Dancing feats

Cultural histories of an American art form

Megan Pugh

AMERICA DANCING From the cakewalk to the moonwalk 398pp. Yale University Press. £25. (US \$32). 978 0 300 20131 4

Brian Seibert

WHAT THE EYE HEARS A history of tap dancing 612pp. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$35. 978 0 86547 953 1

another like sediments from geological eras." Duncan dance, I am always reminded of the real expositors of universal themes. voice of Walt Whitman". West Side Story is a Pugh presents Agnes de Mille's masterpiece ance and the realities of everyday life, of movement as a means of exploring and amplifying ideas of self, alienation and belonging.

he United States' first national dance

inated in the barnyards of antebellum Southern

plantations. As Megan Pugh notes in the open-

ing chapter of America Dancing, race and jokes

about race were an essential part of the Cake-

walk's meaning - but, as with the murky history

of minstrelsy, at whose expense the jokes were

made was not always clear. Was the dance a

perpetuation of crude racial stereotypes or a

means of subversion and mockery? "In the

puffed-up chest of the imagined dandy", Pugh

writes, "the circular path of society on parade,

layers of admiration and satire pile on top of one

was the high-stepping promenade

known as "The Cakewalk", which orig-

Pugh's analysis of Bill Robinson as a master miniaturist is perhaps her best. It was said that in his signature stair dance, Robinson could "extract as much drama with his toes as Sarah internment camps. Bernhardt could out of the tears of Camille". intensifies the drama: he excels within containment. Think of a poet who clings to form and a Broadway star he could still be arrested for disorderly conduct simply for pausing in Times Square to admire his own tap-dancing figure in neon.

Pugh sees Astaire and Rogers as embodiments and purveyors of the American Dream:

"their union is more than the resolution of a love In America Dancing, Pugh writes from the plot: it seems to stand in for the elevation of the perspective of a cultural historian, and with whole country". Fred and Ginger are recognizadmirable clarity, about certain "watershed ably, likeably, often triumphantly American rhythmic panache and lyrical shading. moments" in American dance history. Five but Pugh's emphasis on their utopian Americase studies follow: of Bill Robinson; Fred canness is slightly reductive. She focuses on Astaire and Ginger Rogers; Agnes de Mille; the number "Pick Yourself Up" from the film ive, he is exhaustive to a fault. His dynamism as Paul Taylor; and Michael Jackson. Other semi- Swing Time and its "sense of irrepressible freenal figures and innovators, such as the ballroom dom" which, she contends, is crucial to their sensations Vernon and Irene Castle and the partnership. But a better encapsulation of their choreographer Bob Fosse, are given cameo cultural significance, from the same film, is appearances, but even allowing for Pugh's "Never Gonna Dance", a sequence that recaphighly selective framework there are surprising itulates and elegizes their characters' entire omissions. Isadora Duncan may have achieved relationship, a moving valediction to love that her greatest triumphs before European audien- is less an expression of freedom than a brief ces but her revolutionary Hellenism was fired rebellion against constraint. When Astaire and by a robustly American sense of individual Rogers dance they become not symbols of freedom. Robert Henri, a pioneer of realism in an American dream but dramatic archetypes, American art, remarked: "In seeing Isadora new minted and timeless, wordlessly eloquent

more glaring omission because it surely consti- Rodeo as "a dream of the frontier, with widetutes a watershed moment. "The most savage, open spaces and heroic settlers, cowboys at restless, electrifying dance patterns we've been home on the range". There is a similar sense in exposed to in a dozen seasons", declared the Gershwin's symphonic works where the Broadway critic Walter Kerr. It is, moreover, a sweep and loneliness of the prairie merge with perfect illustration of Pugh's main thesis about the dizzying polyrhythms of the modern the tension between the freedom of perform- metropolis. De Mille incorporates the square dance into her ballet as a metaphor for the successful community, a creative, collaborative, manifestly American unit. Pugh notes, however, the irony of Rodeo's pastoral romance at a time when Jim Crow was still law and Japanese Americans were being placed in

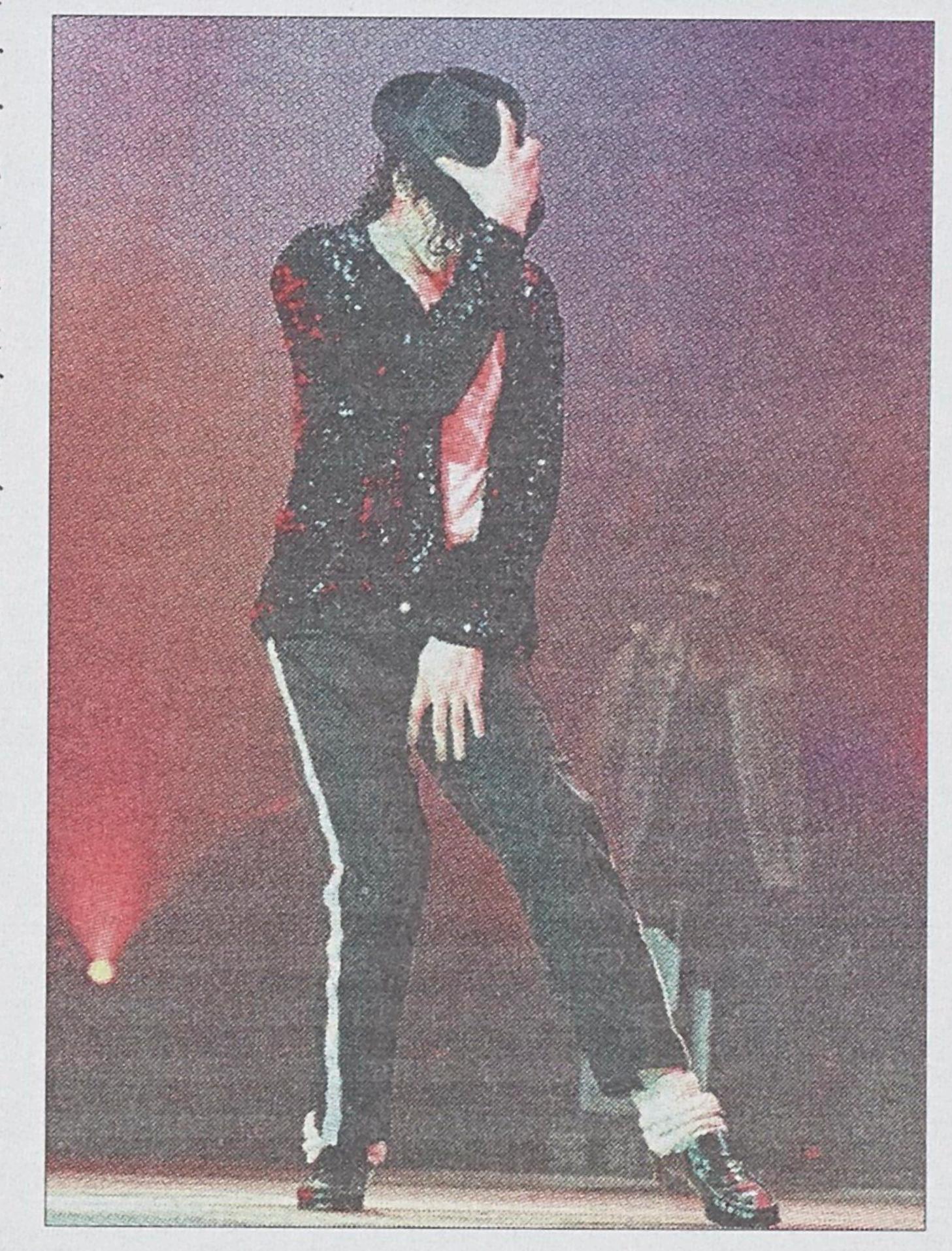
"In a way", Pugh observes, "the smallness the community made whole and meaningful genealogist. This structural flaw stems from a the stealing of steps. Seibert takes measured through movement, Paul Taylor - Pugh's next noble desire to rescue individual tap dancers swipes, too, at Tap Dogs and Riverdance, case study - choreographed dystopian home- from obscurity and to celebrate "the whole mot- shows that became industries or global commakes it look easy, so that instead of being comings, failed and fragmented communities, ley family tree", but there is frankly too much, modities but did not represent great leaps forcontrolled by meter and rhyme, the words seem nightmarish perversions of the American and not all of it is sufficiently compelling or ward in the art of tap. The one, for all its macho to simultaneously fit into a structure and bend Dream. Dubbed the "naughty boy" of modern instructive to warrant inclusion; too much time bluster, was conservative and derivative, the that structure to the poet's will." Robinson dance by Martha Graham, Taylor has been a is spent on periods of desultory activity in the riffed on received forms and made them new, trailblazing maverick and provocateur, one he could dispel echoes of "de old plantation" who has attracted the most infamous dance in "Swanee River" by tapping out "a competing review in history (4 inches of blank white space anthem of grace, urbanity, and power", but, like for his 7 New Dances) and been awarded other black performers in Hollywood, he was France's Légion d'honneur. Taylor's work is also forced to traffic in servile stereotypes. As Greek tragedy Americanized; the buoyant virtuosic solo in his "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" ends with an invisible fatal bullet.

> Pugh's last chapter considers the universal scale of Michael Jackson's achievement as a crossover artist and the eclectic sources from

to Astaire. The back and forth of Jackson's cel- every American", declared Irving Berlin and, ebrated moonwalk is, she believes, a symbolic as Seibert delights in pointing out, "This was a fusion of past and future: groundbreaking and gravity-defying but part of a long lineage extending back to the Virginia Essence, a slow, graceful shuffle of the minstrel stage.

Brian Seibert's What the Eye Hears unearths the thick sedimentary layers of appropriation, imitation and reinvention, as well as the racial politics, that have gone into the making of tap dancing. His account is an epic blend of meticulous research and anecdotal evidence, featuring a cast of thousands: old masters and their apprentices, street-corner rivals and pretenders, the legendary, the forgotten and the hitherto black and Irish populations; minstrelsy's role in unknown. A dance critic for the New York Times and amateur tap dancer himself, he writes prose peppered with tap-like bursts of

This is Seibert's first book, as America Dancing is Pugh's, but where she is narrowly select-



Michael Jackson in Jerudong Park, Brunei, 1996

a storyteller, his deceptively breezy hep-to-thatstep style of inquiry are sometimes submerged reconnected tap to the music of the young but If de Mille gave her audiences a vision of by his excessive diligence as an archivist and he ignored its hybridity, the sharing as well as world of tap, on the esoteric and marginal.

The first-hand stories are often fascinating but they soon become repetitive as they comprise more or less the same elements. Their leitographers, usually based on colour and gender, have emerged from the melting pot a lot better which he drew inspiration, from James Brown credited than others. "Syncopation is the soul of

creed that, as a Jewish immigrant whose family had fled Russian pogroms, he had learned from a Negro ragtime pianist in New York's Chinatown at a dive called Nigger Mike's. (Mike was also a Russian Jew)".

In tracing the evolution of tap, Seibert chronicles, as far as possible, the collisions aboard British slave ships between African rhythms and Anglo-Irish hornpipes and jigs; the "crucibles of convergence" that were the negro dancing cellars in Manhattan's Five Points district, the poorest part of town with large making theatrical tap out of jigs, juba, shuffles and breakdowns. From there he scrutinizes tap as agon, as narrative, as pure sound, tap as instrument of protest and autarkic proclamation. He profiles a dazzling array of great black male tap dancers - Robinson, John Bubbles, "Peg Leg" Bates, Baby Laurence, Jimmy Slyde, Honi Coles, Gregory Hines - but he gives due attention to the young white female dancers - Brenda Bufalino, Jane Goldberg, Camden Richmond, Gail Conrad - who led a tap renaissance in the 1970s, learning from and looking after the art's black elders.

Comparisons between Astaire and Gene Kelly have been well rehearsed over the years but Seibert's is more nuanced and better informed than most. The difference between the two as tap stylists, Seibert perceives, is that "Kelly wasn't a jazz artist and Astaire was". Astaire had, therefore, a wider, less predictable rhythmical lexicon. But Seibert does credit Kelly with putting himself side by side with black hoofers, namely the Nicholas Brothers, and making progress in the racial integration of the film musical.

He also offers a balanced appreciation of tap's new messiah, Savion Glover, paying tribute to his considerable gifts but making no bones about the self-righteous, revisionist gospel Glover preached in Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk with its disfiguring omissions of whites and women from tap's history and its reduction of Robinson's memory to a mercenary Uncle Tom, a race traitor. Glover other rhythmically narrow and danced to prerecorded taps. Seibert is apt to regard more positively cottage-industry tap in Japan or Estonia.

It is sad that tap has perhaps become "peripheral to contemporary popular culture, and its motif is hybridity—the practice of stealing steps place in more specialized zones is far from and making them new – and that is what Seibert secure". But Brian Seibert remains hopeful is eager to document. He rejoices in tap's, and and, like Megan Pugh, he ends on an implicit America's, mongrel magnificence while fully note of proleptic nostalgia, a nostalgia for "that acknowledging that some dancers and chore- place", as the former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins has it, "where people are doing a dance we cannot imagine, / a dance whose name we can only guess".

Riley, Kathleen. "Dancing feats." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5902, 13 May 2016, p. 5. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/FIGOVX640617239/TLSH?u=slnsw_public&sid=TLSH&xid=9cbf837b. Accessed 29 Sept. 2020.