

She's 86 years old and all of 4-feet, 9-inches tall—but **don't underestimate** Judy Ann Bassing. This tap dance teacher in the University of Miami's **Department of Theatre Arts** has a **storied career** of teaching and choreographing across the world. And she'll **kick your butt** in class.

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MEET THE THEATRE DEPARTMENT'S
DYNAMIC TAP TEACHER

SHE'S GOT RHYTHM



“ want dig, heel, scuff, heel, heel, toe, heel. Eight of them. And five, six, seven, eight...”

Without a repeat or demonstration, Judy Ann Bassing expects the students in her tap dance class to catch on or catch up the minute class begins.

There's no time to waste—every class in the Department of Theatre Arts is preparation for the students, who are mostly musical theatre majors with dreams of Broadway and beyond.

Her 4-foot 9-inch frame, bedazzled baseball cap and hearing aid don't give hint to the intensity Bassing dishes out to her students, who are a quarter of her age.

Even when the echoes of 30 students tapping in chaotic synchrony fills the room, she can detect with hawk-like precision exactly how *your* toes are misstepping.

Anyone who doesn't know Bassing, 86, may look at her and see a sweet, tiny grandmother who perhaps spends her days baking chocolate chip cookies or knitting in a rocking chair. But if they walked into one of her tap classes they'd quickly learn, from the sweat-soaked T-shirts and breathlessness of her students, that they are grossly mistaken.

Nothing, especially her age, holds Bassing back from doing what she loves most: teaching dance.

“I would never retire,” she said “Why would I? I'm lucky I love what I do, plus I still get to do it at this age, which a lot of people don't. People retire, but then you just sit around. No way.”

Eliza Knode, a University of Miami senior and musical theater major, has been taking tap with Bassing for three years.

“It was really impressive that she could equally forget my name and at the same time hear every little thing I was doing and be able to articulate exactly what I was doing wrong,” said Knode. “I think that's just a testament to the amazing teacher that she is and how long that she's been in the profession.”

When Knode first entered UM's theater program, she didn't have much dance training. But Bassing worked with her, and other students in class, on a very individualized basis, she said.

“She's a teacher that will very much take you at the level that you are and will challenge you regardless of where you are,” said Knode. “And I really appreciate that.”

Aden Siegel, a junior musical theater major, said he was apprehensive before taking tap this semester.

“Judy, thankfully, made me feel welcome and always tries her hardest to go slower and personalize her tap class to help me improve,” said Siegel. “She's kind, nurturing and makes you feel confident tapping your way across the Hecht dance floor, even if your tap skills aren't at the rest of the advanced class' level.”

Before Bassing came to teach at UM in 2011, she had a busy childhood and long career of choreographing and teaching around the world.



▼ JUDY ANN BASSING ENDS EACH dance class by huddling with her students, like below, and leading a rhythmic chant that goes “I thank you very much.”



Her father was a jockey and photographer. For Bassing, that meant a childhood of constant moving between Miami and the Northeast to follow the racing season. But that was fine by her.

“I’ve had a really, really very interesting life,” said Bassing. “It was good, in a way, because it educated me to be able to go anywhere and fit in and get along with people.”

Even in a derby family, Bassing said that performing was a family affair since she was a toddler, from learning acrobatics to singing with her younger sister, Jean, on a local radio station every Friday night. But dance, she said, was always her true passion.

“I was raised at a time when girls were just supposed to get married and have babies,” said Bassing. But her father didn’t have that attitude, and neither did she. “We were taught from the time we were really young that we could do and be whatever we wanted.”

She went to Miami Jackson High School, often staying with her dance teacher because it became so difficult to change schools. And during the summer, she said, she took advantage of the fact that her father worked at racetracks in New Jersey by riding into New York City to take dance classes as often as possible.

After graduating from high school, she stayed in New York to audition and perform.

“I would go to an audition and they’d say, ‘you’re very very good and we love you, but you’re way too short,’” said Bassing. “And there’s nothing you can do about that.”

Her rejection from some roles, and her later starting a family in Miami, is what led Bassing down the path of teaching and choreographing.

“I realized that I enjoyed teaching and that was what I should do, you know, because at least the knowledge that I had been given I could pass on,” she said. “That’s how you pass it on. It doesn’t come from a book. It comes from somebody working with you. Students only wind up as good as their teacher.”

She opened up her own dance studio, the Judy Ann Bassing Academy of Dance, in Hallendale, Florida around 1965. But about 15 years later, after her three children were grown and

her marriage ended, she moved back to New York City.

Bassing spent the next several decades choreographing, directing and teaching across the country and globe.

She has taught at New York City’s most institutional dance studios like Steps on Broadway and Jo Jo’s Dance Factory (which later became Hines-Hatchett and is now called Broadway Dance Center), along with prestigious companies like Joffrey Ballet School and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

Some of her former students include Tony-award-winning Savion Glover and Jason Samuel Smith, who understudied the leading role in the Broadway show “Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring in ‘Da Funk” at only age 15.

Her choreography credits range from doing the opening ceremonies of the 1999 World Ski Cup Championships to receiving six Los Angeles Drama Logue awards.

To call Bassing worldly-wise would be an understatement—she has conducted master classes in Austria, Czech Republic, Scotland, France, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Yugoslavia, Switzerland, Germany, France... you get the picture.

She used to spend more time in Europe than the states, and when asked if there’s any place she hasn’t been, she said that “the city that got inundated with the volcano” is on her bucket list. She couldn’t remember the name.

To this day, she teaches all of her students to respond to her with “ja, ja” in class, German for “yes, yes.” It was the only phrase she could say when teaching in Berlin and, well, she just thought it sounded funny.

Since she was abroad for work, she traveled alone most of the time. That was until she adopted her Siamese cat, Timmy, in the early 1980s.

Timmy was her companion for everything—even trips across the globe. She would walk him on a leash in airports between flights with a portable litterbox in tow, on the way to wherever she was going to teach her next workshop. Bassing said she once took him on a cross-country road trip to San Diego to choreograph a show. Another time she fibbed to airport employees that Timmy, who had big blue eyes and fluffy grey fur,

was on his way to model a Purina commercial so he’d be able to ride in-cabin to New York.

“Thank God he was beautiful,” she laughed.

But the most profound experience she’s had, said Bassing, was teaching tap to deaf students at the Lexington School for the Deaf in the early 1980s.

“They never got out of rhythm,” said Bassing. “And I would leave there and go back to Broadway Dance Center and teach a class to people who could hear and they couldn’t stay in rhythm, which I couldn’t understand at all!”

The kids, who were mostly in high school, could read lips. But when that didn’t work, Bassing would tap the tap rhythms on their shoulders.

“I did not consider them handicapped. They weren’t handicapped to dance,” she said. “I taught just like I taught hearing people, it was no different. But they would always laugh at me when I’d say ‘okay, listen to this.’”

Bassing doesn’t plan on slowing down any time soon. In addition to her classes at UM, she teaches at Artistry Dance Academy, a dance studio in Cooper City, Florida, and Performance Edge, a dance studio in Sunrise, Florida.

“Even now there are things as a dancer I can’t do anymore, which makes you sad, but that happens to all dancers. You get to the point where your body just cannot do what you used to do all the time and that’s fine,” said Bassing. “But I love working with young people. Part of staying young yourself is being around young people.”

And though for the last two years during the COVID-19 pandemic Bassing hasn’t traveled at all, she said she has plans to teach in Kansas City and New York City this summer.

“I don’t understand people that get bored. There is no reason in this world to ever be bored. I will never, ever live long enough to do and see everything I want to do,” said Bassing.

“Oh, it’s Pompeii!” 🍷