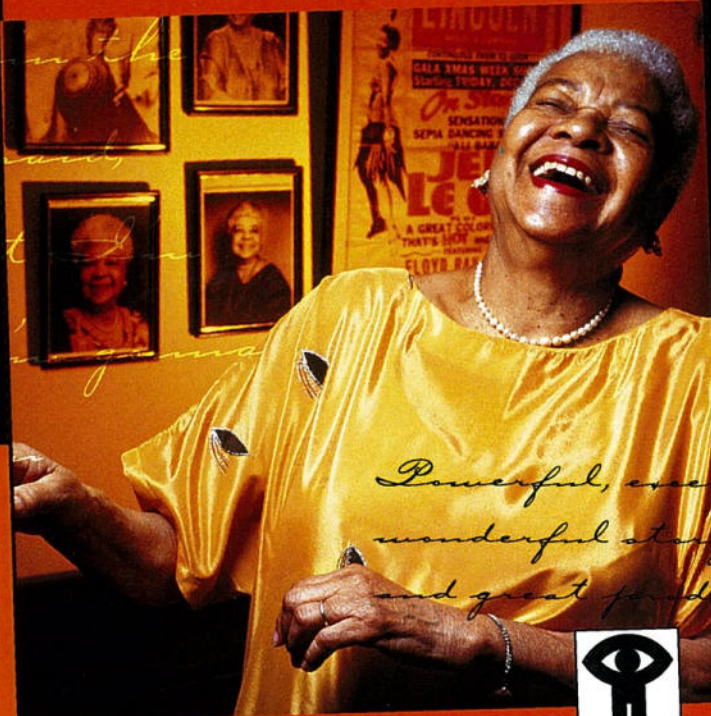


JENI LEGON

LIVING IN A GREAT BIG WAY

"A wonderfully inspiring film for everyone." – Gregory Hines



*Powerful, excellent archival footage,
wonderful story, beautiful lighting,
and great production values.*



A National Film Board of Canada Production

*Don't Miss
Jeni's Autobiography,*

"JENI LEGON Living in a Great Big Way"

THE MICHAEL BLAUSTEIN
BIOGRAPHY AWARD WINNER

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Special mention was given to actress Jeni LeGon, the subject of Vancouver film-maker Grant Greschuk's *Jeni LeGon: Living in a Great Big Way*, which the jury called "an inspiring portrait of an incredible vibrant 20th-century woman."

JENI LeGON: LIVING IN A GREAT BIG WAY



From the moment Jeni LeGon appears on-screen in *Jeni LeGon: Living in a Great Big Way*, viewers realize that they are about to meet an extraordinary woman. This film explores the fascinating life of a talented and passionate dancer, who in overcoming barriers and pursuing her dream to be an entertainer became the first Black woman to sign a long-term contract with a major Hollywood studio.

LeGon grew up in Chicago. At a young age she taught herself to dance, gathering her early audiences around her on the front steps of houses and using sidewalks as her stage. When she finally found an opportunity to be a solo dancer in the Count Basie Chorus Line, she set her sights on Hollywood and never let go of her dream.

Landing her first solo role with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and Fats Waller in *Hooray for Love* in 1935, Jeni subsequently appeared in over a dozen films. Yet, despite her talent and energy, there were many hard lessons to be learned in a segregated Hollywood.

In the late 1960s, Jeni made Vancouver, British Columbia her home and became a teacher and choreographer. A warm and vibrant storyteller, Jeni reflects on her 82 years of life in this engaging documentary – sharing her dreams, successes and struggles. This film showcases the path that Jeni forged for herself and the long-lasting gift of inspiration that she gave a generation of dance students.

The film includes interviews with tap dancer Fayard Nicholas and archival footage of the Nicholas Brothers, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Fats Waller, Paul Robeson and Cab Calloway.

Jeni has appeared with a long list of notable artists:

Made 1st professional appearance with Count Basie teenage dance partner of the fabulous “Bojangles.” Singing/dancing partner on stage and screen with Fats Waller. Starred in *C.B. Cochran* review in London TV with “Amos and Andy.”

Acting/ Singing/ Dancing with

Astaire	Belafonte	Calloway	Cantor	Crosby
Dandridge	Durante	Garland	Horne	Hutton
Lombard	Montez	Sothorn	Tierney	Nicholas Brothers

LEONARD MALTIN, SATELLITE DIGEST: "Hooray for Love... features a couple of genuine show business legends, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Fats Waller in a production number. "Living in a Great Big Way" which spotlights a delightful dancer named Jeni LeGon." • LONDON, ENGLAND: "Jeni LeGon who is a sensation... a riot... a comet in Charles Cochrane's star-studded "Follow the Sun", a success now playing in London." • WALTER WINCHEL, N.Y. TIMES, NEW YORK: "... Jeni LeGon's charm and song and dance delivers a positive show-stopper... you'll see her in Eddie Cantor's flicker, Ali Baba Goes to Town..." • THE MGM STORY, BY JOHN EAMES "But the biggest moments in "Early to Bed" are when Bob Howard and Jeni LeGon lead the prancing of 'Hi-De-Ho High' and 'When the Nylons Bloom Again'." • EXCERPT FROM REVIEW OF 'EASTER PARADE': "Peter Lawford, Jules Munshin, Clinton Sundberg and Jeni LeGon shone in support." • FERNAU HALL, THE DAILY TELEGRAPH: Pelican Players at London International Festival of Theatre, "Much of the fine quality of this work is due to the imagination and highly professional choreography of Jeni LeGon, now celebrating her fifth decade in show business."



Dancer's story honoured

The National Film Board movie about Vancouver celebrity and groundbreaking dancer Jeni LeGon was recently honoured by the National Black Programming Consortium.

Jeni LeGon: Living in a Great Big Way received the Michael Blaustein Biography Award at a ceremony in Pittsburgh. It chronicles the life and times of LeGon, the first black woman to sign a major studio deal, and who starred alongside Fats Waller, Bill Bojangles Robison and Cab Calloway in the first wave of movies aimed at black audiences.

After touring with her own dance troupe, LeGon settled in Vancouver, where she continues to teach the moves that made her famous.

Jeni LeGon: Living in a Great Big Way was directed by Grant Greschuk and produced by Selwyn Jacob. It was inspired by a story about LeGon that appeared in *The Vancouver Sun*.

Vancouver Sun

JENI LEGON: LIVING IN A GREAT BIG WAY

Jeni LeGon lived a GREAT BIG LIFE

by Egbert GAYE

Anyone interested in life must find the time to take in the National Film Board production of *Jeni Legon: Living in a great Big Way*.

Just from reading bits and pieces, here and there about the life of Jeni LeGon, one gets the sense that this fine woman has an unconditional love affair with life.

Word is, the 82 year-old former Hollywood glamour-girl, the first Black woman to sign a long term contract with a major Hollywood film studio, still finds the time and energy to choreograph and teach dance out in Vancouver.

"I really enjoying living," she once said. "I'll make it to a hundred."

No doubt she'll do so in a great

big way. Because there are seemingly no obstacles to compromise this fine lady's belief in herself and in life.

Blessed with captivating beauty and unbridled talent, took her dancing abilities from her Chicago neighborhood to a stint in Count Basie Chorus Line to Hollywood in the 1930s.

Her first gig in Tinsletown, a great big one at that time, came in 1935, in the film, *Hooray For Love*, with the legendary Bill "Bojangle" Robinson and Fats Waller.

But talent and beauty notwithstanding, America in the 1930s was an ugly racist place that not kind to Black folks, so Jeni LeGon had to carve out an existence within the constraints of that reality. She did



Jeni LeGon then and now



it well.

Over the next 14 years she appeared in dozens of major Holly-

wood productions but never able to go beyond the subservient and stereotypical roles "(In the big

movies), I played maids in about every Black culture there was. I've been a West Indian, an East Indian, African and Brazilian."

Although Jeni LeGon never made it big in Hollywood she maintained her dignity.

Outside of Hollywood she continued to tour the world as a dancer. It was on one of these tours that she fell in love with Canada, finding racial attitudes more tolerant and open. She moved to Vancouver in 1969 and has been living there ever since.

In the film, Jeni shares her story of being a Black woman, a dancer, an actor in America, in Hollywood and in Canada's and her determination to follow her dreams. For those who are into life, this biography brings it in focus in a great, big way.

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Details,
Page B15

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LeGon's story made for movies

By David Spaner
Staff Reporter

When Jeni LeGon was growing up in Chicago she liked to walk into the north side, where blacks weren't welcomed. A few years later she toured the Deep South, where she wasn't wanted. Then she went to Hollywood, where she wasn't accepted.

"I didn't like being told what I could and couldn't do," says LeGon, 82, sitting back in her West End suite. Her life has just been chronicled by a National Film Board documentary directed by Vancouver's Grant Greschuk.

There was a time when a Tonight Show appearance meant you'd made it in U.S. showbiz. In Canada, the measure of success has long been an NFB documentary about you. This one dances between LeGon's contemporary life and her long career.

Jeni LeGon: Living in a Great Big Way could have been called The Films of Jeni LeGon. There are clips of LeGon's magical dance moves lighting up the screen with Bojangles Robinson, Eddie Cantor and Cab Calloway.

Jeni LeGon is the kind of name Hollywood would have invented for someone if it hadn't already existed. She grew up dancing on the stoops of the south side of Chicago, then joined a performing troupe, winding up in Hollywood where, at 17, she was signed by MGM to the huge Depression-era salary of \$1,250 a week.

It was a time of American apartheid when Tinseltown landmarks such as the Brown Derby were off-limits to blacks. Upstaging white stars wasn't acceptable either. Set to co-star with Eleanor Powell in 1936's Broadway Melody, she stole the show at a

joint performance with Powell just before the filming and was dropped by MGM.

But LeGon continued in film and touring. She was one of the first female dancers of any colour to go solo in an era when even the best were regarded as adjuncts of males such as Fred Astaire.

It was the "foolishness" about race that prompted LeGon's move to Vancouver in 1969. While touring, she fell in love with the city and has taught generations of local dancers.

She doesn't teach anymore but

often meets former students such as the woman on a Robson Street bus the other day.

"She hugged and kissed me," LeGon says. "It's a great feeling. It makes you warm inside."

When LeGon is 100, she will still give interviews that look to the future as much as the past. This day, she's talking about work in France, Sweden and South Africa.

"So I think I'll really see the world before I pass out," she says. "I can still hoof a bit you know."

Playing today at 12:30 p.m. at the Pacific Cinematheque.



JENI LeGON
still looking ahead

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September 2, 1999

Film

On with the show, girl

>> Jeni LeGon shines as the centrepiece of an NFB documentary

by **MATTHEW HAYS**

Filmmaker Grant Greschuk says he's always had a passion for history. So he was thrilled when he came across the story of Vancouver resident Jeni LeGon in a local paper in 1990.

"Her story involves many of the things I'm interested in—dance, music, history," says the Vancouver resident, who was then a film student at Simon Fraser University.

Five years later, Greschuk would become a segment producer for a CBC current-affairs TV show, where he tried to create a seven-minute segment on LeGon. But the dance instructor's life story, which includes extensive tours of Europe as a dancer and singer and acting stints in numerous Hollywood films of the '30s and '40s, felt too confined by a mere seven minutes.

"I knew then that I wanted to tell her story in a lengthier form," says Greschuk, who brings his NFB-produced *Jeni LeGon: Living in a Great Big Way* to the World Film Festival.

LeGon's story is a remarkable one. At 82, she

continues to teach lively dance classes in Vancouver. But her career started in her late teens when she became a dancer in the Count Basie chorus line in Chicago. Recognized for her talent as both a dancer and singer, LeGon caught the eye of Hollywood and was cast in a series of musicals, becoming the first black woman to sign a multi-picture contract with a studio.

Over the years, she appeared in films with Cab Calloway, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Fats Waller. Though LeGon unquestionably had talent, her career's progress was slowed by racial barriers, which meant roles were usually subservient when they were offered.

LeGon, who says having a film made about her was "very strange but also exciting and wonderful," also says she harbours no regrets about leaving the film business. "I've really enjoyed teaching," she says from her Vancouver home. "People of colour are getting work now, like Eddie Murphy.

But in my period they weren't writing for us. So, I



That was then:
LeGon in the '40s



This is now: LE GON TODAY

took to the road. And touring was just as much fun."

LeGon reports that a high point in her performing career came with Waller. "Now that's my dreamboat," she says of the jazz legend. "He was tops. He wrote songs for me, and he wrote a show on Broadway, *Early to Bed*, which I performed in. He was a warm and lovable guy."

Greschuk's documentary includes film footage of LeGon in her film and stage roles, but it also carefully documents her legacy as an instructor. Several of her students are interviewed, discussing the inspiration they found in her coaching.

For Greschuk, who says he and LeGon have become close friends over the past few years, her story carries a message of perseverance. "She never stopped, despite any setbacks. Her resilience is truly amazing. She's essentially a very optimistic person." ☉

JENI LE GON: *LIVING IN A GREAT BIG WAY* SCREENS AS PART OF THE WORLD FILM FEST THIS SATURDAY, SEPT. 4 AT 9AM AND SUNDAY, SEPT. 5 AT 6PM AT THE PARISIEN. LE GON AND GRESCHUK WILL BE PRESENT AT BOTH SCREENINGS



National Film Board of Canada

Cinderella wore pants

Cinderella never got a chance to try on the glass slipper. Not only was she the wrong colour but the girl was wearing pants. Or so the story goes in a new National Film Board documentary celebrating the remarkable career of Jeni LeGon — tapper, teacher, and for a time, Hollywood movie star.

See story page 17



CALENDAR:14 BETTY & ALISTAIR BELL **TELEVISION:15** NOTHING TOO GOOD FOR A COWBOY
CINEMA:16 INTERNATIONAL FILM FEST • TRADE FORUM • JENI LEGON: LIVING IN A GREAT BIG WAY •
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 FIVE • THE GADJITS • HISSY FIT • SUPERCHACH • MR. T EXPERIENCE • BREAKBEAT ERA • HANDIE MAN
 MAURICE • GAELIC VOICES • OLD BLIND DOGS • LUNASA • SLOAN **BOOKS:26** RETURN OF THE
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through the '40s. She starred in films made strictly for black audiences and made appearances in pictures for the major studios which featured actors such as Jimmy Durante and Fred Astaire.

In *Fools For Scandal* (1938) one of the leading actors, Carole Lombard, took exception to LeGon's act and demanded

the film *Start Cheering* (starring Jimmy Durante) after the co-star Gertrude Neeson protested. Despite these problems there were many highlights for LeGon during her Hollywood period. She played Minnie opposite Cab Calloway in *Hi-De-Ho* (1947) and has the part of Essie in the Fred Astaire/Judy Garland classic *Easter*

technique as well as jazz and tap in her curriculum.

LeGon moved her school to Vancouver in 1969 with 20 students waiting for instruction on the opening day. They were the first of generations of dancers that she has taught to live and dance in a great big way.

Cinderella's Role Models

OSPREY'S NEW BOOK, *CINDERELLA'S ROLE MODELS*, is a collection of 100 black and white photographs of the most famous and beautiful women in the world. The book is a tribute to the women who have inspired and motivated us all. It is a book that every woman should have on her shelf. It is a book that every woman should read. It is a book that every woman should own.

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