

Cultural Daily

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Looking Back: The Nicholas Brothers

Sarah Elgart · Thursday, June 11th, 2015

Sometimes, in order to really appreciate where we are at present and all that we now have globally in terms of film, television, new media, and the world of dance in general, it's helpful to pause and just take a long, steady look back. Often when I look at dance then and now, I'm struck by the distance that has been travelled both artistically and technically in the last fifty years alone. And sometimes when looking back, one can really see just *how* good the good ole days were, and some of the incredible talent that existed in dance that became both a catalyst and point of departure for so much of the excellence that exists today.

Case in point: the legendary Fayard and Harold Nicholas, aka The Nicholas Brothers. Born in 1914 and 1921 respectively, they were known for a technique that was dubbed "flash dancing" (not to be confused with the popular dance film of the early 80's) which mixed classical lines, acrobatics, and tap. The virtuosic duo was famous for a move in which they jumped several stairs at once and landed, amazingly, in a split, from which they were able to extract themselves into a standing position sans hands.

The Nicholas Brothers were unbelievably accomplished and virtuosic. The brothers became regular stars of the jazz circuit known as the Harlem Renaissance, performing in venues including the Cotton Club and on Broadway in the Ziegfeld Follies, and continued into the 1990's with successful careers that mixed film, television, and Broadway, as well as tours performing on stages internationally. While dancing in the film *Babes in Arms* they received training from the legendary choreographer George Balanchine, and they themselves taught master classes at schools such as Harvard and Radcliffe, and later had students that included Debbie Allen, and Janet and Michael Jackson.



The Nicholas Brothers fly in "Stormy Weather"

As is evident in this brilliant excerpt from the 1943 film *Stormy Weather*, the Nicholas Brothers were not only amazing as technicians and acrobats, they were consummately elegant, generous, and graceful dancers as well. Their lines as well as their movement and the coverage of it in this clip is beyond beautiful. With the camera at once moving with them and keeping their bodies in full view from head to toe as was the style back in those days, they soar over the heads of the orchestra with their tuxedo tails trailing elegantly, landing deftly on small platforms.

In viewing these three minutes of beauty and sheer artistry, you'll see immediately why Baryshnikov himself once called them the most amazing dancers he had ever seen in his life.

Enjoy.

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