

# Restoring the missing story of Buddy Bradley's contribution to British dance practice

Part of the *Black History of British Musical Theatre project*

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## Setting the stage

- \* This project aims to take a close examination of African American Buddy Bradley's choreographic work to ascertain the type of influence he had on British dance practice and the musical stage in the twentieth century
- \* Bradley (1905-1972) had been popular as a jazz dance coach and worked extensively in musical shows across the UK and Europe from 1930 to the 1960s<sup>1,6</sup>
- \* This research utilises tools of digital humanities to build a visual social network of a selected period of his work
- \* The researcher will use tacit (implicit) knowledge of dance from their Caribbean heritage and their British (white European) dance training to analyse footage of Bradley's choreography, especially that of tap dance
- \* Very little is written about the development of tap dance in the UK which is an "African American vernacular jazz dance" (with an "African aesthetic")<sup>2,5</sup>

## Questions

- \* How is tap dance practice disseminated and communicated into British theatrical life?
- \* What can a historical biography reveal about Bradley's working practices?
- \* What does the examination of Bradley's work reveal about the current discourse of dance practice in the UK?


## Methods



Icons: flaticon.com


### Buddy Bradley's choreographic work: musical film

#### Visible material



- \* A comprehensive filmography dataset of Bradley's work was built using references from several online movie databases (BFI, IMDb, Wikipedia)
- \* Dance footage was sourced primarily through YouTube clips uploaded by fans of Jessie Matthews's films (example titles shown in collage above)
- \* Some film footage shows negative 1930s racial tropes and stereotypes without adequate warning
- \* Bradley's choreography extends beyond working with popular jazz dances to include ballet and modern<sup>1,3</sup>


#### Unveiling the invisible



- \* A 1933 Pathé News newsreel reveals a hidden historical element of the commercialisation of minstrelsy: Blackface head masks (see photos above)
- \* There is a noticeable lack of representation of Black performers in chorus lines and ensembles despite black stars being hired to headline stage shows
- \* Bradley's late-1920s work on (white-produced) Broadway shows in the USA is largely uncredited due to the racial segregation of the period<sup>3,7</sup>

### Analysis

- \* A selection of Bradley's work in 1930s film shows his development of using "dance as a narrative" before it's recognised popularity in 1940s American musical theatre
- \* Bradley's work was progressive in blending and fusing together different dance styles
- \* An "African aesthetic" can be seen in film footage of dances created by Bradley that include tap dance, jazz and ballet<sup>4,5</sup>



- \* An examination of Bradley's work in British musical film reveals a hidden element of racist history. For the project, trigger warnings have been added for presenting this type of visual material (e.g. Blackface head masks above)
- \* A new comprehensive dataset of Bradley's filmography reflects only a small selection of his work. The volume of his musical stage credits<sup>6</sup> is beyond the scope of this project
- \* By focusing on selected West Midlands theatres and a specific timeframe the project aims to create manageably sized datasets to analyse Bradley's network connections

Film posters and stills (top): British Gaumont, British Pathé. Photo (bottom): Getty Images (Bradley in Evergreen 1934)

## Next chapter



- \* The project highlights that British dance history requires a wider perspective of the cultural context than its European aesthetic to recognise values of the artistic work
- \* This research involves navigating traumatic racial stereotypes and requires self-care as a Black researcher
- \* Recognising the contributions of Buddy Bradley's work in the wider development of British dance and musical theatre<sup>6</sup> is important towards creating an inclusive history

## Key references

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3. Hill, C. V. (1992) Buddy Bradley: The Invisible Man of Broadway brings Jazz Tap to London, *Proceedings of the Society of Dance History Scholars*, pp. 77-84
4. Hill, C. V. (2010) *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*
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6. Mayes, S. and S. K. Whitfield (2021) *An Inconvenient Black History of British Musical Theatre: 1900 - 1950*
7. Stearns, M. and J. Stearns (1994) *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* [1968]

Photos: Picturegoer Weekly (1936), chorus rehearsal (1937)