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## **South Florida performer taps into world beat with headlining Florida Dance Festival show**

By Guillermo Perez

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Tap is America's dance: bright and brash, making itself heard, prone to the big payoff. Hammering its way from street corners to stages to the silver screen, it's powered by a hybrid heritage that draws from clogging, Irish jigs and African shuffle. Small wonder that, especially in the past decade, this audiovisual art form has been embraced and reconfigured from Brazil to Japan in a boom that cross-fertilizes tap's American-bred steps and style with world traditions. Mindful of those traits, Katherine Kramer now wants to add deeper shadings of her own. "I've taken the groundedness of tap and, in a blend, brought to it a sophisticated knowledge of the body," explains Kramer, a performer, choreographer and teacher who's showing a prime example of her work, *Stop, Look, Listen*, at the Florida Dance Festival. Trained first in modern dance techniques and later seduced by world music, Kramer adds those ingredients to the kind of tap she cooks up. "I'd done a little tap before, but in the 1970s I was a modern dancer in New York and along with a group of other women found masters and hoofers, amazing guys like Honi Coles, who luckily were still around to pass on their art," she recalls. "I was really drawn to the elements of improvisation in their work, the tremendous musicality that had sometimes been lost in other manifestations of the form. "After gaining great popularity but also becoming mired in cliches

through rip-roaring numbers in Hollywood musicals, tap found restoration at the feet of artists such as Jimmy Slyde, who went on to influence the brilliant likes of Gregory Hines. These wizards of improvisation gave electric performances with spur-of-the-moment charges riffing off musicians, mostly in solos, but also sparking with other dancers. It was in that climate of rediscovery of tap's earlier vigor that Kramer's interest blossomed. "There was a joyful spirit among those early practitioners that really integrated their dance with jazz," she says. "It transformed me into a jazz artist in a traditional sense. I began to understand how to put music in my body. I became a musician. Even as a modern dancer I always had a sense of flow, my early mentors being very fluent improvisers. But, in a very unique way, tap gave me a real range. I learned to work with the full body, grounded as in West African dance and lifted as in the Western tradition. "Having followed her art to Canada, South America and Cuba - with summer stints as artistic director of Montana's Rhythm Explosion, a dance and music workshop - Kramer can claim kinship in the worldwide band of tappers. "In any art form, there's always room for exploration. Tap is no exception," she says. "I look for ways to use tap shoes - and not - in a piece, for instance. But what I've been doing mostly this time is sharing with others. The music I listen to, the dancers I see, swirl around in me. "Stop, Look, Listen was commissioned by the Florida Dance Festival with funding from the National Performance Network. Bill Doolin, interim director of the Florida Dance Association, was eager to support "an artist whose work I've respected and enjoyed and who was interested in exploring her choreographic process in order to grow. "Kramer's hour-long piece features four dancers along with five musicians who are "very much into the aesthetic of world forms - with a Latin base, yes, but there are other influences," she says. "I wanted to have in this piece people who could play not just stationary instruments but those they could travel with, such as accordion and guitar. That took us deeper into exploring movement and sound. "The work's episodic structure invites different interpretations, the choreographer says. "Here a group of people are traveling. I told the performers we'd set ourselves up as if after a catastrophe. How do we find unity and connect to some kind of change? How do we lift ourselves out of that darkness to claim what feels more positive? "For Kramer, "part of the solution is finding the ability to play, as in jazz - where

we find playfulness out of struggle and confinement." She bemoans the fact that "in our society we are breeding playfulness out of children. We need to move without so much structure, avoid rigidity. "Stop Look Listen" upholds those values; through it, she anticipates, "Audiences will see in it a flavor of who I am, a spirit that's very much me. "It's a spirit that recoils from setting up boundaries between the business of the stage, the classroom and everyday life, a holistic notion Kramer wants to pass on to her students at the festival. Part of a varied curriculum that draws about 150 participants and goes from expected ballet and modern training to snappier offerings such as flamenco and hip-hop, Kramer's classes will delve into tap foundations and, with collaborator Joanne Barrett, lay out the "Fusion of Forms Repertory." "This allows me a context in which I can be observant," Kramer says. "But it also lets me give service to our world. It's important that the way we live should be reflected in our art. Teaching about life through my art form instills in me respect for that role. "Guillermo Perez is a Miami-based freelancer and writer for Dance Magazine. **If you go** The Florida Dance Festival runs Wednesday through June 21, headlined by Katherine Kramer's Stop Look Listen (8 p.m. June 18) and Keigwin+Company (8 p.m. June 20) The Kramer and Keigwin performances take place at the Colony Theater, 1040 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach; 305-674-1040. Tickets \$14-\$20. The performance series also includes the opening faculty concert (8 p.m. Wednesday), Florida Dances (8 p.m. Saturday) and the festival finale (8 p.m. June 21). All are at the New World Dance Theater, downtown Miami. Tickets \$6-\$15. Call 304-547-1117, 800-252-0808 or visit [floridadancefestival.com](http://floridadancefestival.com).

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