

Bill “Bojangles” Robinson: An Icon of early tap

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Dance History 2 Research Presentation



Introduction

- Robinson's historical background
- His successful career in tap dance
- His experience on stage and in film
- Issues he faced as a black entertainer in a racialized field
- The significance of his legacy



Bill Robinson's Background

- Robinson was born in Richmond, Virginia May 25th, 1878.
- Robinson was actually named Luther by his parents. He disliked the name, so later he changed it to Bill.
- Started dancing at the age of 5 at local beer gardens for spare change.
- At the age of 12, he did his first minstrel tour in a show known as *The South Before the War*.
- Over the years, his reputation grew as a entertainer after moving to New York.

Robinsons Career on Stage

- Robinson worked with a series of duo acts
 - “Cooper and Robinson” which featured Robinson opposite well-known vaudevillian George W. Cooper (Petty, 75).
- Robinson decided to do his own solo work after some time and worked with agent Morty Forkin for 40 years.
- He remained popular in the black vaudeville circuit for decades, well known to predominantly black audiences throughout the country. (Petty, 75)



Continued...

- Between 1928-1945, he appeared in a number of Broadway shows including:
 - *Blackbird, 1928*
 - *Brown Buddies, 1930*
 - *The Hot Mikado, 1939*
 - *All In Fun, 1940*
 - *Memphis Bound, 1945*

Robinson became popular in the New York City's urban white crowd after his debut in the Broadway show *Blackbird of 1928*.

- Was well-known for his signature *Stair Dance* starting in the 1920s

THE NEW YORK MAGAZINE PROGRAM

LIBERTY THEATRE
A. L. ERLANGER, President J. W. MAYER, Manager
234 WEST 42d STREET CORPORATION

FIRE NOTICE: Look around NOW and choose the nearest Exit to your seat. In case of fire, walk (not run) to THAT Exit Do not try to beat your neighbor to the street.
JOHN J. DORMAN, Fire Commissioner.

WEEK BEGINNING MONDAY EVENING, JUNE 4, 1928
Matinee Wednesday and Saturday
Midnite Show Every Thursday

LEW LESLIE'S
"BLACKBIRDS OF 1928"
A Distinctive and Unique Entertainment
Lyrics by DOROTHY FIELDS
Music by JIMMY McHUGH
With an All-Star Cast of 100 Colored Artists
Featuring
ADELAIDE HALL—BILL ROBINSON
AIDA WARD—TIM MOORE
Blackbirds Beauty Chorus
—and the—
PLANTATION ORCHESTRA
ALLIE ROSS, Conductor
Entire Production Staged and Conceived by
MR. LEW LESLIE

PROGRAM CONTINUED ON SECOND PAGE FOLLOWING



So Thin!
The New Smart.
Nozida
Vanitie
FOR LOOSE POWDER
CANNOT SPILL—EASY TO REFILL
WHEREVER TOILET GOODS ARE SOLD

Bill Robinson *Stair Dance*

My Choreographic Analysis

- Syncopated rhythmic beats
- Light movement quality in the upper and lower body
- Very clear distinct beats
- Percussive
- Risktaking with the stairs
- Musicality of the steps

Miriam J. Petty's Analysis

- Upright Irish inflected jigging
- Vertical body perpendicular to the horizontal staircase
- Clarity
- Complex rhythmic steps
- In sync with the music

Stair Dance Continued...

“Robinson’s uncanny sense of balance and rhythm seem effortless”
Tap Dance History: From Vaudeville to film

“Perhaps his most famous routine, it became known all over the United States in 1935 when he made the film *The Little Colonel* with Shirley Temple”. - *The International Encyclopedia of Dance*

Robinson's Career in Film

“You know, for twenty years. I had to be bothered with this “Bojangles” stealing show from me, and so I moved into pictures to get rid of him. And now, what do I see? Not less than the face and taps of this same Bill Robinson cropping up in pictures to steal show from me again. Will this fellow ever leave me-~~Will Rogers~~”

- Robinson appeared in 14 films, notably;
 - *The Little Colonel, 1935*
 - *In Old Kentucky, 1935*
 - *The Little Rebel, 1935*
 - *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm,*
 - *Just Around the Corner, 1938*
 - *Stormy Weather, 1943*



Robinson as a Black Entertainer in a Racialized Field...

- Blackface Vaudeville tap dancers of his time
 - These dancers were popularized in the minstrel shows in the mid 1800's into the Vaudeville era.



Writer Miriam Petty, analyzes Will Roger's statement regarding Robinson "stealing" in her book called *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood*

"You know, for twenty years. I had to be bothered with this "Bojangles" **stealing shows from me** and so I moved into pictures to get rid of him. And now, what do I see? Nothing less than the face and taps of this same Bill Robinson cropping up in pictures to steal the show from me again. Will this fellow ever leave me alone?" - Will Rogers

- Petty also looks into the onscreen relationship between Shirley Temple and Robinson.
- She discusses how their relationships reflects symbiosis...
 - Symbiosis is an interaction between two different organisms.
 - Usually, in humans that means its a mutually beneficial relationship between different people.
- Scholar, Karen Orr Vered argues the “inequitable nature” of their symbiosis
 - Robinson absent from publicity around Temples films.
 - Temples popularity was achieved through the articulation and ability of Robinson onscreen.



- Robinson is often portrayed as a servant, caretaker, and butler in majority of the fi
 - This connects to our discussion in class about the “Documentary about effects of Minstresely: Ethnic Notions”.
 - This film discussed how African Americans were always portrayed as the happy servants in films, namely *Hellzapoppin*
- Lastly, I looked into writer Hannah Durkin's analysis of *Stormy Weather* and the relationship between “popular culture” and “self-representation” of Robinson’s dance scenes.
 - Exotic black “other”
 - Cultural representation of “blackness”
 - The “primitive” body.

Why Robinson's Legacy is Important...

- First black entertainer to perform solo in the Vaudeville circuit.
- Performed without blackface
- “Robinson spoke volume to both tap and racism’s impact on culture in America”-Zita Allen

“Robinson’s film roles may have been controversial, but in his own life he worked to combat racism, Hill writes in a separate piece. He helped to found the Negro Actors Guild of America and raised huge sums of money for charities and benefits, she writes. In his memory, Congress passed a resolution in 1989 making today—his birthday—National Tap Dance Day” Kat Eschner

Theoretical Framework...

Scholarly references that have helped me to outline my theoretical framework and literature review from different scholars and historians in the field include:

- **Miriam Petty: *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood***
- **Hannah Durkin: “ Tap Dancing on the Racial Boundary: Racial Representation and Artistic Experimentation In Bill “Bojangles” Robinson Stormy Weather Performance.**
- **Alexander Street Publications: *Tap Dance History: From Vaudeville to Film***

Conclusion

In conclusion, the career of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson is significant because as a black entertainer he successfully navigated segregation and racial dynamics of his time, developed new forms of tap, and guided future black entertainers in the field like the Nicholas Brothers.



References

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