spinning plates to the mix, she's also penned an unpublished children's book using her own photography of New York City water towers.

But of all her interests, tap dancing still comes first. "When I hear it, when I feel it, I want to do it."

Emily Macel is an associate editor at Dance Magazine.



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