

FEATURING THE  
NICHOLAS BROTHERS:  
SPECTACLE, STRUCTURE  
AND RACIAL INTERVENTIONS  
IN THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL

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Discussions of African-American performance in the Hollywood musical have largely circulated around ideas of exclusion, positioning black performers as either displaced within the black cast musical or marginalized as featured performers in mainstream musicals governed by white stars and white narratives. While Richard Dyer contends that narrative exclusion eliminates from the black experience the utopian possibility of “bursting from the confines of life,”<sup>1</sup> Sean Griffin pointedly notes that “a critique arguing that minority performers are relegated to the musical portions of the film overlooks the fact that those portions are the *raison d’être* of the genre.”<sup>2</sup> The Nicholas Brothers have in the main been considered within these parameters, most notably by Constance Valis Hill, whose comprehensive and enlightening study of their careers nevertheless takes an assumed stance of structured exclusion as background to its consideration of the brothers’ film performances.<sup>3</sup> While recognizing the industrial positioning of the Nicholas Brothers as African-American performers, this essay aims to move beyond ideas of limitation to consider their performances in less binary terms. Harold and Fayard Nicholas, after all, achieved an extraordinary level of stardom while essentially featured artists in studio era musicals. In 1940, following the success of their performance in *Down Argentine Way* (Irving Cummings, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940), they were signed to a ground-breaking non-exclusive contract with Twentieth Century-Fox, allowing them to pursue a dual career on screen and stage. Their “Be a Clown” number with Gene Kelly in *The Pirate* (Vincente Minnelli, MGM, 1948) is one of the few fully racially integrated musical numbers of the era aside from the child and adult coupling of Shirley Temple and Bill Robinson. The brothers also transcended the boundaries of musical performance through small speaking or non-speaking narrative roles in *Kid Millions* (Roy Del Ruth, Samuel Goldwyn, 1934) and *The Pirate*, and more substantial parts in *The Big Broadcast of 1936* (Norman Taurog, Paramount, 1935). Their numbers even seemed to prompt the

<sup>1</sup> Richard Dyer, “The Colour of Entertainment,” in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Exeter: Intellect, 2000), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Sean Griffin, “The Gang’s All Here: Generic versus Racial Integration in the 1940s Musical,” *Cinema Journal* 42:1 (Fall 2002): 22.

<sup>3</sup> Constance Valis Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm: The Jazz Tap Dancing of the Nicholas Brothers* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002).

respect of the censors: On the release of *Down Argentine Way* in the South, their celebrated “Down Argentina Way” number evaded the routine cutting of African-American musical performances by southern censors<sup>4</sup>; and it was the showgirls’ revealing costumes in the *Tin Pan Alley* (Walter Lang, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940) “Sheik of Araby” number which incited the censure of the Production Code Administration, rather than the scantily clad Nicholas Brothers dancing amongst them.<sup>5</sup> Such disruptions to received notions of the black featured artist’s experience of the Hollywood musical suggest aspects of production, performance and reception might effectively confront the apparent limitations of the performers’ unintegrated space. This essay considers how the Nicholas Brothers’ performances exceed the boundaries of the black specialty act, fashioning an enhanced screen presence which, at the same time, disturbs ideas of racial identity and American entertainment. Exploring the ways in which issues of spectacle, structure and the representation of black cultural identity combine with the brothers’ style of performance reveals the films’ active promotion of the Nicholas Brothers’ challenge to otherwise restrictive depictions of American culture.

### SHOWSTOPPING SPECTACLE

The Hollywood musical’s sense of spectacle is unequivocally at play in the musical number, and perhaps most notably in the discrete, extra-narrative moments of the aggregate form which work to structurally elevate the performance and performer. The Nicholas Brothers’ performance style, in turn, is explicitly marked by spectacle in its display of their skills as dancers. Acrobatic leaps, back flips, splits, jumping splits and slides were trademarks of their style on the stage and became central to the ways in which their numbers were framed as spectacular cinematic moments. The brothers’ collaboration with choreographer Nick Castle during their tenure with Fox was significant in developing this spectacle-driven style on the screen, Castle being particularly keen to marry their exceptional abilities with his ideas for increasingly spectacular dance numbers.<sup>6</sup> The “Down Argentine Way” number in Fox’s

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Joseph Breen, PCA to Colonel Joseph S. Joy, Twentieth Century-Fox, November 12, 1949, *Tin Pan Alley* File, AMPAS/PCA.

<sup>6</sup> Valis Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm*, 175–185.

*Down Argentine Way*, for example, has its basis in Fayard's choreography drawn from their Cotton Club routines with additions from Castle that include Fayard jumping back and forth over a handkerchief and into splits <sup>[CLIP 1]</sup>. In *The Great American Broadcast* (Archie Mayo, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1941), the brothers follow The Four Ink Spots' rendition of "Alabama Bound" by executing perfectly synchronized splits and leaping through the windows of a train <sup>[CLIP 2]</sup>, while for "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo" in *Orchestra Wives* (Archie Mayo, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1942) the columns of a nightclub floor become springboards for back flips <sup>[CLIP 3]</sup>. Perhaps most famously, in *Stormy Weather* (Andrew Stone, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1943), "The Jumpin' Jive" becomes a literal integration of music and dance, trumpets and trombones prompting the brothers' steps as they dance across pedestals and onto the grand piano of the Cab Calloway Orchestra. The routine's climactic leaps, splits and slides down the staircase seem designed to articulate the point that, as Steven Cohan suggests, "a star performer can quite literally and quite spectacularly stop the show as proof of his or her extraordinary talent."<sup>7</sup> <sup>[CLIP 4]</sup>

The Nicholas Brothers' spectacular performance style routinely enables them to exceed their status, emphasizing featured performers over stars and musical performance over narrative. Reviews of the films signal this transcendent effect, frequently singling out the brothers for praise, above both featured and lead performers, and referring to the showstopping character of the routines. *The Hollywood Reporter*, for example, commented on "Chattanooga Choo Choo" in *Sun Valley Serenade* (H. Bruce Humberstone, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1941): "The furious dancing specialty by the Nicholas Brothers with Dorothy Dandridge is nothing short of dynamite."<sup>8</sup> The *Motion Picture Herald* review of *Down Argentine Way*, while dismissive of the film as a whole, concluded "It is the Nicholas Brothers, Negro dance team, which stops the show."<sup>9</sup> *Motion Picture Daily* similarly described "their routine literally 'stopping the show' on preview night,"<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Steven Cohan, "'Feminizing' the Song and Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the spectacle of masculinity in the Hollywood musical," in *Hollywood Musicals, The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 87.

<sup>8</sup> *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 25, 1941, *Sun Valley Serenade* File, AMPAS/PCA.

<sup>9</sup> "Showmen's Reviews," *Motion Picture Herald*, October 5, 1940, 40, *Down Argentine Way* File, AMPAS/PCA.

<sup>10</sup> "Hollywood Reviews," →



Fig. 1. The Nicholas Brothers stop the show in *Stormy Weather* [Twentieth Century-Fox, 1943].

and *Film Daily* suggested that while the cast of *Down Argentine Way* was “the answer to a casting director’s dream,” above all “The dusky Nicholas Brothers with their dancing are really showstoppers.”<sup>11</sup> The Nicholas Brothers’ dazzling displays work alongside their placement in isolated numbers to present a concentrated injection of spectacle, actively enabling the *featuring* of these featured performers to occur. Unencumbered by the distraction of narrative connections, the numbers act as a distinct space, impeding narrative progression and drawing the film’s focus to a dance performance that seems in its extravagance to reaffirm the structural displacement of narrative by spectacle. As Susie Trenka argues, this privileging of the brothers’ numbers occurs even within the black cast musical *Stormy Weather*, whose narrative of black entertainment history is written, directed and produced by white personnel. The Nicholas Brothers thrive in their

→ *Motion Picture Daily*, October 4, 1940, 4, *Down Argentine Way* File, AMPAS/PCA.

<sup>11</sup> “Review of the New Films,” *Film Daily*, October 4, 1940, 10, *Down Argentine Way* File, AMPAS/PCA.

autonomy from the narrative to the extent that “the best of black entertainment, the film implies, doesn’t need a story – in any case not one scripted by white Hollywood.”<sup>12</sup> For the African-American performer, therefore, the discrete, unintegrated number not only draws focus away from the film’s stars and narrative, but acts as its own racially defined story, finding a contrasting space outside the cultural restrictions of the narrative.

Within this privileged setting, the visual spectacle of the Nicholas Brothers’ demonstration of physical energy and skill counters, for example, *Stormy Weather*’s conservative narrative and generic narrative closure. As Arthur Knight explains, their acrobatic display represents the film’s most symbolically charged performance, suggesting the kind of boundary breaking that the film’s narrative leaves unexpressed. Drawing on Malcolm X’s remark about African-American performances in Hollywood musicals – “I loved all that dancing and carrying on in such films as *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky*”<sup>13</sup> – Knight suggests that the Nicholas Brothers’ extraordinary display articulates an alternative meaning, the spectacle of the number working to challenge the film’s narrative restraint:

Their athletic, acrobatic dance takes the energies of all the performances that have preceded them, encapsulates and embodies those energies, and attempts – quite literally – to take performance *vertical*, not just to carry *on* but to carry *out*, to carry *over*, to carry *beyond* . . . They survive their heroic, improbable labours . . . turning each potentially disastrous landing into another energizing display of skill and refusal of defeat.<sup>14</sup>

The Nicholas Brothers’ physically limitless numbers given a structurally enhanced screen presence become flashes of dissent in otherwise ideologically cautious films. Such symbolic disruptions are perhaps most acute in those films which are otherwise racially exclusive.

<sup>12</sup> Susie Trenka, “Appreciation, Appropriation, Assimilation: *Stormy Weather* and the Hollywood History of Black Dance,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, ed. Melissa Blanco Borelli [Oxford and New York: OUP, 2014], 108–9.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002], 153.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

## [AFRICAN]-AMERICAN ENTERTAINMENT

Both Fayard and Harold commented on the cultural significance of their work, in particular during the 1980s and 1990s when a disconnect seemed apparent between their brand of performance and contemporary African-American culture. This was despite critical and cultural recognition coming by way of awards including *Ebony* magazine's Lifetime Achievement Award in 1987 and Kennedy Center Honors in 1991. Interviewed prior to his New York stage show with the L.A.-based Jazz Tap Ensemble in 1988, Harold lamented tap's increasing appeal amongst white rather than black contemporary dancers: "Black youngsters don't seem to appreciate it as much. . . . I guess they relate it to 'dancin' for the massuh'. But that's wrong. This is our art form, and we should be out there keeping it going."<sup>15</sup> Fayard was even more appalled when Savion Glover's musical history of black America through tap, *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk*, premiered on Broadway in 1996. Commenting on a 1930s Hollywood dance team in the show named Grin and Flash, who appeared to many to be a critique of the Nicholas Brothers, Fayard strongly objected in an interview given to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*: "What the hell were they talking about? . . . It was like they were saying we and Bill Robinson were Uncle Toms. Well, we worked with what we had. They should be thanking us. We were pioneers."<sup>16</sup>

*Bring in 'Da Noise* defined black culture through tap danced from the waist down, and acted as a negative appraisal of the Nicholas Brothers' performance style as Hollywood entertainers, even if the show failed to target them explicitly. Alongside the acrobatic elements of their dance, which were essential in creating a sense of spectacle, the brothers developed a style which combined tap's multiple cultural influences with African-American dance staples such as the challenge dance, and European classical traditions. As *New York Times* dance critic Jennifer Dunning described it in her obituary for Harold, "Their tap was an extraordinarily fluent blend of jazz, tap, 'flash act' acrobatics, angular eccentric movement, black vernacular

<sup>15</sup> Sheryl Flatow, "Flashy tapper's return: A Nicholas Brother shows he hasn't lost his touch," *New York Post*, March 29, 1988, Nicholas Brothers Clippings File, NYPL.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Miller, "Fayard Nicholas, 91, Tap Dancer: Teamed with Brother on Stage and Screen," *New York Sun*, January 26, 2006, Nicholas Brothers Clippings File, NYPL.

dance and ballet.<sup>17</sup> Fayard referred to their style as “classical tap” and emphasized the full-bodied dance and gracefulness that lay at the heart of their performances: “When we tapped, we added a little ballet, a little eccentric, a little flash, and we used our hands a great deal. With style and grace, we used the whole body from our heads down to our toes.”<sup>18</sup> The mix of the brothers’ trademark jumping splits, upright style, complex footwork, extended arm movements and incorporation of overlapping dance traditions, and their impeccable appearance, often Astaire-like in tails, made its own cultural statement. By amalgamating dance styles and resisting racial stereotypes, the brothers presented themselves as a perfect symbol of American entertainment, often in opposition to the films’ lead players.

As Jane Feuer outlines, the celebration of American entertainment functions as a central concern of the Hollywood musical, reinforcing the myth of a classless, democratic community.<sup>19</sup> The Nicholas Brothers’ performances act as cultural interventions, suggesting this mythology is represented outside rather than within the narrative strategy and providing a more racially blended version of American culture. Their numbers in *Tin Pan Alley* and *The Great American Broadcast* disrupt the whitened history of American popular entertainment played out in the films’ narratives. Further, the specific structuring of some numbers as alternative versions of songs performed earlier by white stars and musical performers actively highlights their unsettling qualities. In *Down Argentine Way* the brothers’ performance interrupts the film’s clear narrative agenda to promote the U.S. Government’s “Good Neighbor Policy.” As well as ensuring trade and market alliances for the Allied powers during World War II, this federal policy, instituted by Herbert Hoover and continued by Franklin D. Roosevelt, aimed to strengthen cultural links between the U.S. and its southern neighbours, giving Hollywood a remit to promote positive images of Latin America and its citizens in studio films. As *The New York Times* reported, *Down Argentine Way* was one of a number of “Good Neighbor” films which were poorly

<sup>17</sup> Jennifer Dunning, “Dazzling Hooper Is Dead at 79,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2000, Harold Nicholas Clippings File, NYPL.

<sup>18</sup> Valis Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm*, 188.

<sup>19</sup> Jane Feuer, “The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2:3 (1977): 313–326.



received by South American audiences due to their tendency towards character stereotyping and factual inaccuracies, and a readiness to amalgamate the countries' cultural identities into a vague North American perception of Latinness. Portuguese Brazilian Carmen Miranda was an obvious victim of the latter trait in these films, presented in *Down Argentine Way* – her Hollywood debut – as an imprecise blend of South American identities performing for American tourists experiencing a world of Latin exoticism. South American audiences of the film additionally balked at the depiction of Don Ameche's character as a stereotypical Latin gigolo. Fox's representative in Argentina went so far as to ban its local release "because he feared an uprising, if not against the United States, at least against Fox."<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the film's theme of what it characterizes as "friendly neighbour relations" is explicit, centring on wealthy American horse owner Betty Grable's romance with Argentinian breeder Don Ameche, and the musical numbers performed by the leads and supporting players, which provide an opportunity for cultural exchange. The Nicholas Brothers' performance of "Down Argentina Way" follows Grable and Ameche's version performed in a New York hotel lounge. Initiated by Ameche in Spanish <sup>[CLIP 5]</sup> and taken up by Grable in English <sup>[CLIP 6]</sup>, the stars' number proceeds through Grable's solo dance <sup>[CLIP 7]</sup>, a mini bilingual duet, Latin American drummers, and a group dance, progressing the characters' romantic relationship and aligning the number with the "good neighbor" theme as a preface to the narrative's shift south. In contrast, the Nicholas Brothers appear as American performers in a Buenos Aires nightclub, their only nod to the film's theme coming during the opening vocal section, when Harold sings the first few lines in Spanish while Fayard dances and plays maracas alongside him <sup>[CLIP 8]</sup>. This cultural assimilation though is swiftly concluded by Harold with some scat singing <sup>[CLIP 9]</sup>, which defines the dance performance that follows as wholly American and, moreover, stemming from African-American culture. Unconstrained by narrative connections, and now visually separated from the Latin band accompanying them, the brothers are distanced from the kind of cultural exchange around which the earlier version of the song has been framed <sup>[FIG. 2]</sup>.

**20** Douglas W. Churchill, "Hollywood Snags the Good Neighbor Policy," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1940.



Fig. 2. Taking African-American culture south in *Down Argentine Way* [Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940].

The acrobatic moves, variations on the jumping split and challenge dance, and their intricate footwork combine with the band's swing orchestration to further position the number as the film's most unfiltered representation of American entertainment <sup>[CLIP 10]</sup>. In addition, the top hats, canes and tails which become an explicit part of the performance, the audience's applause at particular demonstrations of dance skill, and the structuring of the number as a spectacular interlude signal the performance as a direct contrast to Grable and Ameche's earlier version, constructing the number as a featured disruption to the film's message of international bridge-building and its definition of American culture.

The explicit structuring of the Nicholas Brothers' numbers as a counter to white entertainment culture is similarly at play in their films with the Glenn Miller Orchestra. The narratives of both *Sun Valley Serenade* and *Orchestra Wives* present an exclusively white picture of American culture on the ski slopes of a snow playground and at the small-town teenage dances of America's heartland. Most notably, the films' branding of American culture centres on the Miller Orchestra,

a swing band whose membership, unlike many others of the 1940s, was exclusively white, and whose style, as Ted Gioia suggests, “retained only a peripheral attachment to the jazz tradition.”<sup>21</sup> Miller openly acknowledged as much in an interview with *Down Beat* magazine in February 1940, outlining a musical style formed around harmony rather than rhythm:

I haven't a great jazz band, and I don't want one. Some of the critics among us . . . point their fingers at us and charge us with forsaking the real jazz. Maybe so. Maybe not. It's all in what you define as “real jazz.” It happens that to our ears harmony comes first. A dozen colored bands have a better beat than mine.<sup>22</sup>

This racially defined harmony vs rhythm opposition is highlighted in the structured contrast of the Miller and Nicholas Brothers performances of “Chattanooga Choo Choo” in *Sun Valley Serenade* and “I’ve Got a Gal in Kalamazoo” in *Orchestra Wives*. In both films the brothers present an alternative version, intervening in the Miller band’s cultural imagery carried from the narrative through to their musical performances. The band’s restrained swing, the vocal harmonies of The Modernaires and the southern drawl of saxophonist Tex Beneke express American culture as white and mainstream, reinforced by lyrical references to “that freckle-faced kid,” a “home-town girl” and the “campus dance.” Moreover, the staging of their numbers is surprisingly devoid of spectacle, the singers huddled around a table for their “Chattanooga” rehearsal and in the conventional stationary position in front of the orchestra for their nightclub performance of “Kalamazoo.”

In the “Chattanooga” number, the Nicholas Brothers are accompanied by the Miller Orchestra, highlighting the dissimilarity of the performances, despite their being connected through time, space and this musical transition. With the addition of a mocked-up train for their set and an unusual element of sexual energy provided by Dorothy Dandridge, the brothers’ performance is framed as a set piece of screen spectacle directed towards the

<sup>21</sup> Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1997), 156.

<sup>22</sup> David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), 120.

camera and the off-screen audience [FIG. 3]. Altered lyrics sung with jazz inflection work alongside blasting horns and piano riffs to reinsert jazz roots into Miller's own number. In the same way, the mix of back flips, jumping splits and Lindy Hop influences<sup>23</sup> both reinforce the number's sense of spectacle and bring the origins of swing front and centre. A camera pan which frames the brothers and the Miller Orchestra in the same shot therefore acts as a moment of racial integration, which references jazz culture while exposing Miller's exclusivity. The characters' applause greeting the end of the routine re-emphasizes the number as a performed spectacle [CLIP 11]. The brothers' version of "Kalamazoo" is similarly set up as an immediate contrast to The Modernaires' static nightclub performance. Modified lyrics and the Miller Orchestra's switch to a brass arrangement set up the juxtaposition of racially defined cultural styles, just as the Nicholas Brothers' entrance from behind curtains on a raised stage introduces their performance as a featured spectacle. The visual reveal of a previously hidden audience, the brothers' splits and back flips off the Roman columns of the dance floor, and the use of lighting to create cinematic moods all point to the enhanced presentation of a number which culturally redefines all that has preceded it.

### REIMAGINING BLACK MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

Alongside strategies of spectacle and structure, and the Nicholas Brothers' insertion of black culture into the white cultural form of the Hollywood musical, the musicals become a space in which the Nicholas Brothers, both as a duo and individually, reimagine black musical performance. Acting as interventions into white depictions of black culture and identity, or through the appropriation of white Hollywood's star imagery and status, the Nicholas Brothers' numbers unsettle established ideas about what constitutes black performance and American musical entertainment. This destabilization is realized through song and dance, but is again actively facilitated by surrounding factors including other performers, narrative context, and the referencing of America's entertainment culture. The 1934 Goldwyn film *Kid Millions* provides a notable example through the Nicholas Brothers' performance in a minstrel number led by

<sup>23</sup> Valis Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm*, 162.



Fig. 3. An alternative version of American entertainment in *Sun Valley Serenade* [Twentieth Century-Fox, 1941].

the film's star, Eddie Cantor. While the film was the brothers' first feature, its interest for critics lay mainly in its final seven minutes when the screen is transformed by 3-strip Technicolor for a scene in Cantor's free ice-cream factory. *The New York Times* called it "the most successful example of fantasy in color that Broadway has seen outside of the Disney cartoons."<sup>24</sup> The narrative revolves around Cantor as the improbable Brooklyn heir to a fortune left by his father, an archaeology professor living in Egypt. Arriving in Alexandria to retrieve his inheritance and held captive by an Egyptian sheikh, Cantor refers to himself as "the spirit of '76" and leads his fellow Americans in a chorus of the Negro spiritual "Go Down, Moses," making explicit connections between Jewish assimilation and African-American culture as the quintessential American experience. As Michael Rogin explains in his essential study of blackface performance in Hollywood film, the origins of minstrelsy lay in the 19<sup>th</sup> century setting of an enslaved African-American population

<sup>24</sup> "‘Kid Millions,’ Mr. Goldwyn’s New Screen Comedy, with Eddie Cantor, at the Rivoli," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1934.

and mass immigration from Europe. As a pervasive form of mass popular culture, the minstrel show partly sought to articulate through blackface the myth of an American identity that both unified the races and enfolded its inhabitants from overseas. Hollywood films continued this symbolic use of the tradition, most famously in *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, Warner Bros., 1927) wherein Al Jolson's blackface performance of "My Mammy" (CLIP 12) expressed the European Jew's Americanization through both physical appearance and his insertion into the American entertainment tradition of jazz, transformed from its African-American roots into an emblem of American culture. Conversely, as Rogin points out, when a blackface Jolson began to include African-American performers in films such as *The Singing Kid* (William Keighley, Warner Bros., 1936), the explicit visual contrast suggested fundamental difference rather than unity.<sup>25</sup>

*Kid Millions'* "Minstrel Night" sequence takes place aboard ship en route to Egypt and self-reflexively positions the film and the genre within the American tradition of popular entertainment. Before taking to the stage, Cantor is seen applying blackface in his dressing room, a recurring scene accompanying Hollywood's minstrel numbers. The revelation of blackface as a performed identity in these scenes both fundamentally disrupts the tradition's naturalization of blackface, and problematically suggests the individual's power to construct their identity.<sup>26</sup> Cantor's remark to the valet – "This is tough to put on, and take off. You know, you're lucky." – continues this conflicted approach to the representation of race. At the same time, the Nicholas Brothers' performance in the number is framed as an explicit intervention into this entertainment tradition and its standard depiction of blackface as racial identity. Harold opens "Minstrel Night" solo with a rendition of "I Want to Be a Minstrel Man," immediately asserting African-American performance within the tradition before being joined by the Goldwyn Girls. The number proceeds to a minstrel routine format, as the showgirls occupy familiar semi-circular seating, Cantor plays blackface Bones to George Murphy's Mr. Interlocutor, and both perform "Mandy" alongside co-stars

<sup>25</sup> Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 5–6.

<sup>26</sup> Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical*, 50–52; Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*, 183.

Ethel Merman and Ann Sothern. Following an off-stage romantic insert with Sothern and Murphy and an all-star return to "Mandy," the stage is left to Cantor and the Nicholas Brothers, dressed identically in white top hat and tails. All three briefly dance in unison until the brothers begin a more complex routine alongside Cantor, finally proceeding to a challenge dance. When Cantor attempts to take his turn, the brothers each physically prevent him, grabbing his arm, putting their hands on his chest, and Harold going so far as to put his arms around Cantor's legs to thwart the star's efforts <sup>[CLIP 13]</sup> <sub>[FIG. 4]</sub>. On each occasion Cantor is directed to watch as one of the brothers performs, explicitly positioned as a passive observer of a virtuoso display of jumping splits, on pointe turns and a variety of syncopated steps. When the brothers finally signal to Cantor his turn to perform, he admits defeat and retreats from the stage, leaving Fayard and Harold to complete their routine <sup>[CLIP 14]</sup>. The brothers' performance is unambiguously framed as an intervention in the traditions of minstrelsy, providing a visually confronting image of both blackface and white stardom stilled as African-American performance takes over the stage and screen. The narrative of "Minstrel Night" enables performance bound up in a constructed racial identity to be explicitly usurped by an alternative version of the "minstrel man" initiated in Harold's introductory routine and defined by the brothers' dominant performance.

### **BLACK-CAST STARDOM IN HOLLYWOOD'S "WHITE" MUSICAL**

Ten years after the Nicholas Brothers' appearance in *Kid Millions*, Harold made two solo films while Fayard completed war service in the army. In both *Reckless Age* (Felix E. Feist, Universal, 1944) and *Carolina Blues* (Leigh Jason, Columbia, 1944) Harold was again a featured performer. However, the latter film provides an interesting concluding note to the brothers' interventions into the musical genre's depiction of American entertainment. The film's narrative centres on Kay Kyser's war bond shows, one of which includes Harold's extravagant "Mr. Beebe" production number, introduced by Ann Miller as an aspiring entertainer. Accompanied by Kyser's band, Miller announces "I've just come from Harlem, from the land of Hi-De-Ho" before curtains open to reveal a giant shadow backdrop of Harold in top hat and tails and carrying a cane. The number's opening <sup>[CLIP 15]</sup> clearly



Fig. 4. African-American performance takes over the screen in *Kid Millions* [Samuel Goldwyn, 1934].

recalls *Swing Time*'s (George Stevens, RKO, 1936) shadow images of Fred Astaire in "Bojangles of Harlem," and commences a series of links to Astaire that become apparent in the number. Harold sings about the eponymous style icon he represents bringing "the Easter Parade . . . to Lenox Avenue," suggesting a problematic one-way cultural crossover from (white) Fifth Avenue to the Harlem setting evoked by the number's *mise-en-scène*. However, the lyrics' unwitting reference to Astaire's 1948 film, echoed in staging similarities to the "Steppin' Out" number, reinforces for contemporary audiences Harold's appropriation of Hollywood stardom. Harold is identified as the number's clear star, separated from the other performers both on screen and in the film's credits. His performance is that of a solo artist, moving between extended tap sequences and duets with female dancers including Marie Bryant, while both male and female dancers act as back-up accompaniment for his routine [FIG. 5] [CLIP 16]. The number sets up Harold's character as an agent of cultural cross-over, and yet he is ironically presented in a style that contrasts distinctly with the Nicholas Brothers' familiar high-class conservatism. The spats, watch





Fig. 5. Black-Cast stardom in *Carolina Blues* [Columbia, 1944].

fob and boutonniere he wears position him instead in ways similar to the costumed excess of the musical genre's male stars, including, most potently, Astaire,<sup>27</sup> and again reinforce the extent to which his status supersedes that of featured performer. The injection of African-American dance and music culture from performers such as Bryant and singer June Richmond similarly works against the number's suggested inequity of cultural exchange, even if Harold's jumping splits and his slide through the legs of the male dancers, the latter performed by the Nicholas Brothers since their *Babes in Arms* days with George Balanchine in 1937, were now wholly familiar to screen audiences as part of the brothers' style. The alternative cultural display of this mini-black-cast musical, combined with Harold's manifest position as its star, act as a conspicuous interruption to a film narrative stressing the white business of show.

The musical genre's divisions between white and black, stars and featured performers during the studio era seem stark,

<sup>27</sup> Cohan, "'Feminizing' the Song and Dance Man," 95-96.

restricting myth and meaning and positioning African-American artists as secondary within the racially defined framework of the star system. However, while structures existed to accommodate America's racial restrictions, films and performers actively colluded in the disturbance of these divisions, enabled by the genre's structure and promotion of performance. The Nicholas Brothers' spectacular style of performance lent itself to cinematic displays, which showcased their numbers in ways that contest the received view of the featured artist occupying a space of isolation. On the contrary, the Nicholas Brothers' performances, set up as direct contrasts to other numbers and performers, inserted an alternative story of American entertainment into otherwise exclusively white cultural depictions. By confronting and rejecting racial stereotypes, and appropriating the space and form of musical stardom, the Nicholas Brothers demonstrated the ability of the African-American performer to supersede their status and make meaning in the musical as legitimately *featured* performers.