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## Tap Dance in America: A Very Short History

by Constance Valis Hill

### Glover and Dunn: A Contest of Beat and Feet

On the evening of the thirty-ninth annual Grammy Awards that was broadcast on national television on February 27, 1997, Colin Dunn and Savion Glover faced off in the fiercest tap dance challenge of their lives. Colin Dunn, the star of *Riverdance*—*The Musical*, was challenging Savion Glover, the choreographer and star of *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*, to a battle of the feet that was staged to showcase and celebrate the two hottest musicals on Broadway. But there was nothing festive about the challenge dance for these two stars. Not only was their reputation as dancers at stake but also the supremacy of the percussive dance forms that each show represented--Irish step dancing and African American jazz tap dancing.

Dunn went on first. Standing tall and straight, his back to the audience and hands placed neatly at the waist of his slim black pants, he spun around quickly on his introduction, and with the stamp of his high-heeled shoe drew himself up onto the balls of the feet and clicked out neat sets of triplets and cross-backs in place. The camera zoomed in on the dazzling speed and precision of Dunn's footwork, zoomed out on the handsome symmetry of his form, and quickly panned right to reveal the hulking presence of Glover—who stood crouched over, peering at Dunn's feet. Without an introduction, Glover slapped out a succession of flat-footed stomps that turned his black baggy pants, big baggy shirt, and mop of deadlocks into a stuttering spitfire of beats. Huinkering down into a deep knee bend, he repeated the slamming rhythms with the heels, toes, and insteps of his hard-soled tap shoes. Dunn heard the challenge. Taking his hands off his hips and turning around to face Glover, he delivered a pair of swooping scissor-kicks that sliced the air within inches of Glover face; and continued to shuffle with an air of calm, the fluid monotone of his cross-back steps bringing the volume of noise down to a whisper. Glover interrupted Dunn's meditation on the "ssssh" with short and jagged hee-haw steps that mocked Dunn's beautiful line and forced the conversation back to the sound, not look.

They traded steps, spitting out shards of rhythmic phrases and daring each other to pick up and one-up. Dunn's crisp heel-clicks were taken up by Glover with heel-and-toe clicks, which were turned by Dunn into airy flutters, which Glover then repeated from a crouched position. When they tired of trading politely, they proceeded to tap over each other's lines, interrupting each other wittily with biting sounds that made the audience scream, applaud, and stamp its feet. When Dunn broke his focus just for a moment to politely acknowledge the applause with a smile, Glover seized the moment and found his edge by perching on the tip of one toe and delivering a flick-kick with the dangling other that brushed within inches of Dunn's face. All movement came to a halt. And for one long moment, the dancers just stood there, flat-footed, glaring at each other. Though the clapping melted their stares, they slapped hands and turned away from each other and walked off the stage without smiling and never looking back.

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