Book review

Behind the Screen: Tap Dance, Race, and Invisibility During Hollywood's Golden Age

Brynn W. Shiovitz, Oxford University Press, 2023. 375 pages.

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In *Behind the Screen: Tap Dance, Race, and Invisibility During Hollywood's Golden Age*, author Brynn W. Shiovitz offers a detailed evaluation of the Hollywood movie musical era from 1927 to 1963. Through in-depth discussion and analysis of prominent movie musicals and specifically the performances of entertainers such as Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Cab Calloway, Fred Astaire, Eleanor Powell, and the Nicholas Brothers, Shiovitz unveils how less-visible forms of minstrelsy, blackface, and racial caricature were prevalent in the movies of this era, slipping past ethics codes to uphold economic, religious, and culturally moral standards supported by systemic Whiteness. The book "traces a history of blackface onscreen and the covert means by which it entered Hollywood cinema, despite the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America's (MPPDA) decades-long efforts to censor such racial caricature" (1), thus establishing layered and deeply coded practices and systems that diminished, demoralized, and erased the Black American presence and people at the origin of the art form.

While there are several notable books on tap dance and tap dance history, *Behind the Screen* is specific in that it acknowledges the not-so-visible ways that minstrelsy and minstrel themes, blackface, racial inequity, appropriation, and human indignity were present in many of history's most popular movie musicals. Shiovitz references the scholarship of Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Robert Farris Thompson, Jacqui Malone, and Lindsay Guarino, and outlines Africanist traits and sensibilities as a framework for viewing the musicals. She notes, "*Behind the Screen* builds on minstrel scholarship of the last thirty years and hopes to reroute the path along which current conversations around blackface are headed" (6).

Shiovitz defines covert minstrelsy as having four identifiable guises – the sonic guise, the protean guise, the tribute guise, and the citational guise – that "work together to obscure the inner workings of an entertainment industry that thrives on racial caricature and masks an even more concealed infiltration of an Africanist aesthetic into the White mainstream" (11). She establishes three main arguments that are fundamental themes when examining covert minstrelsy and that are ever-present throughout the text. First, the author notes how "race performance, and specifically blackface minstrelsy, need not be visible to be effective" and that "blackface performance has been a part of the American narrative since the 1820s, and accordingly, the imagery, music, and dance linked to the minstrel stage might carry an element of nostalgia for Americans who were never directly hurt by its portrayals; sometimes this nostalgia is confused with patriotism" (10). Lastly, she notes, "Africanist aesthetics have pollinated American entertainment in such a way as to mistake blackface performance for lived experience and furthermore to write Black artists out of the equation in favor of White bodies who utilize Black sensibilities" (10).

For example, in chapter four, "Bon Homage: Female Figures, the Tribute Guise, and Pre-War Departures, 1934-1939," Shiovitz outlines how the tribute guise became the prominent means of covert minstrelsy in screen performance. She emphasizes how the "tribute guise involves someone using the 'tribute' label in conjunction with burnt cork and various stereotypes within an integrated backstage musical to convince the audience that their makeup merely acknowledges a historical moment or honors a particular

The International Journal of Screendance 14 (2024) https://doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v14i1.9626

individual" (175). Through the employment of the tribute guise, the racial caricature "invited audiences to read blackface as something unifying and patriotic rather than differentiating and shameful" (175).

Through the lens of covert minstrelsy, Shiovitz also weaves in discussions of race and gender pertaining to the presentation and commodification of White and Black female moving bodies in the movie musicals. In chapter one, "Integrating the Screen: Sound Synchronization, Sonic Guises, and Pre-Code Blackface, 1927-1930," she notes that "'suggestive movement' was unlawful when performed by White people, and yet presenting Black people as overtly sexualized…was a way of delivering sexual content in an agreeable manner. That is to say, fewer people took issue with distributing 'forbidden' material via the Black performer" (53). She goes on to note that "presenting the Black body as a vessel of demoralizing movement reinforced stereotypes that had long been in place; popular dances that stemmed from Black culture (e.g., the Black Bottom and slow drag) were still perceived to be as dangerous as the cakewalk was in 1903" (53). She revisits this theme throughout the book in an analysis of the Busby Berkeley movies and performances of Eleanor Powell.

Shiovitz suggests navigating the book from start to finish, reading each chapter in order as presented. This guidance was helpful while reading for a contextual understanding of the issues central to the text which are complex and layered in nuance and historical, socio-political, and cultural meaning. As the book progresses, Shiovitz skillfully builds upon each concept with helpful repetition and reapplication of thematic ideas, detailed examples, and a thorough examination of each point she presents. She notes, "Reading this book as presented will engage you in the process of layering, allowing you to reflect on all iterations of covert minstrelsy in each of its guises and variations" (xvi).

A unique feature of the book was the descriptive and detailed interludes between each chapter. Shiovitz includes a sing-along, a cartoon short, a Vitaphone short, which she categorizes as a dance break, a travel ad, and a war bond ad. She notes that these "would have been common additions to any feature film seen by this audience; their presentation unfolds in a time-specific manner within a book that is organized chronologically with some temporal overlap between chapters" (xvi). The inclusion of these interludes added a dynamic element to the text and felt interactive in nature. Following the final chapter is a Coda which includes a series of correspondence letters between Director of the Production Code Administration Joseph I. Breen and Twentieth Century Fox's Director of Public Relations, Colonel Jason S. Joy. The letters are an undeniable illustration of covert minstrelsy in action which has greater meaning and impact after reading the text. The Appendix includes excerpts from the actual Production Code referenced throughout the book. Another helpful feature was the visual reference of a descriptive diagram that outlined the intersectional nature of the four guises of covert minstrelsy. Shiovitz notes that "covert minstrelsy is not linear, and its four guises often bleed together. The sonic, protean, tribute, and citational guises comprise covert minstrelsy; each guise is influenced by a set of attributes and variations designated by the map's short descriptors and bullet points" (xvii).

It is easy to watch the virtuosic dancing and songs of Hollywood movie musicals and to appreciate, applaud, and acknowledge the skill and artistry of the performers. The movies are an excellent tool for sharing embodied examples of the origins of jazz and tap history. However, as educators, practitioners, scholars, and enthusiasts of tap, jazz, movie musicals, and other rooted dance forms, we must uphold a responsibility to engage in twenty-first-century dialogue that uncovers the history from "behind the screen." I consider this text an essential tool in teaching this history as it identifies, names, and then dismantles the deep structures of systemic Whiteness embedded in this history. As I read the book, I could imagine ways to incorporate the text into my dance history course to support conversations of identity, culture, erasure, appropriation, narrative, intent, othering, and gaze. This book is a way to move the

conversation forward, acknowledge the history, and then consider the ways covert minstrelsy still exists and is ever-present in popular culture and the current socio-political landscape.

Biography

Brandi Coleman is an assistant professor of dance at Southern Methodist University. She was a long-time performing member, rehearsal director, and associate artistic director of Jump Rhythm Jazz Project, founded and directed by Billy Siegenfeld. She has led more than 40 choreographic and teaching residencies at universities throughout the US and internationally and received an Emmy award for her performance in the documentary *Jump Rhythm Dance Project: Getting There.* Her writing, "Performing Gender: Disrupting Performance Norms for Women in Jazz Dance Through Gender-Inclusive, Human-Centric Choreography" is included in the book *Rooted Jazz Dance: Africanist Aesthetics and Equity in the Twenty-First Century* (University Press of Florida, 2022).