

The world of jazz dance, musical theatre, and tap dance is an exciting and thrilling one. This chapter explores these American dance forms that all have their roots in African movements and rhythms.

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# Jazz Dance, Musical Theatre, and Tap Dance

Similar to the term “modern dance,” “jazz dance” is also used as an umbrella term, encompassing several diverse styles. “Traditional” jazz dance, “musical theatre jazz,” “lyrical jazz,” “funk,” “swing,” and sometimes even “hip-hop” are categorized as jazz dance or as a close relation of the genre. For this discussion, the term jazz dance will be used to define a broad category of styles.

## Jazz Dance

Jazz dance is an exciting dance genre that today has a place in the popular theatre and the concert stage, in small dance studios and large universities, and in movies and television programs. The history of jazz dance is a fascinating one, beginning with the origins that can be traced back to Africa.

In the seventeenth century, when slaves were brought to America from Africa, they brought with them their music and dance. The slaves on the plantations continued the dancing and drumming

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that was so much a part of African life. Eventually, the slave masters prohibited drumming, but the African rhythms did not diminish. They were kept alive by the slaves who clapped their hands, stomped their feet, and sang the songs of their motherland.<sup>1</sup> On the plantations, dances were performed for enjoyment and also for entertainment and competitions. Slave masters would often have the best dancers entertain their guests or compete against slaves from other plantations. "The presence of these dance traditions in plantation settings is evidence that dance was a communal expression that became the basis of popular black dances in the U.S. post-enslavement. The diverse cultural groups [from Africa created] a rich collection of African-derived movements that were later adopted, borrowed, and/or appropriated . . ."<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, the songs and dances of these people were brought into the theatres, but not by the people who had created them. The Minstrel shows, beginning in the 1830s, showcased black songs and dances. But since black people were not allowed to perform on a public stage (with the exception of those such as "Master Juba"—see *Major Figures in Jazz Dance, Musical Theatre, and Tap Dance*), white performers in blackface appeared before the audiences, performing parodies of the songs and dances of the black culture. It wasn't until the 1860s that black performers began to appear in their own minstrel shows,<sup>3</sup> where they performed for black audiences as well as Irish immigrants. As a way to make money and break into show business, black performers also appeared in blackface in the minstrel shows, engaging in a parody of the white performers who were doing a parody of them. Eventually, the black minstrel shows became as popular as the white minstrels, in part because of the wildly popular performances, but also due to a section of the shows (usually the close of the first act) called the "cakewalk." The cakewalk, which came directly from plantation entertainments, ". . . was a contest among dancing couples who attempted to outdo each other in the mock imitation of the white man's manners and behavior."<sup>4</sup> During the cakewalk, the dancers displayed their best struts, high kicks, and show-stopping footwork. Today, the entire concept of the minstrel show, and specifically white performers who appeared in blackface and appropriated songs and dances from black culture, has been examined for its racial implications and its place in early American history.

The minstrels remained popular until the early 1900s and paved the way for the vaudeville, revue, and burlesque shows that were to dominate the American stage for the next twenty years. Although all three theatrical entertainments were popular, none was as popular or as significant to jazz dance history as the vaudeville show. Writer Richard Kislán provided an explanation of the importance of the Vaudeville era:

*More than any other entertainment alternative in its time, Vaudeville encouraged, if not precipitated, the quantitative and varietal expansion of dance acts before the public. Most vaudeville circuits included at least one song-and-dance act or minimusical revue on the bill. The system valued uniqueness and encouraged diversity. Some dancers traded on talent or technique; others developed unusual material.*

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*There were Dutch dancers, Russian dancers, Irish dancers, blackface minstrel dancers, whiteface minstrel dancers, flash acts, class acts, toe dancers, knockabouts, acrobatic dancers, competition acts and legomania. Even the celebrated originators of modern dance—Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman—did their stints in vaudeville. . . . It served as a professional school, a training ground and an experimental station for the dancers destined for Broadway, nightclubs and film. . . .*<sup>5</sup>

The Vaudeville era showcased a wealth of song and dance performers. It is important to remember the contributions that African-American performers gave to this era. Though the lives of these performers were difficult, black dancers continued to create and perform new movements, keeping the African connection to the earth (hence the repeated use of the *plié* in jazz dance) and to the African rhythms. The Vaudeville era also marked the emergence of jazz music (around 1919), which was a combination of ragtime and the blues.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, dancers began to connect to the syncopated rhythms of jazz music. Today, the use of syncopated rhythms is what, for many, characterizes jazz dance.<sup>7</sup>

The advent of Latin jazz music also had an influence on the dance form. In the 19th century, a fusion of African rhythms and traditional music from the Caribbean and the United States came to be known as Latin Jazz. Evident in this music is the use of the *clave*, an instrument comprised of two wooden sticks that are hit together to produce a high pitched sound. *Clave* also refers to the specific rhythmic pattern found in Latin jazz, and that dances such as the Salsa utilize. In Latin jazz, it is not uncommon for the body to have “. . . several axes of motion. [The body] can move forward and back, up and down, and the hips create possibilities for lateral movement. Latin American dance . . . is grounded in African rhythms, which are polyrhythmic . . . there are several layers of rhythm going on at the same time.”<sup>8</sup>

The Harlem Renaissance (1921–1933) was another significant time period in the history of jazz dance. Harlem, in New York City, was the place for all high-society people to come and be seen. At this time, many exclusive clubs opened, probably the most famous being the Cotton Club. These clubs, which catered to a white clientele, had elaborate floor shows where black singers and dancers performed. Because of the popularity of these clubs and their shows, employment for black dancers was plentiful during the Harlem Renaissance. This decade, known as the Roaring Twenties, saw many dances that were performed at these clubs, such as the Charleston and the Black Bottom, become part of a dance craze. The Charleston became immensely popular in the United States and eventually in Europe—everyone wanted to learn how to dance the Charleston. “Flappers,” or women who wore their hair in a short bob and wore short, fringed dresses, are usually equated with the Charleston. There are movements in the Charleston, however, that can be traced back to African dances and also to dances in certain parts of Haiti.

During the 1930s and 1940s, jazz dance was a part of the theatre, nightclubs, movie musicals, dance concerts, and dance studios. During the 1950s

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and the 1960s, television provided the public with many images of jazz dance, mostly through variety shows such as "The Lawrence Welk Show" and "The Ed Sullivan Show." Although much of the "television dance" that was seen at that time would probably appear very dated to a contemporary audience, many great artists regularly danced on television—Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Ann Miller, and Ray Bolger, to name a few. There were also outstanding musical theatre productions created during this time for both stage and screen (see *Musical Theatre*).

Today, jazz dance encompasses several different styles of movement and has come to represent a number of different attributes and characteristics. While "jazz dance" has been defined in several ways, descriptive terms such as *sensual, visceral, improvisational, syncopated, hot, and cool* are often used in reference to jazz dance. Dancers/writers Mike Moore and Liz Williamson provide an excellent description of jazz dance by stating:

*Basically, jazz is an approach. It is everchanging, but vitality is a constant. A continual refinement is also constant. Changes in jazz happen in very subtle ways. Jazz dancers seek the fine edge of perfection in their performance. No movement is dull, there is an unabated theatricality about jazz. No movement is perfunctory. Improvisation is the core. Jazz dance moves through delicate changes of color and shading. In jazz dance, one works toward an individual style that builds from traditional jazz origins and strikes out boldly in the contemporary. Jazz was born in America, of African parents.<sup>9</sup>*

As stated earlier, the term *jazz dance* has come to mean a lot of different things to different people. Certain characteristics of jazz dance, however, are essential and cannot be ignored. At times, so much of what is called jazz dance is concerned only with superficial movements. Many choreographers (particularly those who work in commercial dance) appear to believe that performing certain "dance tricks," such as high kicks and multiple turns, will please and win over audiences. This idea might be true to a certain extent, but choreographers and audiences alike must realize that there is more to a dance than staying in one place and dancing at one set speed and rhythm, which seems to be prevalent in some jazz dance choreography. Changing levels, directions, shapes, and floor patterns are an essential part of *all* choreography and should also be included in jazz dance choreography. In addition, focal changes and movements incorporating space should be considered. Also, the use of diagonal, curved, or asymmetrical groupings might be more interesting than presenting a group of dancers who face the audience in a symmetrical formation for an entire dance.

The use of music and movement in relation to phrasing is an important aspect of jazz dance. Some jazz dances are very "square," with all of the movements happening on the "one" count. Although this use of rhythm might be appropriate for part of a dance, the use of the syncopated rhythm is a specific characteristic of jazz dance and should be used in jazz choreography. The use of varying rhythms and dynamics will enhance a jazz dance tremendously.

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There is much more appeal in viewing jazz choreography that brings the audience through a range of energy than in watching a dance that stays at the same energy level throughout.

Of course, style is also an important aspect of jazz dance. Richard Kislak describes style as “. . . the specific manner of expression peculiar to a work, a period, or a personality. It implies the purposeful and consistent choice of expressive ingredients to achieve a characteristic manner”<sup>10</sup> Can style be taught? Maybe. Should it be encouraged? Definitely. Dancers should be encouraged to develop their own personal style. This personal style is developed when a dancer totally commits every aspect of himself or herself to the movement, including energy, focus, facial expression, and intent, while remaining true to the character or situation that the choreographer has created (see Figure 9.1). Additionally, many different categories fall under the rubric of jazz dance styles—musical theatre dance, tap, lyrical, funk, swing, and Latin jazz (to name a few)—in which dancers and choreographers can study and work.

## *Musical Theatre*

Early examples of musical theatre productions can be found in eighteenth-century England, France, and Germany, although some historians argue that the musical performances the Ancient Greeks and Romans produced were the actual predecessors to what we today call musical theatre. Whenever the beginnings of musical theatre, the advent of the American musical theatre production is an integral part of the history of dance (as well as theatre). American musical theatre dance has its roots in jazz dance. One of the first musical theatre productions of note was *The Black Crook*. In 1866, *The Black Crook* was directed by David Costa and was the first theatre piece to use dance to move the storyline along. This work is significant because after this production, dance was seen as a positive and useful “tool,” and thus was included in many theatrical productions.

There were many significant happenings in the history of musical theatre dance. One such happening was the creation of the first African-American musical in 1921, called *Shuffle Along*, created by a team of talented writers, actors, and song-makers, including jazz great Eubie Blake (1883–1983). *Shuffle Along* paved the way for the African-American performer:

*Shuffle Along is one of the most important shows in Broadway Black history. As one of the first all-Black Broadway musical hits that was also written by Blacks, Shuffle Along significantly altered the face of the Broadway musical, as well as that of New York City. Shuffle Along opened the door for Black performers and writers on the stage during the period in the 1920s known as the Harlem Renaissance. It legitimized the Black musical, proving to producers and managers that audiences would pay to see a wealth of Black talent on Broadway, as opposed to one Black act per bill, which had been the norm. The show also contributed to the desegregation of theaters in the 1920s, giving*

*Figure 9.1*



Dancers displaying different jazz styles as determined by the choreographers.  
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many black actors their first chance to appear on Broadway.<sup>11</sup>

One such performer was a chorus girl and protégée of Eubie Blake named Josephine Baker (1906–1975), who became a popular international star (Figure 9.2). She popularized several dances of the 1920s, including the Charleston and the Black Bottom. Due to racism and lack of acceptance as a performer in the United States, Baker moved to Paris, where she quickly became a star. During World War II, she volunteered for the French Red Cross. Due to her celebrity status, Baker found herself among German officers who attended her performances, and she began relaying information to the French Resistance that she had overheard. She wrote notes in invisible ink on her sheet music and smuggled them to the French authorities. For her actions, she was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* and the Medal of Resistance by the French government.<sup>12</sup>

Another significant happening in the history of musical theatre dance was in 1926, when dance director Seymour Felix (1892–1961) introduced the marriage of book (script), music, lyrics, and dance as an important aspect of musical theatre. While working on the Rodgers and Hart musical *Peggy Ann*, Felix was determined to

*... devise "atmospheric" numbers, dances that unfold gradually and consist of development and climax as if they were dramatic units themselves instead of "a mere pounding of feet and kicking to music." Colorful dances could be and spectacle they could embrace, but harmonize with the story they must—and did. Then as now, the secret to successful integration of show dances lay in the discovery of valid motives for the movement. . . . Once he recognized the dependence of the dance ensemble on book, music and lyrics, Felix sought to ensure a more unified effect onstage by coordinating his efforts with that of the show's creators.*<sup>13</sup>

From that time on, theatre productions highlighting dance sequences were the norm and were also enthusiastically received by the audiences. In 1943, Agnes de Mille (1905–1993), another pioneer of musical theatre choreography, choreographed *Oklahoma!* and presented dance in a way that had never been seen before. Until this time, dances in musicals were inserted to move the storyline, or for sheer entertainment purposes. De Mille's choreography superseded this method, creating on the stage and screen a truly artistic representation of dance. In *Oklahoma!*, one of the most popular dance sections is

Figure 9.2



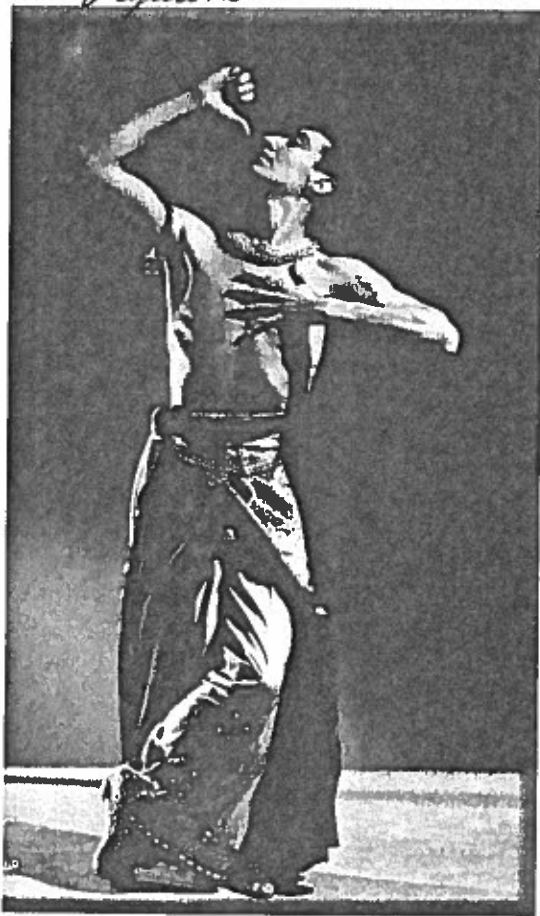
Josephine Baker was an international star that popularized several dances.  
Courtesy of Photofest.

*The validity and artistry of de Mille's work gave musical theatre choreographers the respect they deserved, putting them on equal status with the director, composer, and playwright.*

commonly known as the "dream sequence." Here, the dancers perform a surrealist dance number whose duration is almost fifteen minutes. While adding to the storyline, this sequence is also a dramatic work unto itself, depicting frantic emotion in a nightmarish setting. The validity and artistry of de Mille's work gave musical theatre choreographers the respect they deserved, putting them on equal status with the director, composer, and playwright.

Many choreographers, who were primarily known as ballet or modern dance choreographers, created outstanding dances and dance sequences for musical theatre productions. For example, ballet greats George Balanchine, Agnes de Mille, and Jerome Robbins all choreographed for musical theatre productions. Modern dance choreographers such as Katherine Dunham, Helen Tamiris, Hanya Holm, Valerie Bettis, Twyla Tharp, and Bill T. Jones also produced musical theatre works. There were, however, a number of people who were considered choreographers and dance directors who worked exclusively in the jazz dance and musical theatre genres. One such choreographer was Jack Cole (1913–1974, see Figure 9.3).

Figure 9.3



Jack Cole.  
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It is interesting to note that Cole began his career in dance by studying with modern dance greats such as Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, and Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. He was very much influenced by the teachings of the Denishawn school, particularly the emphasis on Eastern dance styles. Therefore, he "... developed an entirely personal mode of jazz-ethnic (sic)-ballet that prevails as the dominant look of and technique for dancing in today's musicals, films, nightclub revues, television commercials and videos."<sup>14</sup> Many other choreographers who worked in the jazz dance and musical theatre idiom, such as Jerome Robbins, Bob Fosse, and Gower Champion, were greatly influenced by Cole's style.

One of Cole's most popular productions was *Kismet* (1955), where his Eastern dance influence is clearly seen in the choreography depicting the story of the Arabian Nights. Many consider Cole to be the "father of jazz dance," and the style that he developed in the 1940s is still prevalent in today's jazz dance choreography.

The realm of musical theatre belongs to both the theatrical stage and the movie musical. Many musical theatre productions are seen first as live theatre and are then recreated for the movie screen. In recent years, we have also seen many successful Broadway musicals be made into movie musicals (see Table 9.2, Outline of Jazz Dance, Musical Theatre, and Tap Dance Events). The making of a Broadway musical is quite an undertaking, mostly because of the astronomical expense required for such productions. Some popular musical theatre productions were and are *West Side Story* (1961), *The King and I* (1951), *Chicago* (1975, and revived in 1996), *A Chorus Line* (1974), *Cats* (1981), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1992), *The Who's Tommy* (1993), *Beauty and the Beast*

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(1994), *Rent* (1996), *The Lion King* (1997), *Aida* (2000), *The Producers* (2001), *Mama Mia* (2001), *Hairspray* (2002), *Movin' Out* (2002), *Wicked* (2003), *Bombay Dreams* (2004), *Brooklyn* (2004), *Sweet Charity* (revived 2005), *Jersey Boys* (2005), *The Drowsy Chaperone* (2006), *The Wedding Singer* (2006), *Spring Awakening* (2007), *Legally Blonde* (2007), *Billy Elliot* (2008, Broadway premiere), *In the Heights* (2008), *Burn the Floor* (2009, Broadway premiere), *Rock of Ages* (2009), *American Idiot* (2010), *The Book of Mormon* (2011), *Matilda* (2012), *Newsies* (2012), *Nice Work If You Can Get It* (2012), *Kinky Boots* (2013), *Motown* (2013), *Aladdin* (2014), *An American in Paris* (2015), *Finding Neverland* (2015), *Hamilton* (2015), *Dear Evan Hanson* (2016), *Waitress* (2016), *Anastasia* (2017), *The Band's Visit* (2017), *SpongeBob SquarePants* (2017), *Come From Away* (2017), *Once on This Island* (2017), *Escape to Margaritaville* (2018), *Frozen* (2018), *Mean Girls* (2018), *Pretty Woman* (2018), *Carousel* (2018 revival), and *My Fair Lady* (2018 revival).

## Tap Dance

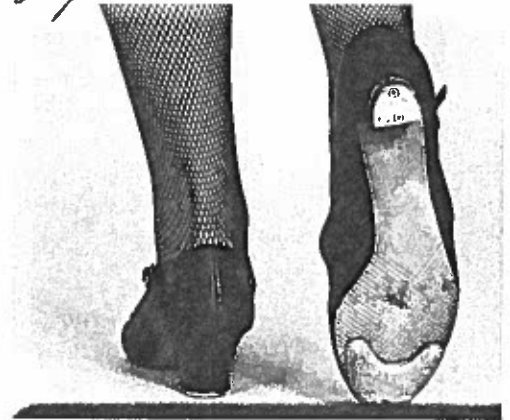
Tap dancing is believed to have been created by the blending of "... the Irish jig and the English clog with the Negro Shuffle."<sup>15</sup> Tap dancing, introduced in the minstrel shows, dominated the vaudeville shows of the late 1800s and remained popular well into the nineteenth century. Tap dance is a style of dance in which rhythmic sounds are produced by moving the feet. Shoes are worn with metal taps on the bottom, which produce the distinctive tap sound against the floor (see Figure 9.4).

Although there are many prescribed tap dance steps, such as the "buck-and-wing," "shuffle," "flap step," and "cramp roll" (to name a few), tap dance is very improvisational. There are also many different styles of tap and tap dance performers. For example, "rhythm tappers," such as Gregory Hines and Savion Glover, call attention to intricate and percussive footwork; "class acts," such as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, execute steps in a refined manner, with elegant body movements; "flash acts," such as the Nicholas Brothers, combine tap dance with acrobatic movements; and a dancer executing "soft shoe," such as vaudevillian George Primrose, would skim the floor and produce soft, muted steps.<sup>16</sup> Recent tap artists have developed other styles of tap, and older styles of past tap artists are being learned and practiced all the time.

Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (1878–1947) was one of the first of many African-American artists who popularized tap dance. Many remember Robinson as the person who tap danced with the child star Shirley Temple. Robinson, however, was a vaudeville tapper who first performed in 1891 at the age of twelve. He was also one of the first African-American performers to have regular employment in the mostly white theatre, and one of the first rhythm tap dancers.

Sammy Davis, Jr. (1925–1990) was another African-American artist who popularized tap dance and was also first seen as a child on the vaudeville stage. Davis combined his dancing talents with his wonderful ability to sing and act

Figure 9.4



Tap shoes have metal taps on the bottom to produce the distinctive tap sound against the floor.

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*Tap dance is a style of dance in which rhythmic sounds are produced by moving the feet. Shoes are worn with metal taps on the bottom, which produce the distinctive tap sound against the floor.*

and became one of America's most popular entertainers. Before his death, Davis starred in a movie entitled *Tap* (1989), which brought about a new-found interest in tap dance by the general public.

Fred Astaire (1899–1987) and Ginger Rogers (1911–1995) made tap especially popular in musical theatre productions (see Figure 9.5). In addition to performing tap routines, they included ballroom dancing in their movies, bringing this unique combination of dance styles to the public. One famous movie musical in which they performed was *Top Hat* (1935), which contains many wonderful tap sequences. Gene Kelly (1912–1996), was another dancer who popularized tap dance. Known for his athletic ability, he presented tap dance in a very different manner from Astaire and Rogers, who were known for their gracefulness. His most famous tap dance can be seen in the movie *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), in which he actually does sing and tap dance in the rain.

Today, popular dancers like Savion Glover (b. 1973) use tap dance in many endeavors, thus allowing audiences to view and appreciate this dance form. Tap dance legend and Glover's mentor Gregory Hines (1946–2003), starred in movies where tap sequences were highlighted. A movie entitled *White Nights* (1985, which also starred ballet great Mikhail Baryshnikov) features Hines in one of the most exciting tap dances ever to be captured on film. Hines also starred in the movie *Tap*, which featured some of the best known-tappers, such as Sammy Davis, Jr., Sandman Sims, and the Nicholas Brothers.

Singer and dancer Paula Abdul (b. 1962) also utilized tap dancing in her work, specifically in her music videos. These videos provided opportunities for audiences to view tap dance on televisions (and computers), thus increasing the popularity and visibility of this exciting dance form. Savion Glover developed choreography for the Broadway show *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* (1995), which mixed tap with hip-hop, break dancing, and Glover's unique style. Shows like *Stomp* (1994) and *Tap Dogs* (1996) are still performed worldwide and demonstrate a wide variety of tap styles.

## Summary

Jazz dance is an American art form whose roots can be traced back to Africa. Within the realm of jazz dance, we find a number of different styles, each one adding to the history of this popular dance form. Jazz dance, probably more than any other dance form, has reached across many cultural and socioeconomic boundaries and has thrilled the lives of viewers and participants.

Musical theatre and tap dance have been an important part of the American theatre and dance worlds. Seen on both the live stage and in movie musicals, these two dance forms have a historical and artistic link to jazz dance. Many artists from the jazz, ballet, and modern dance worlds have contributed to the growth and development of these forms. These popular dance forms will continue to excite and entertain audiences for years to come. Table 9.1 details the characteristics of jazz dance, musical theatre dance, and tap dance. Table 9.2 details some major events in jazz dance, musical theatre dance, and tap dance.

Figure 9.5



Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in "Follow the Feet."  
John Springer Collection/Corbis Historical/Getty Images