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African American Dance History

## ***The Minstrel Show Continues: The Movie Career of Bill***

### ***Robinson***

The war was over, slavery had ended, now what? What could the African-American men and women do that had been forcibly subservient their entire lives? What was going to become of them? There were so many questions and virtually no answers. During this tumultuous time, cities were becoming integrated and time and money were not things afforded to the black man's new found liberties. Even in the North, they were considered inferior, stupid and work-oriented by the white population despite the new abolitionist laws. Lack of opportunities for African American's in the work force, and less than sufficient schooling, forced them to work as farmhands or factory workers in the cities. Those who were lucky enough to have talents as a singer or dancer joined the traveling minstrel shows; shows produced solely for the entertainment of white audiences designed to show them what they wanted to see. And what white men in the North and South wanted to see was scenes of happy darkies working away on the farm. In this time of antebellum and pro-slavery sentiment, the minstrel shows were the windows to the good old days and times when life was better. Minstrelsies of these earlier days gave

way to the movies roles of more recent history. The images transcended stage and were soon brought to a broader range of people on a giant screen and in Technicolor. The movies showed the same stereotypes; black men were shown as the whites thought that they should be: subservient, happy-go-lucky, and musically inclined. This is the role that Bill “Bojangles” Robinson fell into as Hollywood’s leading black actor.

Robinson had worked in his earlier years on vaudeville stages, making his debut in *The South before the War* in 1892, as a tap dancer, and comedic act. In his shows, he embodied the white ideals of Southern Black men. He was kind and courteous, always serving the white master, but it wasn’t until Bill joined the Blackbirds of 1928 that he emerged as a talent among the all black revue. A virtuosic dancer, Bill commanded attention from the audience and brought style and grace to the roles previously reserved to stereotype black men. Soon after his breakthrough on the vaudeville stages, Robinson brought his act to Hollywood. All together, Bill starred in over fourteen motion pictures for companies such as RKO and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. His extensive career in Hollywood is regarded with respect, but no other films garner more admiration than those in which the co-star was Shirley Temple.

Shirley Temple was America’s little sweetheart, a child star and pride and joy of Fox studios. She was the top grossing box office star of: 1935, 1936, 1937 and 1938, a feat yet to be duplicated. All of these accolades speak to the drawing power of a cute little girl full of innocence and happiness during a time when our country was heading to a world war with an uncertain future. People wanted to see a simpler time when black people knew their place and a man named Hitler didn’t exist. The premises for most of her movies were musical, and considering Shirley Temple’s popularity, it was only

natural that the producers of her movies would want to couple Shirley with the best actors, dancers and singers in the business. Bill Robinson was brought in to teach Shirley dance steps and to make her look good to the audiences. His talents were always obvious, but always clouded with the stereo-typical roles that he played.

The movies they starred in together are distinct and different in their own ways, but in the ways that we are concerned with they are the same. Just Around the Corner (1930), Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1938), The Little Colonel (1935), and The Little Rebel (1935) were all movies centered on the Civil War; some post and some pre. The conflict between the states and situations that arouse from these conflicts are evident but not emphasized. The scenes that are presented are happy, demure, and completely oblivious to any divergence in social conduct during this time. They present the South as a prideful community which is content and correct in their actions of Black enslavement and subjugation.

The image that Bill presented on the screen was one that mimicked stereotypes shown earlier in minstrel shows and brought to light by the Jim Crow character, which was the start of the minstrel tradition in the United States. It was a way to support the prejudices of white Americans and entertain them at the same time. In the minstrel shows, white Irish Americans wore blackface, an exaggeration of stereo-typical black features made with burnt coal and red paint, and portrayed a description of black Americans to white people in the audience, many of whom had never seen a black person before. These images of clown-like faces and dim expressions which permeated into the Northern and Southern culture of the Pre-Civil War United States were brought back to life by these movies in the 30's.

Robinson, like Jim Crow, always played the servant, a butler whose actions were emphasized to show his simple-mindedness; and a happy demeanor while going about chores forced upon him by his white master. Bill constantly danced while working which consciously and sub-consciously showed how happy the slaves were to do work for their white masters. It made them seem like children, lost and ignorant, waiting for their “parents”, the white men, to show them the way home. Bill’s characters epitomized this ignorant, dim, dance stereotype. He would dance to make his work more fun, and to entertain the little girl that he was working for (Shirley Temple). His most famous role was in The Little Colonel, when he taught Shirley to dance his famous “stair dance”. This dance is intricate and specialized and takes many rehearsals to master. Contrary to this fact, the movie showed Robinson doing the dance and teaching it to Shirley and her learning it within minutes. This scene seems as though it is all in fun, but the simple fact that the little white girl is able to learn within minutes what the black slave had to practice and perfect trivializes his skill and reduces him once again to a simple house slave.

Shirley Temple has been noted as saying that she has more admiration for Bill “Bojangles” Robinson than any other actor in Hollywood, he is her favorite actor. But her assertions do not change the fact that in not one of the movies that they shared the screen did they also share billing. Shirley’s name always topped the posters and got all the press, Bill was just a sidekick to the talent that was Shirley Temple. His achievements and abilities were always shadowed by the fact that he was a black dancer/actor, not just a dancer/actor. He has only recently been recognized for his talents and postmortem has made a name for himself one of the top tap dancers ever. By the

standards of Hollywood he was forced to abide by the nameless, faceless stereotypes of minstrelsy but in the long run allowed his talents to speak for themselves.