

Research Proposal

This research project will inform my audience regarding the importance of a famous American tap dancer, singer, and actress known as Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. Robinson, who was a widely known black entertainer of the early 20th century. Robinson has been known for his contributions to tap dance that have paved the way for tap artists across our dance history spectrum. In this presentation, I will be discussing the legendary career of Bill Robinson through the exploration of the historical context in the era in which his work was created and performed. Through my research, I am exploring why Robinson was such a predominant figure in the early stages of tap both on stage and film and how his career has had an impact on the dance industry today. Through my exploration, I will reflect on Robinson’s background, his successful tap career, his experience performing on both stage and film, the controversies he faced as a black entertainer, and how his legacy is still significant in our most recent history. As a person who has studied tap for many years, I have always been interested in the history of the field and of the artists who have created notable works.

Through my research, I have gathered both scholarly and primary sources that will help explain my research questions, methodology, and theoretical framework. The research questions that I will address through the process are guided through my interest in this topic along with information gathered from multiple sources. The text *Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood* by writer Miriam J. Petty has informed my historical and theoretical framework in this project. In the chapter, “Bill Robinson and Black Children’s Spectatorship: Every Kid in Colored America is His Pal”, Petty explores how black children may have received and responded to what they watched as a spectator through the lens of Bill Robinson in *The Little Colonel*. This chapter guides an exploration of Bill Robinson as a popular figure and his “connection to the notion of children” (Petty, 74). Scholar Hannah Durkin’s article “Tap Dancing on the Racial Boundary: Racial Representation and Artistic Experimentation in Bill “Bojangles” Robinson’s Stormy Weather Performance” explains the racial dynamic during Robinson’s career. Durkin examines a Hollywood musical *Stormy Weather* and how Bill Robinson’s self-representation was portrayed within the musical as a black entertainer. David Marriot’s short essay called “Tap” goes through film work between Bill Robinson and Shirley Temple. This journal/poem helps me to understand how other scholars in the field interpret some of his work.

The methodology of my work is presented through the choreographic analysis of specific tap pieces like analyzing Bill Robinson’s *Stair Dance*. I examine this work through the viewing of the film *Tap Dance History: From Vaudeville to Film* by Alexander Street video publications. This film discusses tap artists alongside Bill Robinson in the time era of the early to the mid-20th century. Another film known as *The Legends of Tap* by Alexander Street film Publications will further help me examine the works of Robinson, in comparison to others. Through my careful analysis of certain works evidenced by video documentation, I will explore why Robinson rose to such eminence in tap dance entertainment during his time.

Many dance-scholars explore the historical context through several theoretical approaches. As scholars prepare to research specific topics or figures in the field, they are prepared with questions and an overall outline of what their work is going to conclude. Like many, scholar Susan Manning has shown her process through her work in her book known as *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion*. Like Manning, my project regarding Bill

Robinson will provide clear and structured research such that my audience and classmates will be able to understand the significance of my topic.

In conclusion, this research project will further my engagement and curiosity about the history of tap through the importance of Bill Robinson. Through careful examination of my sources using choreographic analysis as my primary methodology and historicizing inappropriate theoretical frameworks addressing race, I want to not only inform my audience about this historical icon but hopefully inspire them to also explore the cultural and social contexts of Bill Robinson to grasp a better understanding.

References

- “Bill Robinson and Black Children’s Spectatorship: ‘Every Kid in Colored America Is His Pal.’”
Stealing the Show: African American Performers and Audiences in 1930s Hollywood, by Miriam J. Petty, 1st ed. University of California Press, 2016, pp. 72–124.
- Durkin, Hannah. “Tap Dancing on the Racial Boundary: Racial Representation and Artistic Experimentation in Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson’s Stormy Weather Performance”. *IJAS Online*, no.2, 2010, pp.98-106
- Marriott, David. “Tap” *Callaloo*, vol.29, no.1, 2009, pp.42-43.
- “Tap Dance History: From Vaudeville to Film.”, produced by Dancetime Publications, 2011. Alexander Street.
- “The Legends of Tap”, directed by Anonymous, American Tap Dance Foundation. Alexander Street.