

## Book Review

Drid Williams

*Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*, by Brenda Dixon-Gottschild. St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000. Foreword, Index, Bibliography, Section of Photographs, Endnotes. Price: \$45.00 (U.S. hardback). ISBN 0-8299-5684-5.<sup>1</sup>

This book is excellent. On a scale of 1 to 10, it rates a 9 or 10 on all criteria for reviewing. First, Dixon-Gottschild sticks to her subject and argues an extremely complex case with authority, aplomb and ease. Second, she aims to make visible the "invisibilized" African American dancers and dances of the swing era, and she does exactly that, accomplishing her aim in a thoughtful, skillful exegesis of black swing-era history. Third, she says,

This work is about race and art, two contested constructs that are laden with connotations. They are as controversial as religion and politics, and all four concepts intersect and interfere with one another: we speak of the politics of race or art, of art or race as sacred, while race and religion may determine the trajectory of art or politics (2000: vii).

By the time readers have reached the end of the book, they have gained valuable insights into race and art, the sacred and politics. If readers do not understand how these combined concepts "determine the trajectory of art or politics," then they can only blame themselves, not the author.

It is the consistent *clarity* with which this book was written that commanded my attention throughout, partly because my career as a dancer-teacher-choreographer emerged during the swing era. I know what it was like, for example, in the late 'fifties, to study with Pearl Primus, and, in spite of the fact of moving as well or better than some of her black American students, another white student and I were prohibited from appearing in public demonstrations of her work. *The prohibitions were not Pearl's*—they were the results of the racism that dominated those times. You couldn't be a white spot on a black board any more than you could be a black spot on a white board, so to speak. Although Primus wanted to debunk the 'Africans-have-such-a-wonderful sense-of-rhythm' syndrome (see Williams 1991: 29)<sup>2</sup> she was prevented from doing so by the very people who invited her to demonstrate her work, black or white.

Because of direct experience back then, and since, I am well aware of the kinds of history that, during most of my lifetime, weren't history, but 'modernity'. I know where the 'primitive dancer' myth comes from on the American dance and entertainment scene, because I know what my connection with Primus and her drummers<sup>3</sup> cost in terms of affiliations with them. My connections with African American dancing were never covert: I never covered up my sources of inspiration, which is probably why my favorite chapter in Dixon-Gottschild's book is chapter four: 'Who's Got His Own: Black Creativity as Commodity'.

To people in the dance field who know body languages as well or better than they know spoken languages, the author's comments about Fred Astaire make perfect sense: "To be clear, this is not an attack on the considerable artistry, talent, and achievement of Fred Astaire. But, to state an obvious point, it is not by chance or for lack of talent that [Charles 'Honi'] Coles, his black counterpart, was barred from the possibility of national fame and fortune" (page 84). And that isn't all: "Of course, plagiarism was and is rampant in the arts and is not limited to whites stealing from blacks" (p. 85).

The author says the magic word, *plagiarism* which, as she points out, is the name of the game in the arts, and always has been. On page 96, under the subheading 'Cultural Exchange—or Rip Off?' she asks what 'appropriation' means:

Who does it and what are its consequences? When is it condoned and by whom? What does public domain really mean? These questions are crucial to the very sensitive issue of cultural exchange between blacks and whites in the United States. For the African American performer, the issue is highlighted and framed by the politics of race, the thorny reality that makes the landscape an uneven playing field. . . . Who holds the purse strings in terms of production and distribution of the cultural product?

In an essay entitled, 'The Cultural Appropriation of Dances and Ceremonies', I recently asked,

Why do dances, ceremonies and rituals lend themselves to adaptations that bear no resemblance to their originals? Why do so many people the world over have so little appreciation of knowledge and meaning of human actions when they seem to recognize meaning and knowledge in less obviously embodied forms? Why is it 'creative' to change dances, rituals and ceremonies, but plagiary when written texts or spoken words are involved? (Williams 2000: 346).<sup>4</sup>

Tourist industries in 'developed countries' exploit whole cultures (and undoubtedly, individuals as well), whether they are Balinese, African, Inuit, Polynesian, Micronesian, Native American (and many others), by turning everything into "primitive dancing" which is a result of the defining consciousness of dominant Western societies, not the result of the consciousness of the performers and/or owners of the dances, ceremonies and rituals to whom they belong. The lame excuse given of "preserving their culture" is simply nonsense, because

Tourists live in a world apart—in a time/space defined by a total lack of political or moral responsibility whatsoever. International tourism is a special kind of escape for the relative minority who can afford it. Television travel is the poor person's substitute (Williams 2000: 345).

International tourism is simply racism and the arts on a global scale, nor does it stretch the imagination to accommodate this idea. The so-called "third world" is where tourism flourishes—all in the name of "entertainment." Dixon-Gottchild is right when she says, "Racism diminishes us all" (page 5). I sincerely hope she writes another book about that topic. I would be happy to serve as an informant.

She also observes,

The profound impact of the dancing body and the dance world...are unacknowledged factors in the development of American performance. Throughout performance history the pivotal role of dance has been trivialized while other performing arts (music, in particular) have been the focus of print documentation and scholarly attention (p. 10).

One can only write "how true" in the margin—with the additional comment that the impact of the dancing body is an unacknowledged factor in the development, not only of American performance, but Canadian, English, Australian, European, Russian and other dominant cultures' performances.

The remarkable thing about Dixon-Gottschild's book is that *she really explains dancing* in the swing era in the United States. Her book is probably still a good blue print for a lot that goes on in the entertainment world, although a few circumstances may have changed somewhat, and, as Dixon-Gottschild observes, "cultural exchange is a two-way street" (page 99), and (we might add), it's money that drives everything.

Recent research has attempted to advance the case that blacks and whites were equal innovators, partners, and players in the evolution of jazz. However, ample evidence refutes that contention.<sup>5</sup> More than some may be willing to admit, the world of jazz reflects not a Utopian exception to the racial divide but, instead, another example of it.

Still, there was a level of worthy artistic exchange among white and black musicians. [Benny] Goodman served the cause of integration by using the finest African American musicians in his band, a practice previously unheard of. He did so at the instigation of jazz aficionado, supporter, and writer John Hammond. In 1936, he employed pianist Teddy Wilson. Then, in 1938, Billie Holiday sang with the Artie Shaw group. Charlie Shavers played with Tommy Dorsey, and Gene Krupa hired Roy Eldridge. But problems arose around issues such as meals and accommodations, and Holiday ultimately left Shaw due to offstage segregationist tactics by hotel and restaurant owners over which the musicians had no control (p. 101).

There are two reasons for this long citation: 1. it is an example of the fairness with which Dixon-Gottschild writes—and this is important, because many authors on the subject are not fair, and 2. it is an example of the dilemma of many individuals in relation to the society in which they lived, i.e. Holiday didn't leave Shaw because she had been discriminated against by him or by the audiences who flocked to see and hear the band: she left because of 'policies' entrenched in the society as a whole, over which no one seemed to have any control.

But in Chapter Five, we find out where the policies came from:

It is no coincidence that the first Jim Crow laws were enacted at the same time as the first civil rights laws. . . . On one side of the coin, to satisfy the needs of white supremacy, state-by-state segregationist provisions—Jim Crow laws—were adopted by southern and southwestern states and the District of Columbia, beginning in 1895 with the state of Tennessee and continuing through 1916 with legislation enacted by Washington, D.C. . . . On the flip side, the first federal Civil Rights Act was also legislated in 1875 but was repealed as an unconstitutional violation of states' rights in 1883, initiating an onslaught of abuse against African Americans that ranged from

an officially sanctioned closed door policy in housing, education, employment and leisure life to the horror of lynchings. By the twentieth century a complicated state-by-state process began in which civil rights laws were passed, mainly in northern states, with extensions or modifications added to them in later years (pages 109-110).

Another long citation, but it is hoped that such fine examples of the author's factual treatment of complex problems will encourage readers to buy the book. It is worth far more than forty-five dollars. In my opinion, this is a book that should be required reading for every student in every dance and dance education department in this country, England, Europe, Canada and Australia as well as those in performance studies courses, anthropology of the dance and human movement and ethnomusicology. *Everyone* should read this book, whether they aspire to professional performance or not.

In the 'Finale' to *Waltzing in the Dark*, (pages 228-230), Dixon-Gottschild summarizes the legacy of the swing era to art and entertainment in America. Her last word is poignant, witty and—like all of her writing—true:

"Without the black swing era legacy, our world would be diminished. What would we do, if we weren't all so black and blue?"

Well, Brenda, we could certainly do a lot better, for a start, and maybe because of your book, and the knowledge and outstanding scholarship it represents, we will.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from *Visual Anthropology* 14(2): 213-218.

<sup>2</sup> *Ten Lectures on Theories of the Dance*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, Appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> Moses Mianns, Montego Joe, Alphonse Cimber and others.

<sup>4</sup> The Cultural Appropriation of Dances and Ceremonies. *Visual Anthropology* 13: 345-362, December.

<sup>5</sup> [Dixon-Gottschild's note] See Sudhalter, Richard M. "A Racial Divide that Needn't Be." *New York Times*, 3 January 1999, sec. 2. 1, 31.