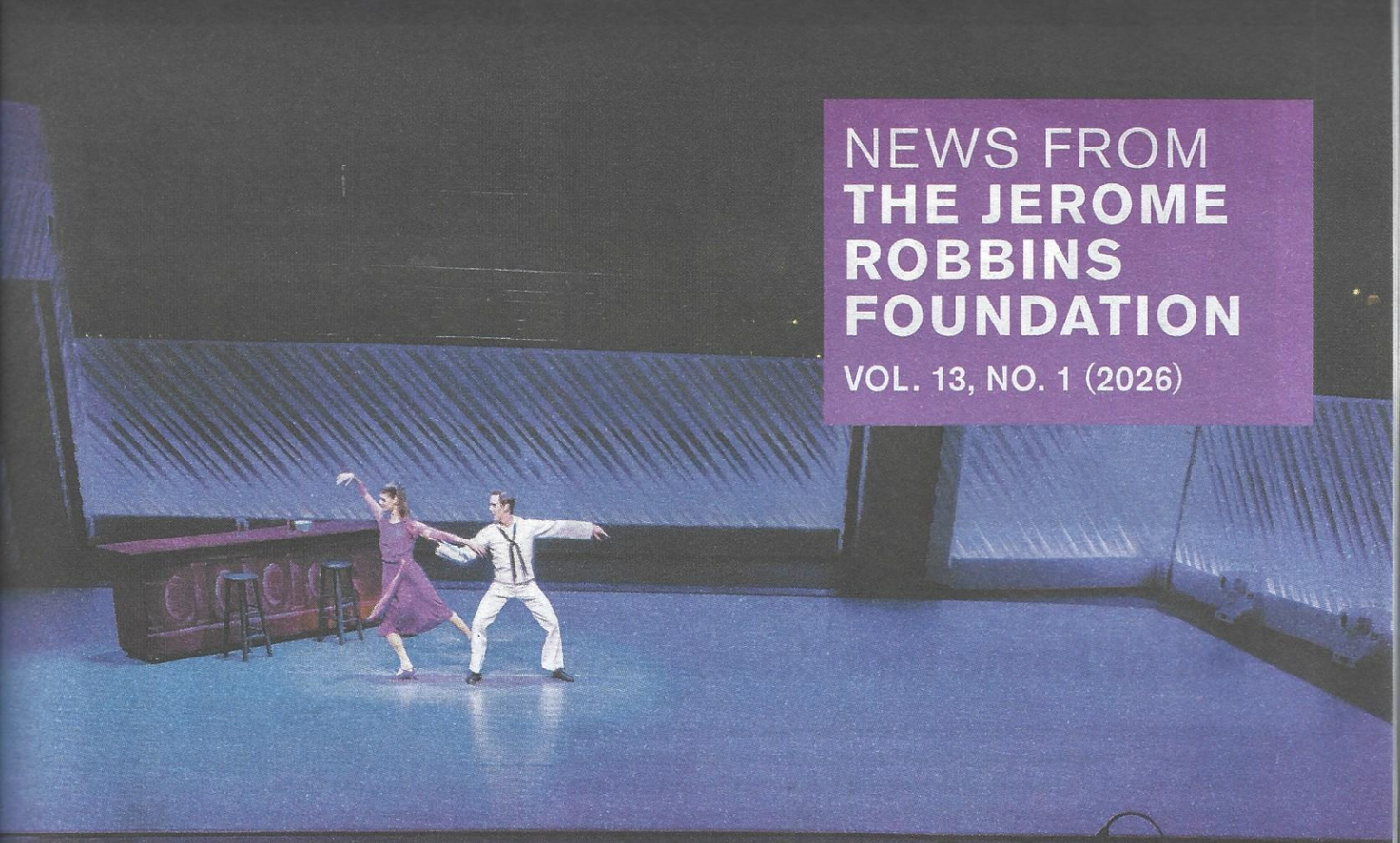


NEWS FROM
THE JEROME ROBBINS FOUNDATION

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recalled, "they premiered
came Tanaquil Le Clercq,
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d white. The skirt floated
semble also wore different
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s, and *Watermill*. Costume
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stumes and how continuity

th Zipprodt, Leonard Ber-
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asperity occasions when
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re the thick folders of Zip-
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hey would appear together

aracters, she shows one
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re they for? Where in his
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tt, Peter Martins, Antony



Buddy Bradley rehearsing Jack Buchanan. © Illustrated London News Ltd. / Mary Evans Collection.

Feel the Floor

Maureen Footer Restores the Legacy of Choreographer Buddy Bradley

Exiting the IRT at Times Square, the walk from the subway to the dance studio on Forty-Sixth Street confirmed what Bradley already knew: he didn't really belong here, a brown face in a sea of white. Broadway, a canyon of theaters and commerce, congestion and commotion, was a foreign country after the leafy expanses, awninged windows, and familiar argot of uptown. The laughably small cubby-hole that masqueraded as a dance school emphasized the absurdity of the situation.

It was also laughably intimidating. He, Buddy Bradley, who had only mastered a time step a few years ago, was now to teach others from a position of authority. He was nineteen, had never been an expert in anything, had only followed orders from maître d's and dance directors until now, had really become a dancer by accident, and now found himself in this unfamiliar realm. In entering this makeshift room, Bradley would step into his destiny.

Feel the Floor: Restoring the Life and Legacy of Jazz Choreographer Buddy Bradley (Beacon Press), a biography of Buddy Bradley by Maureen Footer, resurrects the visionary choreographer whose contributions to rhythm tap and jazz dance reshaped dance on international stages. *Feel the Floor* shows how Bradley's revolutionary moves electrified Broadway in the 1920s and conquered London's West End in the 1930s. His experiments in rhythm would anticipate bebop, and his influence even permeated classical dance, cross-pollinating with ballet choreographers like Frederick Ashton and George Balanchine.

Buddy Bradley's story isn't just one of influence. He created the movement language we still speak today. The white performers Bradley taught to move

Maureen Footer is the author of *George Stacey and the Creation of American Chic* and *Dior and His Decorators: Victor Grandpierre, Georges Geffroy, and the New Look*. Her books have been reviewed in the *Financial Times*, *Forbes*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Vogue*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Vanity Fair*, among others. Footer sits on the boards of the New York City Ballet and the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library, the preeminent dance research institution in the world.

Maureen Footer spent five years in prodigious research, crossing two continents, tracking ancestral history in the Deep South, and enlisting private investigators to uncover Bradley's buried legacy. *Feel the Floor* corrects the false narratives that have erased Bradley's influence, revealing how one man's genius transformed musical theater, shaped modern ballet, and rewired the very DNA of American dance.

Jerome Robbins newsletter editor Gregory Victor had an opportunity to ask Maureen Footer a few questions about this fascinating new biography:

What inspired you to choose Buddy Bradley as a subject?

Bradley, a dancer from the Harlem Renaissance, was the African American choreographer who revitalized dance on Broadway in the 1920s. He also brought jazz and tap to stages on the West End. He planted early seeds of linking movement, music, lyrics, and character into a whole, trailblazing the integrated book musical. He changed the face of 20th-century ballet via his collaborations with George Balanchine and Frederick Ashton.

Bradley's impact on dance is enormous. It endures to this day. His collaborators and dancers from Adele Astaire, Noel Coward, Rodgers and Hart, Ruby Keeler, Cole Porter, and George Balanchine are known and revered. Yet, Bradley's name receded into obscurity. How did this happen?

It became my mission to lift Bradley and his contributions to the light. This story needs to be part of our dance conversation so we can truly understand what we see on our dance stage—and the full scope of our history.

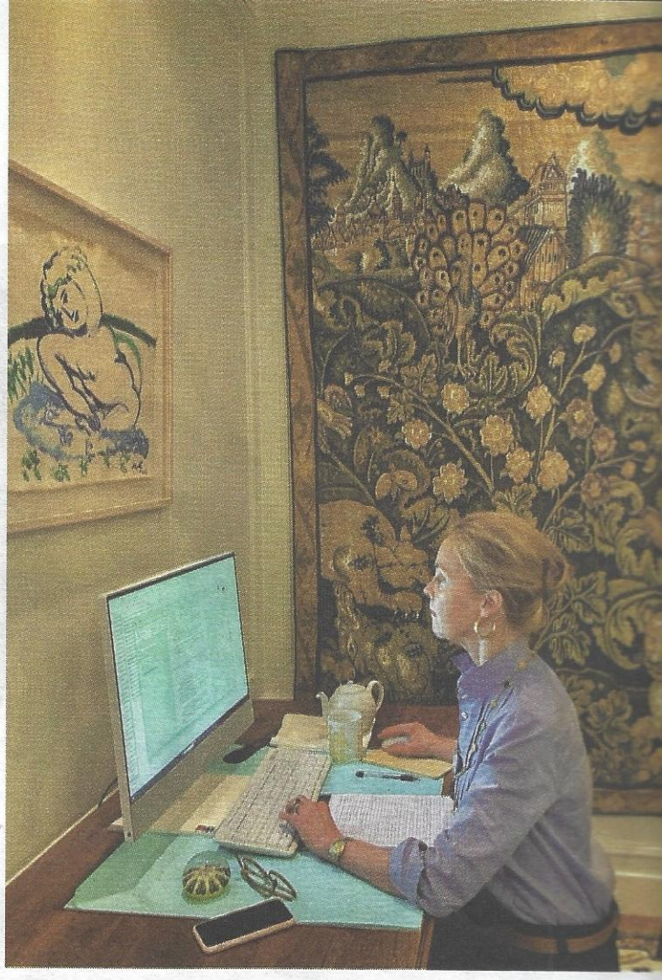
Can you tell me about your research process?

It was a fascinating and arduous as there were no archives and little documentation. There are two reasons for the lack of resources: Dance on the theater stage was long neglected and African American stories are, historically, sparsely recorded.

Regarding the neglect of theatre, jazz, and tap dance: We realize today that popular culture revitalizes "high art" and makes it relevant but, until quite recently, this was not the case. Dance historians and critics focused on concert dance—dance performed in a formal setting, say an opera stage or concert hall—while dynamic movement, including folkloric, street, and vernacular dance remained outside the critic's field of vision. Dance in musical theaters, cabarets, and revues was dismissed as mere "entertainment," not art, so Bradley as well as his white colleagues, such as Larry Ceballos, Sammy Lee, and Albertina Rasch, didn't get the critical attention bestowed on a George Balanchine or a Martha Graham. It didn't occur to anyone to save and document this history. This partially explains the lack of documentation on Bradley but, what is more, jazz dance—and tap, Bradley's subspecialty—with roots in African American culture was even farther outside the critics' gaze. Happily, this is no longer the case.

Hip hop, house, club, and break dancing now are in the lens of history. If we open our aperture even further, to Bradley's time, we can trace how he used Black dance to shake up dance convention and fundamentally reshape our dances. Now Camille Brown stages stepping on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera and the Guggenheim Works and Process showcases hip hop. Buddy Bradley opened the doors for this.

Regarding the process of finding Bradley's story: Digging through theater playbills, *Variety*, *Billboard*, the *Stage*, the African American press, and British press archives helped me piece together an outline. Traveling to the Black Belt in Alabama, Birmingham, and the Blue Ridge mountain town where he was born shaped context. But to find out who Bradley the man was, I had to go to England, where he worked as an expatriate for 35 years, given the racial barriers on Broadway in the '20s. At the Westminster archives, I dug out every playbill of every show, found the name of every dancer, then traced them, often having to hire a private investigator, since 90-year-olds don't have much presence on social media. Most are no longer with us , but the few remaining—as likely to live in Dover, Brighton, or the theatre artist's retirement home, as Central London—shared stories, of Bradley's girlfriends, of how he moved like silk, of his



Maureen Footer. Photo by Zev Starr-Tambor.

Bradley as a dancer in the 1920s admired the clarity and showmans "Bojangles" Robinson, but above all he adored someone named Edd who linked steps musically, carved space three dimensionally, innovate showcase tap technique, and emphasized the visual as much as the p aspects of tap.

Bradley as both a man and as a choreographer was insatiably curio teenage orphan, he took a train to start his own life in Harlem. He was u stay in the confines that society place on an African American man or w what was expected of a "Black choreographer" or "Black dance." Wo Eddie Rector as a model, he continually expanded it. When he moved t he worked with other dance forms from flamenco to ballet, aspects of adapted for jazz choreography. For example, while working with Frede ton, he became enamored of epaulement, the balletic use of torso, h shoulders and it permeates dramatically into his own choreography.

While writing *Feel the Floor*, did you learn anything about Bud ley that surprised you?

The complexity of his character; he had crossed boundaries, took ris alone, experimented, was lionized in London as the go-to choreographe ish stage and film, yet remained so gentle, so kind, when he could have tough and even bitter. The man who emerged from the interviews I obta friends and dancers who knew Bradley, was that of a complex, elegant, i ally curious, and unassuming man. I adore him and I hope the readers c

