

ALL THAT JAZZ

■ **Dancer Shelley Oliver returns to her home town next week, bringing with her some old time vaudeville entertainment**

By LINDA RITZ
Standard Staff

Shelley Oliver took a trip back in time to the glorious era of vaudeville, and liked it so well she decided to stay.

Now she's hoofing it with the big guys. The St. Catharines native has studied and performed with many of the old tap masters (to name a few James "Buster" Brown, Charles "Cookie" Cook and David "Fathead" Newman) who toured with Count Basie and Duke Ellington.

She also studied the speciality act of sand dancing with Harriet Brown, one of the original vaudeville dancers.

Into her fifth year as a member of the jazz tap ensemble Manhattan Tap, Shelley was thrilled to learn of the troupe's March 16 booking at The Theatre, Brock Centre for the Arts.

"We've been to China, the Caribbean, L.A., we're going to Europe in the fall, but when I heard we were going to St. Catharines, I was really excited," she said during a recent telephone interview from New York City, where she has lived since 1982.

She says her mother, Marjory Manning of Fitzroy Lane, St. Catharines, and other members of her family have seen her perform in New York, but it's not the same as coming home. This is the first trip to St. Catharines for Manhattan Tap

which has often performed in Toronto and at Artpark in Lewiston, N.Y.

As a child dancer from the age of four, Shelley remembers watching dance acts at The Theatre and dreaming of performing there one day.

While the Collegiate graduate pursued a psychology degree by day at York University, she danced nights with a modern dance troupe in Toronto, and then set off to London, England for formal ballet training.

"I always found tap extremely expressive, extremely natural, a great way to manifest the musicality within me," Shelley said. "The rhythm came almost like walking. But I realized if I wanted to really develop artistically, I had to train in other forms. Ballet has centred me and given me the physicality I have now."

After a year of modern dance with a western Canadian troupe, she made her way to New York City in search of the tap masters.

Shelley says she wanted to master the original jazz tap form, different from the glitzy, synchronized Broadway style which later emerged. Who better to teach her than the guys who grew up with it in the 1920s and 30s?

"Tap grew up with jazz in this country. It's an original American form, and I wanted to go back to that connection," says the tapper, who appeared three times on Star Search five years ago. "We're taking it back to its roots, connecting with the music as a percussive element."

SHELLEY OLIVER
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Tap dancer



St. Catharines native Shelley Oliver says she is thrilled to perform in her home town next week. The 32-year-old dancer is part of Manhattan Tap, a New York City jazz tap ensemble. Page 13.

SHELLEY OLIVER

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"We're concerned with the space and relationships we make with each other, but the spontaneity and improvisation are vitally important. I mean, Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly had some pretty great routines, but tap got so visual on Broadway that it lost its connection to jazz."

The 32-year-old dancer looks to her mentors, most now in their 80s and still tapping, and insists she'll be on stage for years to come.

Between tours, Shelley keeps busy teaching dance, and English to Russian immigrants.

But there isn't much in-between time left anymore. With

a revival of tap in the past decade, the company has been busy, especially Shelley who doubles as the troupe's tour coordinator.

"I think it wasn't happening for awhile because rock 'n' roll music came in and people weren't listening to jazz so much. Now people are looking back again to the original forms.

"It's not all glamor and glitter, that's for sure," she says about her career. "It's really an extremely stressful lifestyle. But I try not to tell too many people that. You like to keep the illusion alive."