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Tap on the International Stage

A judge's-eye view of a championship competition in Germany

By Diane Gudat

Last December I served as a judge at the International Dance Organization's World Tap Dance Championships in Riesa, Germany. It was one of the great experiences of my life—not because of the obvious honor of being selected to judge some of the best tap dancers in the world, but because of the weeklong display of sportsmanship and respect

for the art of tap dancing I witnessed there.

When the judging panel arrived at the Erdgas Arena every morning, there were colorful clusters of dancers rehearsing everywhere. The 1,300-plus dancers wore team warm-up suits representing countries from all over the globe: Australia, Austria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic,

England, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Norway, Russia, Slovenia, South Africa, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the United States. Their fans waved flags and cheered for their teams in every language imaginable.

As one of seven judges on the panel, I proudly represented the United States. My panic about the weight of my judging decisions eased as I es-

All photos by Tony Maher

established bonds with the other judges and staff, who hailed from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Germany, Italy, Canada, Russia, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, and South Africa. Our opinions were as diverse as our countries, but the extent of our combined knowledge about the art of tap was inspiring. Laughter came easily. Hugs were expected.

Welcoming the dancers to the stage was Michael Wendt, the charismatic, multilingual organizer and longtime host of the IDO tap and showdance championships. And when the dancers exited, it was often to cheers and high fives offered by their competitors, who waited their turn on the steps and in the wings. New friends embraced and coaches shook hands.

The onstage sportsmanship was heartwarming, but the backstage goings-on told an even more inspiring story. Separating the competition area from the practice space and dressing areas was an enormous blue curtain adorned with a flag from each participating nation. Stepping behind it,

The onstage sportsmanship was heartwarming, but the backstage goings-on told an even more inspiring story.

I entered a space I would have loved to linger in. Dancers rushed by on tight performance schedules; groups rehearsed; there were last-minute touch-ups to hair and makeup. Parents scrambled to find headpieces or shoes, and coaches finessed details with their dancers. Props were parked

everywhere. Breathless groups leaving the stage hurried to a replay station to watch their performances. Others edged over to the results board, which announced the names of those who would move on to the next round of competition. The IDO office buzzed with staffers and team coaches who dashed in and out the open door. As Wendt's voice boomed the results from the stage (often in the native languages of the winners), screams and claps erupted from every corner. In this swirl of activity and sound, the colors of the countries—on costumes, warm-ups, flags, signs—blended into one fabulous blur.

Amid all the hustle, I saw two passing coaches hug and laugh. Groups of dancers wearing colorful jackets exchanged pins, bracelets, and other trinkets representing their countries or took selfies with new friends. Everywhere, small improvisational circles formed as the dancers shared steps, speaking in the language they shared and knew best: rhythm. And behind all the action, voices, and laughter, the sound of



Thirteen hundred-plus tappers wore team warm-up suits representing countries from all over the globe.

OPPOSITE: Tappers competing at the World Tap Dance Championships shared the language of rhythm.



Germany placed fourth at the World Tap Dance Championships.

metal taps striking the floor never stopped.

The Parade of Nations, much like that of the Olympics, was a boisterous procession of all the participants. Held at the end of the junior and adult division competitions, it often evolved

into long conga lines and improvisation circles.

Of course the dancers wanted to excel; this was, after all, a world championships. I was a coach for the IDO World Champion United States Team in 2002, so I know how intense

the pride and stress can be for those who are competing at an international level. I saw joy, and I saw disappointment—and always, enthusiasm, applause, and respect.

For me, the best part of the experience came when I hung medals around the necks of the winners and then watched as they stood on the podiums, listening to their national anthems and watching their countries' flags fly. In those moments, the movement in the arena froze. Tears streamed down parents' faces as they watched their children receive the medals and the honor bestowed on them by both judges and audiences.

I left Riesa feeling proud of the advancements in the art of tap dance. Tap is thriving, not only in the United States, where it was born, but all over the world, in many delicious flavors. 