

# Opinion: ON COMMUNICATION

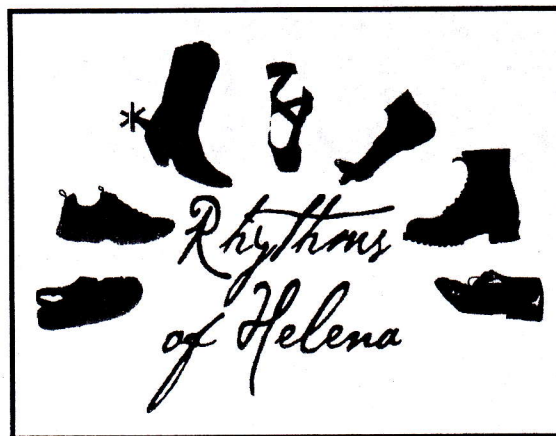
by katherine kramer

I find it hard to be alive in our world today and not feel concerned about communication. So many methods of communication have been created, and yet not enough meaningful communication exists. Mailing a simple letter is now referred to as "snail mail" and has been replaced by fax and email and text messages. A pleasant conversation on the phone is interrupted by call-waiting or is replaced by voice mail. Our activities are constantly interrupted by cell phones. And how many people feel like they are wasting their time if they are *only* walking down the street and not also speaking to someone on their cell phone? Mostly I experience one-way communication—the blah, blah, blah, of communication—and no sense of balance. Much is going out and little is coming in. It seems to me that good communication needs to be a balanced activity, a dialog, and must involve active listening. It implies openness and should involve an exchange of information and mutual understanding. Our ability and willingness to listen and receive information seems to be diminishing.

As an artist, I feel compelled to consider this because art *is* communication—the creative communication of ideas and emotions and the reflection or comment on the human condition. In the jazz arts in particular, we take the art of communication to a unique level. Good jazz is only good if there is good communication, sensitive listening, and dialog. Jazz is both social and democratic by nature, and it respects individuality. It involves dialog with integrity, making room for others and reconciling differences. It is about conversation and the spirit of play. This seems so relevant in today's world. More of this is needed and I believe jazz can be useful. To me, part of the jazz aesthetic is a sense of community supporting the individual creative voice. The soloist is actively supported by the structure and rhythmic foundation created by the group, and within the group exchange there is a continual interaction that brings into play all the individuals' preferences and experiences. Jazz, as well, is an evolution out of creative actions in response to the cultural context in which it grew up. Activism is really inseparable from the jazz aesthetic. So, I often wonder how to act. What is there to learn from jazz? How can it/we be of service?

Regardless of whether one's individual style is that of a jazz tap dancer, tap is rooted in jazz, and the nature of jazz contains an improvisational spirit and promotes good communication, which is made especially potent in tap by its expression through both dance and music. I tend to think it is our responsibility as artists to consider the difference we can make in the world, and we have a very powerful tool at our disposal: Rhythm. Rhythm is a powerful phenomenon. It exists uniquely within each of us; it surrounds us and connects us. It has the power to create community and to transform. How can we put this very powerful tool to good use? How can we use it to make a difference? When you begin to consider the power of this force and the consequences of its use, you begin to think more seriously about how you teach, perform, and produce within this art form.

From 1998 to 2000 I directed an arts project in Helena, Montana. When I was approached to create a community project, my inclination was to focus on the relationship of *rhythm* to community. The goal of the project was to create art through community and community through art. It was called "Rhythms of Helena" and it combined dance (including tap dance), music, video, and text. In the end, it was performed by a cast that included some 30 local performers from all walks of life: students, teachers, government workers, ranchers, seniors, teens, musicians, dancers, visual artists, an attorney, a mail carrier, an arts administrator, a bakery owner, a real estate agent/jewelry designer, a massage therapist, and a man-



From "Rhythms of Helena" poster

ufacturer. The sound score incorporated musical compositions by seven Helena musicians. The text included the work of six local writers, as well as selected quotes from interviews conducted with a cross-section of Helenans. Video footage was provided by a local videographer as well. One would be hard pressed to name a choreographer. It was most definitely a community effort.

The first question we explored was: How do we experience rhythm in our lives? How is it reflected in the work or other activities with which we are involved? How is it felt within the specific groups with which we are identified? The local Native American community brought the deep and steady rhythms of their music and dance. The ranchers brought the whirling, bucking, sizzling rhythms of roping and riding, calving and branding. A large community of ceramic artists brought the rhythm of the potters wheel with its pumping foot pedal. Teenagers and teachers brought the energetic stop-and-go rhythms of the classroom and school experience. Helena is the state capital, and government workers brought the repetitive on-again/off-again rhythms of the legislative sessions. All the groups and individuals involved felt profoundly the rhythms of the seasons and the outdoor activities associated with them—from the "woosh, woosh" of winter skiing to the "tomp tomp" of summer hiking. Everyone felt the rhythms of the buzzing traffic patterns, the blasting surprise of the train whistle, and the continuity of church bells. The musicians involved brought rhythms associated with a variety of musical styles—from jazz to western swing—whereas the writers brought the rhythms of their



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Pictured clockwise from top:  
2004 Flo-Bert honorees George Wein,  
Mable Lee, Arthur Duncan and Frankie Manning  
at Tap Extravaganza, May 30, 2004.  
photos by Julie Lemberger

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words and images. I worked with the individual groups, discovering and creating movement that reflected these perceptions of rhythm in their lives.

Once these patterns were created we asked: How do these rhythms intersect, overlap, and connect us? And: What rhythms impact the entire community of Helena? We explored rhythms of speech, work, play, geography, events, nature, government, and emotions. I brought different combinations of groups together to share the work they had created and to see what they could discover working together.

In the end, the piece felt like a living tapestry. The piece began with the participants moving into the audience and using a structured improvisation to engage the audience—a process that allowed them to discover both their diversity and familiarity. Woven together, the ingredients of music, spoken word, video, and dance provided a new context in which the performers were able to meet one another and find connections, communicating their discoveries to a larger audience, with the thread of rhythm holding them all together.

Throughout the process of working with individuals, separate groups, and then bringing the groups together, a sense of community grew among the participants and through the work of everyone involved. Art was created. The performance itself was very much a reflection of the rhythms of Helena, but more important, the process of creating the performance had a lasting impact on the rhythms and lives of all concerned. The participants represented very different lifestyles and points of view. Their active involvement in sharing rhythms through movement and sound, and the opportunity simply to also share stories and time together created a new openness toward one another and, in some cases, new friendships were formed. Many spoke of perceiving new rhythms in their lives and community in new ways. Rhythm provided a basis from which meaningful communication took place and was transforming.

I feel strongly the urge to suggest that, as tap dancers, we really listen to one another with openness and a very real desire to inspire positive communication in not only our very small community, but in the bigger context of our world. We have a very powerful tool at our disposal. Let's use it!