UNDER REVIEW

BUDDY BRADLEY'S LEGACY OF DANCE

Maureen Footer's new biography, "Feel the Floor," shows how a little-known Black choreographer taught white stars all the latest moves.

By Brian Seibert

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Buddy Bradley with the English actress Patricia Burke, in December, 1942. Photograph by Kurt Hutton / Hulton Archive / Getty

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Around a century ago, in New York, a white starlet named Irene Delroy got a hot tip from her maid, who was Black. The place to get new steps, Delroy learned, was a studio near Times Square, and the man to see was a dancer named Buddy Bradley. For a modest fee, Bradley created a new routine for Delroy, tailored to her abilities, incorporating the still trendy Charleston and other saucier moves popular in Black dance halls and night clubs in the mid-nineteen-twenties. When she débuted it, in the musical revue "The Greenwich Village Follies," she stopped the show, and the next day six other women in the production arrived at Bradley's door. To meet the ensuing demand, the studio where Bradley worked expanded from a small room to two floors of the building. He gave private lessons all day long, two at a time, shuttling between rooms. Soon, he later said, he was pulling down a thousand dollars a week (around twenty thousand dollars in today's money). Not bad for a twenty-year-old Black man from segregated Alabama.

Bradley's roster of clients was the A-list—and the B-list, too—of the era's stars of musical theatre and revues. They came to learn the Mooch and the Sugar Foot Strut, how to drum the floor and roll their hips in the rhythm of the era: jazz. Broadway producers also caught on to Bradley's abilities, and hired him to fix dud numbers and even whole shows. In an interview decades later, he would claim that practically every show on Broadway in the late twenties featured some of his work. But the printed programs told another story, omitting his name and crediting some other choreographer, who was always white.



That changed in 1930, when Charles B. Cochran, London's leading impresario, hired Bradley as the dance director for the Rodgers and Hart musical "Ever Green." Cochran gave Bradley credit for that London show and many more that followed, putting him together with Noël Coward, the young George Balanchine, and the man who would become the foremost progenitor of ballet in Britain, Frederick Ashton. Over the next decade or so, Bradley, having moved to London, also choreographed a series of British film musicals, many starring Britain's top song-and-dance actress, Jessie Matthews.

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If Bradley's influence on Broadway was hidden, his impact on British theatrical dance was undeniable, through his choreography and through the school he ran in London for nearly forty years. Yet when Bradley died, in 1972, he had little place in the popular memory of Britain (despite a few obituaries) and even less in his home country. Histories of jazz and tap dance mention him, but only now has a full-length biography been written: Maureen Footer's "Feel the Floor: Restoring the Life and Legacy of Jazz Choreographer Buddy Bradley." A prodigious feat of research, "Feel the Floor" is an act of redress that restores Bradley's life and legacy. It also puts forth part of an origin story for what ended up being a global dominance of dance originated by African Americans over the past hundred years—from tap and the Lindy Hop to the twist, the moonwalk, the Running Man, and the Milly Rock—and for a pattern that repeats every time dances created by Black people are copied without credit on TikTok. Bradley's transatlantic life is a tale of artistic freedom and recognition earned at the cost of exile. The book's tagline calls him "the most influential dancer and choreographer you've never heard of," conjoining historical neglect with importance. But just how influential was he? That's a question the book doesn't adequately answer.

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Born in Alabama in 1905 (the year and the place of his birth are two of many facts corrected by Footer's research), Bradley arrived in Harlem at a propitious moment—the early twenties, when, as Langston Hughes put it, "the Negro was in vogue." The surprise success of the 1921 Broadway musical "Shuffle Along," created and performed by Black artists, led to such an influx of Black shows that the 1922 edition of the "Ziegfeld Follies" included a number with the refrain "It's getting very dark on old Broadway." White audiences also flocked uptown to a profusion of night clubs, mostly Mob-run during Prohibition, some (like the Cotton Club and Connie's Inn) featuring Black performers but not welcoming most Black audiences. For many, the attraction to Black shows was to experience a kind of moral holiday, a relaxing of inhibitions, but the more significant exposure was to an explosion of creativity: the rapid development of jazz and the rhythmic, uncorseted dancing that went with it.

The teen-age Bradley, though, didn't really know how to dance. A few performers staying in the boarding house where he had taken a room gave him some lessons, and he learned more while trading steps with his peers in an alley next to Connie's Inn. A good word from one of those boarders got him out of the alley and into the night club's floor show as a chorus boy, an opportunity that exposed him to the methods of the leading dance director Leonard Harper, and the stylistic innovations of Eddie Rector, a tap dancer of high rhythmic subtlety and grace who executed what Black performers pridefully called a Class Act.

In the Jazz Age, the culture and the style that Bradley was soaking up every night were information that white performers craved, but which racial segregation impeded them from accessing. In other words, there was a gap in the market. Harper opened a small dance studio, on Forty-sixth Street; business was poor until Bradley was hired and revamped Delroy's act.

Bradley's insight was in the need for accommodation. He didn't give Delroy a routine like one he would perform himself, souped up with the latest technical advances, speed, and acrobatics. She couldn't handle that. He simplified some tap steps and filled in the routine with what he called jive dancing: the kinds of basic motions that everybody in Black show business could do, the party moves (such as the recently popularized Charleston) that had been circulating through Black communities across the country. Most of Bradley's clients were white and female—almost none were Black—and, like a couturier, he made sure they looked cute and flirtatious, rather than athletic. Adele Astaire, sister of Fred, cooed about his "marvelous, new, dirty steps." Soft-spoken and even-tempered, Bradley gave his pupils permission, confidence. He was a whisperer for white dancers coveting Black style.

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This arrangement formalized a long-standing practice of Black dancers coaching white ones on the down-low, and it was more financially secure than the old handshake deals (though Bradley continued to receive gifts such as jewel-encrusted cigarette cases). It was common for even white coaches of white dancers not to receive credit for their work, but it must have been galling for Bradley to read John Martin, the dance critic of the New York *Times*, praising the Broadway performer Clifton Webb, in the 1929 revue "The Little Show," for achieving, in "a number of his own devising," what Martin deemed "perhaps the most notable accomplishment" in "establishing jazz as a fine art." Bradley said that he had created the number for Webb, adapting the shockingly sinuous style of the Harlem luminary Earl (Snakehips) Tucker.

According to Bradley, something similar tended to happen when he was hired to fix an entire production, such as Rodgers and Hart's "A Connecticut Yankee." Critics would applaud the innovative dance numbers, but credit would go to a white choreographer such as Busby Berkeley (as it did on "Yankee")—a former drill sergeant with almost no dance background—who, on the basis of those raves, would be hired for more jobs and, in Berkeley's case, promoted by Hollywood studios. Bradley said that he didn't even see half the shows he worked on.

How do we know this? Here's one of several places where Footer's biography runs into problems. Bradley left no known journals or letters. Nearly the sole source of evidence that he had a hand in choreography credited to others in so many Broadway shows is the partial transcript of a 1963 interview that he gave with the jazz historian Marshall Stearns. (Footer writes that a dark face in a production photo of "Yankee" might be Bradley's.) There were advertisements and articles, especially in the Black press, about Bradley's teaching, and the *Dance Magazine* ran photos of him twisting his pelvis and his bent knees as he gave "the low down on the

real Negro steps," such as the Black Bottom and the Louisiana Mess Around. But not even Footer's thorough sleuthing has unearthed much more than Bradley's brag.

Still, his assertion is more than credible. Such appropriation was ubiquitous. One of Bradley's employers, George White, the producer of "Scandals" revues, claimed credit for the Black Bottom, which originated in Black communities. Berkeley was lauded for a rhythmic complexity that he admitted he didn't understand, and which is absent from the kaleidoscopic film work for which he became famous. If Bradley's choreography was appropriated by his white colleagues, how did he feel about it? Did he accept it as business as usual? Did he resent it as a kind of laundering of intellectual property theft? On the record, he didn't say—though that doesn't stop Footer from presuming to tell us his thoughts and feelings throughout her book.

Bradley did express an attitude by remaining in Britain, where he might still have been barred from entry into certain clubs, but where he was given credit for his work and recognized as an authority. By 1932, *Variety* was noting that his dance ideas were "conspicuous in practically every West End musical." Footer devotes several chapters to his prolific London theatrical work, relying mainly on the record left by reviewers. That's all we have for most theatrical dance of the period, but it's thin support for some of her grander assertions, such as the argument that Bradley was the secret source for many of Balanchine's and Ashton's innovations.

At times, it seems that Footer believes Bradley had an enormous, clandestine influence on everyone he went to lunch with. With Balanchine—whose brush with Bradley came after his precocious beginnings with the Ballets Russes but before his immigration to America and eventual founding of New York City Ballet—Footer pushes hard on not much more than the fact that the two choreographers shared dancers and proclivities. That Balanchine incorporated into his work a lot from Black dance is a critical commonplace, and obvious to the eye; what he learned from Bradley in particular is less clear, though Balanchine did hire one of Bradley's assistants, Herbie Harper, to help with the tap in the musical "On Your Toes" (1936).

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The case that Ashton and Bradley heavily influenced each other is stronger, if also strained. They collaborated on the stereotype-sodden 1932 ballet "High Yellow"—which, if it was not exactly, as Footer asserts, the first jazz ballet, or the first ballet choreographed by an African American, was the most prominent to date. You don't need to buy Footer's proposition that signature characteristics of Ashton's ballets "derive from his work with Bradley" to see the significance of Ashton and Bradley's having been peers early on.

"Evergreen," the 1934 film, features the only known footage of Bradley dancing: about six seconds of him doing the Charleston with some kids on the sidewalk. The cameo is more a stamp of African American authenticity than a behind-the-curtain peek at the creator, but "Evergreen" does demonstrate Bradley's gifts, particularly through the dancing of his pupil Jessie Matthews. Although Matthews's eagerness to disguise her humble origins (she was the daughter of a fruit-and-vegetable seller) caused her to adopt absurdly posh diction and a fluttery vibrato, she was a charming dancer whom Bradley made look like a natural.

At the start of the dance break in the number "Dancing on the Ceiling," Matthews steps with a hitch that rolls through her spine as it bends back deeply, her head releases, and she pushes the air away from her with flexed hands: a soigné, slightly woozy gesture of simultaneous resistance and surrender that's very nineteen-thirties and which would become her signature move. Here, she embodies Bradley's ideal of feminine romance, and, elsewhere, of a pert cuteness sometimes accentuated with crisp tapping.

Matthews's numbers are still worth watching, but Footer gives Matthews's male counterparts perhaps too much credit. Of the top-hatted musical-comedy star Jack Buchanan, she says that Bradley transformed him from "mechanical puppet to seductive dancer," turning the drawback of his stiffness into "charming idiosyncrasy." The slightness of Buchanan's transformation can be seen in the films choreographed by Bradley, and also two decades later, in contrast with Fred Astaire, as the two men dance side by side in "The Band Wagon," from 1953.

Speaking of comparisons with Astaire: as Footer piles up the cinematic achievements of her subject—proving that tap could be romantic, that jazz dance could reveal character and tell stories, and that both could be integrated into a book musical—she acknowledges that Astaire was doing the same things at the same time. This is true only in the narrowest sense.

The bit in "Top Hat" (1935) where Astaire inadvertently annoys Ginger Rogers by tapping in the room above hers came after Bradley's "Dancing on the Ceiling," but Astaire's version of the idea is infinitely more sophisticated, both as stand-alone choreography and for the wit of its integration into a whole musical scene. Bradley's film choreography, even in the numbers that Footer deems masterpieces, is above average, clever and assured, but Astaire's art—inconceivable without the enormous influence of Bradley's Black contemporaries, like John Bubbles—is in another league. Footer's advocacy, in any case, is shot through with special pleading: look how well he did with the bad dancers and low budgets of British films! What he might have done in Hollywood twice came close to being tested. In 1931, he turned down an invitation by the middling white choreographer Seymour Felix to join him in Hollywood, surely a wise decision. There was little chance of a Black behind-the-camera artist advancing in a segregated film industry in which Black dancers served as coaches and dubbed the tapping of white dancers but weren't credited choreographers. Later, Bradley said, Twentieth Century Fox asked him to choreograph the 1938 film "Alexander's Ragtime Band," only to replace him because of a scheduling conflict. His replacement was Felix.

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Bradley is a symbol of how Black dance artists were robbed of credit, and also a fascinating exception. His case, though, seems not to be one of neglected genius. Rather, the extant evidence suggests that he was a choreographer of talent and skill whose fundamental gift was helping white people dance more like Black people. The differences between racial attitudes in America and those in Britain both pushed and pulled him out of his home country, but America needed that gift less than Britain did. American dance was Black from the beginning. Britain's white world required more coaching. When Bradley was getting started, the idea of anyone teaching Black dance in a classroom was new. Many people doubted whether it *could* be taught that way. But Bradley boldly tested the concept on just about the most recalcitrant material imaginable: white British bodies as stiff as their upper lips. Loosening them at all was a major achievement.

The core of Footer's book is Bradley's heyday in the thirties. She covers the rest of his life: some wartime drama, an affair with a white actress, restorative visits by Black American colleagues, the creation and dissolution of two touring dance companies, and a sad slide into obsolescence that ended in a late return to New York, in 1967, and a nearly solitary death. But the book's most valuable chapter might be the one about Bradley's teaching in the nineteen-fifties, the section that supplies her with her title. Fresh interviews with still enchanted former students give us a window onto a man who moved so beautifully that it brought people to tears, a teacher whose graduated routines and spare comments helped his pupils relax and "feel the floor."

More than the films, this teaching may be Bradley's true legacy. Even in the United States, his student turned assistant Henry LeTang became the tap teacher to hundreds, from starlets needing tailoring to the great Gregory Hines. (I studied with LeTang and remember his seen-it-all manner, show-biz pragmatism, and ever-present cigarette.) In Britain, Bradley's influence might best be sensed in a TV interview that the British song-and-dance man Lionel Blair gave in 1981, when he was in his fifties.

Bradley's style was always from the hips, Blair says, demonstrating the frazzled way he danced before studying with Bradley and then showing the after by dropping into bent knees and a freed pelvis, feeling the floor with close-shave footwork. "He taught me to control everything," Blair continues, belying the false assumption that the secret of Black dance is abandon, mere uninhibitedness. "Nobody could do it like he could, but we all tried." ♦

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