

At the Movies with Gene Kelly

by Veronica Schanoes

For me, it all started with *Singin' in the Rain*.

Singin' in the Rain is one of my favorite movies of all time. I've made an executive decision about the film's misogyny, and here it is: I don't care. Yes, I'm fully aware of the many textbook examples of sexism to be found in it: the demonization of female ambition, the valorization of male control of voice and agency, trust me, I know, and I just don't care. My mother, a hard-core feminist if ever there was one, makes exceptions for the Rolling Stones' "Under My Thumb" and "Midnight Rambler," two truly repulsive songs that I can't listen to without becoming nauseated, due to her long-standing crush on Mick Jagger, and I can make an exception for *Singin' in the Rain* because it is wonderful and because, of the hotness that was Gene Kelly.

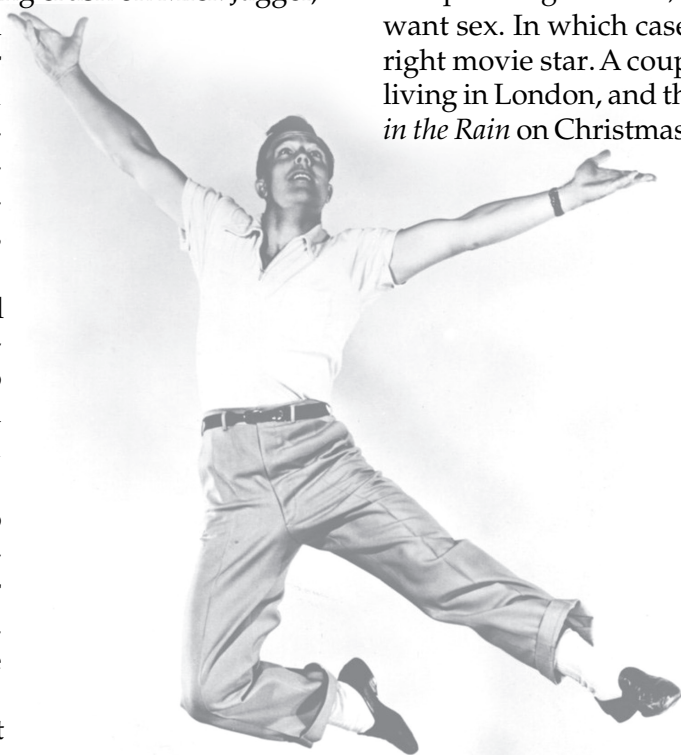
My special feminist dispensation only goes so far, however. I will not excuse *An American in Paris*. The only way to watch *An American in Paris*, so far as I'm concerned, is to skip to the dance sequences.

Let me start at

the beginning. When I was a little girl, my mother sat me down in front of the TV and put in the video of *Singin' in the Rain*. She didn't prep me at all, so when ten minutes later Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen) opened her mouth and screeched "What's the big idea? Can't a girl get a word in edgewise?!" I fell off the couch laughing. I loved Cosmo Brown (Donald O'Connor)! He's a smartass! He runs up walls! An hour and a half later, when it looked like Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) was betraying Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds), I was horrified and on the edge of my seat. There are even things that blow up! What more could a person want out of a movie?

If that person is a child, not much. As that person gets older, though, she might want sex. In which case, she's come to the right movie star. A couple years ago, I was living in London, and the BBC aired *Singin' in the Rain* on Christmas day. I remembered my simple, untainted, childish pleasures and decided to check it out. I was seized by a new, adult insight: Gene Kelly's making me feel kinda...funny.

So I started off the New Year by joining Amazon UK's DVD rental program and requesting every single Gene Kelly movie they had.



Which wasn't much, really. All that's out on Region 2 is *Singin' in the Rain*, *American in Paris*, *Cover Girl*, *Christmas Holiday*, and *Inherit the Wind*. A person might want to see *On the Town*. Or *Anchors Aweigh*. Or *Brigadoon*. That person, however, would be out of luck.

And then...the National Film Theatre stepped in. London's cinemas had been on a campaign to win my heart all year, showing *The Wizard of Oz*, *Jaws*, and *Curse of the Cat People*, and now it showed the depth of its love for me by organizing a Gene Kelly retrospective during the month of March.¹

I saw eight movies. I do not pretend to any erudition as a movie critic or any insight into movie-making, let alone into choreography or dance. This is more or less an entirely subjective set of musings on Gene Kelly and eight of his movies. There are famous dance sequences which I don't mention because I have nothing to say about them that hasn't been said before and said better. It's full of spoilers, but quite frankly, if you don't know how an MGM movie musical is going to end after watching the first fifteen minutes, you're either under the age of ten or you're an idiot.

Without further ado, then.

On the Town

On the Town, about three sailors on shore leave in New York City, makes me homesick, not just for New York City and the now much-reduced Coney Island, but for, of all things, Fleet Week in New York City.

My prom was during Fleet Week and I ended up in my prom dress drinking with a few sailors and the married middle-aged Irishman I had a crush on and who was that very evening embarking upon a two-year program of fucking with my head.

Good times.

Let's start at the beginning: I've always thought that the song went "New York, New York, it's a helluva town," not "New York, New York, it's a wonderful town," which is not as accurate. Why was it changed? Is this the fault of the Hayes Code? The Hayes Code has a lot to answer for, if you ask me. First we're supposed to believe that Nick and Nora Charles sleep in separate beds, and *now* I'm supposed to pretend that sailors don't talk dirty? I suppose I should be grateful they're allowed to look for girls.

Speaking of girls, *On the Town* has some of my favorite female characters. I suppose that mention must be made of Ivy Smith (Vera-Ellen), Miss Turnstiles herself, whom Gabey (Gene Kelly) spends most of the movie pursuing, under the illusion that she is an actual glamour girl, rather than just some local kid who won the subway contest that month. Ivy's kind of dull, but then she's not a New Yorker, really. She's from Meadowville, Indiana, and in order to make ends meet here in the Big City, she works as a hoochie-coochie dancer on the boardwalk, which pleases me no end. That's what we do to wholesome, blonde, small-town girls in New York—we turn them into exotic dancers on Coney Island. She *does* get to be Miss Turnstiles, and that counts for some-

¹ The NFT did not rest on its laurels after the Gene Kelly retrospective either; it followed that up with a Johnny Depp retrospective. Then Riverside Studios showed a double bill of *Valerie and Her Week of Wonders* and *Company of Wolves*. I love London.

thing. As a good feminist, I am of course categorically opposed to beauty contests, but I'm making an exception for this one (I think I'll call this sort of dispensation "The *Singin' in the Rain* Feminist Forgiveness"). I would *love* to be the face of the New York subway system: loud, obnoxious, cheap, dirty, and the only way to go.

Despite my love for the subway system, my personal heroine is Hildy the lady cab-driver (Betty Garrett—ultimately a victim of McCarthyism). She's perfect, from her second line, "I never give up *anything* I like," to her unabashed and ultimately successful attempts to get Chip (a very skinny Frank Sinatra) into bed, to her hell-for-leather driving. She does NY cabbies proud. And then there's Claire Huddesen (Ann Miller) grabbing her chosen sailor Ozzie (Jules Minshin) and bending him over backwards. The playgirl anthropologist pleases me no end, and I'm in love with Miller's dancing—which presents us with a problem not unlike that of the Rolling Stones' "Brown Sugar," in that her showpiece, "Primitive Man," is terribly racist, but the dancing is spectacular. Far be it from me to presume to know anything about dance, but I bemoan the lack of Gene Kelly-Ann Miller dances in the world. I would love to see those two battling it out, but Kelly had other ideas, I guess. Claire is pretty much Hildy with money, and she spends most of the picture bossing everybody around. She and Hildy hit it off immediately, of course, conspiring first to spirit their boys away and have their wicked, wicked ways with them, and then make it seem like Miss Turnstiles really *is* a celebrity instead of just another girl on the IRT, and finally to get the boys out of trouble.

They couldn't do any of that half so well without the help of Betty Comden and Adolph Green's snappy script, of course. It's full of lines that go by so quickly that you don't quite realize what happened for a few minutes, at which point you're amazed that they got away with something that dirty. Kelly gets a few great moments, but the best by far is Miller's final impassioned plea to the police and the surrounding crowd for the release of their men. She strikes a patriotic pose and announces fervently "Anytime—for the *Navy!*"

That's the kind of philosophy that can get a girl in trouble.

I haven't said anything about Kelly, and that's not because he isn't delicious in a sailor's uniform (he is) or because the dancing isn't amazing (it is). It's because I don't think he's the real star of the movie. New York itself is the real star of this movie, and in watching it, I'm gripped by the desire for home rather than for him. To be honest, I get homesick watching *On the Town* when I'm actually in New York, so you can imagine how I felt over in a city where people are bizarrely polite and the subway system makes perfect sense.

Summer Stock

This is the last movie Judy Garland made for MGM, as the body-image problems and the drug addictions that the studio had inculcated in her when she was young made her increasingly unable to function. MGM tried to make amends by pursuing this project and casting Kelly—by this time he was a big star, and didn't necessarily want to do a "let's put the show on right here in the barn" movie. But he owed Judy. His first

movie, *For Me and My Gal*, cast him opposite her, and according to him she was a real sweetheart, helping to guide him through the transition from Broadway to films. Kelly's not thought of as a particularly generous or kind man to have worked with (the words "cruel taskmaster," "perfectionist," and "slavedriver" have been known to crop up, and apparently he was constantly blowing up and making Debbie Reynolds cry when they were filming *Singin' in the Rain*, which would enrage him even more, because they she'd need to get her make-up redone before they could start shooting again), but this movie really was a kindness on his part, as he did things like fake a twisted ankle to cover for the fact that Garland wasn't up to working for a few days.

The plot summary I had going into this movie told me that Jane (Judy Garland) was running a farm in New England and struggling to stay solvent. One day her prodigal younger sister, Abigail (Gloria DeHaven), returns, bringing along a theater troupe to whom she's promised the use of the barn to stage a show. She's also brought along her new fiancé, Joe (Gene Kelly). All I can really think before the lights go down is that if my little sister arrived home one fine day with twenty-five actors in tow and Gene Kelly as her fiancé and expected me to put everybody up, I would kick her ass up and down Avenue A. Jane herself is as angry about it as Hollywood will allow, and after having to watch Joe and Abigail smooch for an extended period of time, she smashes a plate.

You and me both, sister.

I know it's a great aesthetic failing on my part, but Judy Garland will always be Dorothy Gale from *Kansas* to me. Her voice

gets all breathy and feathery when she's arguing the store owner into letting her have a tractor on credit, and I have no idea what she's saying, because all I'm hearing is "And he doesn't chase her cat every day! Just once or twice a week! And Auntie Em, you know what Miss Gulch said she was gonna do to Toto? She said—" Come to think of it, this set-up seems very like what might have happened to Dorothy when she grew up and inherited the farm. She's got this Aunt Em-esque figure bustling around in the background, and Hickory and Zeke and Hunk have gotten old and moved on, and now she's running out of money. At least she's in color.

Kelly's first big number of the movie is "Dig, Brother, Dig," and it comes after Jane tells the troupe that they can stay if they help out on the farm. The actors are less than thrilled. Joe asks them if they want everything to drop into their laps. My mind goes off on a tangent about Gene Kelly dropping into my lap, but it's short-lived, because he goes into a terrific, no-holds-barred stomping dance on the kitchen table. Lots of turning and hard-core stamping. There is an older couple behind me and the man says "Now *that's* more like it," and I can do naught but agree.

Kelly is in fine form, but poor Judy. She's obviously pretty chunky in this movie. I think she looks like a healthy armful myself, rather than fat, but the costumer keeps sticking her in these big overalls and vertical stripes, which not only aren't flattering but also are fooling absolutely nobody. They might as well hang a sign around her neck saying "Judy's not attractive."

She's wearing an especially unflattering dress during the square dance, but I

like the scene anyway. All is going as usual for a square dance until a fetching blonde actress winks at the horn player and in order to impress her, he starts to play something funky, and between the musicians and the theater troupe, the square dance quickly becomes a—lindy hop, I guess. The owner of the general store is outraged. I spend the rest of the film wondering if the horn player and the blonde actress get off together. I hope so.

This, I believe, is the first scene in which Garland and Kelly dance together, and it inspires the following observation: Judy Garland was *really* short. I mean, Gene Kelly was short himself, and he tops her easily by about a head. I suspect that Judy did not get enough to eat as a kid, and my suspicions are borne out when I later read that MGM was so concerned about her curves when she was an adolescent that the commissary was commanded to serve her nothing but chicken broth.

Eventually Joe and Jane kiss each other and of course Jane runs out of the room immediately afterwards. A certain kind of woman in old movies is always running out of the room after kissing the man she loves. It seems counterproductive. I prefer the Lauren Bacall response, which includes “I liked that. I’d like more,” and “You need a shave.” Later, Jane and Joe assure each other that the kiss meant nothing. Judy’s eyes fill with tears and her lower lip is shaking and her voice is trembling and once again I have no idea what she’s saying because all I can hear is her verge-of-tears voice saying “I know it’s wrong, but I’m gonna miss the way you used to run away from danger before you found your courage...”

There’s another tedious old movie

cliché in which a woman (in this case Judy’s little sister) tells a man (in this case Orville (Eddie Bracken), Judy’s irritating fiancé) that women don’t want to be treated kindly, they want to be bossed around. Happily, this absurd message is undercut by the movie itself. Joe is sweet and thoughtful and not only apologizes but makes amends for the troubles his troupe has caused, while Orville tries to boss Jane around and is thoroughly disliked by everyone.

Judy has a big number at the end and guess what? She’s thin again! (Thank you, Mr. Amphetamine.) She has a husky, sexy voice that for these few moments reminds me of nothing in *The Wizard of Oz*, because Dorothy never sounds like that! She’s also wearing a fedora tilted rakishly over one eye. I love fedoras. Fedoras do for men what high heels do for women, which is to make the wearer automatically about ten times sexier and more sophisticated, and fedoras have the added benefit of not hurting like hell. I genuinely do not understand why more men don’t wear fedoras. At what point did men collectively decide to trade in fedoras for backwards baseball caps? Baseball caps are only sexy if they are the right way round and are being worn in conjunction with an actual baseball uniform while the wearer is actually engaged in a game of actual baseball. Fedoras are sexy all the time. You know what else is sexy on men? Vests. Why did men stop wearing vests? I don’t get it. The Beatles wore vests. The Clash wore fedoras. They knew what was cool. Make an effort, guys.

I like Gene and Judy together. There seems to be a certain sympathy between them onscreen—they match each other in a way that Kelly and Leslie Caron or Kelly

and Debbie Reynolds or even Kelly and Cyd Charisse never did. Neither one is in danger of being overpowered by the other and becoming mere backdrop. Garland is a far better singer and her “Friendly Star” packs an emotional punch almost larger than the musical can contain. Kelly is far and away the better dancer and he can blow everyone else off the screen. But during their duets, they complement each other perfectly.

Singin’ in the Rain

You don’t need a plot summary for *Singin’ in the Rain*, do you? OK, OK. Two silent film stars are worried that they’ll get lost in the shuffle during the transition to talkies. That’s all my mother told me, and it’s all I’m telling you. If you’ve seen it, you don’t need a plot summary, and if you haven’t...I fear for the state of your pop culture literacy.

First we get a trailer for *Rebel Without a Cause*. James Dean: “You’re tearing me apaaaaaart!” I roll my eyes and wonder what the overlap in audience is between *Singin’ in the Rain* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. Apparently, that movie helped “invent” the modern teenager, which is not something to be proud of, in my book. I do have a soft spot for Natalie Wood, though, because she was such a cutie in *Miracle on 34th Street*. Also, she played Marjorie in *Marjorie Morningstar*, which co-starred Kelly as Noel Airman. If you’ve read the book, you know exactly how absurd that bit of casting was. If not, let me just set the scene for you: in 1958, some studio executives were sitting around thinking “We need someone to play a young, tall, blonde, lanky, Jewish man—of course! Gene

Kelly!” My mother says he’s quite the heartthrob in the role, but I’m skeptical.

I love Kathy Selden’s nearly incoherent rant at Don when they first meet: “You think just because you’re a big movie star—wild parties, swimming pools—every girl is supposed to fall in a dead faint at your feet!” For some reason, wild parties and swimming pools are the hallmarks of wealthy decadent hedonism in my mind also, and that’s sort of how I imagine movie stars behaving in their spare time. If they really sit around and playing Scrabble, I don’t want to hear about it.

A friend of mine has observed that Kathy Selden exists to prove that Don and Cosmo aren’t gay, and she’s absolutely right. What that doesn’t change, in my eyes, is the fact that Don and Cosmo are clearly the most important people in each other’s lives, and their friendship is the most important relationship either of them has. Friendship gets short shrift in our romance- and sex-obsessed pop culture, which has given rise to the phrase “just good friends,” as though the word “just” had any place next to “good friends.” The chemistry between the two men is why “Moses Supposes” has always been my favorite dance sequence. O’Connor and Kelly are breathtakingly in synch but they move in two completely different styles. O’Connor is loose-limbed, elastic, carefree and weightless; Kelly is explosive, muscular, pounding, and it’s impossible to take your eyes off him. This is a dance about masculinity, what men are, what they can do, and how they can relate to each other, and it’s exciting the way the greatest of action films is exciting.

The movie that contains the definitive

dance on masculine homosocial bonding also, in my opinion, has the final word dance-wise on heterosexual eroticism. When I was a kid, I used to take the Broadway Melody sequence as an opportunity to go to the bathroom. I thought that it was long and pointless, and had nothing to do with the plot. That last point is still valid, but it is swamped by what is clearly the most sexually charged sequence ever to appear on film, the amazing summit meeting/dance between Gene Kelly and Cyd “I’ve got legs up to my eyebrows” Charisse. I have no idea how it got past the censors, but it did, and so we can all watch, with dropped jaws, the beautiful, taut line of Kelly’s body in clothing that must have actually been sewn together on him and Cyd Charisse sliding down his thigh, and wonder how the hell they got away with it.

Brigadoon

I had high hopes for this one. It’s one of my mother’s favorites and it’s a whole movie of Kelly and Charisse dancing together, but it’s also the first one I find really disappointing. The plot concerns two American hunters who get lost in the Scottish highlands and find a magical eighteenth-century village that appears for only one day every century. Part of the problem is that both Kelly and Charisse are a little long in the tooth for their roles. Early in the movie, in an effort to cheer up Tommy (Gene Kelly), Jeff (Van Johnson) tells him “You’re young” and the entire audience guffawed. And Charisse, while lovely, is a grown woman, not a young, naïve lass.

Speaking of which, someone working



on this movie really had it in for Cyd Charisse. First of all, that guy decided to swathe her legs in about nine yards of gauze. Cyd Charisse is a dancer and she has absolutely amazing legs. Wrapping said legs in layers of petticoats down to the ankle not only obscures their gorgeousness but actually prevents us from *seeing her dance*. You can tell she’s doing beautiful things very gracefully, but you can’t see what they are, and it is all very frustrating. Furthermore, her make-up is simply unacceptable. Circus clowns would find it too garish. Tammy Faye Baker would put a word in her ear about the virtues of subtlety. Charisse is a beautiful woman, but what with the mummy-like use of petticoats and spackle-like use of make-up, we can hardly *see* her. Also, her hair never

moves, even she's upside-down, and I find that sort of thing distressing.

Maybe it's me, maybe it's the number done on Charisse, but I just don't find the dancing in this movie all that inspiring. When it comes to music, though, we get one of the most insidious ear viruses I've ever contracted, "I'll Go Home with Bonnie Jean." It stayed in my head for *weeks*; it even withstood a strong dose of "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend." Kelly felt, and he was probably right, that the problem with this movie was that a) it needed to be shot on location rather than on a sound stage (although the inherent fakeness of scenery gives the movie a fantastical, *Wizard of Oz*-like feel), and that Cinemascope, the wide-lens format that altered the dimensions of the filmed image was simply too wide to allow the viewer to focus on the dancers.

I had a long discussion with my mother about the pros and cons of staying in Brigadoon should the opportunity arise.

Our list looked like this:

Cons

- losing family and friends
- lack of antibiotics, vaccinations, reliable birth control, and tampons
- no Chinese food
- having to wear pastel petticoats
- having to wear pastel corsets
- running out of books

Pros

- Gene Kelly

As great an incentive as Kelly is, we both felt that we'd have to opt for the present day. So much for going home with Bonnie Gene.

It's Always Fair Weather

My love for this one knows no bounds, not because it's a better movie than *Singin' in the Rain* or *On the Town*—it's not—but because it's cynical, a bit world-weary, and contains one my favorite subplots, in which two older, somewhat damaged people fall in love with each other, even though they know how lousy the world is, even though they know how hurt they'll get if things don't work out, even though they're tired and worn down and temptation to give it all up is strong. I prefer *Antony and Cleopatra* to *Romeo and Juliet* and I loved *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. The time when I could fall in love trustingly and with faith in the essential goodness of sex is long gone, if it ever existed to begin with. Falling in love before you know what you're risking by doing so, before you have any idea what it means—hell, anybody can do that. Falling in love even after you've been around the block a few times takes guts, guts that I don't have, maybe, but plots like this bring tears to my eyes rather than bile to my throat.

The main plot is about three army buddies who go their separate ways after the war, get older, fall short of their ambitions, and meet up again ten years later only to find that they can't stand each other. An early montage shows what happens to the characters in the intervening ten years, and a shot of Gene Kelly looking all slick in a gangster suit and a fedora, shooting craps and raking in cash, reminds me of my grandfather. According to my grandmother, when she and he first got together, he used to dress in loud, double-breasted suits like a Jewish gangster. And shooting

craps makes me think of my grandparents' first date. In order to raise money for some excursions, my grandmother's landsleit youth group organized a dance—apparently, this kind of thing was pretty common among immigrant kids back then. The manager of the hall where they were holding it promised that they would have the only dance going that night.

Well, lo and behold, the night of the dance arrived, and there was another dance in one of the other rooms of the hall, it was *huge*, and it was being run by an outfit with a lot more cash, so it easily outshone my grandma's dance. So there my grandma is, standing at the door selling tickets to almost nobody, because the other dance is pulling in all the guests, when in comes my granddad, tall, handsome, and as I like to imagine, dressed like a Jewish gangster. And he sees my grandma, whom friends had tried to set him up with before, but the plans had fallen through, and she is looking gorgeous and furious (the first time my grandfather's younger sister met my grandmother, she ran home and told the rest of the family "Ike's seeing a girl who's pretty like a movie star!" My grandma was *stunning*). He walks up to her and says "Are you selling tickets all night, or are you dancing?"

And she says "Well, if you're asking, I'm dancing!"

At the end of the night, my grandma was in a bind. Hardly anyone had come to the dance, and while she had no intention whatsoever of paying rent to the mendacious hall manager, she equally had no intention of stiffing the musicians who had shown up and done their job. But the dance hadn't made enough money to cover the

musicians' fee. My granddad came romantically to the rescue and pulled enough money out of his pockets to pay the musicians handsomely. He was flush, and why was he flush?

He had come to the dance fresh from shooting craps in the alleyway around the corner.

So I feel a great deal of affection for the gambler Ted Riley (Gene Kelly).

His love interest is Jackie Leighton (Cyd Charisse), and aw, Jackie, *c'est moi*. Seriously. She's a Barnard girl who suffers no fools and is smarter than anyone else in the picture. She smooches Ted in a cab to get him to shut up, and then explains the theory of relativity to him in order to get that "intimidated by the aggressive smart girl" thing over with and scare him off. He doesn't scare, though, which makes him about a hundred times better than the slimy and annoying Jerry Mulligan (Gene Kelly) in *An American in Paris*, who wants to sleep with Nina Foch's smokin' hot Milo until she shows some initiative. Anyway, Charisse's Jackie is smart, sharp-tongued, and brisk—a real New Yorker. And Ted isn't put off by this at all! Nor does he do that creepy *American in Paris* thing of harassing her until she agrees to a date out of sheer exasperation—he just mildly corrects a line from Shakespeare that she's misattributed, tells her where he can be found if ever she wants to do so, and strolls away. He leaves everything up to her *and* he knows Shakespeare *and* he looks and dances like Gene Kelly. No wonder Jackie starts to fall for him.

To nobody's surprise at all, then, Jackie shows up at his gym looking for him, and the scene that ensues makes me feel warm

and happy. Ted leaves her so he can go freshen up or consult with a bookie or something like that, and all the guys at the gym assume she knows nothing about sports in general and boxing in particular. She puts up with this for a little while, and then busts out with a truly impressive array of boxing knowledge and trivia, because of course, she's a true boxing aficionado! The guys are duly awed, and can't stop singing about how fabulous she is.

All of which reminds me of how random men would stop my first boyfriend on the street to tell him how lucky he was to have a girlfriend who knew baseball and loved to talk about it. One time I remember especially well involved a cab-driver telling him to be sure to appreciate me because *his* girlfriend wouldn't even watch a game with him, let alone talk about relief pitching, and he sure missed his ex-girlfriend back in Puerto Rico, who was like me, and Boyfriend should be sure to hold on to me.

I will maintain a discreet silence about whether or not random women ever approached me to say how lucky I was to have the boyfriend.

There is one more thing I have to say about this movie, and here it is: Gene Kelly tap dances on roller skates. Yes, you read that correctly, and no, I am not making it up. He actually tap-dances on actual roller skates. Halfway through the sequence, I found myself thinking "All right, now, that's just showing off. You, sir, are *showing off!*" Then I realized that's exactly what

I love about Kelly. He *is* showing off, he's *constantly* showing off. His best, most explosive dances all contain a cocky, exuberant "Look at what *I* can do" quality, and I love it. Because he's right: *look* at what *he* could *do!*

People who show off are people who are really getting off on their own abilities, who really *care* about whatever it is they're doing, who love it enough to learn how to do it better than anyone else. I like to show off. Teaching contains a lot of showing off. My entire *dissertation* is showing off—look at what *I* thought of! Betcha never thought of that, did you? A man who shows off is unlikely to be intimidated when *I* show off, and I have no time for someone who's going to be intimidated because I'm good at what I do. I want him to be impressed, sure, and I want to be impressed by him, and that's not going to happen if he can't keep up with me.

Showing off is good. Showing off is sexy. You just have to make sure you've really got the goods, and Kelly had the goods. Like Muhammed Ali said, it ain't braggin' if it's true.

All in all, this is such a good movie that I will forgive it for not having a dance sequence involving both Kelly and Charisse—perhaps Charisse put her foot down. She says that Kelly was very strong and also never quite learned how to lift women properly so that when she was dancing with him, she always ended up covered in bruises.²

²I have since discovered that there was a Charisse-Kelly dance in this movie, but it was cut. I don't know why—this was the last movie Kelly and his long-term movie-making partner Stanley Donen made together, and their parting of the ways was quite acrimonious, so perhaps the sequence fell victim to some particularly vicious argument, but that's pure conjecture on my part. Anyway, you can see it on the DVD.

Les Girls

I'd like to interrupt this essay in order to issue a PSA to all men. Don't wear toupées. It is never a good idea. Take Gene Kelly, for example. He's...what, forty-five in this movie? He's still very attractive; nice body, sexy grin, still very graceful. So he's going bald. That's OK. It happens. We understand. We still think you're sexy. Unless you decide to wear a toupee. You're not fooling anyone. Toupées are the male equivalent of stuffing your bra. You just end up looking pathetic, even if you're devastatingly sexy without it. Especially if you're devastatingly sexy without it. If you're feeling anxious about your hair loss, wear a fedora.

Back to your regularly-scheduled musings. What a nasty piece of work *this* flick turned out to be. The plot concerns a dance troupe run by Barry Nichols (a toupée-wearing Gene Kelly) that consists of three young women, one French, one English, and one American. There's a whole "Rashomon"-wannabe apparatus in which three different versions of the story are told, and the first two *seem* to be in conflict, but the third supposedly makes everything clear, and shows how *both* the first two are true, except that both the writer and the script editor fell asleep on the job, because no two of these three stories are in any way compatible, let alone all of them. Very sloppy.

I am not going to comment on the music except to point out to Cole Porter that ladies-in-waiting were never in service to the king. Ladies-in-waiting were, without exception, in service to the queen, because they were attendants, not a harem. That is all.

The dancing is quite unexceptional as

well. One scene takes place in a grotty little Andalucian dive and there's a woman dancing flamenco in the background. After a few minutes, I realized I was shifting uncomfortably in my seat and craning my neck to get a better view, which made no sense at all, because the NFT auditoria are on a perfect gradient and it's actually impossible for the view to be blocked. Then I realized that I was trying to see around the *actors* so I could watch the flamenco dancer. Should I have to futilely crane my neck, trying to see around the actual actors in order to catch a glimpse of good dancing in a Gene Kelly movie? No. No, I should not.

This is not entirely Kelly's fault, as I believe he filmed it after a ski-ing accident ended serious dancing for him (as an aside, do you know that Kelly had been in rehearsals to star with Judy Garland in *Easter Parade*, when he broke his ankle by, depending on which version of the story you read: trying out a new dance step (the version he told MGM); playing touch football (the version in Clive Hirschhorn's biography of him); or stamping his foot in frustration at not being able to get on the volleyball court when he wanted to (the story told in the documentary *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*)? And that when MGM said "Well, what're we going to do?" he said some version of "What do you think? Call Fred Astaire out of retirement!")

Leaving aside the dancing, though, it seems that we have a contender for the *American in Paris* award for Portraying Obnoxious, Creepy, and Downright Threatening Male Behavior as Romantic Courtship. Despite continual harassment, the American steadfastly resists Barry's advances because she is a Good Girl and therefore

does not spread her legs unless there's a ring on her finger (not because, for instance, harassment is not sexy and Barry's kinda gross). I cannot tell you how happy I am to have missed out on the 1950s. What a disgusting decade. After being subjected to said harassment, she is lied to and manipulated and fooled into walking Barry home, where she discovers that his flat contains what we on the now-defunct Fametracker discussion boards used to refer to as a Wall of Crazy™. He has covered one entire wall of his flat with various snapshots of this young woman who has repeatedly told him that she is not interested. In episodes of *Law and Order*, it's the kind of thing that makes clear exactly how dangerously psychotic the character is and indicates that he is in fact the stalker/serial killer. Instead of being terrified and fleeing immediately, the American girl is touched.

I will add only that this segment culminates in one of the 1950s' most repellent clichés, as the American continues to decline pre-marital physical advances, and we are treated to the sight of Gene Kelly *chasing her around a table*. Because attempted sexual assault is funny, I guess. I had the urge to rise to my feet and demand sternly of Kelly "Have you no sense of dignity, sir? *At long last*, have you no sense of dignity?!"

Let us never speak of this movie again. In closing, ugh.

Invitation to the Dance

This is a sequence of three dances, and it's a bit of a vanity project, as it is written, directed, choreographed, and danced in by

³Kelly also walks a tightrope in *The Pirate*, a not-particularly-good movie with Judy Garland. While watching him do so, I started to feel a bit like Wendy Darling: "Oh Peter, is there anything you can't do?"

Kelly, and ultimately, I think that's the problem with it. There aren't many people who can pull off the "written, directed, edited by, and starring" thing—Spike Lee and John Sayles are the only ones who leap to mind. Even so, Lee barely appears in my favorites of his movies, *Crooklyn* and *Summer of Sam*, and they're still a bit longer than they need to be. Sayles has a minor role in *Eight Men Out* and he doesn't appear at all in *The Secret of Roan Inish*, which are my two favorite Sayles movies. Kelly needed somebody on this project of equal weight whose opinion he respected who could take him aside and say "Gene? This bit here? It just isn't working."

The first segment opens, and we're in nineteenth-century Italy. Or possibly a Renaissance Faire. It's hard to tell at first, but finally I'm pretty sure that we're in Italy and there're a bunch of happy Italian peasants watching a small commedia dell'arte show. After the show is over, we find that Pierrot (Gene Kelly) really *is* hopelessly in love with Columbine (Claire Sombert), but she's happily involved with Scaramouche (Igor Youskevitch). It's all very life-imitating-art. Eventually Pierrot kills himself by walking halfway across a tightrope and falling off.³ Tragic.

Or it would be if it weren't kind of dull. Part of the problem is that too much of the story is told through mime rather than dance, and mime is dull at best and silly at worst—all that putting one's hand on one's heart and looking mournfully at the heavens. Another part of the problem is that by putting himself in whiteface and the traditional long baggy silk pajamas of Pierrot,

Kelly quashes one the hallmarks of his style, sex appeal.

On the bright side, we get a lovely, exhilarating pas de deux between Claire Sombert and Igor Youskevitch. And, because Kelly isn't using a Balanchine ballerina, his female dancer is not painfully thin. On the contrary, Sombert is graceful, strong, and a pleasure to watch. She is solid, sturdy, and muscular—she has to be in order to dance these steps. In my opinion, Balanchine has a lot to answer for. He used to tell his female dancers “I want to see bone,” which is neither healthy nor aesthetically pleasing. Starvation is not appealing, nor can it ever lead to strength, and powerful dancing requires physical strength. The Royal Ballet has not, by and large, bought into Balanchine's aesthetic of wasting disease as female beauty and I find their performances far more exciting than the New York City Ballet's, much as it pains me to admit it.

I've read some dance critics describe Balanchine as a choreographer who loved women, and his dances as being designed to showcase women. But I just can't believe that anybody who truly loved women and wanted to showcase the abilities of women's bodies would consider female starvation an ideal condition. From what little I've read of Balanchine it seems far more likely that he idealized an imagined wraith of feminine submission and was unable to cope with women who had the physical and/or emotional strength to stand up to him.

The second sequence is *La Ronde* with a bracelet. A husband (David Paltenghi) gives a bracelet to his wife (Daphne Dale), she gives it to her lover, an artist (Igor

Youskevitch), he gives it to his model (Claude Bessy), and so on. Eventually, a thinly veiled caricature of Frank Sinatra (Irving Davies) gives it to the hat-check girl (Diana Adams) he's finally succeeded in seducing, who comes out from behind her counter to reveal the best pair of legs to hit the screen since Cyd Charisse. She goes home to find her soldier boyfriend (Gene Kelly, of course) unexpectedly returned, he figures out that she's cheated on him, takes the bracelet, does a sexy dance with a hooker, and gives her the bracelet (why anyone would cheat on Gene Kelly with a pseudo-Frank Sinatra is never explained). She's spotted by the original husband, who buys the bracelet from her and gives it back to his wife. They go off to bed together arm-in-arm, so I guess everybody's happy, except for the hat-check girl and her soldier boyfriend.

One of the major problems with this picture becomes clear when the hat-check girl dances with pseudo-Sinatra. The music immediately jazzes itself up and swings, which has the delightful effect of rendering the dancing much more exciting, and the unfortunate one of highlighting how uninspiring and like aural wallpaper the music had been up until this point. Once upon a time, when he was a young aspiring dancer in New York City, Gene Kelly used to sit up late with his then-girlfriend, a dark-eyed Jewess named Helene Marlowe (New York is just full to the rafters with us), expounding his theories of the relationship between music and dance. He wanted to perform to the kind of music that made regular people get to their feet—music that made people *want* to dance and had a beat. At the time, he

was talking about Porter and Gershwin and Kern. But he doesn't start using that kind of music until halfway through *Invitation to the Dance*, and I think the movie receives a great infusion of energy when he finally does.

The third section starts off well with Kelly as a sailor, a costume that always becomes him, in an Arab bazaar. He buys a lot of everything and ends up with a magic lamp, as one does, out of which comes a genie in the form of a small boy who dons an identical sailor suit. The genie transports Kelly into a book of fairy tales and most of the segment involves Kelly dancing around in an animated fairytale land and falling for a cartoon princess. Frankly, this was a good idea that was simply ahead of its time. The technology and skill necessary to execute it just wasn't there; his dance with Jerry in *Anchors Aweigh* works, because he's dancing on a real set with a cartoon character. Here he's dancing in a cartoon world. Disney was able to pull it off twelve years later with Dick van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*, but here it doesn't work. The line of Kelly's body keeps on getting sliced into and covered over by the inflexible line of his animated surroundings and too many seams are showing between the live action and the cartoon.

I also find there to be something vaguely but persistently disturbing about a flesh and blood man wanting a cartoon. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* makes it work; *Invitation to the Dance* doesn't.

The Three Musketeers

In seventeenth-century France, a young man named D'Artagnan (Gene Kelly) sets

off from the rural countryside in Gascony to Paris so that—heh. No, I'm not going to recount the plot of *The Three Musketeers*. Go read a book. Good guys: D'Artagnan, Aramis (Robert Coote), Athos (Van Heflin), Porthos (Gig Young). Bad guys: Cardinal Richelieu (Vincent Price)—here he's called "Prime Minister Richelieu" in order to avoid angering church groups, but the hell with that, Milady (Lana Turner), various corrupt guards. Useless, insipid, damsel in distress: Constance (June Allyson). Let the games begin.

This, apparently, was Kelly's favorite non-musical role, and I can't say I blame him. It must have been great fun to make, all that dressing up in silly costumes and leaping about and having swordfights—I would have loved it, too. I just wish it were a bit more fun to watch.

I really wanted to like this movie. For one thing, it was the last movie of the retrospective on my schedule, and I wanted to leave on a high note. For another, it has many of the elements I love: swashbuckling, a sexy villainess, immense amounts of swishy, slashy, homoerotic fun. Unfortunately, the flick just doesn't gel; the movie drags on and on and you should do yourself a favor and rent *Pirates of the Caribbean* again instead. I spent much of the movie rooting for Milady and hoping for Constance's death (she is unspeakably boring, and her face resembles a bowl of tapioca pudding, all white and shapeless and quivering at the slightest provocation).

The only thing worthy of note is that the scenes from *The Royal Rascal* that we see at the beginning of *Singin' in the Rain* are frame for frame an excerpt from *The Three Musketeers* with the color removed

and Jean Hagen patched in. Very clever. And yes, Kelly looks exactly that silly with long hair and a mustache.

And that was it. I still had other movies to see, of course; since then I've seen *Anchors Aweigh* (eh, not as worthwhile as you might think), *For Me and My Gal* (sweet), *The Pirate* (should have been much better than it was), and *Take me Out to the Ballgame* (excellent). I had already seen *Cover Girl*, *Christmas Holiday*, and *An American in Paris*. I have yet to see *Words and Music*, *Deep in My Heart*, *The Ziegfeld Follies*, *Thousands Cheer*, and *Living in a Big Way*, though those are currently winging their way to me courtesy of eBay and Netflix. I guess the real question here is the one Glinda posed at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*: what have you learned, Dorothy?

I guess that, like Dorothy, I've learned something about my heart's desire, and that what I've learned makes me more hopeful about romance than I've been in a long time. I've learned that I really want someone who can show off, who has the kind of drive that makes him or her *want* to show off, but there's more to it than that. There's something wholesome about crushing on Gene Kelly; he's not running around in black leather pulling guns on people, or beating people up, or selling out his friends, or screwing ten groupies a night. He's got a wolfish grin and just watching him move can take my breath away—he's got this taut, masculine grace that seems to come out of a finely controlled power—he's un-

deniably sexy. And still his on-screen persona was kind, gentlemanly, fun, and frankly sexual without the destructive violence that has usually marked the (fictional) men I get crushes on. I've spent too much time crushing on men who treat women badly one way or another, and the promise of crushing on Kelly was that even after all the mistakes I've made and idiocies I've subjected myself to there's still the possibility of finding my way clear to a sexuality that isn't infused with self-loathing and self-destruction.

American in Paris's disgust for sexually aggressive women and its romanticization of stalking and harassment, and *Les Girls*'s chase around the table make it clear how much of an illusion it is. I wouldn't want to live in the decade that produced those movies (to say nothing of Jim Crow or McCarthyism). My mother grew up during that decade, subject to an ideology that claimed that women just didn't like sex, produced sex manuals that advised wives on how to fake an orgasm, and reviled any thought of same-sex desire. She has always associated sexual desire with liberation and freedom. I never have; sexuality has always been bound up with difficulty and humiliation for me. But at the movies with Gene Kelly, I was able to look into a world where that wasn't so, a world in which sexual desire has to do with joy and light-hearted fun rather than cruelty, in which men and women impress each other with snappy patter and then walk off arm in arm. It may be an illusion, but it's an illusion worth keeping.



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