

Two Steps Forward and No Steps Back at the Savoy

By D.C. Copeland

For an
African-American female | 20-years-old.

Based on real and imagined characters and events found in the dancical *Jitterbug!*
a dramatic play set in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance and the Swing Music Era.

If read on Adobe Reader, clicking the number beside a word will take you to the definition.
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This monologue is *timed* to a free video available upon request.

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About the Scene:

Tharbis Jefferson is one of eight “Tall, Tan, & Terrific” showgirls in the latest Cotton Club revue, “*Rhyth-mania*.” Here she reminisces on what it was like working at the Cotton Club, meeting the love of her life, and surviving a dance contest that nearly killed her. This monologue, like the play, is annotated for historical notes and period slang.

Hi, my name is Tharbis Jefferson. I'm named after Moses's Ethiopian wife. That's right, once you go black, you'll never go back. Ha! And Tom Jefferson, too, you know, the gate¹ who wrote the Declaration of Independence *and* did my great-great-grandmother. Un-hunh.

Anyways, I just landed a gig at the Cotton Club as a showgirl when in strolls this hep cat wearin' one of them new Zoot suits,² swingin' his chain with his cogs³ on like he's still outside and the sun's still shinin.' He stops to remove his sky piece⁴-- but not the cogs 'cause he's too hip for that-- to check the joint out like he *owns* it. But he's blacker than me and we don't own nothin' at the Cotton Club except the “prestige” of working there. Trust me, once we step outside, Harlem could care less. In fact most of those hincty⁵ black and tans⁶ on the street look down on us for workin' for the Man. But it's a job, somethin' most of 'em wish they had-- even if it means workin' on a gangster's “plantation.” Cleanin' toilets or doin' laundry for those lucky icky⁷ ofays⁸ who still have jobs what with the Depression and all is for those lame Jack and Jills who aren't too choosy about what they have to do to keep from starvin.' And I get it.

1 Gate: A male, short for “gatemouth.”

2 Zoot suits: Exaggerated clothing, considered by some to be America's only totally and original civilian suit.

3 Cogs: Sun glasses.

4 Sky piece: Hat.

5 Hincty: Conceited, snooty.

6 Black and tans: Dark and light-colored Negroes (*not* Negroes and white folks).

7 Icky: An unhip stupid person who can't “collar the jive.”

8 Ofays: White people.

Thankfully I have somethin' the gangsters runnin' the Cotton Club want-- and it ain't cleaning toilets. I got *looks*. That's how I got a gig in the club's new *Rhyth-mania* revue. I'm one of them eight “Tall, Tan and Terrific” show girls. It don't matter if I can tap dance with the best of 'em-- and I can-- just ask anyone down at the Hoofers Club⁹-- but they hired me on my looks to parade real slowly around the plantation stage half-naked with a giant headdress and all. I know, it sounds ridiculous but it's a job in a world with no jobs and I know it ain't “fair,” but I was the right size and the right color-- I passed the club's “Paper Bag Test” where you don't stand a chance if you're darker than a brown paper bag-- and I was pretty enough to make the cut; so darlin', whether you like it or not, I'm goin' to make it *all* work for me. And yeah, I know it's not much different than standin' on a stump somewhere down in ol' Dixie Land like a slave in them olden times gettin' bought and sold at the market, but at least they're *payin'* me this time around. Yeah, just above slave wages-- but it's enough to make it from week to week. How many Harlemites can say that? At least I'm not standin' in some line lookin' for a handout from some lame ofay. And it gives me a chance to do what I want to do with my life. How many people-- black or white-- can say that? Hunh, how many?

Anyways back to that cat who stole my eye and later my heart. Calls himself Billy *Rhythm*. Really. And he can tell you with a straight face that's his real name, too. Talk about a signifyin'¹⁰ gate. Too much. I'll tell ya, whatever he dragged in that room with him that day was some kinda powerful mojo¹¹ 'cause I happened to be checkin' out Cab Calloway at the time and you just gotta know after seein' Billy, Cab did a Baby Lindy¹². And let me tell you, Cab ain't easy to stop lookin' at. I mean I've *never* seen

9 Hoofers Club: A small backroom in a Harlem speakeasy that the Jolly Fellows (Billy Rhythm's gang) ran. It's considered the “unacknowledged headquarters of American tap dancing from the 1920s through the 1940s.” It's where the greats practiced their steps and no one got entrance without Jolly Fellows approval, thus making this street gang the gate-keepers of the evolution of the art form.

10 Signifying: Bragging.

11 Mojo: A power a person carries with him or her that may seem magical.

12 Baby Lindy: Disappeared.

anyone-- black or white-- that looked so good. And then God goes and throws some talent on him too. He can sing and dance-- like no one I ever saw before. I tell you, he's going to be something big someday. I know, it ain't fair but God works in mysterious ways. Right now, hardly anyone has heard of him or his band, *The Missouriians*. He's only 22-years-old for cryin' out loud; just a couple of years older than me. And, get this: he's Duke Ellington's replacement. I mean this kid is Duke Ellington's replacement! Duke's gone to Hollywood to make a movie and yeah, I know, Duke's not someone to sneeze at either when it comes to looks, but Cab's in a league of his own.

And then along comes Billy Rhythm sash-shaying into the room, coppin'¹³ Cab's spotlight. He goes right up to Cab who's in the middle of rehearsal and pesters him for a gig. Everything comes to a crashing halt. Cab can't believe this signifyin' Jeff.¹⁴ None of us can. He tells Cab *Bojangles*¹⁵ sent him over to the Club; shows him The Mayor's¹⁶ gold stamped business card to prove it. Says he's to check in with some cat called "Calliope or somethin'." That gets us all laughin.' Even Cab has to laugh. Anyway, Cab gives him a chance to strut his stuff-- with Hal Arlen's¹⁷ permission, of course. We don't do nothin' at the club without first checkin' with some ofay first. In this case Arlen is one of the show's songwriters and is about the heppiest hepcat you'll ever wanna meet. He's a little Jewish gate-- probably not much older than Cab-- sittin' at the piano workin' on a new song about coke junkies called "*Kickin' the Gong Around*." I mean, how does he know this stuff, right? (Pause to watch Cab singing). Anyway, he says, sure, give him a shot.

(Billy dances.)

Well, it turns out this cat called Rhythm can deliver on his name in spades. He's a tap dancer but he's all

13 Cop: To take, obtain.

14 Jeff: a pest.

15 Bojangles: Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, arguably the best tap dancer that ever lived.

16 The Mayor: What Harlemites affectionately called Bojangles.

17 Harold Arlen: 26-year-old songwriter who would later write the "Song of the Century:" *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

over the stage. Most hoofers just stand in one place hunched over and tap their feet. Not this guy. Heck, he's even doin' splits and springin' back up without usin' his hands to push off the floor. (Pause to watch Billy finish his routine). Of course, he's hired on the spot and the next thing I know he's hittin' on me. I told him to save it, I'm not as easy to impress.

Turns out I was a bigger push over than I thought. We went out that night after work. Mr. Big Spender bought me a hot dog and a 7-Up from a push cart vendor on Lenox Avenue and then we went for a walk. I fell for him hard along the Harlem River (video) when he looked out at it and told me it was lonely, that it had no friends or dreams; that it was just a flowin' along like it's always done, comin' from nowhere and goin' nowhere. I told him I know that river but I got dreams and I'm swimming against the current. Simple dreams, really. Nothin' fancy about 'em. Just black girl dreams. Only difference is I'm countin' on my dancin' to get 'em and that ain't gonna be easy bein' a show girl at the Cotton Club. And then he starts droppin' some Brother Hughes¹⁸ on me:

“To fling my arms wide/In some place o' the sun,
 To whirl and to dance/Till the white day is done.
 Then rest in cool evening/Beneath a tall tree
 While the night comes on gently/Dark like me.
 That is my dream!”¹⁹

Yeah, I let him kiss me that night. He was real tender like and I couldn't say no. It was like nothing I had before. A few weeks later, when the Cotton Club decided to throw a dance contest at the Savoy

¹⁸ Brother Hughes: Langston Hughes, one the Harlem Renaissance's greatest poets.

¹⁹ “*Dream Variations*” by Langston Hughes, 1932

Ballroom²⁰ for “all of Harlem” to promote the new revue, Billy volunteered us to be the club's reps. That's when our romance was really put to the test because losin' wasn't an option to those gangster bastards. I thought about hoppin' the first bus out of there more than once but Billy convinced me *we* were different. As a team *we* were meant to win. In everything.

But on that night on that Savoy floor it didn't look that way. Despite everything-- death threats from Savoy regulars and the Cotton Club and then gettin' sliced and diced by razors and knives when we danced close to the crowd-- it didn't look like we were goin' to win at anything.

Brother Hughes ends another poem urging us black folk to “beat with bare, brown fists... the dark closed gate... And wait”²¹ for some ofay to open it. But Billy and I didn't wait. We couldn't wait no more. We kicked down that gate together that night. And we went through it *together* because without each other, the gate wasn't gonna fall. And fall it did.

(Video: female dancer is getting up.)

Staggering and bloody, we kept dancing and digging deeper for steps no one had seen before on that hallowed floor. Our refusal to give up and our dancing finally won the crowd over and it ran to us and lifted us above its heads. We were paraded around the floor and abruptly set down in front of a big icky ofay Cotton Club gangster named Big Frenchy Demange. He pretended to be our friend and wanted us to come over and meet his boss and owner of the club, Owney “The Killer” Madden. Billy looked at me and then up at the mobster and said, “We ain't your niggers no more!” And I backed him up shouting, “And we never were!”

20 Savoy Ballroom: Opened in 1926 and closed in 1959. This legendary unsegregated block-long ballroom in Harlem is where the Jitterbug was born. Those in the know pronounce it SaVOY.

21 “*Song*” by Langston Hughes, 1925

Suddenly the crowd around us grew quiet. No nigga had ever spoken like that to no icky ofay, especially one packin' a pistol in a shoulder holster. But then, we weren't niggers no more.

He tried to collar us but the crowd stepped between him and us and we got away with our lives.

And the prize money, too! \$500 took us a long way down that road to believin' in ourselves. Without holding on to each other after that dance, we would have toppled over. Now we never let go.