



1. Zabawka, 1933. Photo from the collection of the Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, 1-K-12379-1; quoted from: <https://audiovis.nac.gov.pl/obraz/156821/4949a47b08ff7c6d883ebbef70d79ed6> (access date: 11.02.2023)

Swing dance costumes and their dynamics as seen through the prism of the feature films of the Second Polish Republic*

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The interwar cinema serves as a particularly helpful source for swing dancing research – thanks to dance scenes woven into the films' plots, we can now admire the original choreographies and stylings of the dancers. Today, both scholars and dancers can draw on it; over a decade ago, a renaissance of swing dances in Poland began – on a wave of this flourishing vintage fashion, one can learn the steps of inter-war dances and take part in hairstyle workshops from that era. Despite the interest of many, there is still no scholarly publication that discusses the costumes worn by performers appearing in these recordings¹, while the film dance costume is an extremely interesting issue for several reasons. To quote Eugenio Barba, the costume is a **living partner** for the dancer, and in a sense an extension of his or her body – a **prosthesis**, as Jerzy Grotowski put it². It is meant to harmonise well in dance with the performer, so it had to be designed to convey some information, and, to use de Saussure's term, costume is a **signifier**³. However, it is important to point out that the costume itself is not pre-expressive, but can only act when worn by the dancer, who actually gives it life⁴.

In this essay, after presenting a brief history of swing dancing in the United States and Poland, I shall analyse selected film scenes from Polish interwar productions. Focusing on the ones in which swing dance is performed, I shall inspect the costumes of the dancers performing there. The starting point for my research is the issue of the dynamics of the dance and question: how the costumes in the films try to emphasise it. I shall also consider what role dance scenes play in specific films and address the matter of the gender of their performers.



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¹ One can find numerous works regarding fashion of the period with parts dedicated to the dance fashion in general. For relations between dancewear and jazz music, see A. McClendon, *Fashion and Jazz: Dress, Identity and Subcultural Improvisation*, London 2015.

² E. Barba and N. Savarese (*Scenografia i kostium*, Transl. I. Kurz, [in:] *Sekretna sztuka aktora. Słownik antropologii teatru*, Introd. L. Kolankiewicz, Wrocław 2005, p. 213) wrote about actors in the theatre, but one can successfully adapt these terms to dancers, especially those performing on stage or in front of the camera.

³ M. de Winkel (*Fashion and Fancy: Dress and Meaning in Rembrandt's Paintings*, Amsterdam 2006, p. 18) writes on costume as *signifier* in the introduction to her book on costume in Rembrandt's paintings.

⁴ See *ibidem*, p. 219.



⁵ See **B. Cohen-Stratyner**, *Social Dance: Contexts and Definitions*, "Dance Research Journal" 2001, No. 2, p. 122.

⁶ There are two anecdotes tracing the roots of swing music in the United States back to the late 19th century. According to one, swing originated as barrelhouse music, i.e. music in pubs where alcohol was served straight from the barrel. The music there was provided by a pianist who often played for hours on end: he played a repetitive motif with his left hand while improvising (or eating) with his right. A second anecdote links the distinctive rhythm of the music to the railway industry, as this is where the BIPOC people associated with the development of that music and dances worked. See *Encyclopedia of Music in the 20th Century*, Ed. **L. Stacy**, **L. Henderson**, London-Chicago 1999, pp. 76-79.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 68, 621.

⁸ For basics regarding swing dance, see also **Ch. Baade**, "The Dancing Front": *Dance Music, Dancing and the BBC in World War II*, "Popular Music" 2006, No. 3; **R. Giordano**, *Social Dancing in America: a History and Reference*, Vol. 2: *Lindy Hop to Hip Hop, 1901-2000*, Westport [Connecticut] 2007.

⁹ **Mr. and Mrs. Castle**, *Modern Dancing*, New York 1914, p. 43.

¹⁰ Cake walk was presented in New York in 1889 in The Creole Show, the first musical with a cast made up exclusively of actors of African descent. It appeared in Europe in 1902 and became instantly popular. See **K. Dalton**, **H. Gates Jr.**, *Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes*, "Critical Inquiry" 1998, No. 4.

¹¹ See **T. Stevens**, *Swing Dancing*, Santa Barbara 2011, p. 43.

¹² Some works argue that the charleston was introduced to the public in the 1921 production of *Shuffle Along*. See **K. Dalton**, **H. Gates Jr.**, *op. cit.*

¹³ See **Sh. Rohlfson Udall**, *Dance and American Art: A Long Embrace*, Madison 2012, p. xvi.

¹⁴ It is not entirely clear where the name of this dance comes from; it was used in an interview by one of the first dancers, George "Shorty" Snowden. See **M. W. Stearns**, **J. Stearns**, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*, New York 1994, p. 321.

¹⁵ See **K. Unruh**, *May we have this dance? Cultural ownership of the Lindy Hop from the swing era to today*, "Atlantic Studies: Global Currents" 2020, No. 1.

¹⁶ See **T. Monaghan**, *Why Study the Lindy Hop?*, "Dance Research Journal" 2001, No. 2, p. 126. More about the group is written by its members themselves. See **N. Miller**, **E. Jensen**, *Swingin' at the Savoy: The Memoir of a Jazz Dancer*, Philadelphia 1996; **F. Manning**, **C. R. Millman**, *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop*, Philadelphia 2007.

¹⁷ See **K. Karpinski**, *Był jazz. Krzyk jazz-ban-
du w międzywojennej Polsce*, Kraków 2014, p. 9.

The origins of swing

The word **swing** is an umbrella-term that brings together many varieties of dance differing in technique, dynamics and finally the distinctive steps. The word encompasses the charleston, historically the first of the swing dances, as well as the lindy hop, a dance resulting from the famous breakaway (that allows people in a pair to break apart and improvise some steps), the balboa and the shag (dances with strong, fast bouncing where small steps are used), and, last but not least, the boogie woogie (a fast dance with a stiffened body line). The clear differences between aforementioned dances became evident relatively recently, during the so-called swing revival, that is the great comeback of swing dances in the 1990s. Before then, the terms lindy hop, jitterbug or swing were often used interchangeably, meaning simply a dynamic dance with improvised steps, full of kicks and jumps, performed to distinctive music accentuating the second and fourth beats in a four beat measure⁵. This type of music – also termed swing – covers music derived from jazz⁶, and experienced its greatest popularity in the 1930s and 1940s, the years thereby referred to as the "swing era"⁷. In this article I shall use the word swing as linking in its meaning the above-mentioned variety of social dances and steps danced to this characteristic music⁸.

Before jazz emerged in the 1920s, people were keen to dance to dynamic piano music called rag-time. Vernon and Irene Castle, a pair of famous Broadway ballroom dancers, wrote of it:

People can say what they want about rag-time. The Waltz is beautiful, the Tango is graceful [...]. One can sit quietly and listen with pleasure to them all; but when a good orchestra plays a "rag" one has simply **got** to move⁹.

Drawing on rag-time, as well as dances like the turkey trot and cake walk¹⁰, in 1923 charleston was born. The dance made its debut in *Running Wild*, the famous Broadway show, where it was performed by troupe called The Dancing Redcaps¹¹ to the song *Charleston (Green Hill)* – hence the name of the dance¹². Soon, the dance also appeared in Europe – as early as 1925, it was performed by Josephine Baker in the production of *La Revue Nègre* in Paris¹³.

Charleston and jazz led to the creation of a new phenomenon – swing and lindy hop¹⁴. This type of music and dance evolved in Harlem, a neighbourhood of New York City, especially in two dance halls: The "Cotton Club" and the "Savoy Ballroom", the first inclusive club, i.e. not subject to racial segregation. Significantly, the origin of the new dance is inextricably linked to the BIPOC people, although over time it was appropriated by the American white middle class¹⁵. It should be recalled that the most popular swing dancing group was the one associated with the "Savoy Ballroom" and led by Herbert White: Whitey's Lindy Hoppers¹⁶.

Modern dances in the Second Polish Republic

Jazz, and later swing as well, became a permanent element of the Second Polish Republic – the new state organism enjoying its regained independence¹⁷. After all, as it was said, “When the country is free, we will dance and party, but not before”¹⁸. The first mention of the existence of jazz music¹⁹ comes from an article by Jerzy Sosnkowski in the “Tygodnik Ilustrowany” (Illustrated Weekly) of 1921²⁰. It is known from sources that in the 1920s, entertainment venues and cabarets were importing foreign repertoire, adding Polish words to well-known hits, and songs were spreading thanks to gramophone records and the radio²¹ – it is assumed that the period between 1918 and 1927 was the “prehistory” of Polish jazz, whereas the 1930s were the so-called “swinging period”, when the American hits were fully adopted²². In 1935, a series of broadcasts called *Gwiazdy filmowe przed mikrofonem* (Film Stars Behind the Microphone) and *Najwybitniejsze zespoły jazzowe* (The Most Outstanding Jazz Ensembles) featured the songs of Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman²³, and the new dance steps were learned through the performances of American dancers in Europe²⁴.

Along with new music, a new dance appeared in Poland²⁵. In 1926, Zula Pogorzelska (Zofia Pogorzelska) performed the first Polish charleston on the stage of the “Perskie Oko” in Warsaw²⁶. A few weeks later, at the same venue, Loda (Leokadia) Halama and Eugeniusz Bodo performed the black bottom, described as “the freshest dance novelty”²⁷. Henryk Liński described this new dance²⁸ as some kind of “super-charleston, as far as the figures are concerned, while the tempo is a little slower”. He wrote that the dance was danced “not only with the legs, arms and head, but with the whole body”²⁹.

The new dances were quickly approved in the Second Polish Republic, and the polonised term *dancing* (written with “s” instead of “c”) entered into common parlance. According to the *Słownik języka polskiego* (Dictionary of the Polish Language), this word means “a dance party in a café or a restaurant”³⁰. And indeed, in the capital city, *dansings* took place in many venues, like the famous “Adria” club, which accommodated almost 1,500 people in its room with a spinning dance floor and a jazz band orchestra³¹. Another recognized locale was the “Oaza” club, where a guest without a partner could dance with taxi dancers³². Dancing parties were also organised in various holiday resorts, for example in Zakopane. The “Morskie Oko” hotel advertised in the “Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny” (Illustrated Daily Courier) that it had “a first-class orchestra at lunchtime, two orchestras in the two dancing rooms in the afternoon and at night”³³. The famous dancing parties in Zakopane were recalled by Witold Gombrowicz:



¹⁸ M. i J. Łoziński, *Narty – dancing – brydż w kurortach Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa 2010, p. 38.

¹⁹ At this point it is worth noting that while various studies are available on the history of jazz and swing music in Poland, nothing has been written to date on the development of the dance itself. The brief history of swing dancing presented below draws on works related to music and on a variety of sources mentioning some aspects of choreography only. For the history of jazz see R. Kowal, *Polski jazz. Wczesna historia i trzy biografie zamknięte: Komeda, Kosz, Seifert*, Kraków 1995; A. Schmidt, *Historia jazzu*, Lublin 2009; I. Pietraszewski, *Jazz w Polsce: wolność improwizowana*, Kraków 2012; K. Karpiński, *op. cit.*

²⁰ See K. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²¹ In 1926, Polskie Radio (Polish Radio) was established in Warsaw, and a year later radio stations were founded in Kraków, Katowice and Poznań. See *ibidem*, pp. 47, 249.

²² See A. Józwiak, *Dancing Retro. Historia jazzu w Polsce w latach 1918–1939*, Warszawa 1989, pp. 102–103.

²³ See *ibidem*, pp. 386, 390.

²⁴ N. Miller, E. Jensen, *op. cit.*, pp. 83–106.

²⁵ See R. Kowal (*op. cit.*, p. 13) recalls that in the first stage of the formation of jazz in Poland, it was difficult to distinguish in sources between information on “pure” jazz, other popular music, or fashionable dances.

²⁶ Later it was called “Morskie Oko”. See A. Lisińska, *Loda Halama. Pierwsze nogi Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej. Burzliwe losy legendarnej gwiazdy*, Warszawa 2017, pp. 50, 69. The exact date of the premiere is unknown. However, from Loda Halama’s memoirs, it appears that her younger sister Helenka performed a charleston show together with Pogorzelska. Halama sisters were employed at the Perskie Oko in the 1926/1927 season, so the first charleston could have taken place in 1926 at the earliest.

²⁷ The black bottom is one of the charleston variations. See *ibidem*, p. 90.

²⁸ This dance developed in the United States at about the same time as the charleston, but apparently arrived in Poland later.

²⁹ A. Lisińska, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

³⁰ *Dancing* [entry], [in], *Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/dansing.html> (access date: 28.11.2022).

³¹ P. Zakrzewski, *Na dancingach i na dechach, czyli polskie parkiety XX wieku*, <http://www.culture.pl/pl/artikul/na-dancingach-i-na-dechach-czyli-polskie-parkiety-xx-wieku> (access date 27.11.2022).

³² The same happened at the famous “Savoy Ballroom”, where hostesses waited for guests, counting 25 cents for three dances. See M. W. Stearns, J. Stearns, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

³³ M. i J. Łoziński, *op. cit.*, p. 38.



³⁴ W. Gombrowicz, *Wspomnienia polskie*, Kraków 2002, pp. 187-188.

³⁵ See M. i J. Łoziński, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

³⁶ See K. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³⁷ M. i J. Łoziński, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

³⁸ See K. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 153. In addition, the carriages were equipped with a bar and a hairdressing salon. See I. Kozina, *Polski design*, Warszawa 2015, p. 104.

³⁹ See P. Zakrzewski, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ See K. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, pp. 470-471.

⁴¹ M. Moźdzynska-Nawotka, *Od zmierzchu do świtu. Historia mody balowej*, Coop. E. Halawa, Wrocław 2007, p. 88.

⁴² K. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 32. The theme of jazz in Polish poetry has been addressed by B. Śniecikowska: *What Did They Need Jazz For? Jazz Music in Polish Interwar Poetry*, [in:] *Regarding the Popular: Modernism, the Avant-Garde and High and Low Culture*, Ed. S. Bru [et al.], Berlin-Boston 2012.

⁴³ P. Zakrzewski, *Zakopianina - narokoty k specyficznie polski*, <http://www.culture.pl/pl/artykul/zakopianina-narokoty-k-specyficznie-polski> (access date: 27.11.2022).

⁴⁴ S. I. Witkiewicz, *O antyintelektualizmie*, [in:] *idem, Bez kompromisu. Pisma krytyczne i publicystyczne*, Ed. J. Degler, Warszawa 1976, p. 159, 271.

⁴⁵ S. I. Witkiewicz, *Pożegnanie jesieni*, Warszawa 1927, p. 298.

Dawn. Couples do not want to stop, they dance, although the music falls silent – so the music starts *da capo* again! [...] At last, the jazzmen put away their instruments, people get dressed by the entrance, put on overcoats and wellingtons, when something twisted them around again, they whirled, the music started again, overcoats flew, scarves flew on the dancing public! I have never seen such a party as sometimes broke out in the morning in Zakopane venues anywhere else³⁴.

People also danced at the seaside, not only in hotel rooms, but also on open-air terraces³⁵. It is known that Henryk Gold's jazzband played in the Spa House in Krynica, and that guests from even far away came to the afternoon and evening dancing parties³⁶.

For those who couldn't get enough of dancing because – to quote Wanda Dobrzyńska from the magazine "Kobiety w Świecie i w Domu" (Women in the World and at Home) – they danced "for all year long: in autumn and in spring, in winter and in summer"³⁷, there were dancing parties on trains: they were organised in the railway carriages of the Warsaw Lilpop, Rau and Loewenstein factory³⁸. According to Kazimierz Brandys, not even the war hindered Poles from dancing. At the beginning of September 1939, regulars still came to Warsaw venues, only they brought gas masks along³⁹. When the occupation authorities introduced a ban on dancing in public places, people danced swing in private, usually with crank gramophones which didn't need electricity to function⁴⁰.

Not everyone was in favour of modern dances, sometimes referred to as "dancing disease" or "charleston epileptic twisting"⁴¹. In a 1926 issue of the magazine "Muzyka i Śpiew" (Music and Singing), this entertainment was described as "jazzbanditism", and the poet Maria Ejsmondowa of Wieniawski appealed:

and on the model of "economic" and "anti-gas"
let's create a "League of Defence" also "anti-jazz"⁴².

One of the most famous opponents was Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, who complained that his beloved Zakopane was "becoming defiled, and dancing, record-oriented sport, cinema and radio [...] wipe out all deeper interests from people"⁴³. He wrote of dancing parties as a place "deafening with noise"⁴⁴, and in *Pożegnanie jesieni* (Farewell to Autumn) he referred to the criticised character-decadent as a "dancing jerk". In addition, he noted there that "dancing and sport are among the elements of stultification", just as stultifying as cinema and repetitive mechanical labour⁴⁵.

Swing scenes in Polish film – an analysis

The steps of new dances from the 1920s and 1930s could have been preserved until today thanks to a new invention of the time, namely –

the film. Dance scenes were already being recorded on film at the end of the 19th c. and, as an example, the first hand-tinted film from 1894 can be mentioned. *Annabelle Serpentine Dance* (dir. William K. L. Dickson) is a silent miniature featuring a dance performed by Annabelle Whitford. The dancer refers here to a widely known number by Loïe Fuller, who introduced the so-called “serpentine dance” to the “Folies Bergère” in Paris in the early 1890s⁴⁶.

Swing developed in parallel with film and occurred at a similar time as a revolutionary invention: the soundtrack. The first film in which the world heard dialogue was released in the United States in 1927 under the title *The Jazz Singer* (dir. Alan Crosland)⁴⁷. The popularity of this particular production triggered the creation of an entirely new genre in cinema: the musical film, in which dance was to play an important role⁴⁸. Musical films reached their highest popularity in the second half of the 1930s and early 1940s – in 1936–1942 Hollywood produced more than 50 musical films a year⁴⁹.

The first sound film was about jazz, so it is not surprising that this particular music took hold of a new film genre. The productions that followed often featured swing dance scenes – full of dynamic jumps and acrobatic routines. Charleston and lindy hop have been danced in the movies as early as 1929, in *After Seben* by Paramount Pictures (dir. S. J. Kaufman) and *Glorifying the American Girl* (dir. Millard Webb). Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers also danced in couple American productions, including *A Day at the Races* (dir. Marx Brothers) and *Manhattan Merry-Go-Round* (dir. Charles Reisner) in 1937.

Film – including musical – was also popular in Poland. In Warsaw alone, in 1938 there were 69 permanent cinemas, the largest of which, the “Colosseum”, had a capacity of 2360 spectators⁵⁰. Polish films also featured swing dance scenes or scenes of dancing performed to swing music. Thanks to the productions that have survived, we can look at the dance steps used in films and observe dance fashion, of which film became the most common medium of promotion in the 20th century⁵¹.

On the one hand, the dancers’ costumes were very much in line with everyday or formal fashion trends⁵²: in everyday life, people usually wore their best clothes to balls or dancing parties, and this was reflected in the film. On the other hand, the costume had to be comfortable, so female dancers, just like female tennis players in the 1920s and 1930s, quickly abandoned stockings in favour of shorts worn under the skirt, and socks⁵³. Furthermore, as it should be remembered, the costume in the case of cinema also fulfils another role: it has to fit into the plot of the film. For those exploring the issue today, this can be a bit of a pitfall – the costume was not always consistent with the current fashion trends, and it is important to be fully aware of this issue.

It should also be noted that in swing dances the most important thing was their dynamism, and efforts were made to emphasise



⁴⁶ J. Yumibe, *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism*, New Brunswick – London 2012, p. 52.

⁴⁷ See M. J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction*, London 2007, p. 136. This was not the first sound film, as experiments with the soundtrack were already presented at the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900. See L. Kydryński, *Przewodnik po filmach muzycznych*, Kraków 2000, p. 7.

⁴⁸ See A. Dziekońska-Kozłowska, *Moda kobieca XX wieku*, Warszawa 1964, p. 180.

⁴⁹ See L. Kydryński, *Przewodnik po filmach muzycznych*, Kraków 2000, p. 6. Producers in Hollywood have taken advantage of the “swing craze” and created more than 50 films with the word “swing” in the title. See N. Miller, E. Jensen, *op. cit.*, pp. xxv–xxvii

⁵⁰ See K. Karpiński, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁵¹ See A. Sieradzka, *Moda w przedwojennej Polsce. Codzienna, sportowa, wieczorowa, ślubna, dziecięca, bielizna*, Warszawa 2013, p. 16. Sources for the present-day study of dance costume can be photographs or press information about revues and cabaret shows. For example, we know that Zizi (Zuzanna) Halama in Perskie Oko performed in a dress finished with tassels extending from her wrist, over her arm, around her waist and down her back. Tassels were also replaced by frills, as in Zula Pogorzelska’s and Helena Halama’s *Dwie Zule* (Two Zulas) number: the dancers performed in tight dresses with short skirts consisting of layers of frills. Lisiecka. See A. Lisiecka (*op. cit.*, pp. 69, 72) wrote about this. However, in the case of the photographs, we can only guess that the various elements of the costumes interacted with the dancers’ movements and emphasised the dynamic nature of the dances they performed.

⁵² For more on the fashion of the era, see N. Jaroszevska, *Chłopczyce, uwodzicielki, damy. Polska moda międzywojnia*, Warszawa 2007; B. English, *A Cultural History of Fashion in the 20th and 21st Centuries: From Catwalk to Sidewalk*, London 2013.

⁵³ See K. Mulvey, M. Richards, *Decades of Beauty: The Changing Image of Women 1890s to 1990s*, New York 1998, p. 96.



⁵⁴ To my best knowledge, the scenes analysed below are all scenes featuring the performance of swing dance choreography in Polish interwar films. Swing music with steps characteristic of other ballroom dances appears in many productions (about which more later in the text), but all dances with typically swing steps are described below. It is possible that some films were missed during the search due to the difficult access to much of the material – the film stock in many cases survived fragmentarily, in very poor quality, or not at all.

⁵⁵ They were tightly arranged girls standing in a line, shown in a horizontal film shot, derived from cabaret and revue. See **Sh. Dodds**, *Dance on Screen: Genres and Media from Hollywood to Experimental Art*, Basingstoke 2004, p. 63.

⁵⁶ See *Fryzjer w trumnie* [exhibition cat.], Ed. **J. Torchała**, **E. Ziemińska**, 6 July – 23 August 2006, National Museum in Warsaw – Królikarnia Branch, Sc. Ed. **J. Torchała**, **E. Ziemińska**, **A. A. Szablowska**, Warszawa 2006; **M. Orzeszyńska**, **Antoine Cierplikowski. Król fryzjerów, fryzjer królów**, Kraków 2015.

⁵⁷ The first colour films recorded with Technicolour technology, among others, were made as early as the 1920s. See **F. E. Basten**, *Glorious Technicolor: The Movies' Magic Rainbow*, South Brunswick – New York 1980.

⁵⁸ Thus, in the early days of cinema, with weaker technical capabilities, actors applied multi-layered make-up and bright, schematised costumes. See **Sh. Dodds**, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

this visually. Costumes were decorated with fringes, frills and various accessories; the appropriate choice of fabrics (as I shall argue) from which the costumes were sewn was important, too. Dynamism is a common feature of each of the following dance performances in Polish interwar films⁵⁴ but, as we shall see, executed differently in each described case.

One of the earliest scenes in Polish cinema (additionally wonderfully depicting early swing dance) is the showcase performed in Michał Waszyński's 1933 film of manners *Zabawka* (A Toy) [Fig. 1]. The main character's name is Lulu (Alma Kar), she is working as a dancer in a nightclub; later in the narrative, Lulu meets a rich landowner (Eugeniusz Bodo) and accepts his invitation to his estate. The dance scene is set at the very beginning of the film and, as it were, introduces Lulu: the dancer, together with a troupe of Tiller girls (otherwise known as chorus girls⁵⁵), performs to the song *To wystarczy mi* (That's Enough for Me). The dancers, including the aforementioned Zula Pogorzelska and Stefcia Górka, combine steps commonly known from revue cancan performances and steps typical of charleston. They are all dressed in identical one-piece costumes, distinctive for 1920s fashion consisting of white satin blouses with round collars, combined with shorts, decorated with wide black belts. The blouses have voluminous sleeves that do not form a whole with the top of the garment, but are reduced to the form of sleeve covers. They are decorated with frills edged along the edges with black ribbon, as well as cut-outs showing the shoulders. The dancers wear low-heeled black slippers fastened with a belt, and have black bow ties under their collars. All the dancers – with the exception of the main character – have the same sleek blonde wigs cut in the typical “bob” style – perhaps the most popular hairstyle of the early 20th c. popularised by Antoni Cierplikowski, known internationally as Monsieur Antoine⁵⁶. Only Lulu's hair is darker and styled in waves. She wears a sequined fascinator; in addition, her costume is edged with sequins in the black parts of the fabric.

It should be noted that this 1933 recording – like most in this period – is a black-and-white film⁵⁷. Consequently, the costumes and make-up of the actresses had to be designed to look good not in “colour reality”, but on a black and white screen⁵⁸. Therefore, contrasting colours were used – hence the choice of white costumes decorated with black elements. This contrast also visually enhances the dynamics of the dancers' steps. It is worth noting that the sequins sewn onto the main character's costume shimmer in the spotlights on set: the light flickers and emphasises the movements of the actress. Similarly, with every gesture of the hands, the frills – also black and white – gently ripple, drawing the viewers' attention.

As the dance scene takes place in a nightclub, the extremely skimpy costumes should come as no surprise. According to the plot of the film – which in this case matches the real-world situation – the



2. *Prokurator Alicja Horn*, 1933. Photo from the collection of the Filмотeka Narodowa - Instytut Audiowizualny, serwis Fototeka, 1-F-2393-2; quoted from: <https://fototeka.fn.org.pl/pl/filmy/info/6262/prokurator-alicja-horn.html> (access date: 11.02.2023)



3. *Dyplomatyczna żona*, 1938. Photo from the collection of the Filmoteka Narodowa - Instytut Audiowizualny, serwis Fototeka, 1-F-2879-6; quoted from: <https://fototeka.fn.org.pl/pl/filmy/info/8876/dyplomatyczna-zona.html> (access date: 11.02.2023)

dancers' job is to entertain the audience, which consists largely of men. At the same time, the dancers provide entertainment for the spectator sitting in the cinema; this point will be addressed later in the article.

In the same year, the swing dance scene appeared in a drama *Prokurator Alicja Horn* (Prosecutor Alicja Horn, dir. Marta Flanz, Michał Waszyński). In a nightclub called "Argentina", the title character (Jadwiga Smosarska) meets a man with a criminal past (Franciszek Brodniewicz), with whom she falls in love with reciprocally.

In one of the scenes in the aforementioned club, Loda Halama (listed on a cast list as a "dancer") sits at a table; a man asks her to dance, but she refuses and performs a sing-and-dance solo number to the melody played by the orchestra. The dancer is dressed in an airy evening gown in bright colours [Fig. 2]. The costume has deep V-cuts at the front and back and a slightly lowered waist: both features are characteristic of the trends of the previous decade. The top of the dress is asymmetrical: the right shoulder is covered by a short sleeve decorated with tulle frills, while the left shoulder is exposed. The bare shoulder and the front of the top are decorated with a garland of artificial flowers. The dress is long, in keeping up with the fashion contemporary to the film, but the length seems not to be a problem for the dancer. The skirt is extremely wide and delicate, sewn from multiple layers of light, translucent fabric, probably tulle, which allows Halama to perform her acrobatic choreography. After each leg kick and jump, the delicate fabric flares upwards and slowly falls, highlighting the energetic dance steps. In the pirouettes, the ruffles of the skirt and sleeve interact with the dancer's turns. Another important element of Halama's costume are the low-heeled slippers, which has crucial meaning for the stability of the movements performed. The silver shoes harmonise well with the light-coloured dress and the silver flowers on the chest. They are also reflecting the spotlight at times, focusing the audience's eyes on the dynamic dance steps.

The semi-transparent lower part of the costume creates additional effects: part of the dancer's performance is recorded on a rather dark set, with the light positioned behind her and directed towards the camera. As a result, Halama's swiftly moving legs are perfectly visible through the skirt, made somewhat unreal by their juxtaposition with almost invisible layers of tulle. On the one hand, this results in a focus on the dancer's quick steps and good technique. On the other hand, it creates a voyeuristic situation, in which the heroine is an erotic object that's being looked at. This is an interesting combination, as fast dances and swing music are not associated with the sensuality that appears so often in slower dances – here, however, the backlighting of the dancer from behind, during a scene happening in a nightclub, sexualises the performance.

The swing dance scene then appears in a musical comedy of Polish-German production from 1937 – *Dyplomatyczna żona* (A Diplo-



⁵⁹ See M. Możdżyńska-Nawotka, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

⁶⁰ At this time, cardigans were becoming fashionable among dancers in the United States. See N. Miller, E. Jensen, *op. cit.*, pp. xxiv-xxv.

⁶¹ One has to remember that Marlene Dietrich used to wear tuxedos since 1930, when she starred in Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco*.

matic Wife, dir. Mieczysław Krawicz, Carl Boese). The plot revolves around the completion of the ensemble of an operetta in Warsaw. The management is considering hiring a young actress, Wanda (Helena Grossówna) and during the rehearsals at the operetta they ask her to perform an act with more experienced actor, Jan (Wojciech Ruszkowski). The first part is exclusively sung, while in the second part of the piece the characters dance on stage performing elements taken directly from the charleston. Both of them execute the dance routine, only holding each other's hands for a few moments [Fig. 3].

Grossówna is dressed in a short pleated black skirt and a navy short-sleeved white blouse with turned-up cuffs, and wears shiny low-heeled black slippers. The costume has a sporty character, reminiscent of women's gymwear, which was characterised by emphasising the edges of the neckline, pockets and lapels⁵⁹. Despite the sporty nature of the costume, she has not abandoned her stockings – which are clearly visible under the short skirt. The front-tied collar together with the pleats in Grossówna's skirt works interestingly energetic during the dance, gently adding vibrancy to the overall impression of the performance. In addition, the contrasting colours make every element of the costume highly visible.

Ruszkowski in the dance scene wears casual, everyday men's attire: wide high-waisted trousers, a checked shirt and a wide dark tie with diagonal stripes. His costume indicates a major change regarding men's outfits in the 1930s. The trousers are widened to make them as loose and comfortable as possible, which is significant for dance scenes. In addition, the free-flowing fabric of the trousers emphasises the actor's dynamic movements. Furthermore, Ruszkowski performs without a jacket, which highlights the informality of this scene, which is a rehearsal before the performance in the storyline⁶⁰. It is worth noting that so far this is the first and, to the best of my knowledge, the only swing dance scene featuring a man.

Another interesting dance scene takes place in Marian Czauski's 1938 comedy film *Szczęśliwa trzynastka* (Lucky Thirteen). The film's main character is the superstitious Mr Koziółek (Stanisław Sielański), who, after many adventures, saves the theatre show. The scene featuring a swing dance performance occurs at the very end of the film: the heroine is Hanka (Helena Grossówna) who had replaced the star of the show Lola Vulpi (Maria Chmurowska) at the last minute.

The scene is kept in a revue character, strongly alluding in steps and costumes to the famous Roaring Twenties. Grossówna is dressed in a costume traditionally understood as masculine⁶¹ [Fig. 4]: she is wearing a white tailcoat tuxedo with a white bow tie and white trousers with contrasting black sequined lampasse. The same sequins decorate the tuxedo's lined lapels. The actress wears a black tophat and black shoes with white gaiters. She performs an energetic charleston-type solo dance on the theatre stage. The tails of the tuxedo and the wide trouser legs fly with each energetic step (especially



4. *Szczęśliwa trzynastka*, 1938. Photo from the collection of the Filmoteka Narodowa - Instytut Audiowizualny, serwis Fototeka, 1-F-2387-4, <https://fototeka.fn.org.pl/filmy/info/6221/szczesliwa-trzynastka.html> (access date: 11.02.2023)

pirouette) of Grossówna, and the light on stage reflects off the sequins on her costume. After a moment, two female dancers dressed in airy, light-coloured gowns appear on stage – every one of their movements creates a dynamic work of fabric, resembling that in Halama's performance in *Prokurator Alicja Horn*.

After a few stanzas of the song the chorus girls dressed in short deep-cut sequin strappy costumes enter the stage. Their costumes are not identical yet very similar to one another: some of them are edged with fringe, others with tulle. All the dancers wear flat-heeled black shoes with a strap and headbands with bows. These dancers only provide a setting for Grossówna's performance, but are nevertheless clearly visible. In addition to the dance steps themselves, sequins and rhythmically swinging fringe also contribute to the overall impression of vibrancy and dynamism of the dance.



„ZAPOMNIANA MELODIA“

5. *Zapomniana melodia*, 1938. Photo from the collection of the Filmoteka Narodowa - Instytut Audiowizualny, serwis Fototeka, 1-F-2316-40, <https://fototeka.fn.org.pl/pl/filmy/info/5283/zapomniana-melodia.html> (access date: 11.02.2023)

The same year saw the premiere of *Zapomniana melodia* (Forgotten Melody) by Jan Fethke and Konrad Tom, the film hailed as “unquestionably the best Polish comedy of the Second Polish Republic”⁶². The film was created on the American model and introduced revue excerpts closely related to the plot and featuring almost thirty girls – students of the Girls’ Training Institute⁶³. One such piece is a performance in the classroom of the Institute, where the schoolgirls sing a swing version of the song *Panie Janie* (*Brother John*) [Fig. 5]. One scene earlier, some schoolgirls heard a song played this way by Stefan (Aleksander Żabczyński), the nephew of their music teacher (Michał Znicz) who interrupted the song by shouting that such a version was “terrible”. So the girls decide to have some fun and sing the song in precisely the way that the professor would despise. One of the students pretends to be the teacher and the rest of them executes a choreographed sequence with tap dance elements. At the end of the song, the real professor bursts into the classroom, recognises his nephew’s arrangement and, angered, orders him to leave – it is one of the most important events in the plot that develops the romance between Stefan and Helena (Helena Grossówna).

The heroines are dressed in identical school uniforms with buff sleeves typical of the second half of the 1930s. The dresses are quite well-fitted, knee-length and dark, tied at the waist with a sash of the same colour. They have lined white polka dot collars tied with a ribbon in the same pattern. The same fabric is used for the sleeve edges. Each actress has the same costume but disparate shoes – each pair is slightly different yet similar in style (they are all low-heeled and dark).

In the case of this performance, the dynamics consist mainly of the choreographed movements themselves, however the way the dancers look is quite significant, because the actresses’ curled hair and ribbons at their collars sway to the rhythm of the steps. I believe that the key feature of the costumes for this scene is that all the dancers’ demeanour is almost identical. The main element emphasizing the dynamism of the dance are the strong colour contrasts: polka dot cuffs and collars move slightly in the dance and are visible on plain, dark dresses.

Interestingly, this is the only example of a dance scene that does not take place on a literal stage (in a nightclub or theatre, as in previous films). The song is woven into the story and is played out in a school classroom, although it should be noted that the schoolgirls are putting together benches to build a “stage”. In addition, the performance is not intended to be seen by any audience – the schoolgirls are making fun of their teacher and enjoying themselves.

The crowning example of a swinging performance of the interwar period is the 1939 drama *Kłamstwo Krystyny* (Krystyna’s Lie) (another title: *Dzień upragniony* [The Desired Day]), directed by Henryk Szaro. The film’s plot revolves around the love story of the titular



⁶² J. F. Lewandowski, *100 filmów polskich*, Katowice 1997, p. 20.

⁶³ See T. Lubelski, *Historia kina polskiego. Twórcy, filmy, konteksty*, Katowice 2009, p. 91.



⁶⁴ See A. Lisiecka, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

⁶⁵ See N. Miller, E. Jensen, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁶⁶ See A. Sieradzka, *op. cit.*, p. 199. During this period, women tended to no longer wear gloves with their evening-wear, instead often wearing multiple bangles at once.

⁶⁷ See *ibidem*, p. 235.

⁶⁸ See *ibidem*, p. 113.

Krystyna (Elżbieta Barszczewska) and Janek (Jerzy Śliwiński) – the characters meet one evening in the exclusive club “Eldorado”. Before their entrance, the attraction for the club guests is the performance of a dancer (Loda Halama) [Fig. 6]. The solo dance choreographed by Edward Radulski⁶⁴ and performed to music composed by Henryk Wars consists of elements characteristic of the charleston, lindy hop and tap dance.

Halama is dressed in an evening floor-length gown with an exposed back and shoulders. Information about the colour of the dress is provided by a handful of preserved colourful posters, on which we see the dancer in a coral-coloured creation. Finished with multilayered ruffles, the costume is buckled at the waist with a belt embroidered with glittering stones or paillettes flashing as the choreography is performed. The wide and loose cut of the costume allows the dancer to freely perform leg throws, spins and even cartwheels. The shoes have been tailored for primarily practical reasons – they are fairly low-heeled Cuban types⁶⁵ with an additional strap on the instep that holds the foot tightly. On her right hand, Halama wears a couple of bracelets⁶⁶ to which a handkerchief is attached; this accessory flutters in the dance, adding some dynamism.

In this scene, the dancer is accompanied by a troupe of six men dressed in evening wear typical of the 1930s. Each of the dancers is wearing a black tailcoat tuxedo, white waistcoat, shirt, bow tie and pocket square, black trousers and lacquered dance shoes. A white flower, presumably a carnation contrasting with the blackness of the tuxedo, is pinned into the buttonhole making the dancers dressed appropriately for a nightclub party. None of the dancers wear gloves – they were already a rarity in the 1930s for an outfit of this type⁶⁷. Each of the dancers has, according to contemporary fashion, short hair, parted to the side, smoothed out with brilliantine⁶⁸.

This particular scene makes an extremely interesting play with the dynamics of the dance and the costumes. The most energetic element of the whole arrangement is Loda Halama herself – she dances with great joy and performs sweeping movements enhanced by her costume. The frilly dress flows with the dancer, enhancing the expressiveness of her movements in dance; in addition, she makes use of the shiny appliqués reflecting the stage lights, a case known from previously analysed movies. An additional attribute, cleverly used by the dancer, is the handkerchief at her wrist. By waving it, she emphasises every gesture and throw of her arms. A remarkable contrast to her energetic dancing create the men accompanying her: incredibly calm, they perform their movements smoothly and tranquilly.

In addition to the scenes presented above, Polish interwar cinema very often reached for popular swing music by using it in the background. Many films feature a dance scene – whether it is a formal party or a dancing in the club – where a big band orchestra plays a lively jazz piece and the dance floor is filled with couples dressed in elegant



6. *Kłamstwo Krystyny*, 1939. Photo from the collection of the Filmoteka Narodowa – Instytut Audiowizualny, serwis Fototeka, <https://fototeka.fn.org.pl/pl/filmy/info/8885/klamstwo-krystyny.html> (access date: 11.02.2023)

evening wear. However, couples dance not the swing steps, but way calmer and more gliding steps that often unnaturally contrast with the music. Dancing scenes of this type appear in films such as *Czy Lucyna to dziewczyna?* (Is Lucyna a Girl, dir. Juliusz Gardan, 1934), *Dwie Joasie* (Two Joasias, dir. Mieczysław Krawicz, 1935) and *Pani Minister tańczy* (Madam Minister Dances, dir. Juliusz Gardan, 1937).

* * *

A reason for analysing the costumes of swing dance scenes was the aspect of their dynamics and especially how the performer's costume affects the expression (and reception) of the dance. As it turned out, fabric type was of key importance in the costumes: for example, the use of multiple layers of tulle in Loda Halama's costumes emphasised the lightness of her breakneck stunts and, what's incredibly significant, did not restrict her movements. Naturally, the design of the costumes



⁶⁹ For more on Polish interwar musical comedy, see: P. Sitkiewicz, *Przedwojenna polska komedia muzyczna. Próba rehabilitacji*, "Pleograf" 2019, No. 4.

⁷⁰ The only example of a full partner in a dance scene is Wojciech Ruszkowski appearing with Helena Grossówna in *Dyplomatyczna żona*.

was also important, where the loose fabric (the ruffles of the dancers' sleeves in *Zabawka*, the collar of Wanda's navy blouse in *Dyplomatyczna żona* or the handkerchief at the dancer's wrist in *Kłamstwo Krystyny*) emphasised the choreography with its rhythmic movement. In addition, the glittering sequins or paillettes created a subtle play of light with each movement of the dancers, highlighting steps in the choreography.

While drawing conclusions from the analyses of swing dance scenes in Polish interwar cinema, several further issues going beyond point in question should be noted. Firstly – dance scenes of this type appear in some productions of the musical comedy genre⁶⁹, but it should not be seen as a rule. It indicates that swing dancing was popular, but was not necessarily the leading trend. Secondly, swing dance scenes in some films were tightly woven into events in the plots – and this was the case of musical comedies. For example, the rehearsal on stage before Wanda's engagement to an operetta troupe in *Dyplomatyczna żona*, final show in *Szczęśliwa trzynastka* making the main heroine the real star or the scene in *Zapomniana melodia*, at the end of which the music teacher hears a swinging version of *Brother John* composed by his nephew and tells him to leave, propels the film's plot forward. Sometimes, however, the dance scenes don't add that much to the plot of the movie. In *Zabawka*, *Prokurator Alicja Horn*, and *Kłamstwo Krystyny*, the scenes in the nightclubs are not that significant and might as well not have taken place. In those cases, the dance scenes act as interludes: they introduce a brief pause to the action of the film and they entertain the audience (both the audience in the narrative attending the nightclub party and the audience sitting in the real-life cinema watching the film). Interestingly, these productions are dramas, which allows the cautious conclusion that in interwar comedies the sing-and-dance numbers were strictly incorporated into the narrative, while in dramas they were used as independent elements, making the film more interesting and visually appealing.

It is also noteworthy that the swing dance scenes in almost all of the above cases are set strictly within the theatrical context of a performance in front of an audience of some kind. I believe that such meta-shows – a performance within a performance – indicate the need to mark a specific plot situation. Even the school scene in *Zapomniana melodia* takes place partly on a platform improvised out of school desks. Perhaps swing dancing must have been so strongly associated with a stage convention (such as cabaret or *vaudeville*) that it was not imaginable to set a scene of this type in an everyday context.

Another issue that presents itself very clearly in the scenes discussed above, is the question of the performers' gender. As seen here, in general the main characters appearing in the dance scenes are women, and if men appear, it is only in the role of an accompanying ensemble "in the background" (*Kłamstwo Krystyny*)⁷⁰. The source material can be analysed by referring to Laura Mulvey's famous article and to the

phrase “male gaze” she used⁷¹. She pointed out that cinema is created by culturally accepted (often in a somewhat unconscious way) patriarchy. In a film plot, the main protagonist giving rhythm to the action is frequently a man, with whom the viewer should identify. She pointed out that female characters usually have little influence on the events of the film and become passive: they become objects to be watched by both their male partners on the set and the people watching the actual movie production.

It seems that the role of objects to be watched is precisely played by the actresses performing in the scenes analysed above. In *Zabawka*, *Prokurator Alicja Horn* and *Kłamstwo Krystyny*, the dance choreographies are executed, as I already mentioned, as an addition to the narrative – they could be removed without undermining the logic of the plot. Not bringing any twists to the story, they are a purely entertaining bonus; the dancers performing the choreographies are there to give the audience some visual, aesthetic pleasure from their show. Those scenes are set in the context of the performance: in each case, a group of spectators watch and applaud the show, and the dancers conscious of their role, bow at the end of the showcase.

The case is slightly different in the other three films, where the swing scenes are more strongly linked to the narrative. *Dyplomatyczna żona* is the only instance of a woman being partnered by a man in a performance – they sing together and perform the choreography together, so they both become objects to watch. Despite this, the gender dynamics in this scene still distribute similarly to the previous examples: Jan is an already experienced actor who is there to test Wanda’s abilities on stage. The man, therefore, is not only her partner, but also an observer – so regardless of his presence, the performance can be categorised just like the previous ones. In *Szczęśliwa trzynastka*, Hanka replaces a star by saving the show – but it’s not entirely her conscious act. The character, as it were, becomes embroiled in a substitution, and then, along with the whole show (which was at stake) is rescued by Mr Koziółek. Her performance is a certain effect of the ongoing plot rather than a conscious act. Again, she is watched and assessed by the audience and the theatre management, through the performance she herself becomes the star – her show is meant to give the audience visual pleasure.

The exception to this rule is the instance of *Zapomniana melodia*, where the dancers are observed only by the audience sitting in the cinema and not the audience shown in the narrative. The swing performance is invented by the schoolgirls and is an important part of the film’s storyline, even though they sing a version of the song invented by Stefan, the male teacher’s nephew. I’d like to perceive this movie as a certain step towards the emancipation of the film’s female characters, which is far from complete: after all, Mulvey’s article written in 1975 referred to her contemporary cinema and, in some cases, is still relevant almost 50 years later.



⁷¹ L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, “Screen” 1975, No. 3.



⁷² M. Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska, *Dancing. Karnet balowy*, Warszawa 1927, p. 34.
Transl. T. B.

Summary

The central issue of this study was the dancewear of the performers of the swing scenes in interwar Polish films. My analysis showed that the costumes helped to pursue the principals of these modern dances – clothing emphasised dynamism and spontaneity, the most important features of the dances and of the music accompanying them. I would like to point out that the swing dance scenes are an indicator of the rapid spread of these dances – already several years after the appearance of the charleston or the lindy hop in American clubs, the steps were performed in film productions of the Second Polish Republic.

The fascination with jazz, and later with swing, was enormous in interwar Poland, which was also reflected in the cinema of the time. This vast enchantment can be summarised in Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska's poem *Krzyk jazz-bandu* (Scream of the jazz band):

You say that jazz-band is wild
that it cries like a whirlwind in a chimney
and that it scares you
it will pass
aren't the notes of life wild
life is confusion and screaming
after all, we were born amidst such music⁷².

Słowa kluczowe

swing, taniec, moda, film, dwudziestolecie międzywojenne

Keywords

swing, dance, fashion, film, interwar period

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Summary

ZOFIA ZALESKA (University of Warsaw) / Swing dance costumes and their dynamics as seen through the prism of the feature films of the Second Polish Republic

The article is a synthetic presentation of the presence of swing dance in the Second Polish Republic. It presents a brief history of this music and dance genre in the United States and its arrival in Poland, where it rapidly gained popularity and began to appear in cinematography. The author focuses on swing dance scenes in the following films: *Zabawka* (A Toy, dir. Michał Waszyński, 1933), *Prokurator Alicja Horn* (Prosecutor Alicja Horn, dir. Marta Flanz, Michał Waszyński, 1933), *Dyplomatyczna żona* (A diplomatic Wife, dir. Mieczysław Krawicz, Carl Boese, 1937), *Szczęśliwa trzynastka* (Lucky Thirteen, dir. Marian Czauski, 1938), *Zapomniana melodia* (Forgotten Melody, dir. Jan Fethke, Konrad Tom, 1937), and *Kłamstwo Krystyny* (Krystyna's Lie, dir. Henryk Szaro, 1939). It analyses the costumes of the actors and actresses performing in the scenes in question in order to demonstrate their features which emphasise the vibrancy and dynamism of the fashionable dances. The author also draws attention to the narrative function of the vocal and dance numbers she describes and to gender issues.