

# Vernon (1887-1918) and Irene (1893-1969) Castle

by Christopher Martin

The dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle are probably best remembered today through the 1939 RKO motion picture *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, which starred [Fred Astaire](#) and Ginger Rogers. Irene served as a consultant on the film, which, along with her autobiographical books *My Husband* (1919) and *Castles in the Air* (1958), provided a romanticized version of the couple's rise to stardom as elegant performers of ragtime dancing. If recent scholarship (most notably Eve Golden's *Vernon and Irene Castle's Ragtime Revolution* (2007), has brought to light some of the less savory details of the Castles' career, it has done nothing to diminish the stature that the couple held as two of the first American media superstars. From 1914 to 1915 they were the darlings of the popular press, and among the most famous and sought-after performers of their time.

Vernon Castle was born Vernon Blythe in 1877 in Norwich, England. Between 1906 and 1911, Vernon played comic roles in several of vaudevillian Lew Fields's productions. Going on stage for the first time, he changed his name from Blythe to Castle because his older sister was a somewhat successful serious actress in Fields' stable. The lanky, eccentric Englishman acted as a foil to Fields' portly German immigrant. Vernon was 5'11", 118 pounds, and his rail-thin frame reportedly made him a humorous figure in the dance. In the summer of 1910, Vernon met Irene Foote, the young daughter of a Long Island physician. Irene grew up fascinated by the theater, taking dancing lessons and performing in local theatrical productions. Vernon and Irene were married in May, 1911.

During the fall 1911 tour of Lew Fields' production *The Hen-Pecks*, a French producer approached Vernon and asked him to come to Paris and re-create a slapstick comedy sketch from the show. Irene recalled that the show was not good, and Vernon's performance was ill-received. His French was barely passable, and consequently the comic dialogue did not

play well with Parisian audiences. The only things Irene enjoyed about the show were the two dance numbers Vernon choreographed and convinced the producers to allow them to perform. One told the fable of the tin soldier and the paper doll, but it was the second that would end up making their careers: a ragtime dance, the Grizzly Bear.

After leaving *Finally . . . A Review!*, the Castles took their dance routine to the Café de Paris, one of Paris' most prestigious nightclubs, where they were much better received. Vernon recalled: "We were terrible, really. Somehow, our dance pleased some Russian prince, an awfully rich fellow, and he sent 2,000 francs over to us as a gift."<sup>1</sup> Soon, they were invited to dance at private parties all over France, Germany, and England. Wealthy socialite Elsie de Wolfe arranged for the Castles to perform at a private party at the residence she shared with Elisabeth Marbury. Marbury, who had carved out a career as one of the first female literary and theatrical agents, was, like de Wolfe, a member of elite New York social circles, a friend of Vanderbilts and Rockefellers. The Castles likely intrigued Marbury for several reasons: not only did she see money to be made from the popularity of ragtime dances, but their performances could further her interest in reforming those dances to make them suitable for polite society. Marbury described Irene as having a "body lithe and graceful, her swanlike neck suggested the highest distinction, her features and coloring beautiful. Her limbs, ankles, and feet were perfect," while noting that it was "Vernon, however, who had the talent as a dancer."<sup>2</sup> The Castles were able to translate their reputation in Europe into some work in vaudeville after returning to the United States, but this was nothing compared to the success they found after Marbury became the Castles' theatrical manager in 1913.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vernon Castle, "How the Castles Began to Dance." Philadelphia *Ledger*, undated clipping, Castle Scrapbooks, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>2</sup> Marbury, *My Crystal Ball* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923), 244.

Marbury first secured Vernon the leading role in *The Sunshine Girl* on Broadway opposite Julia Sanderson, with whom he danced a Tango. The show ran for 181 shows from February to June, and featured Irene in a small part. Marbury also worked to promote Irene as an icon of style and appearance. Internationally famous fashion designer Mme. Lucille (a friend of de Wolfe) was engaged to design dresses for Irene, and before long her photos appeared in numerous magazines. Irene's image was leased to products ranging from cars to cigarettes. The Castles also danced at private parties for Marbury's friends, making connections among the movers and shakers of the city's elite, charming people with their good looks and clean-cut dancing. These strategies worked in raising the Castles' public profile, setting the stage for the breakout onto the national stage in the years 1914 and 1915.

Some major events in the Castles' two years of meteoric celebrity include the opening of "Castle House," a dancing school and salon featuring the Castles as the principal teachers. They also opened a nightclub, "Sans Souci," and "Castles by the Sea," a resort and dancing school. In April and May of 1914 the Castles went on a "Whirlwind Tour" from Boston to Omaha, giving thirty five performances in twenty-four days. They travelled in a three-car private train that they hired for the tour, bringing with them their manager, six "student" dancers from Castle House, black composer James Reese Europe, and eighteen African American musicians.<sup>3</sup> Sponsored by the "Patronesses of Castle House," thirteen of the wealthiest women in New York, the Castles published a dancing manual, *Modern Dancing*, which spelled out their instructions for proper performance. The couple appeared in the Irving Berlin musical *Watch Your Step*, which toured into 1916. They also starred in a silent film, *The Whirl of Life* (1915), which was semi-autobiographical; excerpts from the film can be seen [online](#).

---

<sup>3</sup> The tour avoided issues of integrated housing and eating facilities by taking meals and sleeping on the train.

While performing in the national tour of *The Whirl of Life*, Vernon abruptly left the show, acquired a pilot's license, and returned home to join the Royal Flying Corps. He served with distinction in WWI, earning the Croix de Guerre in 1917. The Castles' marriage was falling apart, and despite maintaining a unified front in public, they remained separated even after Vernon's return to the United States. Vernon died on 15 February, 1918, in an accident while training pilots for the United States Army. Irene continued to have a career in show business for many years, appearing in dozens of silent films, but never regained the level of fame she had with Vernon.

The legacy of the Castles' work lies in the mediation of African American dance forms for European American consumption. During the first decades of the twentieth century there was fierce debate regarding the performance by European Americans of the ragtime dances which originated in African American culture. Vernon and Irene Castle were at the leading edge of a cultural trend that aimed to encapsulate and incorporate certain elements of an African American aesthetic even as they neutralized and eliminated others. The aesthetic which emerged from the Castles' work on behalf of Elisabeth Marbury and her coterie of social reformers became the template by which European American artists would safely transcribe subaltern dance practices – valued and forbidden for their differences from similar European American practices – into forms that satisfied European American notions of propriety throughout the twentieth century. Ultimately, the Castle's work led to the erasure of even the memory of African Americans from the inception of modern ballroom dancing, instead framing the battle over aesthetics as a part of the struggle to move from Victorian to Modern sensibilities. The Castles presented a de-sexualized, elegant, and refined version of ragtime dances such as the Turkey Trot, Grizzly Bear, and Bunny Hug, refashioned as variations on a single dance they called "The One-Step." They retained the popular ragtime music while

eliminating the specific body movements that were problematic for white performance.

By the time of Vernon's death in 1918, the majority of ballroom dancing professionals on both sides of the Atlantic had modified their teaching to incorporate the dances advocated by the Castles. While there were certainly others who worked in this field, none approached the success, popularity, or fame of the Castles. By the time Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers began their film partnership, the mode of ballroom dancing promoted by the Castles had become the world-wide standard.

---

**Christopher Martin** recently finished two years as a Lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. His article "Naked Females and Splay Footed Sprawlers: Ballerinas in Jacksonian America" was published in *Theatre Survey* in May 2010. Chris holds an MA in American Dance History from Florida State University, and a Ph.D. in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Maryland. Chris is currently a Project Manager for K4 Solutions in Rockville, MD.