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BEHIND THE MASK

On the minstrel circuit.

By **Claudia Roth Pierpont**

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Backstage in a Detroit vaudeville house sometime in 1896, a mild-mannered West Indian gentleman named Egbert Williams dipped his hands into a supply of oily black burnt cork and rubbed it over his face until his features all but disappeared. These gestures marked the end of a private moral battle and the beginning of a great career. Williams and his partner, George Walker, had been knocking about the minstrel circuit for three years, playing medicine shows and hoochy-coochy joints and, most memorably, a rough Colorado mining camp where, accused of being better dressed than Negroes ought to be, they had been stripped of their clothes and were lucky to exit with their lives. Williams—tall, relatively fair-skinned, a child of the Bahamas—claimed that he learned about racism on such tours. Walker—small, very dark, and Kansas-born—already knew everything about it. During these years, Williams had carefully coached himself in “stage Negro” dialect (“To me,” he later wrote, “it was just as much a foreign dialect as that of the Italian”) and the shambling stage mannerisms that regularly accompanied it; there was no getting around audience expectations. But both partners seemed to agree that degradation had its limits: there would be no blackface makeup in their act. White minstrel performers used it; black minstrel performers used it; but Bert Williams and George Walker did not. Until the night in Detroit, that is, when, desperate for a permanent spot on the distinctly less deadly vaudeville circuit, Williams—the straight man of the team—blackened up. To his surprise, safe behind the obscene mask, he found himself suddenly free to play the clown, and the act got laughs as never before. He was no longer the straight man. And by the time the pair reached New York they were billing themselves as “The Two Real Coons.”

Bert Williams, largely forgotten today, was the first African-American star: the most famous “colored man” in America during the early years of the twentieth century. The team of Williams and Walker put together the first all-Negro musical comedy to play a major Broadway theatre, in 1903—“In Dahomey,” so successful that it was moved to London’s West End, and gave a command performance at Buckingham Palace. Back at home, their popularity among audiences both black and white allowed them to force the integration of first-class theatres around the country. Williams, who went solo after Walker fell ill, in 1909, was a Ziegfeld Follies headliner—the only Negro member of the troupe, playing alongside Fanny Brice and Eddie Cantor—for nearly a decade. And through it all he continued to perform in blackface, embellished by giant lips painted over the cork, an ill-fitting suit, a preternaturally unhurried style of locomotion, and a cringing “Uh-huh, boss” lazy drawl. According to another Follies colleague, W. C. Fields, Williams onstage was the funniest man he ever saw, and offstage was the saddest.

Both Williams’s reputation and the remaining record of his work—a number of scratchy vocal tracks, some suggestive photographs and reels of film—make one long to ask: What on earth was he thinking? How does a mind maintain its balance when

professional pride is so bound up with personal shame? These are the questions that Caryl Phillips braves in his alternately fascinating and frustrating novel “Dancing in the Dark” (Knopf; \$23.95), in which Bert Williams serves as a troubled and troubling hero, and a glittering assembly of New York’s black performers, in the years before Harlem came into vogue, begin to grasp what they might do for American culture, and what America might do for them. Closely based on documented fact, Phillips’s book intersperses excerpts from interviews, song lyrics, comedy routines, and newspaper columns with forays into purest speculation—the novelist’s realm of psychology, romance, nightmare—in order to evoke the devastation wrought by the celebrated act that Phillips’s hero calls “my own impersonation of a Negro.”

Of course, it was not his own impersonation. The first travelling minstrels, who, even before the Civil War, made the songs and dances of Southern blacks into the nation’s first home-grown entertainment craze, were white men playing to the curiosity of Northerners. The fact that imitation soon turned to exaggeration and then to grotesquerie, as minstrel shows became insidiously jaunty arguments in support of slavery and eventually of Jim Crow (the term itself derives from a minstrel character), was given a further grim twist when aspiring Negro performers took to mimicking the whites who were caricaturing them. “The Two Real Coons” was a billing meant to suggest Williams and Walker’s superior authenticity over so many white “coon” acts, and it had the desired effect of bringing attention to their undeniable talents. If the only existing use for those talents was as equally ersatz “coons,” the duo—who, success achieved, let the objectionable billing slip away—set out on a long-winding path toward something true. Their personal conflict about how to get there is the core of Phillips’s book. For the outspoken Walker, the time had arrived “for the Negro to storm the American stage and stake his claim to a position of equality.” (Walker died in 1911, long before any such claim could be staked.) For the fearful and introspective Williams, the only hope was to make the stereotypical “shuffling, dull-witted, clumsy, watermelon-eating Negro”—as Phillips mercilessly has it—into a human being sympathetic to an audience, if not to himself:

***{.break one} ** The audience may think they are watching a powerless man but they are, in fact, watching art. We must understand how to make them feel safe, George. We must see the line. We cross that line, George, then who is going to pay to see us? They feel safe watching a supposedly powerless man playing an even more powerless thing. Williams and Walker have to respect this and simply strive to be the center of laughter, not the object of it. In time an alternative to the counterfeit colored culture that besmirches our stage will emerge, but only in time. Right now nobody will pay to see the colored man be himself. ***

It would have added immensely to the novel if we were, in fact, permitted to glimpse Williams’s art, or to get some sense of the pleasure it must at times have given him. Despite the book’s many references to the stage, Phillips confines the action almost entirely to the gloomy depths of his characters’ minds—even the above argument is not spoken aloud—where little warmth of any kind appears to penetrate. Phillips, who was born in the West Indies and raised in Britain, seems somewhat inhibited in the face of the historic burden that these African-American artists had to bear. Although he has been prolific as a novelist and critic, and has often dealt with racially charged subjects, this is his first novel to take on America, and he brings to it much the same tightly wound control that he implies Bert Williams adopted to keep from exploding. It is hard to say how much of the book’s restricted emotional tone is a result of Phillips’s dramatic intent—as though to let go of suffering for a moment would be to discount it—and how much a result of his own attempt to keep from exploding over his hero’s resignedly unheroic choices.

The novel is divided into acts, like a drama, with the principal players—Williams, Walker, Walker’s unhappy wife, Aida, Williams’s even unhappier wife, Lottie—repeatedly breaking in to speak from their distinctive points of view. Yet everyone sounds dryly reflective and dully indistinguishable until anger begins to surface, rather late, and the varied voices suddenly become as clear

as what they have to say. Only anger—not regret, and certainly not sympathy—brings the book to life, as when Aida Walker lashes out at “this damn fool know-it-all West Indian, with his white heart, who deserted our colored stage just when we needed him most”; or when Williams’s father bemoans how “the country has made a nigger of the boy”; or, above all, when George Walker cuts straight through his partner’s chief defense: “It don’t matter a damn how much you want to talk about what you do as art, I’m telling you, please cut that colored fool loose.”

Williams may have attempted to cut the fool loose, three years after Walker’s death, when he made a short film titled “Darktown Jubilee.” The film does not survive, but accounts suggest that Williams took advantage of the newly intimate art form to make significant—and, to a white audience, extremely disturbing—changes in his act. Phillips, not alone among writers on Williams, takes the longed-for imaginative leap and assumes: no more blackface, no more rags. Instead, he has Williams wear (one may as well leap for the heights) a snappy zoot suit and a top hat. In a fictionalized news story about the film’s premiere, Phillips elaborates: “Gone was the familiar ‘darky humor’ heavily laden with pathos, and in its place he gave to us an uncorked colored person of cunning and resourcefulness,” who—and here Phillips accords with the history books—“caused a powerful outburst of resentment among the audience.” To put the matter plainly: whatever Williams did or wore, white viewers reportedly caused a riot in the Brooklyn theatre where the film was shown.

Williams appeared in only two more short films before his death, in 1922: “Fish” and “A Natural Born Gambler,” in both of which he performed in his usual blackface and essentially recapitulated his stage routines. Despite the films’ enforced humiliations and clichés, Williams in the cinematic flesh displays a subtle pride, which in recent decades has come to be widely acknowledged and even, perhaps, wishfully exaggerated. Thomas Cripps, whose landmark 1977 volume “Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film” remains the standard in the field, observes that the lolling farm boy Williams plays in “Fish” is evidently “itching to be his own man,” while Williams’s gambler is nothing less than a “leader of blacks,” an “enemy of convention,” and—this is a tribute, given the emasculated image that fearful whites had long imposed—“the ‘bad nigger’ for all who could see through his darkey makeup.” For all who could see: here, of course, is the rub, and another way of saying that most people see only as much as their time and place allow. In the world that Phillips constructs, hardly anyone sees through the darky makeup; Williams in these films is admired for his fine portrayal of “a charming big child of arrested development” and for his “watermelon grin.” Whatever Williams thought he was giving to an audience—there is, after all, no way of knowing—Phillips’s bitter fiction reflects what it found.

During the early nineteen-twenties, some two decades after Williams and Walker first aspired to improve the lot of Negro entertainers, black song-and-dance teams were appearing under names like Dis ’n’ Dat, Sleep ’n’ Eat, and Brains and Feet. One talented performer who had been working the minstrel circuit since the age of fourteen adopted the name of a horse he had won some money on—or so he claimed—and called his duo Step and Fetch It. Whenever his partner failed to show up or management refused to pay them both, he took the full titular burden upon himself, eventually arriving at the solo billing “Stepin Fetchit, the World’s Laziest Man.” Although his story seems in many ways identical to that of Bert Williams—a West Indian background, a long and unprecedented stardom, continuous accusations of making “a mockery of upstanding Negro citizens”—Stepin Fetchit (his friends called him Step) was a very different, boldly assertive man. And Fetchit’s first-ever biographers, Mel Watkins, in “Stepin Fetchit” (Pantheon; \$26.95), and Champ Clark, in the horrendously titled “Shuffling to Ignominy” (iUniverse; \$14.95), take a boldly positive attitude toward the actor whose name became a racial epithet and a virtual synonym for Uncle Tom. Watkins, the author of previous books on African-American comedy, writes a wide-ranging, somewhat academic

cultural chronicle; Clark, a correspondent for *People*, provides a more bluntly anecdotal history. Both books are opinionated and absorbing, particularly in their attempts to explain how the actor's virtuoso indolence—Fetchit could convincingly fall asleep while standing up—was as much a political as a vaudeville act.

The anthropological notion of the wily “trickster” figure—like Prometheus, or Odysseus, or Huckleberry Finn—has long been a staple of African-American studies, useful in reclaiming the characters of the old slave tales (like Brer Rabbit) as symbols of sneaking rebellion, for whom the evasion of work was a significant victory, and the only one they were likely to achieve. The term has become as tiresomely overfamiliar as any other piece of current jargon, and Watkins employs it liberally, but his book reveals a stirring and indisputable heir to the tradition in the man born Lincoln Theodore Monroe Andrew Perry—named, he claimed, for four American Presidents—in 1902, shortly after his Jamaican father and Bahamian mother disembarked in the wilds of Florida. Even in childhood, even in church, when the collection plate was passed around, he “would put ten cents in the plate,” an acquaintance recalled, “and take out twenty cents change.” Although a school dropout, Perry was so far from being illiterate that he supplemented his early income with a regular column for a leading black weekly, the *Chicago Defender*; he also published poetry, most notably on the death of a tuba player in Kansas City. If he later won fame as a semi-incoherent mumblor—and Fetchit insisted, once he'd become a star, that his published statements be rendered in dialect, to maintain the illusion—his justification belied the linguistic pose: “Sometimes those script writin' men come to me and say Ah ain't readin' their lines clear enough. Most of the time they ought to be glad Ah ain't.”

He made his first movie in 1927, shortly before the release of “The Jazz Singer,” in which Al Jolson gave the waning blackface tradition an unsettling new hold on the national psyche. During the early years of cinema, black characters had traditionally been played by corked-up whites, owing to fear of offending white Southern audiences, who ostensibly refused to countenance real Negroes on the screen. Nevertheless, by 1928 Fetchit—shuffling and dim, but cork-free—had a contract with Fox and was reputedly “the highest salaried colored actor since Bert Williams.” This was only the beginning: the advent of sound promised a vast artistic emancipation, eagerly assured by an industry convinced that mellifluous Negro voices were suited to the new technology—an industry willing, for a remarkable moment, to lead rather than follow the society it entertained. “The rich gift of music and of dance makes this race a boon to the singies and the talkies,” *Motion Picture Classic* gushed. “A new race has come to the screen.”

The breakthrough events were two all-Negro major-studio musicals, both set in the post-Civil War South, both released in 1929: King Vidor's majestic, nearly operatic “Hallelujah!”—Fetchit publicly scolded the director for overlooking black Hollywood talent, including himself—and Paul Sloane's critically lauded “Hearts in Dixie,” in which Fetchit, as a sublimely shiftless ne'er-do-well named Gummy, danced with a light-footed grace that gave the knowing, twinkle-eyed lie to the physical “miseries” that saved him from working in the fields like everybody else. Of course, no one who put in a hard day's work could dance like that for long. Gummy's ruse, as Watkins notes, had a proud history in the way slaves sometimes feigned illness to avoid backbreaking labor; there was thus a cool logic and a covert defiance behind Fetchit's characteristic sloth. There is no sign, however, that Fetchit ever made this connection. His personal breakthrough came in a scene where, following the death of Gummy's wife, he briefly extended his range to stunned and tearful sorrow. Despite such humanizing moments, “Hearts in Dixie” was hopelessly embarrassing even in its time—black leaders made their objections known—and is virtually unavailable today. Most readers will have to take on faith Robert Benchley's contemporary view that Fetchit, making full use of rare opportunities, proved himself “the

finest actor that the talking movies have produced,” and—in the age of Chaplin and Keaton—“one of the great comedians of the screen.”

All hope for a black Hollywood Renaissance crashed with the stock market, later that year; these two films were both its beginning and its end. Fetchit's career soon appeared to have ended, too: either because he courageously fought the studios' more debasing demands or because his personal behavior had become intolerable. The Negro press took opposing sides on whether Fetchit was a heroic crusader or simply out of control, and his biographers offer ample evidence that both were right. In 1930, it was reported that Fetchit planned to produce his own screenplay, “The Dancing Fool,” which would “expel the cotton scenes” and “bring out the modern Negro”; with the movies he was actually filming, however, he was continuously late to the set or outright missing, in a wreck or in a brawl. He did not take his success lightly: he drove around town in a pink Rolls-Royce with his name in neon on the back; he married a seventeen-year-old chorus girl, and was promptly sued by another seventeen-year-old for breach of promise; a valet reportedly delivered his requisite raggedy costume on a gold hanger. And why shouldn't the buffoon that he was forced to play in seeming perpetuity—“The Dancing Fool” never saw the light—be countered, as Watkins writes, by the first black movie star's “wealth, flamboyance and outspoken sense of entitlement”? Fetchit's fantastic self-assertion could not have been wholly bad for black audiences to read about when they got home from the movies. For Fetchit himself, it might be considered a just reaction to watching a revolution die.

After a few years of exile in vaudeville, Fetchit returned to Hollywood a humbled man. His new roles included a servant subjected to the screaming racial abuse of Lionel Barrymore, a snivelling sidekick in a John Ford movie, and a butt of amiably insulting jokes for Will Rogers—and all the while he was becoming ever more absurdly stylized, his high, whimpering speech nearly vaporizing into the musical spheres. In 1939, the *Times* film critic compared him to James Joyce: “It is now almost impossible to form any idea of what he is trying to say.” Fetchit's biographers defend his acceptance of such roles: he had no choice, after all, if he wanted work; even Duke Ellington appeared in 1930 in an Amos 'n' Andy feature. More, both writers manage to detect a nearly hidden (if differing) note of insurgency in the way he played them. Watkins writes of “a surreal obtuseness which so insistently ignored the slights that they were not only deflected but trivialized”; Clark sees the actor's soul concealed in his half-closed eyes, manifesting a “secret and separate self.” Both may be right in claiming that Fetchit's loyal black audience saw such things quite clearly, and recognized a parody of their own methods of survival. There is hardly any other way of explaining why they bought their tickets—except, perhaps, to enjoy the way that the Negro dupe inevitably stole the show.

The N.A.A.C.P. failed to notice any radical qualities in Fetchit's performances. By the early nineteen-forties, its head, Walter White, had launched a campaign to rid the screen of all “subservient, dimwitted, craven, eye-rolling” Negro caricatures, who, in being taken for truth by a white audience, were “doing infinite harm.” Stepin Fetchit was far from the only offender. Mantan Moreland, Hattie McDaniel, and many other actors trapped in domestic roles felt that their livelihoods were being threatened, particularly when studio moguls—eager, during the war, to appear to honor the claims of democracy—agreed, in March, 1942, to enforce the N.A.A.C.P.'s demands. And it wasn't only Hollywood that was changing. In 1943, Fetchit volunteered to entertain a black Army unit (the Army was, of course, racially segregated), and was booed as soon as he stepped onstage. In spite of these signal developments, McDaniel and most of the others continued to play their standard roles throughout the forties. Only Stepin Fetchit—whom Walter White had mentioned by name—was unconditionally blackballed.

And yet, typifying the confusion about what Fetchit's character really meant, some of his broadest (and best) performances were in the independent all-black films that he made in the years when Hollywood would not touch him for fear of offending black

audiences. His brief turns in “Miracle in Harlem” (1948) and “Richard’s Reply” (1949) bear out all that he might have achieved in a better world. Fetchit is as delicately calibrated in his physical clowning as Chaplin or Keaton (if as unvarying in his persona as Mae West), and in the context of an all-black society, with other actors portraying shopkeepers and police detectives and well-bred daughters, he implicates no one by his antics except his unique self: a long and sinuous, dreamily unfocussed, narcoleptic moon-calf (“Right now, I’m ’a finish a little nap I started week befo’ last”), a marvel of the human condition rather than of a merely racial one, who today seems a creature of the minstrel shows by way of Samuel Beckett.

Although the burgeoning civil-rights movement had effectively killed Fetchit’s career, the strength that it generated among the black population eventually allowed him to be rediscovered. In 1965, the twenty-three-year-old Muhammad Ali announced that none other than Stepin Fetchit—drawing on a previously unsuspected expertise in boxing—was serving as his “secret strategist”; cynics referred to Fetchit as Ali’s court jester, but the young champion offered him the respect of one great showman for another. Around the same time, a newly intense breed of black comedian, unafraid of the old stereotypes, came to view Fetchit as an invaluable ancestor. Dick Gregory claimed him as a childhood hero, citing—without recourse to hidden meanings or winking tricksters—the plain thrill of seeing a black man on the screen. “To me,” he later said, being mad at Stepin Fetchit “was like being mad at Rosa Parks.” Flip Wilson, in the summer of 1968, asked Fetchit to take a major role in a sketch for a TV pilot, in which a respectable old Harlem junk-shop owner talked his son, an aspiring lawyer, out of leaving the neighborhood. The character was serious, smart, even political. “Right here is where we need a criminal lawyer,” he advised his son, played by Wilson, “because the worst crime around here is being black.” But, just when it seemed that Fetchit was being ushered into the new era, the door leading out of the past was slammed shut.

That same summer, CBS aired a nationwide television special, written by Andy Rooney, titled “Black History—Lost, Stolen or Strayed,” in which another up-and-coming young comic, Bill Cosby, reminded a new generation that Stepin Fetchit had popularized “the tradition of the lazy, stupid, crap-shooting, chicken-stealing idiot,” and that his character remained in the minds of those who had seen his films “as clear as an auto accident.” Fetchit’s deal with Flip Wilson was swiftly called off. As Wilson later explained the decision: “The tide had turned against him, and nobody wanted to take a chance.”

“Just because Charlie Chaplin played a tramp doesn’t make tramps out of all Englishmen,” Fetchit argued, “and because Dean Martin drinks that doesn’t make drunks out of all Italians.” But the burden for members of a vulnerable race is to be representative: to feel a sickening unease as members of the race are judged by powerful eyes, to fear that your jokes about each other will be used to twist the knife. Fetchit’s late years, mostly spent playing tawdry clubs, were a continual fight against this way of thinking, and his few victories were hardly less bitter than his losses. In 1976, he suffered a stroke while reading a newspaper article that, according to a friend, “blamed him for every black problem this side of slavery”; when, the same year, he was voted a Special Image Award by the Hollywood chapter of the N.A.A.C.P., he was too sick to attend. The current renewal of interest in both Bert Williams and Stepin Fetchit—the attempt to reclaim the individuality of these once oppressively representative figures—suggests a healthy or at least hopeful progress beyond extremes of racial vulnerability. Like the novels of Zadie Smith or the empire of Oprah Winfrey, these comparatively modest books about two comedians posit the existence of a post-racist world, if only in the shape of an audience to receive them.

And yet both Caryl Phillips and Mel Watkins, who are black, relate their interest in their respective subjects to a profound distaste for aspects of black popular culture today. (Champ Clark, who is white—and who was warned by Sidney Poitier, no less, that he would not be capable of writing about Fetchit, whose experiences Poitier says he himself “could not have endured”—steers clear of

the territory.) Phillips has talked about “the rise of hip-hop and rap in their more vulgar, misogynistic, homophobic form” as an impetus for his novel, and about the disturbing qualities of “minstrelsy” among current performers. Watkins concludes his book by arguing that Stepin Fetchit’s public image was “not nearly as harmful, deleterious, and degrading as the images projected by many of today’s black comedians, rap artists, and even television sitcom stars,” despite the fact that these figures, unlike Fetchit, have had many other choices. And he notes that few cultural critics, with the famed exception of Bill Cosby—still campaigning against insulting stereotypes, but now accused of being out of date—have offered a word of protest. As the twenty-first century begins, it appears that the argument about who has the right to represent black America is far from over.

“You all have heard about dat straw what broke de camel’s back,” Bert Williams used to sing—this was his 1909 hit, “Believe Me”—“Well, a bubble added to my load would sholy make mine crack.” More than half a century later, Stepin Fetchit’s night-club routine showed what he had been learning from the brash civil-rights-era comics who had displaced him: “My wife and I were just voted the good-neighbor award—we even went out and burned our own cross.” The language of black humor had changed fundamentally; the experience had not. In an impossible time, these two funny men succeeded in turning tragedy—the usual prejudice, injustice, hate—into something painfully hilarious and widely beloved. How they did this, no book can explain. Looking back at the stark staring madness of so much of American history, it seems a miracle that anyone could laugh. ♦

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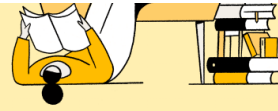
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