

Tapping for exercise – with thanks to the “Times”

If you've ever tried tap dancing, you'll know how hard it is to pull off. I tried it once, aged 10. Armed with ugly, hand-me-down (but thrillingly noisy) metal-plated shoes, I attended my first class ready to show off - and it was a stomping disaster.

So, to conquer my childhood nightmare, and half-inspired by the all-singing, all-dancing TV phenomenon Glee - in tonight's episode the cast perform a Singin' in the Rain routine with (inexplicably) Gwyneth Paltrow - I decided to try tap again.

You don't have to be pre-adolescent to unleash your inner foot-tapper - in fact, the older you are, the better. "Tap is a form of dance that one can take into old age," says Heather Rees, fellow at the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, and author of Tap Dancing: Rhythm In Their Feet. "Most of the old masters have continued to dance well into their seventies."

As an exercise, tap is strengthening for feet, ankles and thighs, and good for improving balance. For older beginners, tap can also help retain mobility. It is, however, important to - excuse the pun - take it one step at a time. "Beginners should build up strength gradually and older people in particular should work sensibly within own limitations," says Heather.

Inspired, I went along to an adult beginner class at Dance Attic in west London, and was struck by the varied backgrounds of the students and their differing reasons for wanting to learn. Rachel, a fellow newcomer, told me: "I wanted to fulfil my ambition that I'd had since I was a child, but without the snideness of little girls' dance schools." "I get a lot of adult learners who did tap as a child and then gave up, but always kept a fond memory of it," said Chris Ernest, tap dance teacher at Dance Attic. "And then there are those who have always had a love for it but never built up the courage to take lessons. Increasingly, people see it as a way of combining a hidden passion with keeping fit. It's moved away from top hats and tails." What keeps people coming back, however, is simpler: tap is noisy, energetic and fun.

After a simple warm-up of "step-tap" sequences, Chris took us through basic steps increasing in difficulty. First, there was the classic shuffle, backbone of Broadway-style tap, and then a more challenging shuffle-ball change, in which the shuffle is followed by a step onto the other foot. These steps were repeated over and over again, so even the most inexperienced beginner feels as if they're tapping away in no time,

One surprise was the mental exertion required. I found that my feet could do the steps but my poor brain wouldn't always follow. As Heather says: "Tap is an excellent way to learn rhythm and timing. It's like the percussion section of an orchestra."

Eventually, with my heart pounding and my head spinning, we moved on to some travelling step3 - used by performers to glide around a stage. Once we got to the "time step", I didn't want to stop. There is nothing quite as satisfying as getting a tap sequence right, down to the last beat of the music.