

Henry LeTang, Master of Tap, Dies at 91

By MARGALIT FOX
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Henry LeTang, a master dancer, teacher and Tony-winning choreographer who for three-quarters of a century taught the leading lights of Broadway and Hollywood how to tap dance, often with show-stopping results, died last Thursday in Las Vegas. He was 91 and was active until shortly before his death.



Frederick M. Brown/Getty Images

Mr. LeTang died in his sleep, his son Henry Jr. said.

From the mid-1930s till the early 1990s, when he moved to Las Vegas, Mr. LeTang maintained an internationally renowned studio in New York City. During that time, if a stage show featured tap dancing, the odds were overwhelming that he had had a hand in it. Mr. LeTang choreographed some of Broadway's best-known musicals, among them "Black and Blue" (1989), for which he shared a Tony Award with Cholly Atkins, Frankie Manning and Fayard Nicholas.

Writing about "Black and Blue" in The New York Times, Anna Kisselgoff said that Mr. LeTang's chorus lines had "a rare subtlety of rhythm." She added, "The dancers here return the compliment he has paid them by downplaying the spectacular and favoring a collective virtuosity of sound."

Mr. LeTang's other Broadway credits as a choreographer include "Sophisticated Ladies" (1981) and "Eubiel!" (1978). For the movies, he choreographed "The Cotton Club" (1984), directed by [Francis Ford Coppola](#); and "Tap" (1989), starring [Gregory Hines](#) and Sammy Davis Jr.

The list of performers Mr. LeTang taught reads like a Who's Who of 20th-century show business: [Debbie Allen](#), Hinton Battle, [Harry Belafonte](#), [Milton Berle](#), Lola Falana, [Savion Glover](#), Joey Heatherton, the brothers Gregory and Maurice Hines, Billie Holiday, [Lena Horne](#), [Betty Hutton](#), [Bette Midler](#), Chita Rivera, [Ben Vereen](#) and Flip Wilson.

In an enterprise that can be pictured only with difficulty, Mr. LeTang also taught tap dancing to Lenny Bruce, Lee Marvin and [Clifton Webb](#).

Henry Christian LeTang was born in Harlem on June 19, 1915, to parents who had come from the West Indies. As a boy, he became enraptured with tap dance after seeing it on the stage, but his mother had other plans: he was meant to become a concert violinist. Young Henry prevailed, starting tap lessons at 7. At 17, he was touring with the entertainer Sophie Tucker.

Around this time, Mr. LeTang opened his own studio in Manhattan. Before long, word was out: if you were a performer who had just been cast, quaking, in a show that called for high-level tap dancing, your first phone call was to Mr. LeTang.

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"Anybody who's put on tap shoes and been around Henry knows he's The Man," Gregory Hines told The Los Angeles Times in 1988. (Mr. Hines died in 2003.)

After an early marriage that ended in divorce, Mr. LeTang married Emma Jimenez; she died in 1965. His third wife, the former Ellie Epps, died in 2002. Mr. LeTang is survived by two sons from his marriage to Ms. Jimenez, Henry Jr. of Las Vegas, and Jon, of Houston; a sister, Edith LeTang of Queens; and 10 grandchildren.

A soft-spoken, slight man — his adult height was 5 feet 4 inches — Mr. LeTang taught through deliberate understatement: "Point your foot," he might counsel, puffing thoughtfully on a cigarette. "Could be a little faster."

His methods inspired lasting devotion. Last year, when Mr. LeTang was hospitalized in Las Vegas with a cold, Mr. Vereen visited him and performed a tap number in his room.

In a philosophy Mr. LeTang had honed over many years, the art of successful tap choreography could be boiled down to two essential ingredients. The first was to have a deep understanding of a dancer's particular strengths.

"It's like making a suit," he told The New York Times in 1981. "What a tailor would make for Gregory Hines, he couldn't make for me."

The second ingredient, as Mr. LeTang told The Las Vegas Review-Journal in 1997, was something his mother had taught him long before.

"She said, 'Don't you ever put anything on the stage that your father and I can't come see.'"

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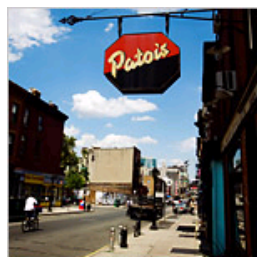
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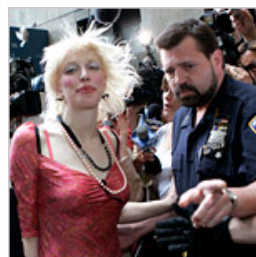
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