

Buster taps into fame and fortune at last



Photo: Andrew Crowley

Ismene Brown meets Buster Brown, the last great hoofer who swung from top billing to cleaning floors and back again

**"We put in gimmicks,
we did the flash work
down on the floor,
the crazy leg things"**

TAP-DANCING died 40 years ago. It wasn't Fred Astaire's and Gene Kelly's fault, but what they did in their tin-toed pumps and wet raincoats in the Fifties was not true tap: they were dancing on the graveyard of the real thing.

True tap-dancing, the macho fiery thing where men outdid men in ratatatats, and by extension virility, dropped dead in the mid-Forties, when the travelling roadshows ran out of venues. All over America thousands of tap-dancers like James "Buster" Brown, true craftsmen, found themselves cleaning lavatories instead. Because, of course, they were black.

Now Buster Brown is 79, and his fortunes have swung like his dancing style: the former janitor is now, to his immense surprise, a professor who lectures on tap-dancing at Harvard. He finds himself perched on the crest of a tidal wave of cultural nostalgia that has brought Forties musicals back to the stage and tap-dancing back to the forefront of young fashion.

The wave finally reaches our side of the Atlantic this week, when Buster and a crowd of young New Yorkers will roll out those fancy feats of feet again at the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith, in what the Dance Umbrella festival nervously calls "a new departure" from its usual diet of contemporary dance.

"I loved Astaire - he was wonderful. But we thought of him as a *ballroom* dancer," said Buster, small and trim, with long Maryland vowels and a tobacco-stained voice. His slightly flared suit is in a style which, like his dancing days, has come round the clock from snappy to old-fashioned to snappy again. His feet are a neat size 6 and a half, shod in light-grey laced-up leather. Elegant, to use the word he accords his heroes.

He doesn't bear grudges about the way life goes, though well he might. While white tap-dancers soared into celluloid immortality, it was all the other way for the blacks who largely taught them.

"We kids did tap on the street. We taught each other. We'd see a show in our hometown theatre, the Royal, we'd see a guy on stage do a step, and we'd... steal it, heh-heh-heh! Most of the white kids took tap lessons in the studios, but we couldn't afford that. There were many white dancers that did learn from black dancers because they *paid* 'em to teach 'em."

Anyone could tell a street tap-dancer from a studio dancer. On the street the hero was Mr Bill Robinson, the only black tap-dancer to make it big - he ended up teaching little Shirley Temple for their films together, *The Little Colonel* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. For a black dancer, that was something.

"He didn't have no taps on his shoes to start with, he had wooden shoes. None of us had taps. You would have little contests out in the street, people would throw money at you. It made me feel *good*. Still does. Dance a lot of problems away. Get in a room and dance all those problems right out of my mind..." He said this reflectively, as if he still turns to his tap shoes when trouble comes to call.

Buster and two classmates at Douglas High School, Baltimore, took to the road at 16 calling themselves the Speed Kings. It must have been a blow to his mother. She was a widow with seven daughters and just the one son, who for a while had declared his intention to be a doctor like his uncle - until the annual school musical gave him the theatre bug.

THE Speed Kings mixed acrobatics, tap-dancing and jive. "Most acts are built up with a guy doing this step, another guy doing a step to outdo him. It's a challenge. That's all it is a friendly battle of taps.

"In the Speed Kings we did everything uptempo, but you didn't have to be a speed freak. Mr Bill Robinson didn't do no fast dancing. He did natural, comfortable style, but when we came in we put in gimmicks, we did a lot of flash work down on the floor, with the crazy leg things."

The travelling road shows of the Twenties and Thirties were packed with tap acts with resonant names, the Speed King Trio, the Four Step Brothers, the Five Percolators. "It wasn't much money but we had such good *times*."

A mother, a wife, two children and seven sisters depended on Buster Brown's crazy leg things. "You'd work a week for seven dollars. But you could get a lot of use out of seven dollars. You could get a wagonful of food for five dollars."

And a week's accommodation with a hospitable black family for two. That, though, is not something to cheer about. It is still painful for Buster to recall the routine humiliation dished out to blacks by whites in the '30s.

"There was hardly anywhere for you to stay or eat. You'd be travelling by bus all day on a road show, and you were hungry and stopped somewhere to eat and they'd hand it in through the windows. You weren't allowed to go into the store to buy it.

"Yeah, I was angry. Because I'd work with a white show, and we'd go to a hotel and they'd say, 'Room for the whites', then when they go to me they'd say, 'He can't stay here'. So we'd stay with black families and they always treated us nice. Two dollars for a whole week, and they'd even come and waked you up in the morning."

Wartime brought higher taxes on clubs and theatres and an explosion in movie-going, and the road shows faltered. "I'd say tap passed away around the time Mr Robinson passed away, 1949. The road shows didn't come through any more, and every tap-dancer that wanted their family to eat and sleep at night, they did any manual job they could find.

"I was a clerk in a hotel, then I had to clean... well, clean building. But many of the old elegant dancers couldn't do anything because they were too old to get a job."

All that was left was a bunch of what Buster Brown calls "the die-hards", tap-dancing to each other, shoe-horning a tap number gratis into a singers' or comedians' show that they got to compere.

Meanwhile, in Hollywood it was a different story: Astaire's *The Band Wagon* and Kelly's *Singin' in the Rain*, and hoofing classes *de rigueur* for starlets.

"I thought Astaire was wonderful and Kelly with his ballet, but up till recently that's all people thought tap-dancing was. A lot of white dancers like James Cagney, Bob Hope, became actors, became great, whereas for us that was *it*. Yeah, we envied them because they could get the work, but we didn't dislike 'em, because we all liked tap-dancing."

After a dozen lean years Buster Brown got his reward for staying loyal to the cause. "I came into being noticed when bebop came on the scene with Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk. [Brown shared a bill with Gillespie.] Today what I teach mostly is bebop taps, which is a lot of taps packed into one bar. R-r-r-r-r-r-r. Pack it with taps.

"But my proudest moment was when Mr Ellington hired me." This was in the mid-Sixties when Duke Ellington asked him to join his Sacred Concert tour around America's churches. "I would have paid *him* to work with him. *Elegant* man. I used to stand around just watching him. He was so great. His elegance. His speech, his poise, he was handsome, tall - he had everything." Ellington and Brown were decked with medals by Emperor Haile Selassie, who was mad about the tour.

A MORE egalitarian showbusiness finally came round to discovering Buster Brown's own elegance. He did *Bubblin' Brown Sugar* on Broadway, *The Cotton Club* in Hollywood with Gregory Hines, made historical documentaries about Harlem.

Now that America has also discovered health benefits in tap-dancing, Buster finds himself teaching a group called the Silver Belles, all over 75; and a class of 80- and 90-year-old ladies who prepare routines for each other's birthday parties.

What makes Buster animated, though, is the teenage dazzlers like 18-year-old Savion Glover, who was supposed to be in *Transatlantic Tap* in London but too late was found to be locked into his Broadway contract for a musical about Jelly Roll Morton.

"We have some wonderful *young* dancers coming on," Brown says in awestruck tones. "They still do the Over-the-Top step, but oh boy, they do it their own way. Matter of fact, we couldn't even *do* it their way..."

'Transatlantic Tap' is on Tuesday and Wednesday at the Riverside, Hammersmith, and the Newcastle Playhouse Nov 3-6

