

2012

# Reel Men Do Dance: Choreography, Masculinity, and the American Film Musical

Amy Weintraub

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone](http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone)

---

## Recommended Citation

Weintraub, Amy, "Reel Men Do Dance: Choreography, Masculinity, and the American Film Musical" (2012). *Senior Capstone Projects*.  
157.

[http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone/157](http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/157)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Window @ Vassar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Window @ Vassar. For more information, please contact [library\\_thesis@vassar.edu](mailto:library_thesis@vassar.edu).

Vassar College

REEL MEN DO DANCE  
CHOREOGRAPHY, MASCULINITY, AND THE AMERICAN FILM MUSICAL

A research thesis submitted to  
The Department of Film

Amy Weintraub

Fall 2011

## Acknowledgments

I extend my sincerest gratitude to the many people who helped me complete this project:

Keith Harris, Visiting Associate Professor of Film

John Meehan, Professor of Dance

Michael Pisani, Professor of Music

Stephen Rooks, Professor of Dance and Chair of Dance

Abby Saxon, Adjunct Instructor in Dance

Katherine Wildberger, Lecturer in Dance and Drama

Thank you for taking the time to share your ideas and help me to form my own.

To my wonderfully supportive parents – thank you for (inexplicably) tolerating me during this whole process.

Lastly, to Sarah Kozloff, Professor of Film on the William R. Kenan, Jr. Chair and my fearless advisor – words cannot capture the impact your advice, honesty, and vision have had on my work.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Designing Women: Busby Berkeley and the Female as Prop.....	17
‘Fragility and Steel’: The Romance of Fred Astaire.....	37
An American in Practice: Gene Kelly’s Post-War Masculinity.....	61
‘Little Islands’: A Brief Interlude on Ballet Interludes.....	83
Living Dance: Jerome Robbins’ Violently Emotional World.....	95
Choreographing Sex: Post 1960’s Cultural Revolution Eroticism and Bob Fosse.....	118
Conclusion.....	141
Bibliography.....	148
Filmography.....	153

## Introduction

This thesis tells three different stories, distinct yet intersecting. One story is the progression of the film musical, a genre that emerged in Hollywood with the sound era and maintained its popularity, though in constantly changing forms, through the 1970's. The second story is that of dance, an independent artistic form that often found itself repositioned within the Hollywood musical, and its changing styles and manifestations on film over the decades. Thirdly, this thesis will tell the turbulent story of how conceptions of masculinity in America were redefined, shaped, affirmed, and dismantled over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, and most holistically, the aim of this thesis is to explore how the American film musical, through its use of dance, unconsciously told a tale about American masculinity. Each chapter will serve as a reflection on a significant moment in film/dance/social history that manifested in the artistic expressions of a lauded choreographer.

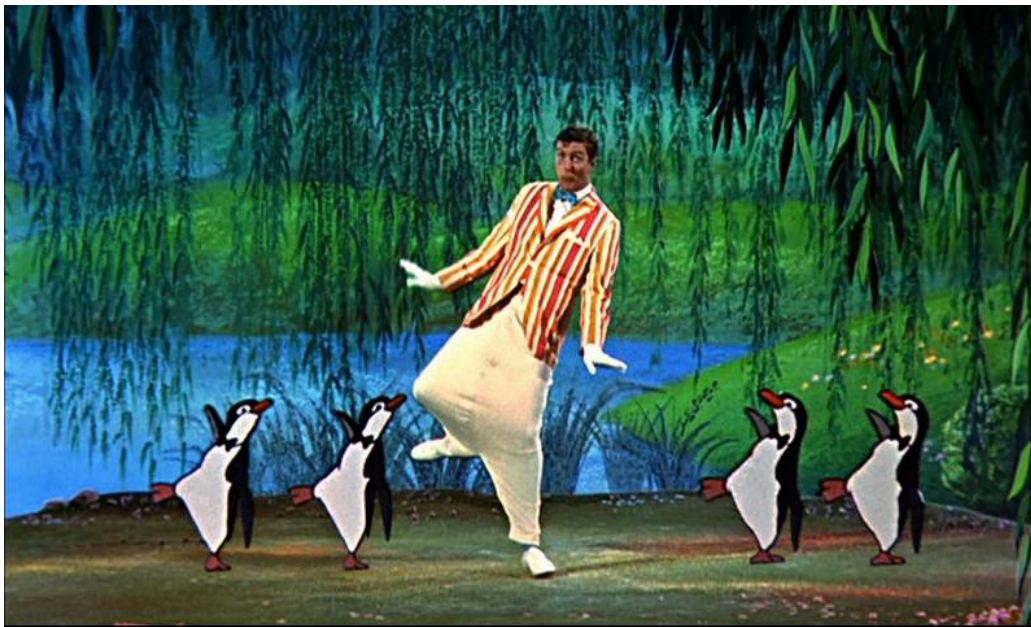
Scholars define the film musical as a movie that contains diegetic musical performances. In *The American Film Musical*, Rick Altman provides a well-rounded framework for the genre, as well as a careful approach to its study, and so he will continually serve as a reference point when discussing Hollywood musicals.<sup>1</sup> The diegetic-musical-performance definition is of course not limiting enough in scope; for example, would a film such as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), which contains but one diegetic song – “Moon River” – count as a musical? My selection criteria pares down the list not only by focusing on the prominence and number of performances but also by stressing that choreographed dances must be included.

As Altman specifies, musicals work through oppositions. The opposition between reality and the ideal or dream, the opposition between work and entertainment, the opposition between viewer and viewed – these dichotomous relationships all speak to what make the musical such an

---

<sup>1</sup> Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

appealing genre for audiences. Musicals, more so than many other genres, allow the spectator to experience something so escapist and fundamentally unreal – Richard Dyer argues that musicals present the audience with a vision of “utopia”<sup>2</sup> – that they at once have the power to both fully immerse the audience and completely alienate it (though often in a pleasing way). By showing scenes to the audience that are limitless in their ability to play with and shape the diegetic world, the real world of the audience becomes fundamentally opposed to the world on film.<sup>3</sup> Look to the musical world of *Mary Poppins* (1964) to see just how fantastical musicals can become. This movement away from “realism” is perhaps the most salient genre characteristic beyond the actual music.



Bert (Dick Van Dyke) immersed in the fantastical world of *Mary Poppins* (1964)

The music itself, however, is also fundamentally grounded in opposition. Musicals must create a clear divide between non-diegetic and diegetic music, with musical numbers being

<sup>2</sup>Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Routledge, 2002), 28.

<sup>3</sup>Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 60.

founded generally upon diegetic performance, though often with non-diegetic sweetening to enhance atmosphere. A relationship, then, often forms between these two worlds of music, regularly in the form of an audio dissolve. Altman discusses audio dissolves, gradual fading between diegesis and non-diegesis, as bridges between these two musical worlds.<sup>4</sup>

This idea of an audio dissolve speaks to the relationship between reality and fantasy in the musical as a whole. Although some sort of extension of reality is in many ways the defining characteristic of a musical, the films are always grounded in some form of reality first, from which they must diverge (look again to the realistic London setting of *Mary Poppins*). Stacy Wolf describes this as an inherent (and expected) paradox in the narrative structure of the musical, in which an entirely distinct “expressive mode” should kick in once musical numbers begin.<sup>5</sup> Although the musical form stands in opposition to reality, this inherent connection to it bridges these two realms thematically. In this sense, the reality informs the fantasy, and the fantasy informs the reality; Altman refers to this as a “perceptual continuity” between the two worlds.<sup>6</sup> While this might be clear in terms of the individual film, it should also be extended to analyses of how the more fantastical sequences in all musicals may reflect an even broader reality – the social-historical contexts of the eras in which the films were made. That is just what this thesis intends to accomplish.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>5</sup> Stacy Wolf, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 80.



A pre-Mary Bert in a dreary London, *Mary Poppins* (1964)

Altman complicates the narrative foundation of musicals, as well, by framing them as dual narratives. Whereas other genres form their narratives and meanings around causal events, the musical derives meaning from parallelism. That is to say, musicals traditionally have two lines of focus that are separate yet bridged, and a holistic understanding comes from interpretations of these parallels in a non-linear fashion. This parallelism, according to Altman, generally occurs along gendered lines.<sup>7</sup>

That is, the popular claim that musical films are simple love stories is in a sense true; musicals are almost exclusively romances. However, the development of this romance occurs in a structurally unique way. According to Altman, a man and a woman stand opposed in a couple of ways – firstly through the simple division of sex, and secondly through some kind of unrelated characteristic, such as attitude or social status. A familiar example of this is the rich, educated Professor Higgins and the poor, uneducated Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* (1964). In musicals, generally speaking, men are men and women are women, and because the narrative development

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 20.



depends so much upon this opposition, gender roles are repeatedly established – indeed, insistently stressed. From the male-as-rich/female-as-beautiful parallel exemplified by *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933) to the male-as-adult/female-as-child comparison<sup>8</sup> in *Daddy Long Legs* (1955), these roles are constantly in flux and change depending on the social context. Other theorists, some of whom appear in this thesis (such as Lucy Fischer and her analysis of gender politics through the representation of the female image in early musicals<sup>9</sup>), agree with this line of thinking, examining musicals in terms of sex and gender.



The differences between Eliza Doolittle and Professor Higgins, *My Fair Lady* (1964)

But if gender identity plays such a large part in musicals, then we must account for the ever-changing dynamics of gender, as sculpted by the equally metamorphic social and political landscape of America in the last century. Firstly, however, let us consider how musicals code traits as masculine or feminine. According to Altman, for every expression of each character's sexuality or otherwise defining characteristic, a parallel expression on the part of his/her corresponding person occurs, which could take place in a number of ways, such as in the form of dialogue, appropriate mise-en-scene, a montage, or, most fittingly for the genre, songs.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 25-27.

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Fischer, "The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of *Dames*," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 70-84.

<sup>10</sup> Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 22.

The musical number is the most important element of the musical film. A large portion of these numbers also include dance. However, film scholars, including Altman, focus more on song than dance in their discussions of the film musical. This thesis intends to widen the scope of musical film criticism to include this relatively neglected, though extremely important, genre characteristic. What qualifies as dance, though? Merriam-Webster defines dance as “a series of rhythmic and patterned bodily movements usually performed to music.”<sup>11</sup> Such a definition includes a wide range of movements in a limitless number of contexts. Dance can indeed manifest in any number of ways – on stage or on film (as the primary art form or integrated into a narrative), socially or individually, improvised or choreographed, a cappella or with musical accompaniment. My thesis concerns itself with formal dance numbers, in which these movements are obviously portrayed as intentional and artistic in nature. Additionally, in terms of the creation of dance, three major components are integral to these formal dance routines – the choreographer, the choreography, and the dancer. In many cases, these components overlap; the choreographer and the dancer may be the same person, or all three may be one in the same if the formal piece is comprised of improvised movements. As previously stated, my thesis will touch on each of these facets, though it will pay particular attention to the role of the choreographer through an integration of film and dance criticism.

In the past 50 years or so, the critical study of dance developed first into a finely-tuned discipline, and then evolved even further so that its analyses were not simply grounded in other media (stage, and less so, film), nor were they solely limited to dance’s aesthetic and thematic properties. All of these major developments are integrated into my theoretical approach. Arlene Croce, known as “the dean of American dance critics,” set a precedent for criticizing dance

---

<sup>11</sup> “Dance,” *Merriam-Webster.com* (2011), accessed December 21, 2010, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dance>.

based on its technical qualities, setting standards of excellence across many different dance styles.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, my criticism will focus not only on the thematic implications of the choreography, but also on their effectiveness, which is partially determined by technique. Croce also broke ground in dance criticism (though this was no new trend in terms of other disciplines, such as film criticism) by speaking on behalf of the whole audience, a collective viewership of which she was a part but also quite separate. “The implication,” Strauss explains, “is one of audience consensus, similar to Kant’s (1790) oft-noted claim of implanted agreement.”<sup>13</sup> I, too, speak on behalf of a generalized viewer’s reactions to both the films and the choreography within them.

Additionally, a number of scholars strove to create a more formalized interpretation of dance. Notably, Janet Adshead-Lansdale began writing in the 1980’s about dance semiotics, drawing physical parallels to the linguistic concepts of semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. She argued that a critical reading of a dance can only occur when one breaks down a routine into a series of movements, looking for repetitions, variations, and themes that build into a corporeal dialogue of meaning. This meaning, a “plausible” interpretation, she argues, is further informed by the more general context in which the piece was choreographed and performed.<sup>14</sup> The criticism here will certainly look into the specific uses of different movements within a dance to create thematic significance, thus partly utilizing this formal analysis. The dances are broken down and analyzed, section by section, movement by movement, because each movement was deliberate and deserves attention. However, I will not apply a strict structure, as advocated by Adshead-Lansdale, to this interpretive endeavor. The aim of the forthcoming analyses is to

---

<sup>12</sup> Marc R. Strauss, *The Dance Criticism of Arlene Croce: Articulating a Vision of Artistry, 1973-1987* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005), 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Adshead, ed., *Dance Analysis: Theory and Practice* (London: Dance Books, 1988), 86.

capture the fluidity of the relationships between musicals, dance, and masculinity, and so an equally fluid interpretative style is fittingly used.

Another influential dance theorist, a contemporary of Adshhead-Lansdale's, Susan Foster, similarly advocated for a breakdown of the dance into its segmented, individual movements. However, her major contribution to dance studies has been her framing of the dances in terms of the choreographer's desires and vision. She applied metaphorical representations of the dancer, the audience, and the dance itself to choreographers' works; for example, Martha Graham's dancer experiences angst while the audience is a concerned spectator.<sup>15</sup> What she accomplished here is a focus on thematic intentionality in the creation of a dance. In other words, what the choreographer has to say works to define the nature of the artistic expression manifested in the performance.<sup>16</sup> However, critics have attacked Foster's methodology, as it limits the interpretation of a dance down to a "correct" interpretation or decoding that can only be framed from the perspective of its creator.<sup>17</sup> This critique of her theory is valid, especially when viewing the dance through an interdisciplinary lens. What is important to take away from her work for our purposes here is the importance of the role of the choreographer. The way a choreographer sculpts a dance, as well as the specific power relations that exist between the choreographer and choreography, and between the choreographer and dancer, are extremely important in the interpretation of the meaning, both textually and more generally, of a number. Any advocated intent, however, is more of a subconscious act, molded by the social context in which the choreographer existed.

Always recognized as a historical practice (Croce's criticism looked to classical roots and

---

<sup>15</sup> Naomi Jackson, "Dance Analysis in the Publications of Janet Adshhead and Susan Foster," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 12 (1994): 7.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Jackson, "Dance Analysis in the Publications of Janet Adshhead and Susan Foster," 7.

standards of beauty<sup>18</sup>), dance studies have recently become fully multidisciplinary, looking at how the choreographer, choreography, and the dancer interact with various contexts, including the historical, social, political, and beyond.<sup>19</sup> This development is perhaps most important to my theoretical approach. This thesis will draw from a number of contexts when reading into the overall meaning or effect of a dance.

The major context that will be the driving force of this analysis is fluctuating discourse concerning masculinity in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America. The concepts of gender and sex have been explored by a number of critics, from a number of varying perspectives. For my analysis, perhaps the most fitting concept to explore first is gender performativity. Judith Butler first began writing about this idea in the 1990's, and her impact on gender studies has been enormous. Gender performativity is the concept of gender as a construction that is formed through the iterations of gendered behaviors, acts, speech, etc. In other words, gender is simply a norm that is formed by the repetitions of foundational customs, and these individual acts fall along or in opposition to larger groupings – something is masculine or something is feminine, something is heterosexual or something is queer.<sup>20</sup> The concept of performativity, though, also implies agency. The key to performativity is that saying something (or acting something) is a way of *doing* something.<sup>21</sup> The weight of “doing” by saying, or in fact dancing, seems a bit much in terms of this work's understanding of masculinity in dance. I do not claim for these choreographers to be activists or even advocates; instead, they simply reflect trends to which they may have not even been attuned.

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>19</sup> Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea, eds., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, second edition. (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, “Performativity Precarity and Sexual Politics,” lecture given at Universidad Complutense de Madrid. June 8, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Introduction,” in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

Gender *performance*, on the other hand, is a concept that falls more in line with the forthcoming analysis. As compared to performativity, which is a critical, interventionist act, performance is a repeated act, or “restored behavior” that is simply the acting out of everyday life by a once-spectator, now-performer.<sup>22</sup> This seems to take away the idea of agency, the idea that there remains some sort of deep intentionality driving an act. This theory is very closely connected to that of “gender display,”<sup>23</sup> posited by sociologist Erving Goffman in his discussion of gender portrayals in advertising. Similarly to gender performance, gender display involves people acting out a “code” of gender, a shorthand language consisting of rules and behaviors of which everyone is aware.<sup>24</sup> An important note to keep in mind is the ultimate goal of traditional gender roles – procreation. In masculinity’s case, simply from a biological standpoint, the goal is the sexual conquest of the female. Traditional gender roles function as the tools with which to ensnare the female via reinforcement of not only desirability but also normalcy. The very explicit common thread amongst these theories, though, is that people can act in certain ways to either affirm or contradict gender codes or norms. Dance, I argue, can do this in a number of ways.

Judith Butler has recently started shifting the focus of her gender studies to the concept of precarity. As she frames it, precarity is a state of being in which one teeters on the precipice of destruction, at the hands of his/her “differentness” or at the hands of an ineffective power structure.<sup>25</sup> What this thesis looks at is a different kind of precarity – the precarious nature of the definition of masculinity, which often, we will see, involves this same threat of destruction. Certainly overarching characteristics of manhood do not disappear over time. However, the

---

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Roach, “Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World,” in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 46.

<sup>23</sup> Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 1.

<sup>24</sup> *The Codes of Gender: Identity and Performance in Popular Culture*, dir. Sut Jhally, DVD (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Butler, “Performativity Precarity and Sexual Politics.”

concept of the ideal man shifts depending on context. This context could be cultural, locational, or temporal. In the case of America, masculinity was shaped, threatened, and rebuilt many times throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Various forces, ranging from social (the growth of the youth culture in the 1950's, the countercultural movements of the 1960's), to political (World War II, the Vietnam War), to economic (the Great Depression) forced American men down an uncertain path that constantly questioned what it truly meant to be a man. This does not necessarily imply a continuous shift in the definition of masculinity (but it does, at times); it does imply a continuous shift in the importance or primary focus of different facets of masculinity, and this is represented through shifts in choreographic styles over the decades.

In the 1970's, social scientist Robert Brannon established an interesting, oft-cited framework for studying the masculine ideal, pointing to four traditional male roles to which men aspire (as stated above, presumably and predominantly to win sexual partners).<sup>26</sup> These are:

- (a) 'no sissy stuff' – the avoidance of all feminine behaviors and traits;
- (b) 'the big wheel' – the acquisition of success, status, and bread-winning competence;
- (c) 'the sturdy oak' – strength, confidence and independence
- (d) 'give 'em hell' – aggression, violence and daring<sup>27</sup>

The various norms employed in gender performativity/performance are thus grouped to create these four extreme, distinct portraits of manhood, and I will look to these traditional roles in my discussions, at times referring back to the ultimate goal of a successful romance (or, less politely, seduction). While men may strive to embody each of these archetypes, I will argue that varying contexts and pressures cause these standards to fluctuate in importance, with one generally rising

---

<sup>26</sup> Robert Brannon, "The Male Sex Role: Our Culture's Blueprint of Manhood and What It's Done for Us Lately," in *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*, ed. D. David and R. Brannon (New York: Random House, 1976), 1-14.

<sup>27</sup> Nigel Edley and Margaret Wetherell, *Men in Perspective: Practice, Power, and Identity* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), 77.

above the others. Thus, with the shifting American landscape, and depending on the perspective, the pinnacle of manhood floated between the anti-feminine, the efficacious, the robust, and the dangerous.

What is the intersection between these conceptions of masculinity and dance, though? Firstly, one must recognize the various relationships at play. All of the choreographers examined in these chapters are males, and so the creation of the choreography will be placed in gendered terms. Analyses will ponder how male choreographers could structure and frame their dances according to the different societal pressures acting on all men at that time. The choreography could be for either women or men. In terms of the female dancer, she is positioned, as women so often are, in relation to the overpowering male force. This manifests both symbolically and literally in the choreographer/dancer relationship, as well as within the dances that include both sexes.

For men, the performance is complicated in a number of ways. Firstly, the ever-present stigma of the male dancer, labeled as being effeminate, simultaneously stigmatizes his performance. Many other cultures value dance, and particularly the male dancer, highly; historically, America did not really respect dance or the dancer.<sup>28</sup> Because of this, dance was, and to an extent still is, viewed as a wasteful pastime for people with no other skills (generally women), which is an inherently emasculating concept. Going along with these preconceived notions is the necessary acknowledgment that many male dancers and choreographers were and are homosexuals, which further informs the representations of masculinity in dance.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, the way narratives treat the homosexual dancer can be detrimental to his perceived

---

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Rooks, Professor of Dance at Vassar College, personal interview, December 12, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Doug Risner, "What We Know about Boys Who Dance: The Limitations of Contemporary Masculinity and Dance Education," in *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, ed. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59.



masculinity, thereby affecting all male dancers whom audiences are trained to assume are gay. For example, although *A Chorus Line* (1985) is a very open film that celebrates all kinds of identities, the one gay dancer who actually discusses his homosexuality in length (he discusses dressing in drag and then breaks down crying, cementing him in this homosexual-as-feminized-male archetype) injures himself almost immediately after his monologue. As Stacy Wolf puts it, “The musical at once values, rouses sympathy for, and punishes the gay character.”<sup>30</sup> However, as young dancer Billy Elliot (Jamie Bell) from the film *Billy Elliot* (2000) insists after he receives sexual advances from his male best friend, “Just because I like ballet doesn’t mean I’m a poof, you know?” Indeed, performing dance as a man will lead to many unsubstantiated assumptions on the part of the viewer because of these preconceived notions (and these assumptions’ continued support through popular representations in the media and the arts).

Additionally, the male dancer arrives at this position through a performance that is unique amongst people. Dance is in many ways a spectacle, and the spectacle itself is an object of gaze. According to a number of theorists, men have preserved their power by remaining the gazers, and never the objects of gaze. That role is reserved for women. Male dancers arrive on the stage “unmarked,” not yet analyzed. By stepping out into the realm of the visible, male dancers position themselves vulnerably, open to scrutiny.<sup>31</sup>

In terms of the film musical, the male dancer does not quite so overtly face the scrutiny and stigmatization described above. Many times, the male dancer was idolized as the epitome of sexiness and masculinity by contemporaries - indeed, newcomer Gene Kelly’s “sexy intensity” while dancing even caught veteran actress Judy Garland off guard, creating a “magical”

---

<sup>30</sup> Stacy Wolf, “Gender and Sexuality” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 213.

<sup>31</sup> Ramsay Burt, “The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity,” in *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, ed. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 152.

“rapport” on the set of *For Me and My Gal* (1942).<sup>32</sup> Retrospective analysis may draw comparisons to more contemporary views of masculinity or dance outside of the film industry to see how these idolizations may not hold, but one must remember that a dance on film is not the same as dance in the dance world. John Martin comments,

The camera per se can render incalculable service to the dance, as the phonograph has rendered incalculable service to music. The cinema art, however, is even more than the theater, an art of synthesis, and all the individual arts which contribute to it must necessarily sacrifice their own highest potentialities in the interest of the common good. This way we may expect the ultimate emergence of a great cinema art, which is eminently to be desired, but the development of the dance in its own right from this collaboration will obviously be negligible.<sup>33</sup>

Dance in films was not often taken as seriously as other modes of performance. There may be validity in the claim that cinema is an art of synthesis that may require compromise, but that is not to say that dance as an art form was literally compromised by its filming. Martin himself comments on the wonders that the camera can do for choreography. As it will be shown throughout the chapters, filmic techniques such as cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scène (particularly through the manipulation of space) allow for complexity and nuance that a live performance could simply never accomplish. Not to say that one is better than the other – something is of course lost without the immediacy, holistic presentation, and performer/audience connection of a live show – the two modes are simply quite different. What it comes down to, in truth, is the choreographer. Good choreographers create a beautiful dance; great choreographers take advantage of their tools and create something transcendent.

This thesis focuses on five famous film choreographers – Busby Berkeley, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Jerome Robbins, and Bob Fosse. These men each took advantage of the tools

---

<sup>32</sup> Alvin Yudkoff, *Gene Kelly: A Life of Dance and Dreams* (New York: Back Stage Books, 1999), 106.

<sup>33</sup> John Martin, “Dance on Film,” in *The Dance Has Many Faces*, ed. Walter Sorell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 164.

afforded to them by working within the film industry. Busby Berkeley played with space and costume in order to create visually complex mise-en-scenes that elevated his relatively simple choreography to the status of pure spectacle. Fred Astaire used the power of the surrounding film narrative to frame his dances with Ginger Rogers as moments of romance and seduction, with arcs of development shaped by his dynamic choreographic style. Gene Kelly took control of the camera, making sure that it danced along with him, showcasing his power and control over both his own body and the environment. Jerome Robbins created an iconic world of dance in an urban setting, choreographing smoothly within the environment and matching stylistically with the equally urban and exciting musical score provided, in one notable example, by Leonard Bernstein. Bob Fosse choreographed raw sexuality, and with creative control over some of his pictures, he was able to use editing to highlight the snappy, provocative nature of his works.

But these choreographers are not simply the focus of this thesis because they did great things for dance on film in distinct ways. These five men created works, and in some cases personified these works by starring in them, that carry much more weight than just standing the test of time. The films, the dances, resonate now because of how popular and influential they were when they were created. But why were they so popular? They were popular because they were symptomatic of something much bigger than just dance or just entertainment. Berkeley, Astaire, Kelly, Robbins, and Fosse represent five distinct moments in gender identity that manifested in five wholly different ways – specifically, each of these manifestations becomes particularly clear and resonant when looking through the lens of Brannon’s four traditional male roles. These major differences between choreographers and “moments” are reflected primarily through the marked variations in dance style – ranging from the simplistic hooper-inspired tap/walking routines performed by Berkeley’s all-female choruses of beauties (representative of

Brannon's "no sissy stuff") to Astaire's graceful ballroom/tap duets ("the big wheel") to Kelley's power-driven, jazz/ballet-inspired tap ("the sturdy oak") to Robbins' tough yet emotional jazz/ballet ("give 'em hell") to Fosse's explicitly sexual, stylized jazz (simply the raw biological desire with none of the four used as tools, resulting from the complete destruction of previous masculine ideals in the 1970's). Running in parallel with these styles is the classical form of ballet, growing, changing, and being shown to the American public along with these other styles, speaking to their own sets of American "moments." All of these moments mean something; they are the amalgamation of various pressures and histories, and even if the choreographer did not create with the intention of capturing this moment, he did it nevertheless. More specifically, each of these artists shows, through his choreography, what it meant to be a man in that historical moment. Through the musical form, and through the tool of dance, Berkeley, Astaire, Kelly, Robbins, and Fosse paint shifting portraits of American manhood, immortalized and made pervasive through their films' successes and legacies.

## Designing Women: Busby Berkeley and the Female-as-Prop

Once I had seven hundred twenty three girls show up on a call for one of my Gold Diggers pictures. I was all afternoon picking girls out of this large number; and finally I ended up selecting three girls out of the seven hundred twenty three! My sixteen regular contract girls were sitting on the side waiting; so after I picked the three girls I put them next to the special sixteen and they matched, just like pearls.

Busby Berkeley<sup>34</sup>

The Great Depression, into which the United States plummeted at the end of the 1920's (and thus shortly after the introduction of the sound film and the film musical) represented a major blow to the strength of the American masculine ideal. The major cause of this crisis of masculinity was unemployment; by 1933, the unemployment rate was up to 25 percent (37 percent for nonfarm workers).<sup>35</sup> A man's self-worth had been defined by his livelihood, and now the ability to even have a livelihood was disappearing. Even with the New Deal creating a number of jobs starting in 1933, the damage had been done, and the Great Depression continued to negatively influence the self-confidence of men across America.<sup>36</sup> In short, not being able to work was emasculating.

Contributing to this sentiment of loss-of-manhood was the strengthening American female identity. Michael Kimmel writes,

The chief problem seemed to be women, both at work and at home, as coworker, as mother, and as symbol. Everywhere men looked, there were women. Work itself was seen as increasingly feminized, with more women employed in increasingly feminine offices – hardly the world of real men at all.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Bob Pike and Dave Martin, *The Genius of Busby Berkeley* (Reseda, CA: cfs books, 1973), 64.

<sup>35</sup> Gene Smiley, "Great Depression," in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*, accessed January 2, 2012. <http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc/GreatDepression.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Don Martindale, "Conformity, and the Search for Personal Identity." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 378 (1968): 84.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 197.

Thus, women were already chipping away at the American man's source of pride – his honest labor. By 1920, women made up one third of the work force.<sup>38</sup> When the depression hit, their presence still held relatively strong; women made up 25 percent of the workforce in the 1930's, with more than three million of employed women married.<sup>39</sup> Men were further distanced from their former domain, both unable to work and witnessing a tremendous shift in the demographics of the American workforce; it seemed they could no longer use their professions to prove their masculinity.<sup>40</sup>

Taking into account this major shift in the masculine mindset, various labor movements attempted to tackle economic issues through a masculine lens, hoping to reinvigorate the national climate by similarly reinvigorating the men who helped shape it. In *Gendering Labor History*, Alice Kessler-Harris describes a number of approaches taken by varying groups trying to get support for their causes, each of which speak to the masculinity of workers. The American Federation of Labor, in support of voluntarism, played upon the American man's ideal of freedom. "Voluntarism presumed that wage earners had the courage, independence, and economic power to protect their own interests...Its advocates assumed that dignity – a man's dignity – resided in the capacity to do so."<sup>41</sup> Conversely, supporters of unemployment insurance appealed to a masculinity that emphasized male camaraderie and solidarity, hoping that men would stick it out together in dignity until they could all work together again.<sup>42</sup> What these two distinct approaches have in common is a rejection of femininity, and this theme indeed carried over into the popular portrayals of masculinity. Voluntarism advocates spoke of "a man's

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>39</sup> Elaine S. Abelson, "Women Who Have No Men to Work for Them: Gender and Homelessness in the Great Depression, 1930-1934," *Feminist Studies* 29 (2003): 106.

<sup>40</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 193.

<sup>41</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 238.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 246.

dignity,” an ideal of heroism that was not applied to women at that time. Those in favor of unemployment insurance stressed the importance of the male bond, an inherently exclusionary relationship. These fall in line with Robert Brannon’s traditional male role ‘a’ – “no sissy stuff.” Even with this attempted affirmation of a masculine ideal, men still felt hopeless, helpless, and stagnant when faced with the problems of the real world.

Busby Berkeley represented one answer to this depression-era malaise. Berkeley is widely, even arguably universally, recognized as the most prominent creator of large-scale film spectacles. Some of his most famous and popular works (which will be the focus of much of this chapter) were created during the Great Depression, which greatly influenced his work in terms of subject matter and stylistic expression. Choreographing many pictures over the course of three decades, he is remembered by viewers for his extravagant and often eccentric uses of concepts, spaces, dancers, and costumes in his over-the-top musical numbers. These elements arguably function as reactions to the Great Depression in two ways. Firstly, “over-the-top” in this case means decidedly unrealistic and often impossible. Through their distinctly un-real qualities, his numbers represent a kind of utopia, founded primarily upon an aesthetic of abundance to counteract the very real paucity of poverty.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, much of this aesthetic of abundance relies on the use of large quantities of female dancers as highly sexualized props. As the male choreographer of these numbers, Berkeley has complete choreographic control over the usually nameless, overtly-feminized chorus girls, and this control seems to reaffirm masculine strength, particularly when taking into account the role women played in depression-era emasculation. Further, Berkeley almost never uses men in his numbers; when he does, they appear as strong, realistic representations of American men (they typically do not dance; when they do, they are strong individuals, such as James Cagney dancing as a sailor trying to win an enigmatic woman

---

<sup>43</sup> Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 28.

in “Shanghai Lil,” from 1933’s *Footlight Parade*), perhaps most notably as in “Remember My Forgotten Man,” from *Gold Diggers of 1933*. This effectively positions man as the holder of the gaze, with the women as the objects of gaze. By so distinctly separating the masculine from the feminine, feminizing the musical number, removing the man from the corporeal performance almost completely, and placing him in the position of spectator, Berkeley truly embodies Brannon’s “no sissy stuff” traditional male role. He completely rejects the feminine from the portrayed masculine archetype and places men in a position of power over women through his artistic direction.

When examining the work of Busby Berkeley, one must pay considerable attention to all of his choices, choreographic and otherwise. The combination of all of the artistic elements in his numbers culminates in a complex and unique portrait of a crisis in (and reactionary reaffirmation of) American masculinity, and ignoring any of the aesthetic decisions behind any of his numbers would ultimately undermine the abundance-driven creative expression. Additionally, to understand Berkeley’s choreographic style is to understand the overall aesthetics of his musical numbers, because in many ways the movements of the dancers’ bodies are of minimal importance as compared to the other aspects of these larger-than-life numbers.

Although it may seem as though his numbers directly respond to the problematic social climate in which he worked, Berkeley’s artistic perspective began to develop long before the Great Depression. Berkeley emerged in the film industry in the early sound era, but he came from a background in musical theater that informed but did not prescribe his artistic vision. His career began with the stage, where he was dance director first for operettas, then musical comedies, and then revues.<sup>44</sup> As Martin Rubin explains, operettas are marked by a certain

---

<sup>44</sup> Martin Rubin, *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 47.



refinement and romanticism; musical comedies are characterized by, fittingly, their comedic lightness and playfulness; and revues are branded by their lack of cohesive narrative and compensatory emphasis on providing showstopper after showstopper.<sup>45</sup> According to Rubin, each of these forms worked to influence Berkeley's Hollywood career; indeed, elements of each of these styles can be seen in Berkeley's numbers. As the film musical was still quite new when Berkeley entered the scene, it follows that musicals of that era would be heavily influenced by the theater; it just so happens that the resulting combination of stylistic elements would fit very well with what the American public wanted and needed from their escapist entertainment. In order to illustrate this, a preliminary discussion of the overall filmic style will follow. Films from Berkeley's "Classic Warner Bros. Period (1933-1934)" provide the most representative examples of the "Berkeleyesque" form.<sup>46</sup>

While Berkeley was not director of his films until later on in his career (his Warner Bros. Period films were directed by a range of men, with Lloyd Bacon appearing most frequently; Bacon directed *Footlight Parade* and 1933's *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, for example), he is still associated with the generic forms of his earlier films, beyond their dance numbers. Films from the Classic Warner Bros. Period (and many others, as well) are backstage musicals, with the central plot revolving around show business. Films like *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *Dames* (1934) follow both newcomers and veterans as they work on new Broadway musicals, the films generally culminating with the performances of said shows. This basic scenario allows for the integration of the various elements associated with operettas, musical comedies, and revues. The films as a whole can generally be categorized as musical comedies; the characters are charming and funny, the dialogue is pithy, and the overall tone is playful. While the films may deal with serious

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 43-56.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 79.

topics, such as *Gold Diggers of 1933*'s focus on the effects of the Great Depression, comedy pervades the narrative of the film. Further, the musical performances often have a comedic, lighthearted tone. The choreography in many of his numbers can be quite playful, as well. In *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, "Shuffle Off to Buffalo" shows Ruby Keeler and her character's new husband slowly spinning in full circles of confusion to peer at fellow passengers who are laughing at them; unbeknownst to the couple, the groom has a "Just Married" sign pinned to his back. This scenario is funny, but the turn – with its syncopated steps and the head moving at a different, slower pace than the body – is funnier. Beyond the choreography, a whole number can be comedic. Like "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," *Dames*' "The Girl at the Ironing Board" is nothing short of silly, with Joan Blondell giving a hilarious performance as a laundry worker fawning over underwear. One particularly comical moment comes when the other laundry workers form swans out of their arms, feeding from a bowl of laundry pins as balletic music – *Swan Lake*, no less – facetiously scores their movements. At the same time, the romantic motivation of the song mixed with the lewdness of handling men's undergarments makes for a strikingly sexual effect, despite Blondell's conservative attire and goofy behavior.



A silly moment in “The Girl at the Ironing Board,” *Dames* (1934).

While Berkeley’s numbers can be comedic, they are often offset by more serious performances. These numbers are marked by a highly wrought feeling that manifests in the music, the dancing, and the costumes (take the “The Shadow Waltz” from *Gold Diggers of 1933* or the second half of “I Only Have Eyes for You,” from *Dames*). These numbers are big, beautiful, slow, and deliberate. This aesthetic of grandness is directly tied to Berkeley’s operetta roots. The fact that both comedic and serious numbers can fall side by side (“The Shadow Waltz” is preceded by the frivolous and cute “Petting in the Park” in *Gold Diggers*, for example) is possible because of the backstage nature of the films, coupled with the conceit that the shows within the worlds of the films adopted the revue format. The numbers in Berkeley films, like numbers in revues, were predominantly non-integrative. An integrated musical is one in which the songs serve the same narrative function as non-musical performances by characters; music emerges because characters are experiencing a heightened emotion that cannot be expressed

through mere dialogue or non-dance movement.<sup>47</sup> Conversely, a non-integrated musical is one in which the songs do not work to further the narrative or character development beyond whatever meaning can be taken externally from the performance; the songs fit within the world of the film as pure diegesis, like Dick Powell singing “I’ve Got to Sing a Torch Song” to Ruby Keeler in *Gold Diggers of 1933* because he is a songwriter who is simply practicing on his piano as she watches. By taking character development out of the equation, a wide range of emotions could be expressed within each film. The revue format epitomizes this because no cohesive plot links the various numbers in a show, thus allowing for a variety of musical styles, dance styles, and tones without the necessity to contextualize.

But what do these big numbers actually look like? Berkeley numbers generally utilize a few key elements. Firstly, his use of space is quite unique. While many of his routines take place on stage, the space opens up to an impossible degree. In “I Only Have Eyes for You” from *Dames*, for example, the curtain opens to reveal a city street, then the camera rounds the corner and goes down another street, boards a train, travels into a fantasy world comprised of multiple spaces, goes back to the train, and ends on an expansive yard that dwarfs the seven subway cars lined up in the background. Rubin argues that this clear divergence between musical number and the rest of the narrative (as the impossible only occurs during routines) permits an artistic freedom that lets the musical numbers function autonomously, reveling in their spectacular nature to an even greater degree than, say, an integrated musical’s numbers could.<sup>48</sup> This obviously connects back to the aesthetic of abundance, with space being yet another visual aspect off of which the deprived audience could feed. Within these spaces, large, elaborate

---

<sup>47</sup> Heather Laing, “Emotion by Numbers: Music, Song and the Musical” in *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell (Portland, OR: Intellect Books, 2000): 6.

<sup>48</sup> Rubin, *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle*, 39.

structures host the dancers. These allow for striking extreme long shots of surreal configurations on a grandiose scale (see below).



“The Shadow Waltz,” *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933).

The dancers (almost always female) move through these large spaces not as agents, but rather as props, thus informing the gendered power dynamics through the relegation of female to object. This is supported by the choreography, which often involves not much more than complex, synchronized blocking, resulting in eye-catching geometric patterns that could easily be accomplished by inanimate objects. While Berkeley does employ tap dancing (See hooper Ruby Keeler’s relaxed style in “42<sup>nd</sup> Street” from *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, below – her hunched posture, widely-set legs, and deeply-bent knees made for a surprising and unconventional performance from a female dancer), he mostly has his dancers do little more than twirl, step, sway, kick, and perhaps perform mundane movements such as fluffing hair that simply reaffirm their feminine qualities. The most interesting choreographic elements of his numbers are arguably the moments

where he arranges his girls in the aforementioned complex, kaleidoscopic patterns shown from a bird's-eye-view (this freedom of camera usage during these numbers follows the same principle as his use of space), truly separating the women's individual identities from their usefulness in the numbers.<sup>49</sup>



“42<sup>nd</sup> Street,” *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933).

Berkeley also enjoys utilizing interesting props to visually enhance the generally unimpressive body movements, such as with the giant bananas in “The Lady in the Tutti Frutti Hat” from *The Gang’s All Here* (1943) or the glowing violins in “The Shadow Waltz.” Ultimately, the viewer does not care about the actual dance steps; instead, the viewer experiences a spectacle that is comprised of many elements, all of which compete with each other for the viewer’s attention. The one element that stands above all others, though – the one element to which a discussion of Berkeley will always inevitably return – is the chorus of girls. As mentioned, the Berkeley dancer is a different kind of prop, and she paradoxically reinforces the idea of choreographic minutiae being inconsequential, despite her being the very vessel carrying

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 6, 43.

out the dance steps. His dancers are the major source of movement in the dance numbers, and as such they catch the eye; Berkeley often went the extra mile, though, by utilizing dozens of beautiful women in a number. While the leading ladies of his films, such as Ruby Keeler, Joan Blondell, and Ginger Rogers, would feature prominently in these numbers, beautiful chorus girls' faces (and bodies) would be comparably glorified by the camera. Women became part of the aesthetic – objects featured in the spectacle.

A major way that this occurred was through Berkeley's use of costume, which will be a major reference point through this discussion. Costumes, as Jane Gaines explains, work to define the person. They serve a narrative purpose. For women stars in the silent era, this even developed into a "dress plot," a story defined by the costume changes throughout a film.<sup>50</sup> However, in the world of Berkeley spectacles, because the premises of the numbers are so disconnected from the narratives into which they are woven, costumes simply become part of the spectacle, as well, only working to further define the female performer as an aesthetic element of the display. Clothes are no longer a tool for self-expression,<sup>51</sup> but instead enter into the arsenal of the dance director's artistic choices. The fact that all of the girls in Berkeley routines wear similar or identical costumes solidifies this. The women frequently go through numerous costume changes per number; garments serve various purposes, ranging from highlighting sexuality, to accentuating and filling out the overall aesthetic, to telling a story within the world of the number, to contributing to the architecture of the space. One number that both illustrates these uses and is in essence and theme a meditation on this very topic of woman-as-spectacle is "Dames" from *Dames*.

Within the larger story arc of *Dames*, a racy film made despite the newly-enforced

---

<sup>50</sup> Jane Gaines, "Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story," in *Fabrications: Costumes and the Female Body*, ed. Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (New York: Routledge, 1990), 181-182.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

Production Code of 1930,<sup>52</sup> this number represents a heightened level of sexuality on display within the final, diegetic Broadway production, which becomes progressively more and more indecent from song to song. Numbers such as this would not be easily made in the near future because of the enforcement of the Code, adopted in 1934. Berkeley's films are the epitome of pre-code sexuality with their explicit imagery and often erotic conceits. Promising to be a hot new show with beautiful ladies, the revue within *Dames* presents this number, eagerly awaited by sincere viewers and incognito protestors alike. Berkeley is giving the diegetic audience what it wants; through the use of impossible spaces and camera work, though, it becomes clear that he is also giving the extra-diegetic film audience what it wants. The number becomes an ode to the female form. In a fittingly meta-theatrical vein, the number begins with men in a business meeting, discussing how to get customers to come see a Broadway show. Dick Powell has the answer – dames. This of course ties back to the problem of the Great Depression. Actors look for jobs; producers look for paying audiences; and all around them destitution pervades every aspect of life. Theater, film, and particularly the spectacles found within them represent fantastical departures from the stark penury of reality. And what better way to take one's mind off of economic collapse than dames! Berkeley uses a multitude of "dames" to create the utopian fantasy described earlier.

As beautiful women come into Powell's office searching for work, he sings of the power of the female presence to draw people in.

*What do we go for? Go see a show for?  
Tell the truth, we go to see you beautiful dames.  
We spend our dough for bouquets that grow for -  
All you cute and cunning, young and beautiful dames.*

---

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey Spivak, *Buzz: The Life and Art of Busby Berkeley* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 109.



Berkeley begins by allowing the camera's gaze to focus in on the women's individual faces. The scene has not yet transcended into true fantasy yet, and so it remains grounded in reality and the accompanying decency that is manifested in a more modest camera gaze as well as costume design. The women are in street clothes, albeit beautiful ones. Also worth noting is the fact that this narrative premise is one of sexual power dynamics, with a male board of trustees having control over and choreographing these show girls as they move through a fantastical representation of their lives as performers. So, even the "real" quality of this number speaks to male power over the female.<sup>53</sup> As soon as the setting switches to fantasy with a blatant but clever iris wipe, the camera's gaze becomes much less inhibited, and the costumes become both more sexual and more fantastical.

The first sequence within the fantasy section of the number tells the story, still referencing the conceit of the number, of "dames" waking up and getting ready for work on the stage. This story is elevated to the level of spectacle partly through the use of space – the stage opens up to reveal an expansive area that will host a number of upcoming scenes, all of which involve large geometric configurations of props encountered in everyday life. On the other hand, the spectacle is not enhanced by the music. After Dick Powell's singing performance ends, the music simply repeats, never really building or changing all that much until the end, when the chorus of girls echoes Dick Powell's expressed sentiments. Because of this, visual elements become the key to the number. One major visual aspect that enhances the spectacle, as previously mentioned, is the use of various costumes, created by prominent costume designer Orry-Kelly. Because the next section of this number can be considered a transitional fantasy sequence, as it still stays grounded in plot and also partly in reality, the costumes are not surreal. They are, however, very sexual, and thus fit more easily and acceptably within the realm of

---

<sup>53</sup> Lucy Fischer, "The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of *Dames*," 76.

spectacle.

The first part of this transition sequence shows the girls in bed. They sleep in pairs, which in itself can be considered highly erotic, and they also wear slinky nightgowns that reveal the arms and chest and are quite form-fitting. They rise and stretch together to show off their bodies (see below, left). In these costumes, the ladies perform the first dance section of the routine, arranged in two circles (the beds in the outer circle) and mimicking morning stretches and exercises. Reconfiguring the beds, the girls run in a line towards the camera and collapse in front of it, faces filling the screen. Faces, throughout the number and particularly in this first fantasy sequence, mark the transitions between scenes or spaces. Perhaps this is a constant reminder that beauty, as epitomized by a stunning female face, is the most important aesthetic element. It cannot be abandoned, no matter how big or elaborate everything may become; beauty must be the focus, the goal, the constant. While some may argue that concentrating on faces is a positive, empowering move, Berkeley's utilization of the face is quite the opposite. Faces in Berkeley numbers are almost always fleeting, vacant, anonymous, and disembodied; a face might as well be a particularly appealing leg, chest, or crotch.

With the aforementioned close up on the nightgown-wearing girls' faces, the number transitions to a more scandalous bathing scene. The girls in the tubs are naked but covered with bubbles to just above their breasts; the girls standing are wearing two towels – one wrapped around their torsos and one over the left shoulder. These costumes are more modest than the nightgowns but are simultaneously more suggestive in nature because of the promise of nudity underneath. The number is effectively stepping up its game, but only in terms of concept, not in movement. Dance in this section is limited to synchronized movements of the standing girls, walking to one side of the tub and pouring water in for the other girl. This slightly sensual act is

accompanied by a fitting element of voyeurism; a girl finally notices the camera and, shocked and scandalized, blocks the camera's gaze, marking the next transition (see below, right).



Similarly voyeuristic, the next scene shows the women in their undergarments, putting on makeup. These costumes are arguably more sexual than the tub scene's, because they reveal the arms and legs and carry with them the scandalous undertone of a more contemporary forbidden fruit – women have always bathed, but women have not always worn girdles and slips. The choreography is fitting for this scene; the girls primp themselves in unison, fluffing their hair, applying lipstick, rising and twirling, checking themselves in the mirror (see below). The camera's gaze is once again spotted by two girls adjusting their garters, and the scene transitions one final time in this first fantasy sequence. The girls emerge, ready to work, in street clothes. They are modestly dressed but still the object of gaze, the few men in this scene ogling them as they walk by. Disappearing into an assortment of stage doors and entering symbolically into the world of show business, the transitional fantasy sequence comes to a close; with its end comes the end of even quasi-realism, in terms of story, space, dance, and costume.



To herald in the abandonment of reality, the stage doors collapse into the set, revealing an expanse of ambiguous figures spaced in even rows that fill the frame. Suddenly, these figures open up in one unified movement, and an overtly sexual one, at that. Enough of faces - the girls open and close their arms and (more importantly) legs widely and repeatedly. This movement is exaggerated by the costume. The legs and hips are highlighted; the bottom half of the ensemble is a skin-tight, black legging, the shape of the leg accentuated by black pumps. As the space in this scene is comprised of a stark, monochromatic, light background, the effect is for this portion of the costume, and thus the body, to stand out. Every curve and every movement is gazed upon intently. The top half of the garment is full and white, with ruffles surrounding the shoulders, bust, and head (the face is isolated, still given its rightful attention), with matching ruffled gloves covering much of the arm. The female form here is thus relegated to the status of literally “a pair of legs.” As if to drive this point home, the camera cuts to a tight, low-angle shot of a girl opening and closing her legs straight at the audience (see below). The sexuality of it all is

startling in its directness. She gets up and stands in front of the camera so that all the viewer can see are her legs. The others fall in line behind her and then, in an even more blatant display of female to-be-looked-at-ness, they all spread their legs and bend over as the camera literally passes through each opening.



These crotch shots, a frequently-used Berkeley technique, epitomize female objectification and solidify the male-female differentiation necessary to fulfilling the “no sissy stuff” male paradigm. Nadine Wills argues that the crotch shot in the 1930’s is a representation of the modern conception of physical femininity. The “crotch” was a relatively recently-defined area on the body, and new clothing styles were drawing further attention to this private, sex-defining space.<sup>54</sup> According to Wills, by using the crotch shot as an expression of femaleness, particularly within this performance framework littered with other symbols of feminine beauty, Berkeley paints the portrait of a “110 per cent woman.” The 110 per cent woman has “a female body where sex and gender are so codependent, stereotyped and stylized that the final product is an excessively delineated femininity.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, the crotch shot effectively corporealizes a woman’s identity and worth, bringing her down a level from man. Additionally, Berkeley’s

<sup>54</sup> Nadine Wills, “110 Per Cent Woman’: The Crotch Shot in the Hollywood Musical,” *Screen 42* (2001): 122.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

crotch shots are almost exclusively “posed,” as opposed to “accidental.” These posed crotch shots “derive power from the shame/shamelessness the girls exhibit in their exposure,” therefore further sexualizing a woman’s physicality and very core. Wills refers to this effect as “sexual escapism,”<sup>56</sup> which adds to both the utopian aesthetic and the clear gender divide, as men are the recipients of this sexual fantasy and are never analogously objectified. Going even further, many argue that this is an image of rape, with the male viewer transported through the legs via the symbolic phallus of the camera.<sup>57</sup> Taking that into account, Berkeley’s position as puppet-master is thus even more powerful in terms of gender dynamics.

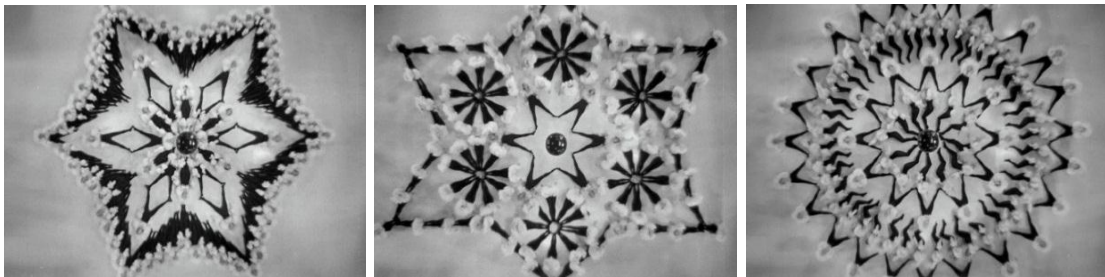
At this point in the number, after simply posing and arranging themselves for exposure, the women begin to actually dance, configuring themselves into neat lines and shapes, and ultimately doing a vaudevillian-caliber tap routine, but their movements are not really important. Perhaps this is cemented by the fact that the girls are not really in unison as they jump and wiggle their way through the steps; this inattention to detail seems out of place considering the precision they are about to display in the next sequence. It seems as though their movements now do not matter in terms of dance; the steps are simply being performed to show off the dancers’ bodies. As if to solidify the precedence that beauty takes over, say, talent, the girls shuffle in unison and arrange themselves into a crouched circle that allows one girl at a time to fly up to the camera, landing on a tight close up that glorifies the face for well over a second, a long time to highlight girls who have no significant role in the film. After this brief “beautiful face interlude,” the true Berkeleyesque display of precision and artistry occurs with the geometric, kaleidoscopic arrangement of the girls. From a birds-eye-view, they arrange themselves in complex designs that are visually stunning. Because they are still in the same costumes, the legs are still the focal

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 127

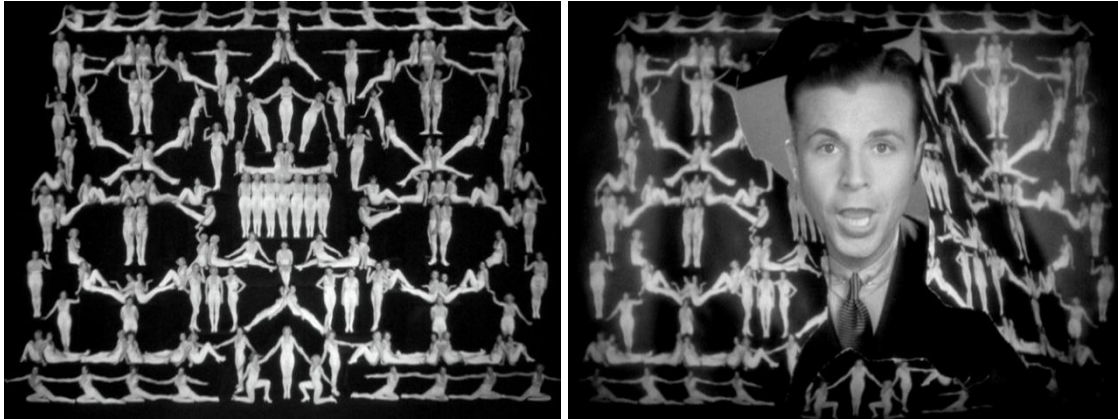
<sup>57</sup> Fischer, “The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of *Dames*,” 72.

point, and the strategic opening and bending of the legs gives these geometric forms an overarching eroticism, despite the complete lack of individualization of each female form. This epitomizes Berkeley's use of the woman; while he may focus in on a beautiful face, he thrives when he reduces the female body to the status of manipulatable, interchangeable object, always secondary to the overall aesthetic.



The girls continue to jump and dance in unison and then, in the ultimate relegating expression of woman-as-object, are frozen in a pose and turned into poster board that then falls away into the now-black background. Geometric designs emerge in their place, forming a series of squares within squares. This is slowly replaced yet again by women, showing the interchangeability of the female body and set design elements. This time they are wearing the same costumes as before, but they are completely white. Now the entire female form, the whole silhouette, is the object of the gaze. The camera pushes through the rectangular prism of women, a symbolic opening literally constructed out of their bodies, and ultimately lands on a shot of one female form standing, white against black, a gift to the audience. As the shot cuts to a close up of her shining face, she and the rest of the girls start singing Powell's refrain from the beginning of the number. The camera pulls out to reveal the rest of the girls staged in a romantic arrangement, almost Baroque in aesthetic. Only the girl from the close up wears the frills; the rest have skin tight white costumes from head to toe, only with a bit of organza to soften the neckline. They are sensually, deliberately posed. All they dare move are their heads; the beauty of the configuration

must not be disturbed. Then they freeze, immortalized in their design. In one final act of whimsy, the gaze literally bursts through the image as Dick Powell's head rips through the frame, bringing the audience full circle and back into reality with the end of the number.



In the final moments of the number, as the women stand and recline in their complex configuration, they sing one last verse which builds upon Dick Powell's first words. These lyrics encapsulate Berkeley's use of and presentation of the female –

*Those dames are temporary flames to you.  
Dames, you don't recall their names, do you?*

Indeed, these women are temporary flames, nameless but beautiful, their sole purpose to be gorgeous, feminine, and to help men forget about life for a while. Clearly, the choreography of the early sound era is truly unique. With the newly-musical-capable film industry beginning to develop its own identity separate from that of live theater, spectacles of impossible proportions made film musicals an entirely new, exciting experience for viewers who truly needed an escape. Berkeley provided distraught men, out of work and looking out onto a reality defined by desperation, futility, and defeat, with a utopia. Men could gaze, as men, upon something beautiful, spectacular, abundant – and controlled, nameless, and temporary.



## ‘Fragility and Steel’: The Romance of Fred Astaire

When you were in his arms, you just knew how to dance –  
anything. With Fred, the director always took the backseat.  
Everything was always Fred.

Leslie Caron<sup>58</sup>

While Berkeley defined spectacle in the 1930’s, Astaire embodied romance, class, and impressive talent in the same decade. In many ways, Astaire’s choreography was a different kind of reaction to the same problem that Berkeley faced. The Great Depression partially informed both of these choreographer’s distinct styles, but caused two very different responses, particularly in relation to the role of the male and the use of the female (however unconscious these responses may have been). For Berkeley, the implicit goals of the musical number were to eliminate the male from the feminine performance, objectify the male-controlled female with the invisible puppet strings of the choreographer, and provide a spectacle of abundance; for Astaire, musical numbers allowed for an assertion of his masculinity through his personal performance *with* the female, romancing and therefore controlling her with dance and the promise of security.

How did the Great Depression lead to these two choreographic styles? As already discussed, Berkeley’s aesthetic of abundance and objectification of the female arose when unemployment and the growing number of women in the workforce threatened the American man’s conception of his own self-worth, which was partially grounded in his very presence in the workplace, as well as in the very nature of the ‘workplace.’ Building upon this notion, however, one sees that a man’s measure of his own masculinity was wounded beyond this fact because of the Great Depression. Aside from positioning manliness within the public sphere (i.e. a man’s work), men also base their level of manliness within the private sphere – in other words, a man is a man when he can take care of his family. The rampant unemployment and general economic

---

<sup>58</sup> Sarah Giles, *Fred Astaire: His Friends Talk* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 19.

downturn of the 1930's meant that it was, in turn, much more difficult for a man to fulfill his masculine duty of providing for the household. Michael Kimmel explains, "For most men the depression was emasculating both at work and at home. Unemployed men lost status with their wives and children and saw themselves as impotent patriarchs."<sup>59</sup> Losing status in both the public and private spheres was a harsh blow to the American man.

Efforts to revive the American spirit, similar to the previously-discussed workers' rights campaigns, spoke to these threatened masculine ideals. Elaine Abelson explains,

Representations of the unemployed man, particularly the white-collar worker, were generally optimistic, pointing not to a state of panic or the deterioration of the human spirit, but to a strong sense of individual responsibility and determination to provide for his family, even if it ultimately meant accepting relief.<sup>60</sup>

The American man's pride was being targeted, and a man's main source of pride and obligation came from his family. Related to this familial responsibility, men began to concentrate on aspects of their home life that they could control. American men worked hard at turning their sons into ideal men, studying parenting methods and joining parent teacher associations. Kimmel says that men hoped to attain "some masculine redemption" through these acts.<sup>61</sup> If masculinity could be affirmed through maintaining a healthy, strong family, then it would follow that, in reaction to the crisis of masculinity in the Great Depression, men would try to prove themselves to be the ideal candidate for marriage, for romance. After all, Brannon's traditional male role 'b' is "the big wheel," which represents "success, status, and bread-winning competence."<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 199.

<sup>60</sup> Abelson, "Women Who Have No Men to Work for Them: Gender and Homelessness in the Great Depression, 1930-1934," 108.

<sup>61</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 201.

<sup>62</sup> Edley and Wetherell, *Men in Perspective: Practice, Power, and Identity*, 77.

Fred Astaire exemplifies “the big wheel.” He is successful in that he is talented, as some even argue that he was the most talented male dancer in history; all of his characters have this same degree of talent. He has status; even though his characters may start out having nothing, such as the irresponsible and broke gambler John “Lucky” Garnett in *Swing Time* (1936), the films always end with them in more comfortable positions. In addition to this, Astaire films, and particularly Astaire dance numbers, are often quite aesthetically “classy.” In terms of costumes, top hats, white ties, and tails abound. The sets are often performance spaces frequented by the rich, such as the ritzy French restaurant that hosts the tap solo “Don’t Let It Bother You” (though Astaire’s character is technically dancing because he thinks he has no money to pay for the meal) in *The Gay Divorcee* (1934); the Café de Paris, in which various ballroom performances occur in *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939); or the various respectable stages of concert halls and clubs that hire Astaire’s characters, such as the club in “Waltz in Swing Time” from *Swing Time* or the concert hall seen in the title number from *Shall We Dance* (1937). If not in these public settings, then dances frequently occur in lavish private spaces, such as the fancy hotel room in *Top Hat* (1935), the location of two tap numbers, “No Strings (I’m Fancy Free)” and “No Strings (reprise).” Additionally, the choreography itself is often sophisticated, particularly the multitude of ballroom numbers that appear in all of his films. Finally, to round out the “big wheel” characteristics, Astaire has “bread-winning competence” because he always manages to win the girl, proving to her that he is the man with whom she should be in love and spend the rest of her life.



Club in “Waltz in Swing Time,” *Swing Time* (1936)      Hotel in “No Strings (I’m Fancy Free),” *Top Hat* (1935)

While “the big wheel” ideal seems a perfect match for the desperation felt by emasculated fathers in the Great Depression, it also functions as an effective transitional ideal for the already-coping American man. Astaire emerged in the middle of the depression, with many of his films being released midway through the 1930’s (generally after Berkeley’s films). By this point, the preliminary jolt of the economic collapse was waning. Indeed, the emphasis on childrearing occurred once men accepted their situations and tried to find new solutions to their problems.<sup>63</sup> So, although the works created at this time were still shaped by the Great Depression, they also represented a forward step; audiences needed something more than the aesthetics that Berkeley’s films delivered in order to match their growing resolve. The “no sissy stuff” paradigm that accompanies Berkeley’s treatment of the musical calls merely for abundance of femininity (an escape); shifting the emphasis to “the big wheel” calls for romance, purpose, and personal pride (a goal). Astaire encapsulates all of these things, and he does this most effectively through dance.

---

<sup>63</sup> Kimmel, *American Manhood: A Cultural History*, 201.

Growing up in the first decade of the twentieth century, Astaire became involved in Vaudeville at a young age. Attending dance school along with his sister, Adele, he learned various dance styles that were incorporated into their elaborate routines.<sup>64</sup> The first routine he ever performed on stage (at the age of six) involved dancing up and down a giant, wooden wedding cake with his sister; this coincidentally seems to foreshadow the pervasiveness of romantic themes in his later performances.<sup>65</sup> The most important style that he learned early on in his training was arguably tap. By the time he made it to Broadway in the second decade of the new century, reviewers claimed he was the best known tap dancer in the world.<sup>66</sup> His fast footwork, grace and sophistication in movement, and dedication to perfection set him apart from other hoofers of the era. This allowed him to rise to prominence, ultimately outshining his promisingly talented and equally successful (up to that point in their joint-career) sister, who gave up on show business to marry an English nobleman, Charles Cavendish (a fitting marriage to match the air of sophistication off of which the Astaire success thrived).<sup>67</sup> Taking advantage of his successes as a star of the stage, Astaire increased his involvement in the choreographic process. When he was offered a contract with RKO in the early 1930s, he was already primed to become a musical star, despite reservations related to his somewhat gangly and (arguably) homely looks.<sup>68</sup>

Emerging from this strong dance background, Astaire went on to choreograph and star in a long line of movie musicals with RKO that showcased his skills as both an innovator and a performer. Although Astaire did have creative control over most of his dances, prominent

---

<sup>64</sup> John Mueller, *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 3.

<sup>65</sup> Carin T. Ford, *Legends of American Dance and Choreography* (Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 2000), 19.

<sup>66</sup> Mueller, *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Epstein, *Fred Astaire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 16.

<sup>68</sup> Bob Thomas, *Astaire: The Man, The Dancer* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 77.

choreographer Hermes Pan also played a large role in many of Astaire's pieces as co-choreographer.<sup>69</sup> The impressive dance routines often utilize both tap and ballroom elements. The somewhat-paradoxically flashy, reserved, and often merely suggestive choreography seen in these numbers reflects the contextual differences between his and Berkeley's work. Berkeley used chorines, the crotch shots, the raw sexuality; Astaire had dance and class, and with those tools he was able to create a different, less explicit kind of spectacle for the film viewer. This, as stated above, partially speaks to the varied pressures created by the Great Depression. In addition to providing the spectacle of the ideal man, the films, similarly to Berkeley's, functioned as a form of escapism. Dance in Astaire-Rogers films, Jim Collins argues, serves as an "alternative to despair."<sup>70</sup> A relationship between the film and audience, he says, further establishes this escapist quality. Astaire films accomplish this by addressing diegetic audiences during performances in ways that simultaneously address the extra-diegetic spectator, such as with Astaire aiming his cane and shooting out into the audience (instead of at performers on the stage, as he had been doing) at the end of "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails" from *Top Hat*.<sup>71</sup> This invitation into the world of the film is not the same as Berkeley's escapism. Berkeley takes the audience into an absurd world full of impossibilities; Astaire takes the audience into a romanticized but somewhat attainable version of reality, where a guy can prove himself and win a girl (though those in the audience could not expect to accomplish this with the same amounts of grace and charm as Astaire).

---

<sup>69</sup> Epstein, *Fred Astaire*, 68.

<sup>70</sup> Jim Collins, "Toward Defining a Matrix of the Musical Comedy: The Place of the Spectator Within the Textual Mechanisms," in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman, 134-146 (London: Routledge, 1981), 136.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.



Shooting out into the extra-diegesis

Additionally, however, the climate of the film industry at the time also informs these Berkeley-Astaire stylistic differences. The Production Code of 1934, barely touching Berkeley in his Classic Warner Bros. Period, did affect many of Fred Astaire's films. For example, the script for *Shall We Dance* was reworked a number of times to address the nineteen deletions insisted upon by the Production Code Administration.<sup>72</sup> In the films, this manifested as flirtatious, innocent, and refined romances carried out through dance sequences that, to put it simply, did not contain crotch shots. The two studios that produced these series of films also added to this divide. While Warner Bros. had no problems being outrageous and bawdy, RKO consistently attempted to assert itself as a reputable, high-class company. Although RKO did not have a niche, its various heads (David O. Selznick and Pandro S. Berman, to name two) churned out well-respected classics such as *King Kong* (1933) and *Of Human Bondage* (1934).<sup>73</sup> Fred Astaire's RKO films fall right in line with these successful pictures, representing a higher class of cinema. Between 1933 and 1939, while with RKO, Astaire worked on a series of musicals

<sup>72</sup> Thomas, *Astaire: The Man, The Dancer*, 140.

<sup>73</sup> Richard B. Jewell, *The RKO Story* (New York: Arlington House, 1982), 10-12.

costarring Ginger Rogers (the vast majority of which directed by Mark Sandrich). This chapter will focus on these films, as they most effectively represent Astaire's romantic charm through dance.

What did these films look like, and more importantly, what did the dances look like? Firstly, a key factor in Astaire's choreographic style is his ability to integrate narrative into the routine. All of the Astaire-Rogers films are, to some extent, romantic comedies, centered on the budding romance between the two stars. In all of them, Astaire's character is a skilled dancer, and he is often already a performer (indeed, a star) at the beginning of the film (take, for example, the roles of ballet star Petrov in *Shall We Dance* and Broadway leading man Jerry Travers in *Top Hat*). Rogers is also always a strong dancer, though not always a performer. When the two meet, Astaire becomes infatuated with Rogers; more often than not, he wins her over through dance. Astaire and Rogers mostly express their love through ballroom dance. Slow, dramatic ballroom numbers perhaps come to mind first, such as "Night and Day" from *The Gay Divorcee* or "Let's Face the Music and Dance" from *Follow the Fleet* (1936), but their repertoire is seemingly limitless. For example, dozens of dance performances punctuate *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, a biography of a famous dance couple from the 1910's that invented lively ballroom classics such as the castle walk, the hesitation waltz, and the foxtrot, all of which greatly influenced Astaire's choreography. Additionally, numbers often blur the line between ballroom and tap ("Waltz in Swing Time" from *Swing Time* or "They All Laughed" from *Shall We Dance*) – these dances either accompany the budding flirtation between the two costars or occur once the major conflict has been resolved and they are together. Accompanying and sometimes counterbalancing these dance numbers, the plot lines of the Astaire-Rogers films are often silly, though well-crafted by strong writers and directors, usually involving mistaken



identity (most notably in *Top Hat*, *The Gay Divorcee*, and *Shall We Dance*) and making use of hammy but entertaining character actors, such as Edward Everett Horton and Eric Blore. The films almost always end happily, with the couple together. The most notable exception is the unsuccessful *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, in which Astaire's character dies before being able to reunite with his love; even then, Astaire is able to have one final dance with his partner, as a ghost.



Getting one final dance, even from the afterlife. *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939)

The truly effective thing about Astaire-Rogers films, though, is that dance numbers in these films fit with the general narrative arc of the developing romance. While Astaire seduces Rogers, he simultaneously seduces the audience, cementing his image as the ideal “big wheel”

man. Partially accomplished through narrative structure and function, partially accomplished through aesthetic and choreographic choices, the effect of these films is to have every woman in the audience fall in love with Astaire and to have every man wish to be just like him (indeed, although he dances with beautiful women, the natural inclination is to watch his impressive movements<sup>74</sup>). Narratively speaking, unlike Berkeley's films, Astaire musicals are integrative. Although many of the songs and dances are performances within the diegesis of the film – unlike in the upcoming Rodgers & Hammerstein musicals where characters only spring into song in order to express emotions felt in their everyday lives, such as in “Oh What a Beautiful Morning” from *Oklahoma!* (1955) – Astaire numbers often still function to move the narrative forward, characterize the performers (both in dance and song, with lyrics often expressing the emotions of the characters, despite being pre-planned performance pieces), and generally flow well with the film. In addition to these performance numbers, many traditionally integrative songs also appear throughout the films. Emerging out of moments of pure emotion, songs such as “Isn't This a Lovely Day (to be Caught in the Rain)” (*Top Hat*) and “A Needle in a Haystack” (*The Gay Divorcee*) form a bridge between the non-musical plot and the slightly fantastical musical numbers. This bridge is important because it brings truth and significance to all of the musical interactions between Astaire and Rogers, also allowing these numbers to inform and shape the rest of the narrative. All of the numbers, both small and large in scale, are thus key to plot development, particularly through the emotional connections that grow between Astaire and Rogers by the end of the dances.

Within the films, the routines generally follow a pattern that emphasizes Astaire's masculinity via his position as ultimate mate. Astaire often first displays his impressive tap abilities, either in a full-fledged routine or in a short vignette. In *Carefree* (1938), the first dance

---

<sup>74</sup> Abby Saxon, Professor of Dance at Vassar College, personal interview, December 11, 2011.

number, “Since They Turned ‘Loch Lomond’ into Swing” is an impressive tap solo; in *Shall We Dance*, Petrov is first shown tapping alone in his studio, also integrating ballet leaps. These introductions to Astaire’s abilities solidify his character as strong and desirable and signal early on the importance of dance within each of the films. They also show that, at his core, Astaire is a tapper. His steps are exciting and fast. His legs fly out in all directions; he twirls and jumps; he strikes dynamic poses in the rests and silences; he plays with rhythm; and, most importantly, he looks like he is having fun. This carefree style connotes strength, independence, and ingenuity – all traits of a “big wheel” breadwinner, an ideal husband.



Impressive first solo in *Carefree* (1938)



Leaping impressively as Petrov. *Shall We Dance* (1937)

The middle section of the typical Astaire-Rogers film is an amalgam of different types of routines, each arrangement sculpted to match the developing love story between the two stars, allowing Astaire to effectively seduce Rogers. If the two characters are just getting to know each other (in other words, if Astaire’s character has not yet found himself in too much of a comically-crafted pickle), sometimes a cute, flirtatious, partnered tap dance will allow for Rogers to see his sweet side. A notable example of this is the aforementioned “Isn’t This a Lovely Day” from *Top Hat*, during which Rogers’ character attempts to keep an open mind about Astaire’s

character, allowing him to begin to truly woo her, despite her misgivings related to his identity (she thinks he is her friend's husband – already a pretty big pickle). If Rogers already hates Astaire, or knows that she cannot be with him for whatever reason, a more dramatic dance is necessary to assert Astaire's strength, sexual attractiveness, and serious, romantic nature. The power Astaire displays in partnering Rogers, who becomes completely submissive, speaks to the symbolic trust that a woman would place in a man's ability to protect her; the tenderness he displays speaks to her trust that he will love her. Carol Lynley described this dynamic beautifully when she said of Astaire, "he was fragility and steel."<sup>75</sup> The combination of power and compassion makes for an intoxicating suitor, as he is both the perfect dance partner and the perfect lover. In *Carefree*, the number "Change Partners" has Astaire literally hypnotizing Rogers and controlling her movements without even needing to touch her. Almost immediately after this number, he wins her back from her stupid, uncoordinated fiancé.



Flirting in "Isn't This a Lovely Day," *Top Hat* (1935)



Hypnotic control in "Change Partners," *Carefree* (1938)

Astaire often solos multiple times in a film, beyond the inevitable initial display.

Sometimes these solos exist explicitly to impress the girl (he hopes Rogers' character is watching

---

<sup>75</sup> Giles, *Fred Astaire: His Friends Talk*, 202.

during “Since They Turned ‘Loch Lomond’ into Swing”), but sometimes they are simply stage performances or individual expressions of passion or excitement. A well-known example of this would be “Slap That Bass” from *Swing Time*, a purely self-indulgent act on the part of Astaire’s character, who plays with mechanical sounds and movements in a cruise’s hull. “Top Hat, White Tie and Tails” from *Top Hat* also does not include Rogers, but is an example of an impressive staged performance, this one specifically with a chorus of men dancing behind Astaire. The common thread running through all of these solo numbers is that they allow for Astaire to dance with abandon. While Rogers is an extremely talented dancer, the necessity for partnered work and synchronization in their routines together works to subdue Astaire’s dancing style to some degree. Astaire’s solo work, as described above, is distinctive and difficult, even impossible, to replicate. These solo numbers exude both class and strength, showing just how masculine Astaire is without the weight of a woman’s presence bearing down on him. Astaire’s tapping style is very “up;” he just skims the surface, floating around the space.<sup>76</sup> This lightness connotes a certain refinement through its relatively delicate execution, and the agility necessary for this execution of course reminds the viewer of Astaire’s strength. The fact that Rogers is not present during many of these numbers also speaks to the ongoing, parallel seduction of the audience. Viewers see him play, experiment, and show off, and he becomes much more than a dancer; he becomes the ideal man.

---

<sup>76</sup> *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*, dir. Robert Trachtenberg, DVD (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2002).



“Slap That Base,” *Shall We Dance* (1937)



“Top Hat, White Tie and Tails,” *Top Hat* (1935)

After these varied solo and partnered performances which display the versatility of the stars, each film ends with a large dance number, more often than not the largest number of the film. Once more, this number may be a performance, such as “Shall We Dance/ Finale and Coda” from *Shall We Dance*, in which the ongoing juxtaposition between classical ballet and more contemporary dance styles reaches its climax with a chorus of girls pirouetting and tapping as Astaire and Rogers reconcile on the dance floor; the finale may also be an elaborate integrative number, such as the overwhelmingly large, extended “The Continental” at the end of *The Gay Divorcee*. While the mechanics of the choreography and spectacular nature of the numbers are important elements, the main goal of these routines is to express *through* these elements the happy conclusions to the romance arcs that dominate all of these films. This over-the-top celebration of Astaire’s triumphant seduction of Rogers in effect completes his seduction of the audience. The happy couple’s celebration is the audience’s opportunity to completely give in to the alluring spectacle of the romantic musical number. Admittedly, these grand finales are not typically successful (such as the somewhat unimpressive “Piccolino,” from *Top Hat* – Arlene

Croce calls it “not devastating”<sup>77</sup>), but they certainly all try to immerse the audience in a world of celebration and romantic achievement through dance. Perhaps this speaks as a testament to the captivating individual performances the audience craves from Astaire; *he* (the big wheel) – not the film - has seduced us.



The grand finale of *Shall We Dance* (1937)



“The Continental” in *The Gay Divorcee* (1934)

A particularly important element of Astaire-Rogers musicals is the fact that these romance arcs do not fill in the spaces between dance numbers, nor do the dance numbers fill in spaces between plot developments. Instead, the films epitomize musical integration, with plot and routine intertwined seamlessly. The integration is further heightened by the narrative expression that is worked into each dance number’s choreography, both with the specific dance steps and with the acting that occurs during the numbers. One way that Astaire does this is through creating mini arcs and progressions within one number; because of the extensive repertoires of both of the lead dancers, Astaire is able to do this by changing not only the pacing and intensity of the dance steps, but also by transitioning between dance styles within a routine. These mini narratives serve as microcosms for Astaire’s effective, drawn out seductions of

---

<sup>77</sup> Arlene Croce, *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972), 66.

Rogers, as seen in the larger narratives of the films. A musical number that exemplifies this is *Top Hat*'s "Cheek to Cheek."

In *Top Hat*, Astaire plays Jerry Travers, a dancer who is starring in a new show under the producer Horace Hardwick, played by Edward Everett Horton. Hardwick's wife plans to set up her friend Dale Tremont (Ginger Rogers) with Astaire. The two meet unbeknownst to the married couple and are infatuated with each other, but, as previously mentioned, through a series of improbable but actually well played out coincidences Rogers ends up believing that Astaire is actually Mr. Hardwick. She is understandably upset and through most of the film struggles with her conflicting feelings for Astaire, as he is not aware of the confusion and thus does not clarify his identity. At this point in the film, Astaire and Rogers are officially meeting through their mutual friends, though Rogers goes through the entire encounter still believing that Astaire is Hardwick. Mrs. Hardwick is consistently cynical in regards to her own marriage, so when Astaire and Rogers go out on the dance floor, and Mrs. Hardwick gives encouraging gestures to Rogers, Rogers is embarrassed but not entirely dismissive of this reassurance. With a wink, a wave, and a nod from Mrs. Hardwick, Rogers sighs and says "Well if Madge doesn't care, I certainly don't." She thus decides to let Astaire woo her on the dance floor, as she has already fallen in love with him, and this is when the number begins.

Still out on the dance floor, Astaire begins singing along with the band's romantic string melody. The pair does simple social dancing, holding each other close and spinning together.

This fits with lyrics he sings to the now all-too-familiar Irving Berlin refrain –

*Heaven, I'm in heaven  
And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak  
And I seem to find the happiness I seek  
When we're out together dancing cheek to cheek...*



He dances her over to a column and parts from her, allowing her to lean and watch him as the song becomes more playful. A jazzy horn, instead of strings, begins to play, and Astaire sings,

*Oh, I love to climb a mountain  
And to reach the highest peak  
But it doesn't thrill me half as much  
As dancing cheek to cheek*

At this point he dances cheek-to-cheek with her in one small circle before returning to a similar musical phrase with equally cute lyrics. The important parts of this section of the song, the lyrical section, are not only Astaire's attempts to express his feelings through vocals (masculine in their candidness and the expressed desire to be with her and thus take care of her), but also Rogers' reactions to these expressions. Her face shows that she is flattered and entertained; her body is slightly stiff and her movements reserved, but she allows him to lead her without hesitation. She is not yet sure how she feels about the whole situation. Rogers effectively conveys this through her performance, and one major reason for the successes of Astaire's numbers is Rogers' ability to act well as she dances. Without her convincing enactment, so much meaning would be lost.



Rogers' expressive reactions to Astaire's advancements.

As they dance away from the column, the music slows slightly and crescendos with the

elimination of the jazzy winds and the reintroduction of (now high) violins filled out with dramatic undertones of piano and lower strings. Astaire's voice drops, and they strike a dramatic separated pose as he sings a phrase that Arlene Croce describes is "like a full-voice exclamation that blazes once in the midst of a whispered conversation and then drops with a sigh. A truly transporting song and lyric,"<sup>78</sup> she calls it, and it does indeed stand out as a moment of overt masculine strength, emerging from a decidedly soft and playful vocal. He sings-

*Dance with me*

*I want my arm about you* [He leans to her and puts his arm around her as she stares at him, analyzing his intentions]

*The charm about you*

*Will carry me through to...*

- and the "heaven" refrain starts over again (with a return to soft strings) as they go back to softly socially dancing. This quick progression from section to section foreshadows the longer movements in the upcoming dance section. Astaire's serenading at different levels of intensity and seriousness fit well with this tentative interaction; just as she is unsure of how to feel about him, he is unsure of how to approach this situation in order to win her over (she has already slapped him and told a manipulative lie about meeting him in Paris). In this number, they are dancing around – and exploring – their emotions.

As the dance section begins, he whisks her away to an empty ballroom. The very private dance in which no audience, diegetic or extra-diegetic, is recognized or alluded to, thus creates a somewhat voyeuristic experience for the film viewer.<sup>79</sup> This strengthens the sexual undertones of the encounter, solidifies their bond, and strengthens the audience's feelings for Astaire, inspired by these secluded displays of masculine prowess. The music briefly harkens back to the "dance with me" phrase with another dramatic crescendo. The choreography in this section quite

<sup>78</sup> Croce, *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book*, 62.

<sup>79</sup> Collins, "Toward Defining a Matrix of the Musical Comedy: The Place of the Spectator Within the Textual Mechanisms," 144.

literally represents them “dancing around” their feelings as the music switches back to the main melody, this time with more clarity and intent through a stronger violin (Astaire is making his move). Mueller coins the most striking step seen here, one that appears in many numbers, the “Astaire double helix,” and it fits beautifully with the emotion of the number; they twirl around each other, not touching, in opposite directions, representing simultaneously both longing and resistance.<sup>80</sup> Astaire’s delicate approach to winning over Rogers shows his strong intuition and makes his ultimate success seem well-earned. As the main melody continues, they continue to do close partner work, executing the first of a number of assisted backbends in the routine, this one swinging in a half-circle. These moments of intense closeness are quickly followed by partnered turns where both of their arms are casually extended out to the side, as if to retract their expression of affection for fear of moving too quickly. Irving Berlin’s music also reflects this; indeed, the orchestration similarly follows the contained narrative, slowing and building along with the exploration of their feelings for each other. The softer moments of this dance return to the jazzier, quicker version of the song heard when the couple was still in a room full of people, this time rounding out the main melody. The music maintains a lighter undertone carried out by a faster-paced violin playing out a sweet tune as they dance tentatively side-by-side. The underlying emotions of the number, the longing and cautious displacement of that longing onto dance, is also exemplary of the post-Production Code approach to sexuality in film. This dance is modest in many ways but also extremely sexual in its suggestiveness. The side-by-side partner work that follows shows a conflicted Rogers in ballroom stance, dancing beside the man she

---

<sup>80</sup> Mueller, *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films*, 19.

loves; he stares at her with an entranced look, every once in a while leading her into an embrace.



The secluded ballroom



Dancing close

He reels back again, and the music becomes even more sweet and cautious as the “climb a mountain” melody returns with a decrescendo, the return of the horns, and no sustained, romantic violin notes; the choreography becomes appropriately playful. This marks the first major transition in dance style, as the pair progresses into a short tap combination. The steps are slow and sweet, a simple synchronized few phrases, and he respectfully stays far away from her throughout, allowing her to remind herself of the fun times they have had together. Her face shows further signs of wavering as she shoots sideways, flirtatious glances at him. The music stays the same, repeating the light measure, but the dance transitions back to ballroom once Astaire seems confident in his wooing. At this point, Astaire becomes bold in his leading. He guides Rogers around the floor, holding her closely, in hopping and spinning movements, ultimately ending with two dramatic assisted backbends. These suggest an abandon on Rogers’ part, a trust that is becoming deeper as the dance progresses.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 85.



Flirtation while tapping



Backbend 1



Backbend 2

In the aftermath, or perhaps afterglow, of these intimate steps, the routine takes a loud and dramatic turn. The music swells and jumps in pitch into the “dance with me” phrase with a dramatic crescendo of high violins, and the camera cuts to an extreme long shot. The dancers

begin to leap and twirl across the floor in synchronization, all while not touching. Rogers' face wavers between infatuation and concern as she stares away from Astaire; Mueller describes her as being "almost in a dreamlike state."<sup>82</sup> Astaire remains enraptured. As the song transitions back to the main melody, this time with the violins sustained to highlight the romance and drama, their movements become more subdued, and they dance more intimately with each other, though still not touching, leaning and pausing so that it appears they breathe as one. Trying once more to get closer to her, Astaire reaches out and grabs Rogers' hand; she is still unsure, and so they step forwards and backwards, moving past each other alternately, repeatedly. No longer able to resist her allure, he gingerly approaches her from behind and clings to her. She stares off into the distance, her face revealing that she wants nothing more than to be held by him, despite her knowing that it would be wrong (as per her understanding of the situation). At this point, she attempts once more to resist him, though truly knowing that she is succumbing to him, and the routine climaxes in the subsequent musical movement, which is comprised of two sections.



---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 85.

In the first of these final two sections, transitioning to the “dance with me” melody one final time, the music builds with another bold crescendo, and Astaire and Rogers enter into a complex partnering combination. They jump and slide across the floor separately and rapidly, almost as if they are chasing each other. Rogers spends most of this movement gazing at Astaire, and when she looks off again he makes his final move. He reaches for her and the music swells for the last time into the main melody. What follows, with one final crescendo and a slowed version of the main melody, is a series of lifts that require the most physical contact, trust, cooperation, and submission on her part as compared to any of the other moves seen in the routine; they also happen to be the most impressive. She finally succumbs to his advances, allowing herself to smile as she leaps into his arms. The culminating movement is the deepest assisted backbend, the ultimate expression of trust on her part and of masculine strength on his. He holds her in this position, savoring it, and then slowly and confidently brings her up to meet him face to face. The music returns back to a slower, softer, vaguely playful but undyingly romantic, final version of the main melody, and he leads her to the balcony in the original, casual, cheek-to-cheek social dance form. This time, however, they dance with mutual freedom of affection – until the moment passes, and Rogers remembers once more the “truth” about Astaire’s identity. This attempt on Astaire’s part was not in vain, though, as this dance solidifies Rogers’ feelings and is instrumental in ensuring their ultimate happiness.



Impressive assisted jump



The final backbend

Astaire is clearly able to tell a story through his dances. By transitioning between different styles, and by carefully crafting the manifestations of the individual styles within a movement, he presents an emotional spectacle that speaks to his masculine strength. With the Great Depression still creating a climate of doubt, the American public needed to see something proud and hopeful. The “big wheel” masculinity that Astaire exhibits as the ideal, classy, sexy, strong lover was the successful outgrowth of Berkeley’s coping mechanism of abundance and excessive femininity. What Berkeley affirmed through crotch shots and bounding chorus girls, Astaire both affirmed and built upon with a top hat and a backbend.



## An American in Practice: Gene Kelly's Post-War Masculinity

I think his contribution was exactly what he wanted it to be. What he hoped for, what he dreamed of. He wanted to express the most complex yet the most simplest emotions and give everyone the chance to do the same. To give them the impression they could jump in puddles and sing in the rain and dance down the street.

Betsy Blair, Gene Kelly's first wife<sup>83</sup>

World War II effectively brought the United States out of the Great Depression.

Extensive increases in production (particularly of weaponry and other war-related materials) kick-started an economic upturn.<sup>84</sup> This ultimately boosted national morale by instilling in the American public a sense of patriotic camaraderie and purpose, as well as by finally creating enough jobs to bring down the unemployment level. Meanwhile, the boys and men of the US traveled overseas in the name of freedom, democracy, and 'Goodness.' For a brief moment, American men lived out the glory and heroism of winning the war and saving the world. Following the war, however, while the glow of victory still afforded men with a source of pride, the return to "everyday life" left American masculinity again in a state of crisis.

While many of the anxieties that caused this crisis are related to servicemen's feelings in the postwar era, men at home during that time seemed to identify with, and live vicariously through, the many that did go overseas. The unwavering support from the home front as well as the popularity of the multitude of war films hint at this near-obsession with the American soldier. It follows, then, that the problems of the male soldier were in a sense the problems of every American man – perhaps only empathetically, but perhaps more deeply as well.

---

<sup>83</sup> Betsy Blair in *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*, dir. Robert Trachtenberg.

<sup>84</sup> Eric Rauchway, *The Great Depression & The New Deal: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

One problem that the American soldier faced in the post-war environment was the shock of returning to the mundane American life. Overseas, the soldier had the most immense responsibility; once home, he simply had to fall back into the regular routine of things. In fighting the evil forces overseas, the American soldier was transformed into a hero, a “new man,” crafted from the mold of boys next door, working men, fathers and sons; when he returned, he was expected to become the man he once was, but it was not so easy. Leonard Kriegal describes the phenomenon –

But when he returns to America he discovers that the “new man” has finally died in that very Europe which gave him birth. He is now only a cautious hero for a frightened time, no longer an outlaw – at best, he is a misfit, a bumbling citizen trying to meet all the obligations that have been thrust upon him.<sup>85</sup>

These obligations being thrust upon him are emasculating when compared to the strength and courage required of a soldier. Because of the war, America considered itself a masculine nation. “The nation claimed an ascendancy over the world, men an ascendancy over the nation, and a male persona of a certain type ascendancy over men,” explains Susan Faludi.<sup>86</sup> She continues, “The promise was that wartime masculinity, with its common mission, common enemy, and clear frontier would continue in peacetime.”<sup>87</sup> But the role of an American man in peacetime was not to be a hero on a mission, it was to simply make a living and have a family. In *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), an honest portrayal of soldiers’ difficult reintegration into society, Frederick March’s character Al, who struggles with the postwar climate, comments, “Last year it was ‘kill Japs’ and this year it’s ‘make money.’”<sup>88</sup> With the revitalization of the American economy, the growing consumerist culture, and the ideal of middle class suburbia defining the

---

<sup>85</sup> Leonard Kriegal, *On Men and Manhood* (New York: Hawthorne, 1979), 82.

<sup>86</sup> Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: Perennial, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 16.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>88</sup> Sarah Kozloff, “Wyler’s Wars,” *Film History* 20 (2008): 462.

postwar era, making money certainly became the priority over the very recent goals related to strength, aggression, and virtue. Patricia Vettel-Becker explains,

It was feared that the gray-flannel-suited organization man, encased in his corporate uniform, had lost access to the rugged physicality that was so much a part of idealized U.S. manhood. In fact, he had become feminized, forced to use persuasion, manipulation, even charm, rather than physical brawn, to make his place in the world.<sup>89</sup>

This new American ideal had even once seemed a respite for the daydreaming soldier, but once he found himself actually immersed in it, it was less than perfect.<sup>90</sup>

In the calmness of peacetime, now distanced from the propagandistic support and portrayal of the good old boys who went to fight, all that was left were a memory of greatness and the emotional and physical scars of war. “War shock, difficulty reintegrating, unexplained lethargy, emotional mood swings, and nightmares were common.”<sup>91</sup> Women were advised to help ease their men’s reintegration by being particularly sensitive, a rather emasculating notion.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, the wounded soldier represented an even more explicit manifestation of masculine repression. The male body was in crisis because of its embattled form. Wounded soldiers permanently carried with them the trauma of the past, the bittersweet memory of their heroism, and a literal disruption of the perfect masculine form that was so revered during the conflict.<sup>93</sup> *The Best Years of Our Lives* and contemporaneous art photography movements represented some of the only realistic portraits of the struggling veteran and thus the struggling American man.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Patricia Vettel-Becker, *Shooting from the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Postwar America*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 116.

<sup>90</sup> Kriegal, *On Men and Manhood*, 82.

<sup>91</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 225.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>93</sup> Vettel-Becker, *Shooting from the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Postwar America*, 113-114.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

So how did the American man cope with his embattled body, stifled manhood, and mundane daily life? He sought to recreate the glory of the war by celebrating his physicality, his raw masculine strength and virility as an individual. Athleticism became an obsession, even in excess with fads such as the muscleman craze of the 1950's.<sup>95</sup> Film heroes became extremely tough and masculine - cowboys, private detectives, soldiers.<sup>96</sup> In essence, the ideal American man was the embodiment of Brannon's male role 'c,' "the sturdy oak." A "sturdy oak" is independent, self-assured, and powerful. Translated into an unlikely mode, the "sturdy oak" ideal worked its way into the Hollywood musical through increasingly masculine forms of dance. In the postwar era, Gene Kelly represented the ideal American man through his unique choreography, on-screen persona, and pure physicality.

Gene Kelly began his film career doing bit parts alongside greats such as Judy Garland; within a few years, he would be directing and choreographing some of the most successful musicals of all time. Coming from strong backgrounds in athletics and varying dance styles, including tap, ballet, and ballroom,<sup>97</sup> which he performed on numerous stages (in Pittsburgh as a child and on Broadway as a young man), he was able to develop his own dynamic choreographic style.<sup>98</sup> While the previous years had been marked by dancers and styles that were somewhat restrained and refined, Kelly's years at MGM, specifically under the Freed Unit headed by legendary producer Arthur Freed,<sup>99</sup> yielded pieces of choreography that appealed to audiences with both their sprawling displays of athleticism and their connection to the everyday man, exactly what postwar America needed. Additionally, as a public figure, Kelly represented the

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Earl J. Hess and Pratibha A. Dabholkar, *Singin' in the Rain: The Making of an American Masterpiece* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 28-30.

<sup>98</sup> Alvin Yudkoff, *Gene Kelly: A Life of Dance and Dreams*, 6, 10, 46.

<sup>99</sup> Hugh Fordin, *MGM's Greatest Musicals: The Arthur Freed Unit* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 89

ideal independence and power of a “sturdy oak.” Kelly’s artistic control over the presentation of dance in film marked a shift in musical direction. ‘Choreographer’ became a significant creative role, one that carried much weight for the thematic undertones of the film as a whole, and Kelly was seen as a creative powerhouse. This is partly because of Kelly’s approach to dance, in which he stressed the emotional importance of the pieces within the story of the film; dance was no longer just flash, it also had meaning that could be conveyed through a dancer’s precise and power-driven control of his own body.<sup>100</sup>

Certainly his success was informed by his aforementioned versatility as a dancer, and the personal style that emerged because of it exemplified the postwar masculine ideal. Kelly was both prodigious and rooted in tap, and he had a very distinctive execution. He danced very “down,” with a lot of weight.<sup>101</sup> Astaire, who represented sophistication, exhibited a kind of levity in his tapping; Kelly was all about command and force, with his characteristic sharp, downward leans and lunges becoming especially prominent through his strength. At the same time, his dancing still carried with it a lightness and bounding effortlessness. This almost weightless quality was partially achieved through his integration of ballet technique into his stature and upper body movements;<sup>102</sup> while Kelly always honored his origins in tap, he was also very dedicated to exposing the viewing public to ballet, particularly later in his career with his failed pet project, *Invitation to the Dance* (1956). His muscular strength also allowed for ease of movement, a testament to the range of motions made capable by a truly toned masculine physique. His overall aesthetic and rhythm were also extremely jazzy, making everything he did feel very modern and of-the-time. This contemporary approach to dance perhaps negated the potential for the masculinity he presented to be viewed as a ghost of the past, despite the

---

<sup>100</sup> Peter Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992), 12.

<sup>101</sup> *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*, dir. Robert Trachtenberg.

<sup>102</sup> Wollen, *Singin' in the Rain*, 15.

common portrayal of him as a serviceman; he was strong, and he was strong ‘now.’ Additionally, although his dancing is certainly known for its power and sheer difficulty, his style and quality of movement are intrinsically musical, and this makes the steps seem intuitive to the viewer. Thus, as a dancer, he was much more tolerable, approachable, and understandable to the average male viewer. This, of course, seems somewhat ironic given his penchant for over-the-top, elaborate fantasy dance sequences, but in his core arguably lies a dedication to simplicity, as will be seen later with the Newspaper Dance from *Summer Stock* (1950).



Dancing “down” with Jerry Mouse in “The Worry Song” from *Anchors Aweigh* (1945)



Striking an impressive pose before doing a series of barrel turns in “I Got Rhythm” from *An American in Paris* (1951)

Gene Kelly was every man’s dancer; when he danced, the audience saw the soldier who had just returned home, the charming boy next door, the clerk at the local hardware store - but they saw him doing amazing (yet still masculine) things with his body. This all-American man persona formed for a number of reasons. Previously mentioned were the mechanics of his dancing style, which was inherently masculine and something with which American men wanted to identify. When it came to wardrobe, he was either in uniform or casual clothing – polo shirts, baseball caps, slacks – which again distanced him from the white tie and tails aesthetic of previous years. His clothing was also consistently form-fitting, showing off his sculpted body

and thus emphasizing his pure strength. This speaks to the glorification of the body in response to its embattled, underutilized status in postwar America, as discussed above.

In terms of acting, Kelly “played his roles as the poor kid from the big-city streets,”<sup>103</sup> differentiating himself from the refinement of musical stars from the 1930’s such as Astaire. In his films, as with many musicals, numbers were fantastical digressions occurring within usually realistic plots, in an integrative form. For Kelly, these plots were often simple love stories that did not involve improbable, screwball hijinks (such as with Astaire-Rogers films), nor did they center on the creation of the elaborate musical numbers (as with Berkeley backstage musicals). The relaxed and realistic premises – exceptions such as *Brigadoon* (1954), for example, are not forgotten, though the portrayal of the love story itself is believable – helped to establish Kelly as the everyday man. The constant interplay between fantasy and reality in Kelly’s films through the integrative nature of the numbers, such as when the very real policeman (an overt symbol of narrative reality) disrupts Kelly’s theatrically exuberant celebration in the title number from *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952),<sup>104</sup> allowed for an equally effective interplay between Kelly’s non-musical and musical personas. The boy next door from the non-musical sections of the films was further masculinized by the athletic, versatile dancer, and the dancer became someone with whom the audience could relate when framed as the boy next door.

---

<sup>103</sup> Epstein, *Fred Astaire*, 65.

<sup>104</sup> Martin Sutton, “Patterns of Meaning in the Musical,” in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981): 192.



Fantasy meets reality in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)

Kelly's all-American identity also partly arose because of, quite simply, the early roles in which he was cast. One of the first films to show him performing his distinctive style was *Thousands Cheer* (1943), in which Kelly plays a drafted soldier who falls in love with a girl at training camp. Although his character is a performer, his major solo occurs at the training camp while Kelly mops the floor, a decidedly unflashy, everyday activity to which audiences could relate.<sup>105</sup> He often portrayed these regular or traditionally strong American men early on, such as sailors Joseph Brady and 'Gabey' in *Anchors Aweigh* (1945) and *On the Town* (1949), respectively, or baseball player Eddie O'Brien in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* (1949), and he also served in the naval air service himself (photographic division).<sup>106</sup> As Clive Hirschhorn put it, "some would say, 'that's just how a sailor would move, that's just how an airman would move, that's just how a construction worker would move.' You'd think wow I've done it, I've

<sup>105</sup> *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*, dir. Robert Trachtenberg.

<sup>106</sup> Yudkoff, *Gene Kelly: A Life of Dance and Dreams*, 152.



actually achieved that. Not through dialogue but through movement.”<sup>107</sup> Kelly secured his position as an everyday American so strongly that it seems that his air of down-home-ness never left him, even when portraying flamboyant characters, such as circus performer Serafin in *The Pirate* (1948), painter Jerry Mulligan in *An American in Paris* (1951), and movie star Don Lockwood in *Singin’ in the Rain*. Granted, many of these roles (in particular Serafin and Lockwood) actually establish Kelly’s character as a fraud, a regular Joe pretending to be something more, which actually aids in creating this mystique of normalcy. This reinforced identity as the man next door was arguably primarily aided, though, by the fact that his masculine dancing remained a constant across his varied roles, as did the role of, and progression of, dance in all of his films.



Dancing with a mop in “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” from *Thousands Cheer* (1943)

Displaying masculine strength with the the Nicholas Brothers as a circus performer in “Be a Clown” from *The Pirate* (1948)

In general, the arc of Kelly’s dance numbers within a film follows a formula. The film begins with an impressive couple of numbers, upbeat and dance - or spectacle - intensive; examples include the playful “Bonnie Jean” from *Brigadoon*, the short but flashy “Fit as a

<sup>107</sup> Clive Hirschhorn in *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*, dir. Robert Trachtenberg.

Fiddle” from *Singin’ in the Rain*, and the raucous “Dig-Dig-Dig Dig For Your Dinner” from *Summer Stock*. These numbers assert him as a force to be reckoned with. He is strong; his presence is strong; and he has complete mastery over his body. Then, as the central romance of the film progresses, Kelly will pull back. The central part of the film is marked by a pas de deux – a nice slow easy dance between lovers, highlighting the romance and giving the viewers a break from the hyperstimulation. “You Were Meant for Me” from *Singin’ in the Rain*, “Our Love is Here to Stay” from *An American in Paris*, and “The Heather on the Hill” from *Brigadoon* (though still quite striking in its choreography, “Heather” mostly consists of just a slow series of poses) allow the lovers to be so blissfully wrapped up in their mutual enchantment that the viewer barely notices their dancing. This number need not be impressive; it exists to communicate the emotion and the story, not spectacle. The toned-down nature of these numbers, as well as how Kelly conducts himself in his romances (never desperate, always charming), embodies the self-assured, confident nature of a “sturdy oak,” whose masculinity is not simply defined by physical strength.



The playful “Bonnie Jean” from *Brigadoon* (1954)



Confidently romancing his leading ladies in “You Were Meant for Me” from *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) (Left), “Our Love Is Here to Stay” from *An American in Paris* (1951) (Right)



Impressive yet slow romance in “The Heather on the Hill” from *Brigadoon* (1954).

In reality, while these subdued numbers do serve their aforementioned purpose, they are also placed very strategically. Kelly is, in fact, preparing the audience for a shock. Soon after this slow number (with a variable number of other routines mixed in, be they upbeat dance numbers – “Good Morning” in *Singin’ in the Rain* – or ballads – Garland’s solo, the imploring love song, “Friendly Star” in *Summer Stock*) is the first of two show-stoppers. This first number builds in its grandeur. “Singin’ in the Rain,” the Newspaper Dance from *Summer Stock*, and “I’ve Got Rhythm” from *An American in Paris* all begin modestly and then explode into a display of his impressive skills. These displays of individual, physical prowess epitomize Kelly’s “sturdy oak”-

ness and will be examined shortly. After this first show-stopper appear a throw-away song or two, and then – the spectacle. Not necessarily the ultimate finale (take, for instance, “Broadway Melody” in *Singin’ in the Rain*), this number marks the last big performance. Tiptoeing on the fine line between epic and self-indulgence, these long numbers boast larger-than-life sets and ensembles, are highly stylized, and often veer towards the fantastical – in short, Kelly creates a spectacle. Kelly usually crafts this number in the guise of a weak narrative excuse – a proposed dance number in a film-within-a-film, an imaginative retelling of the film up to that point – and it lasts for far longer than any other number. The epic ballet at the climax of *An American in Paris*, for example, lasts 16 minutes. The viewer is meant to be swept away into this world within a world, this world of dance. The main goal is for it to be a transcendental experience. This is, of course, aided by Kelly’s insightful use of the camera on the dancer. Indeed, these displays speak more to the power of Kelly as choreographer and innovator, which, as mentioned, also informed his masculine identity. These fantasy worlds belong to Kelly, and he runs freely through them, dominating the spectacle with his own individual performance; thus, he demonstrates a tremendous amount of power through these numbers, both diegetically and as choreographer.



Dominating his fantasy world in three sections from the “American in Paris Ballet” from *An American in Paris* (1951)

Kelly’s creative control over the film manifested most effectively (beyond, of course, his choreography) in his directorial choices, which both added great depth to the numbers and ensured that the impressiveness of his dancing (and thus his masculinity) came through on film. Kelly’s role as star/choreographer/director, coupled with his exceptional understanding of how dance should be captured on film, put him in the perfect position to revolutionize the dance musical as art form. Kelly himself said, “You learn to use the camera as part of the choreography.”<sup>108</sup> Even when he was not directing the entire film, he was behind the camera, plotting out the dance sequences.<sup>109</sup> He knew when to focus in so close as to see the joy on a

<sup>108</sup>As quoted in - Hess and Dabholkar, *Singin’ in the Rain: The Making of an American Masterpiece*, 33.

<sup>109</sup> Leslie Caron in *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*, dir. Robert Trachtenberg.

dancer's face, the tensing of their muscles, their very breath; he knew when to pull back and reveal their sweeping use of the stage. His dance sequences are not just defined by the dynamic choreography, they are also defined by the harmonious relationship between the steps, the music, and the camera.

A particularly breathtaking moment, for example, occurs during the first Cyd Charisse interlude in the "Broadway Melody" fantasy from *Singin' in the Rain*. This moment additionally represents a turning point for Kelly's character, initially timid and awkward, as he reclaims his masculinity and becomes incredibly strong and sexy. Charisse cattily taunts Kelly with her sultry hip swivels as he stands befuddled behind her. The camera has just tracked out to an eye-level long shot. Finding something deep within himself (that gusto American men are made of) as the music crescendos, a newly-confident Kelly throws her cigarette (a playful gift to him) on the ground, straightens himself, reaches out, grasps her arm forcefully, and pulls her up onto him, her legs in a stylized, suggestive double attitude lift, legs spread and knees bent so the feet meet almost daintily behind her. Kelly cuts to a close up of their intrigued, excited faces. Then the camera cranes, settling on a high angle long shot as she slowly slides off of him and rests on the floor. He gracefully steps around her and pulls her up as the camera shifts down to eye level again. She stands and immediately twirls into a lightning speed standing triple *petit passé* turn, her leg winding down so that she might step out into the most beautiful of dips. Her body straight, her endless leg extended, his arms wrapped around her – this position is so profoundly sensual. Just as he begins to lower her, the trumpet blares and trembles, she raises her arm above her head in seductive submission, and Kelly cuts – masterfully cuts – back to that crane shot, pulling up and out as she is slowly placed on the floor. That is how a dip should be filmed. Kelly's routines are full of nuanced moments such as these, and that is part of what makes him

one of the most iconic dancers, choreographers, and directors of Hollywood cinema.



The dip sequence in “Broadway Melody” from *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). Kelly pulls Charisse into a double attitude lift (Top Left), lowers her to the ground (Top Center), and dips her as the camera moves with her graceful descent to the floor (Top Right, Bottom Row).

One striking routine that also illustrates this use of the camera comes from *Summer Stock*, a film that Kelly worked on as a favor to Judy Garland.<sup>110</sup> It would be Garland’s last film with MGM, but it would also strengthen Kelly’s reputation as a choreographic force to be reckoned with. Although Kelly did not direct this film (Charles Walters did), his artistic vision certainly influenced the filming of his musical numbers; because this is the case, and in order to simplify, all artistic decisions related to this number will be attributed to Kelly in this text. Kelly plays Joe Ross, a small-time theater director trying to make it big. Garland plays Jane Falbury, farm owner and sister to Kelly’s leading lady. Garland’s sister (Gloria DeHaven) arranges for Kelly and the cast and crew of his new show to rehearse and stage a production on the farm, much to Garland’s chagrin. Of course, in time, Kelly and Garland fall in love. They express this in the *pas de deux*

<sup>110</sup> *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*, dir. Robert Trachtenberg.

“You, Wonderful You.” Frustrated by what he perceives as a lost cause with Garland (she is engaged to Eddie Bracken, and he is semi-engaged to her sister) and overwhelmed by his decidedly gaudy and over-the-top musical, Kelly finds himself alone in the barn after rehearsal, whistling the “You, Wonderful You” theme to himself. Thus begins one of the most iconic Gene Kelly routines – his personal favorite from any of his films.<sup>111</sup>

“The Newspaper Dance” has a very back-to-basics quality to it because of the modest conceit of the scene, and this again highlights the down-home American masculinity that Kelly came to represent, despite his character being a part of show business. In his post-rehearsal solitude, Kelly casually yet thoughtfully strides around the floor of the barn, obviously considering both his show and his romantic dilemma. Suddenly, he steps on a creaky floorboard. In this routine, the complex motivations and metaphors that plague the numbers in the show-within-a-show, *Fall in Love*, have no place; a pure, beautiful, meaningful routine emerges from the simplest of incidences. Like many of Kelly’s routines, The Newspaper Dance begins with Kelly playing (he plays with children at the beginning of “I Got Rhythm” from *An American in Paris* and pokes fun at/with his vocal coach in “Moses Supposes” from *Singin’ in the Rain*, for example). This playful spirit endeared him to audiences,<sup>112</sup> perhaps tying back to the confidence that partially defines the ideal man. Kelly riffs around the board, doing simple tap steps and then integrating the squeaky sound to make interesting rhythms. Ultimately dismissing the blemish in the floor, he begins to walk away and stumbles upon a newspaper. He begins to play with this mundane object, too, and effectively turns it into an equally entertaining tool of dance with unique sonic properties. These playful moments represent Kelly’s agency and control within this

---

<sup>111</sup> Hess and Dabholkar, *Singin’ in the Rain: The Making of an American Masterpiece*, 38.

<sup>112</sup> Wollen, *Singin’ in the Rain*, 17.



number. He is master of this environment, using the force of his body to make these sounds when he wants to.<sup>113</sup>



Playing with the squeaky floorboard and newspaper, respectively

The dance up to this point is a cappella, save for his taps and his whistling. Halfway through the newspaper portion, though, the orchestra begins to accompany him. This lack of music at the beginning drives home the idea of this number emerging from straight diegesis, free from any feeling of a forced performance. The moment is organic, and so the sound begins as organic. Like every Gene Kelly number, though, it builds and is embellished by exaggerated artistic elements and performance aspects. Essentially, this spontaneous dance number evolves into a fully produced work of art by the end, affirming Kelly's (as choreographer and dancer) power over the diegetic world. This progression also seems to represent Kelly's philosophy of choreography – start with the bare bones and then build up from there, filling in the spaces; indeed, his numbers always seem to start with slow or small steps, never really starting with a bang. As already stated, this progression speaks to Kelly's choreographic control over the number. The gradual building up of the choreography, the lighting design, the music, and the

---

<sup>113</sup> Abby Saxon, Professor of Dance at Vassar College, personal interview, December 11, 2011.

camerawork, all occurring around Gene Kelly-as-star, works to put Kelly on a pedestal of masculine power and stardom. The effect is that all of the elements seem to be working at his behest, and it almost becomes unclear who is controlling them – Kelly as choreographer or Kelly as diegetic dancer – because both figures display impressive command in this number.

As mentioned, the dance begins to grow in a number of ways. The steps get bigger; in the beginning his movements are very contained, his footwork very small. He works from the floorboard to the newspaper and remains relatively insular. He still demonstrates power through these steps, as arguably more control is needed to keep the body so precise and small. Then he decides to up the ante and begins floating between the two play objects. The viewer can see that the routine is about to turn larger than life as Kelly departs from the floorboard and hops just a little higher, kicking his leg back behind him and hovering in the air just a split second longer. Landing between the paper and the board, he begins to shift his weight from side to side more dramatically, spreading his legs apart more widely. By the end of this movement he finally swings his arms high with his movements, displaying the athleticism that cements him in his masculinity. Additionally, the music begins to gain in texture, volume, and tempo as his steps continue to grow in grandeur. Finally, everything swells at once – the music, the dancing, the lights – as he climbs the stage set stairs behind him. This shift in position to one atop a stage represents the culmination of all of this buildup; he has finally crossed the threshold into full-out show stopping performance. And it truly is a show stopper. Kelly glides, lunges, leaps, and barrel turns his way across the space, ultimately indulging in grandiose and frantic movements that stop abruptly as the song comes full circle and he stops to read the newspaper, emerging back into reality.



Beginning to build in range of motion



Culmination of heightened lighting, music, choreography

The dance is very private and personal, which speaks to his “sturdy oak” self-sufficiency, but manages to amplify itself for an audience. The larger-than-life silhouette behind him on the wall pasted on by the red and purple production lights (seen above), the way the music crescendos and decrescendos in play with the complexity of his footwork – everything in this scene exists for him in this moment. The one thing that is most there for him, though, is the camera. The sequence begins with a medium shot of Kelly in the space and then pulls back to reveal the whole room, emphasizing his solitude and then dazzling the audience with what Kelly can do with his aloneness. Kelly then cuts to a tight long shot of himself noticing the floorboard. As he walks back and forth over the board and begins to play with it, the camera pans ever so slightly with him, keeping him in the center of the frame – this dance is about him and only him in this moment, after all. The camera holds as he begins to step away but hesitates, and then it decides to follow him when he decides to move; it repeats this pause when he decides to step onto the newspaper, keeping him on the side of the frame until he decides to go all-in, at which point it corrects. Kelly’s cinematographic direction calls for no cuts through this whole section; it seems as though he and the camera are breathing together. As seen with the *Singin’ in the Rain*

dip example, Kelly does tend to use many cuts to emphasize movement; the intimacy of this dance seems to negate this need for dynamism in perspective. The camera's devotion to his movement emphasizes his sheer presence and control over the environment.



Subtle camera movement following Kelly's translocation. The stair seen on the right sides of the frames serves as a good reference point for the scope of the pan.

As the dance gets bigger, so too does the frame. Kelly moves back; the camera pulls back. The first cut since the dancing begins fittingly occurs at that pivotal moment when the exploration ends and the routine begins, atop the set stairs. That moment deserves a tighter shot, and so Kelly fills up the screen, his strong muscles serving as the focal point (indeed, his back is to the camera for most of this shot). The camera then follows him diligently, without cuts, up until the next crescendo, when the dance again gets larger with the manual ripping of a newspaper. This literal dismantling of a prop signals the beginning of his display of ultimate control over the environment. The symbolic weight of a newspaper, a window to the outside world and thus a mini representation of practically every external force that may be working against him, gives this action much meaning. He grabs another newspaper and plays with it in a way quite different from the exploration in the beginning of the number. Though he exhibited some control over the prop initially, he was still somewhat respectful of it, not disturbing its placement or destroying it. Now, however, he twirls with the newspaper and steps into a matador pose, with the paper serving as the cape; needless to say, a strong masculine connotation

accompanies this brief section. Sarcastically switching to a balletic travelling step and femininely waving the paper up and down, Kelly asserts his power over the paper by crumpling it up and throwing it away, transitioning into a smooth, jazzy tap section. At this instant, Kelly, smiling with eyes closed, seems to be basking in his agency, his ability to create a perfect moment of happiness for himself.



Ripping the paper



Striking a masculine matador pose



Reveling in his self-made moment

Another interlude involving the stairs follows, which is even bigger than the first. He dances all over those stairs, swinging his arms to show physicality and maintain balance, syncopating his steps, and making a spectacle of himself; at this point, Kelly has complete control over the stairs, the room, the whole diegetic world. When he returns from the stairs, he further destroys the diegetic world, this time in a much more frantic and unrestrained way. He

jumps on the paper and tears it into smaller and smaller pieces with his feet, flailing his arms even more wildly than before as he uses his strength and precision in movement to claim power over the helpless object. Caught up in the moment, he violently kicks away the fragmented pieces of newspaper, and his movements become too frantic, too abandoned. As a “sturdy oak” is in fact “sturdy,” restraint and composure (power over the self) seem to be fitting accompanying traits, and Kelly exhibits these after this loss of control. Kelly thus holds back, pauses, calms himself, and settles for simply walking away contently, newspaper in hand.

The Newspaper Dance serves as strong example of why Gene Kelly was so popular with audiences at the time. In a postwar world, where American men had so recently felt truly masculine and then had it ripped from them, Gene Kelly emerged and gave it right back. Known as the everyday American man with copious strength and physical ability, Kelly, as director, choreographer and dancer, was the embodiment of wartime heroism when there was no longer a need to be heroic. Audiences saw his athletic, commanding movements and felt that they could still be powerful, independent men within the sprawling suburban landscape of peacetime America. Kelly was every man, but he was also an ideal. As a commanding creative force and an impressively-physical performer, Kelly represented both the figurative and literal applications of the sturdy oak archetype. That masculine perfection emerging from the humdrum is what drew in audiences, captivated by a lone man who could notice a creaky floorboard and turn it into a larger-than-life display of pure manhood.

## ‘Little Islands’: A Brief Interlude on Ballet Interludes

I feel so strongly about Gene, a brilliant talent, and Minnelli, so gifted...and Freed has impeccable taste. So I'm telling New York this picture is going to be great because of the ballet – or it'll be nothing. Without the ballet it's just a cute and nice musical. So that's what we're gambling on.

L.B. Mayer, on *American in Paris* (1951)<sup>114</sup>

We have not yet considered ballet. One of the most traditional and structured styles of dance, ballet is an expression of high culture and represents a chance for talent to showcase traditional training and technique in Hollywood musicals. Further, American ballet represents one of the most diverse and metamorphic traditions, transforming throughout the twentieth century and seeping into many other styles of dance. Early film musicals sometimes included a version of ballet close to the stringently classical styles; nonetheless, these visitations were usually quite brief, as small sections of larger numbers. American ballet was never the star of a movie until decades after a dance tradition in musicals was established, and even then ballets were generally segregated from the rest of the picture as interludes. Given ballet's beauty, prestige, and impressiveness, why would this be so?

Looking back to the fundamental aesthetics of ballet as a dance form, independent of modern American flare or even the specifics of its traditional European background, one can see that the idea of gender in ballet is somewhat confused and contrary to many other forms of dance. This fact may begin to explain ballet's sparing use in the Hollywood Musical. Ballet is perhaps not the smoothest of dance styles, as positioning and movements can be rigid at times, but aesthetically it demands just that from its dancers' bodies. That is to say, the ideal ballet dancer is slender and flat, lacking any bumps or hairy masses; the female is thus the ideal to

---

<sup>114</sup> As quoted in Yudkoff, *Gene Kelly: A Life of Dance and Dreams*, 212.

which the male aspires.<sup>115</sup> A man can never hope to make himself simultaneously strong and shapeless, while a woman can. As men build up muscle, which is necessary for lifting, their shape changes and expands. That which makes women shapely (the birthing structure of the hips and breasts) has nothing to do with strength, and toning in a slender woman adds little to no shape. In fact, for the type of strength a female dancer requires (allowing her to jump, twirl, and extend her limbs), bulk is a burden. Thus, the interesting corollary here is that the ideal female form in the world of ballet is a more androgynous version of a woman. The best ballet dancer would be a stick – no wide hips, no breasts. The body would be a sinewy board to be bent, manipulated, twirled; anything detracting from this simplicity would be contrary to this aesthetic goal. In a way unrecognized by proponents of a Freudian reading of the ballet dancer – the women are made powerful through their lack-of-penis and men are forever doomed to be imperfect through what usually makes them worthy of envy<sup>116</sup> – the woman is still held to a masculine ideal. Although she should not aspire to have a male sex organ, she should aspire to represent a lack of natural feminine pubescent growth patterns and have what men have naturally, no hips and no breasts. Tutus and ribbons re-feminize ballerinas in order to aesthetically differentiate them from the men, but a naturally curvy girl would never thrive in the world of ballet; the costumes are simply facades placed over cookie-cutter forms. So, in ballet, slender, androgynous women have the upper hand both in their femininity and their masculinity. It would seem as though male ballet dancers should be lauded for their masculine forms, especially when they carry out impressive feats of strength, but the true “beauty” of ballet is the ballerina, and the male dancer’s primary purpose is to showcase that beauty, which he can never

---

<sup>115</sup> Jennifer Fisher, “Maverick Men in Ballet: Rethinking the ‘Making It Macho’ Strategy,” in *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, ed. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 37-38.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



hope to embody, himself.

Where does that leave men? It seems, burdened by their masculinity and tarnished by their femininity. The omnipresent stigma of the male dancer, particularly the male ballet dancer, as being effeminate, places the male dancer in a difficult position. This stigma was strengthened in America by the recurring pattern of male ballet dancers being gay and audiences knowing this fact.<sup>117</sup> Jennifer Fisher explains that a male dancer “whose limbs drift too languidly or curve into a form that might be interpreted as too soft or vulnerable may have his masculinity questioned in no uncertain terms.”<sup>118</sup> Additionally, ballet as an art form can be seen as appealing primarily to a feminine audience, meaning that male dancers are there to serve and appeal to the female perspective. Traditional French and Russian ballets often centered on the melodramatic, featuring doomed women in tragic and extreme situations, or the romantic.<sup>119</sup> Melodrama is associated with female viewership, as something about the earnest emotion and romance speaks to a woman’s interests and sensibilities and simultaneously turns men off.<sup>120</sup> While male ballet dancers may dance masculine roles, they are dancing masculine roles within an inherently feminine form.

Male ballet dancers and choreographers (both male and female) alike, then, have something to prove through the choices they make. The confounded nature of each gender’s position in this balletic world, combined with the viewers’ stigmatic perceptions of male ballet dancers, makes for a consistently confused performance. Choreographers such as influential American dance figure Ted Shawn, who insisted on only male dancers and trained them to channel Greek gods, athletes, and tribal patriarchs, tried desperately to claim ballet as a

---

<sup>117</sup> John Meehan, Professor of Dance at Vassar College, personal interview, December 12, 2011.

<sup>118</sup> Fisher, “Maverick Men in Ballet: Rethinking the ‘Making It Macho’ Strategy,” 31-32.

<sup>119</sup> Lynn Garafola, “Russian Ballet in the Age of Petipa,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, ed. Marion Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 154.

<sup>120</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 236.

masculine form, but the stigma still remained;<sup>121</sup> ballet was for women and feminine men. This feeling is to some extent counterintuitive, as male ballet dancers perform some of the most acrobatic feats in dance, including lifting and twirling women, which require tremendous strength. Ballet manages to represent Brannon's "big wheel" and "sturdy oak" archetypes through its aristocratic roots and the demonstrations of strength and confidence, respectively; nevertheless, its connection to femininity through the fundamental aesthetics described above turns its male performers into problematic specimens. Of course, male ballet performances can be, and often are, beautiful, but perhaps this is why traditional ballets were conservatively used in Hollywood musicals. Ballet numbers' entirely distinct feel, defined partly by their accompanying gender dynamics, render them too antithetical to the American musical's persistent desire to represent their song-and-dance men as manly to be seamlessly integrated into the whole of a musical. Therefore, ballet numbers were reserved for interludes – fantasy sequences that highlighted romance or drama, softened the tone, and presented a unique form of bodily expression.

But what do actual balletic movements look like, and why does the ballet seen in Hollywood fantasy sequences feel so different from traditional forms of ballet? To investigate the growth of the distinct American style, one must first look to ballet's traditional roots. Ballet began in Europe as early as in the fifteenth century, with only royalty and nobles taking part in the dance; the fundamental mechanics have remained consistent. Thus, a truly traditional ballet dancer has always moved, and still moves, just as royalty moved in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.<sup>122</sup> Traditional performance ballets mirror the structure of the royal court, with a principal couple representing the king and queen and the rest of the ensemble representing the

---

<sup>121</sup> Walter Terry, *Ted Shawn: Father of American Dance* (New York: The Dial Press, 1976), 72.

<sup>122</sup> Agnes De Mille, *The Book of the Dance* (New York: Golden Press, 1961), 80-82.

nobility.<sup>123</sup> Modern American interpretations of ballet, as seen in film and on stage, broke down the structure of the court and played with the traditional repertoire of movements. How and why did this occur? In part, America's exploration of the balletic form simply started much later and without strong tradition, with companies only popping up around the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. As Agnes De Mille explains,

Ballet as it was practiced in Europe was not our natural means of expression... We had not the houses or institutions for it, not the state schools or the government patronage, and therefore we had not the means of cultivating public taste. Our own kind of dancing was developing elsewhere, in the barrooms, tents, and low-grade theaters.<sup>124</sup>

Add to this the American ideal of egalitarianism and the nation's antiroyalist roots,<sup>125</sup> and what results is a unique interpretation of a traditional form, though what people refer to when they speak of "American ballet" did not develop until the twentieth century.

American ballet as it manifested in the middle of the last century transformed what was a very strict, traditional dance style into something much more adaptive and welcoming to the average viewers, those people in barrooms, tents, and low-grade theaters. Generally denounced by traditionalists as a mutt-like amalgamation, American ballet is founded on experimentation and the decomposition of rigid form. These experimental roots appear in early Hollywood musicals, a fitting medium for a deviation from the regal origins of the form, though one may associate the peak of this metamorphosis with later choreographers such as Jerome Robbins, who created an urban, aggressive, jazz-modern-ballet mixture.<sup>126</sup>

Looking to Hollywood musicals, one can clearly see that this style of dance in America was not limited to old-fashioned forms. Ballet was, again, sparingly used, and when it was, it seeped into other dance numbers in very non-traditional terms. Vera Ellen, for example, trained

---

<sup>123</sup> John Meehan, Professor of Dance at Vassar College, personal interview, December 12, 2011.

<sup>124</sup> De Mille, *The Book of the Dance*, 122.

<sup>125</sup> John Meehan, Professor of Dance at Vassar College, personal interview, December 12, 2011.

<sup>126</sup> De Mille, *The Book of the Dance*, 189.

in ballet but coming from a predominantly Broadway background, would go on to perform many ballet numbers for choreographers such as Gene Kelly.<sup>127</sup> Her later performances, such as the two fantasy ballet sequences in *On the Town*, show her more fully immersed in the development of this distinctly American art form; one interesting manifestation of her training, though, is seen through the integration of hints of ballet into larger tap numbers in her early films. In *Wonder Man* (1945), she performs a routine, “So in Love,” which is predominately tap. She does impressive ankle isolations, a flurry of complicated time steps, and many acrobatic kicks. The number is extremely playful and laid back. But then every so often her posture will change; her arms will rise up in various ballet positions. She even begins dancing *en pointe* – in tap shoes. Similar instances can be seen even earlier on, with tapping *en pointe* appearing as a novelty in films such as *The Broadway Melody* (1929). Numbers such as this one speak to the fluidity of dance styles in Hollywood musicals, to the persistent presence of traditional balletic elements in an otherwise strictly contemporary film or number, and to the laid-back American approach to ballet choreography. One must remember, however, that while American ballet is a fundamentally integrative dance style, it remains founded on tradition, honoring much of the classic ballet technique.<sup>128</sup> After all, it must be recognizable as a form. As Agnes De Mille explains, though, these small flourishes of *pointe* and poses were not significant expressions of the American ballet movement on film; this did not happen until the 1950’s.<sup>129</sup>

---

<sup>127</sup> David Parkinson, *The Rough Guide to Film Musicals* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 245.

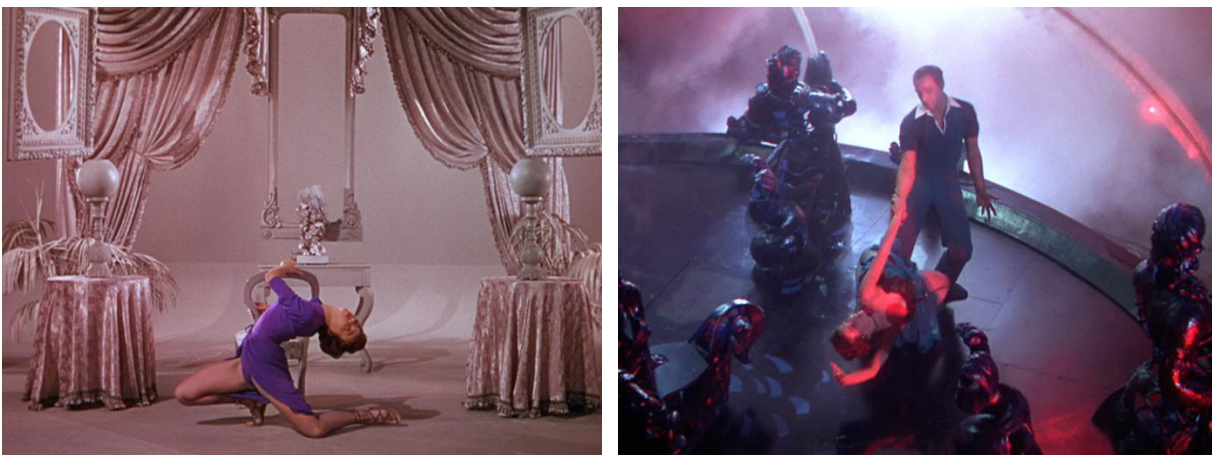
<sup>128</sup> De Mille, *The Book of the Dance*, 193.

<sup>129</sup> Agnes De Mille, *America Dances* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980), 197.



Vera Ellen tap dancing *en point* and striking a balletic pose in “So in Love” from *Wonder Man* (1945)

Actual ballet numbers from studio-era Hollywood musicals also speak to the developing American style without being as explicit in their integration as the aforementioned Vera Ellen routine. Other accomplished ballet dancers (on film) of the era, such as Leslie Caron and Cyd Charisse, dance in sexy routines with prominent partners who are not strictly known for ballet. Caron’s ballets with Fred Astaire in *Daddy Long Legs* and Charisse’s sequence with Gene Kelly in *Singin’ in the Rain*, for example, allow for increasingly dreamlike explorations of romance on the parts of these two male dancers known for other styles, thus setting apart these moments as something special. The dances accomplish this by combining the romance of ballet with the somewhat more sexual feeling jazz affords; additionally, by Americanizing and modernizing the balletic movement, these dances also work to maintain the male dancer’s masculinity. The way Gene Kelly choreographs himself and Leslie Caron in *An American in Paris* is quite dynamic and particularly telling of this pattern in Hollywood musicals. At times performing traditional ballet moves, which add new depth of expression and, more simply, displays of impressive skill, Caron will also swivel with a jazzy sensuality and looseness of movement not part of the ballet repertoire, making her all-the-more feminine. Both in Kelly’s solos and partnering, he stays true to his jazz roots, bending his knees and hunching his back, still insistent on upholding his masculine image as a postwar “sturdy oak.”



Jazzy backbend (note the splayed legs and chair prop) (Left) and tough-guy stance (note the strong arms and confidently cocked head) (Right), both from *An American in Paris* (1951)

The particularly important recurring pattern amongst these numbers is the fact that these dances occur as interludes within a larger, non-ballet-centric film. Ballet interludes were a common occurrence in musicals of the 1950's (*Singin' in the Rain*, *On the Town*, and the 1955 screen adaptation of *Oklahoma!*, for example). As mentioned, a major motivation in isolating these numbers was perhaps to maintain the masculine images of the male stars. At the same time, dance interludes afforded choreographers with a degree of freedom not allowed with other integrated numbers. Not even necessarily limited to ballet (though they often were), interludes created a chance to put the story on hold and introduce a fantastical exploration of human emotion and creativity. They created the utopian escape Dyer describes<sup>130</sup> in one of its purest forms, letting the reality of the narrative fade away into unadulterated art and thus allowing the musical to accomplish what other genres were unable to do. In a dance interlude, everything is exaggerated and fanciful – costumes (think Cyd Charisse's mile-long train in "Broadway Melody" from *Singin' in the Rain*), lighting (the giant circle spotlight illuminating only Gene Kelly, Vera Ellen, a dance bar, and a bright red wall in "A Day in New York" from *On the Town*), and sets (the French impressionist-inspired café in "Dream Ballet" from *An American in*

<sup>130</sup> Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 28.

*Paris* or the looming, multicolored, cardboard buildings of *Daddy Long Legs*), to name a few enhanced elements.



Exaggerated costume in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)      Dramatic lighting in *On the Town* (1949)

This heightened artistic expression allowed for the creation of pure, impossible spectacle, nearing the scale of the outdated Berkeley showstoppers, all through the form of a dream or fantasy. Ballet is an exaggerated dance form that, unlike tap or jazz, is not so easily integrated into everyday movements (yet – Jerome Robbins would change that). As such, it was a fitting dance form for this fantasy world. And fantasy worlds were fitting sanctuaries for this overtly theatrical dance style, as well as heightened emotion. As Peter Wollen, when describing Gene Kelly’s use of the fantasy ballet, explains, “I think they have to be dreams because they’re ballets...ballet was more difficult to integrate. They are like little islands within the rest of the film, but they were very important to him because it was a way of showcasing the breadth and variety of the forms of dance.”<sup>131</sup> And, contrary to Wollen’s categorization, these islands were not little. Everything about them was big, from the aforementioned stylistic flourishes, to their duration, to their insular story lines. These interludes often allowed for romantic fantasies to play

<sup>131</sup> Peter Wollen in *Gene Kelly, Anatomy of a Dancer*, dir. Robert Trachtenberg.

out in their entirety – from meeting, to chase/wooing, to conquest/embrace, and sometimes to loss (look to *On the Town* and *Singin' in the Rain*, for example). They were fantastical centerpieces, though they were isolated and sometimes undervalued. Despite the fact that ballet had already reached a new and exciting (for the choreographers and dancers, at least) place within the film musical by fitting into this interlude niche, more exciting changes to this style were occurring in the dance world. These changes would soon make their presence known in Hollywood.

As dance in America developed, more innovations were attached to the balletic form. Agnes De Mille, one of the most influential ballet choreographers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, integrated traditional American dance forms in order to form a more modern interpretation of the style.<sup>132</sup> As a woman choreographing men, she was perhaps even more sensitive to the potential emasculation of her dancers. Her depiction of the cowboy in her famous ballet *Rodeo* (1942) is both distinctly American and exaggeratedly masculine. For the 1955 film adaptation of *Oklahoma!*, De Mille's ten minute long ballet, transferred from the original 1943 stage version, introduced the American film viewer to this more nuanced ballet movement of the modern age.<sup>133</sup> In this number, not only did she choreograph the dancers to express themselves through more relaxed, broader movements (associated with a more modern tradition) in order to illustrate and elevate the ongoing plot and contextualize the choreography rather than just the story of the dance, she also added elements of American folk dance, such as heel clicks, arm flapping/leg slapping, and Western-influenced cowboy stances. Many of these elements were also comedic,

---

<sup>132</sup> De Mille, *The Book of the Dance*, 189.

<sup>133</sup> Grant, Barry K., ed., *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film, Vol.1* (Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007), 279.



lending a lighter touch to a once entirely serious and sacred form.<sup>134</sup> De Mille explains her own work,

To the classic base we added colloquialism. We have come down to earth; we have put our feet on the ground. Above all, pantomime is not as arbitrary or formal as in the older ballets. All this came about inevitably as ballet began to take contemporary subjects for themes. The king's stance and bow, his formal acting, were suitable to monarchs, birds, and ghosts; they are not suitable to cowboys, sailors, crap shooters, and their molls.<sup>135</sup>

De Mille's extremely influential work helped set the tone for future works in ballet/modern/jazz, such as that of the aforementioned Jerome Robbins.



Dramatic, modern pose – note the natural feel of the fight, her spread, bent legs, the harsh elbow and splayed fingers – in “Dream Ballet” from *Oklahoma!* (1955)

<sup>134</sup> De Mille, *The Book of the Dance*, 189.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.



Heel clicks, a hint of Americana, in *Oklahoma!* (1955)



Cowboy stance in *Oklahoma!* (1955)

What De Mille's and other choreographers' amalgamation of styles amounted to was a very fluid dance form that carried many conflicting connotations about the use of the balletic form. Was it the most traditional of the Hollywood dance styles or the most experimental? Was it soft and beautiful or harsh and bold? Lastly, was it feminine or masculine? While the integration of other dance styles opened up the possibility for ballet to shed the feminized-male stigma, the increasing emotionality behind the movement, as well as the looseness of many of the newer

movement styles and the oft-repeated melodramatic/romantic focus, made for an increasingly feminine choreographic tone. Perhaps this relative feminization was acceptable because it occurred in interludes that were bookmarked by more masculine forms of performance. Perhaps it was acceptable because of the stars performing it; Gene Kelly's virile masculinity seemed to negate any feminine movements, and steps that required a lightness of movement even read as powerful because of the amount of control needed for them. Finally, a little later on, perceptions of masculinity shifted as the American man distanced himself from the glory of WWII and the "sturdy oak" archetype; choreographers such as Jerome Robbins presented dancing men in conflict, both tough and emotional, and this nuanced representation of the American man through American ballet was acceptable as per this new masculine ideal. This change allowed for Robbins to compose a film consisting of almost entirely ballet (though in its modern-jazz-urban form). As will be shown in the next chapter, with *West Side Story* (1961), Robbins managed to create a world around this dance, rather than banishing it to its own little interlude island.

## Living Dance: Jerome Robbins' Violently Emotional World

That's who he was, to me, growing up in Denmark as a kid...he was a giant. I didn't know him as a classical ballet choreographer...And so I don't know whether I was really equipped to truly appreciate him or even understand him as a classical choreographer. He was the man who did this [*snaps finger*]. And that's what I fell in love with.

Peter Martins<sup>136</sup>

Out of the postwar era grew a culture of consumerism, suburbanization, conformism, and complacency. Leaving the memory of the glory of World War II behind with time, American men fully immersed themselves in post-postwar dullness. Men came to reluctantly accept their role as breadwinner, which had initially come as a shock when emerging from the demanding battle environment. And so the masculine archetype of the 1950's was the responsible, professional, morally strong, routine-oriented, white father figure (Ward Cleaver, from the show *Leave It to Beaver*, for example). This archetype was still in many ways a traditionally masculine one (the epitome of Brannon's "big wheel" ideal), but it was one that was not as hypermasculine and strong as that which men had striven for not too long ago; therefore, in comparison, it felt weak. Men needed a goal that fit with the now subdued American landscape, though, and this was it. Michael Kimmel explains that by the end of the 1950's, men, while settled, did not truly embrace this ideal – "Responsible breadwinners and devoted fathers, they were still anxious about overconformity but unable and unwilling to break free of domestic responsibilities to become rebels on the run. Besides, they were *needed* at home to raise those sons to be real men."<sup>137</sup>

While adult men may have generally grown complacent, there was a portion of the

<sup>136</sup> Deborah Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 266.

<sup>137</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 257.

population that did not approve and would let it be known – “those sons.” Susan Faludi explains that young boys raised by World War II veterans were taught to strive for the masculine perfection of the war hero, but they quickly saw their fathers fail to embody this. “What they bestowed was a culture where the sons could not exercise the sorts of traditional manhood that the fathers so judgmentally endorsed,” she explains.<sup>138</sup> Teenage boys were confused about their masculinity, but they were not men yet, so – so what? Well, this crisis of confusion emerged along with a strong, unified American youth culture, so the feelings of teenage boys were impossible to ignore. More than ever before, the youth of America had a real identity, an identity that was grounded in opposition to all of the things for which American men now needed to stand, and these boys experienced their own crisis of masculinity well before they even became adult men.

But how did this youth culture develop? The American teenage identity began to truly evolve in the 1940’s. For example, in January of 1945, *New York Times Magazine* published “A Teen-Age Bill of Rights.” Some of these rights, bestowed upon the youth of the nation by the adults that would soon disappoint these kids with their breadwinning-intent inertia, included, “the right to a ‘say’ about his own life,” “the right to make mistakes, to find out for oneself,” “the right to question ideas,” and “the right to struggle toward his own philosophy of life.”<sup>139</sup> Ironically, some of the very facets of society that American teens came to resent would indeed foster the adoption of these ideals by youths in the 1950’s and 1960’s. Consumerism in particular played a role in this process. With a revitalized economy, America became preoccupied with buying and selling. Marketing campaigns appealed to all members of the household, but primarily to the housewife and the teenager with plenty of money to spend and no real-world

---

<sup>138</sup> Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, 36.

<sup>139</sup> As quoted in Jon Savage, *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 455.

obligations keeping him from spending it. Therefore, companies and advertisers alike created a teenage style, complete with musical preferences, fashion trends, and a general sense of what it meant to be a young American at the time.<sup>140</sup> Through these consumer trends arose a sense of camaraderie, both cementing the status of these patterns as representative of a “culture” and representing a driving force of the youth culture movement – they were all searching for something different and personal, but they were doing it together.<sup>141</sup> This camaraderie founded by consumerism thus, in turn, developed into a resentment of the very forces and ideals that gave rise to consumerism.

The specific teenage obsessions of the 1950’s and early 1960’s speak to the philosophical and sociological nature of the growing youth culture. Wearing jeans, for example, was not simply a random fashion trend that expressed a teen’s individuality. As the clothing of the working middle class, jeans came to represent the anti-elitist philosophy of the American teenager, who would reject the suburban office-worker ideal.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, along these lines, the rugged manliness and physicality connoted by this garb suggests a rebellion against the accepted “big wheel” paradigm in favor of a more rugged masculinity.

Another trend that seems to fit with this rejection of the “big wheel” ideal is delinquency, which became a major problem across the nation. Although the idea of teens acting out and rebelling was certainly not a new one, the youth culture that developed in the 60’s was overwhelmingly categorized as a “more or less specifically irresponsible” movement “in conflict

---

<sup>140</sup> Moya Lockett, “Girl Watchers: Patty Duke and Teen TV,” in *The Revolution Wasn’t Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 97.

<sup>141</sup> Ernest A. Smith, *American Youth Culture: Group Life in Teenage Society*, (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), 2.

<sup>142</sup> Alan Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 193.

with the adult world's sense of responsibility...and productive work.”<sup>143</sup> Delinquency, including gang culture, theft, and violence amongst male youths, arose out of the frustration and anger teens felt in response to the “methodism and routine” of their parents.<sup>144</sup> Popular representations of this phenomenon both added fuel to the fire and shed some light on the true motivations behind this uncouth behavior. Teen films became increasingly popular, showing the anxiety (and coolness) of the young American man. In *The Wild One* (1953), the first major teen delinquency film, Johnny Strabler (Marlon Brando) is the leader of a motorcycle gang that rebels against society by roaming from town to town causing serious trouble.<sup>145</sup> *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), perhaps the most famous and iconic portrayal of the burgeoning youth culture, shows gangs of teens playing chicken and carrying out various acts of violence. This fascination with and near-glorification of violent acts (although represented as flawed practices within these films, their actual depiction is usually quite exciting, even tinged with a sexual energy – indeed, Marlon Brando and James Dean were the pinnacle of male sexiness) speaks to the American youth culture's own masculine ideal. In so vehemently rejecting the “big wheel” model, teens seemed to jump right past the “sturdy oak” physicality and aim for something even more extreme – Brannon's traditional male role ‘d,’ “give ‘em hell.” Men successfully living out this role show “aggression, violence and daring,”<sup>146</sup> and these traits perfectly describe the affect that the tumultuous and fervent teens of the American youth culture exhibited.

At the same time, these teen films showed a side of the youth culture on which many adults did not choose to focus – the emotion. For example, Alan Petigny explains that, in *Rebel Without a Cause*, “when we lift the veil...underneath [James Dean's] tough exterior is a sensitive

---

<sup>143</sup> Michael Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada* (London: Routledge, 1985), 85.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 86.

<sup>145</sup> Grant, Barry K., ed. *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film, Vol. 4* (Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007), 209.

<sup>146</sup> Edley and Wetherell, *Men in Perspective: Practice, Power, and Identity*, 77.

young man from a troubled home.”<sup>147</sup> In other words, Jim Stark (James Dean) and all American boys were confused and hurt; their hostile reactions and admiration for aggressive displays of masculinity emerged from a very emotional place. Additionally, despite sensitivity not being a part of the “give ‘em hell” ideal, simultaneous subcultural trends perhaps allowed for emotionality to become somewhat acceptable. Other misfits of the 1950’s, particularly the beat generation and the other members of the burgeoning music, dance, and visual art scenes in major cities like New York, allowed art and emotion to guide them through their rejection of society.<sup>148</sup> Perhaps only artistic explorations of these contemporary phenomena, such as *Rebel Without a Cause* and Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* (1957), were able to truly capture the nuanced nature of the young American, showing both the violent outbursts and their sensitive motivations. One form of artistic expression that proved particularly effective in communicating these complicated truths was dance; in the film *West Side Story*, Jerome Robbins was able to show through dance both the “give ‘em hell” ideal and its emotional core.

Robbins emerged at the right time with the right grasp on these cultural occurrences, but he also understood the motivation to assert one’s manhood in reaction to building emotions and confusions related to personal identity. In observing the choreography of this gay male choreographer/dancer of the mid-twentieth century (who for a long time tried to conceal his homosexuality<sup>149</sup>), one can see his desire to proclaim his manliness through dance by manipulating once wholly feminized movements. Any discussion of displays of masculinity in Robbins’ choreography should be taken with a grain of salt, as there is an undoubtedly feminine touch that shines through in softness and balletic influence; this arguably parallels (though

---

<sup>147</sup> Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965*, 202.

<sup>148</sup> Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*, 87.

<sup>149</sup> Jowitz, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*, 135.



certainly without intent) Robbins' failed attempts to disguise his sexuality in order to conform to masculine standards. In societal terms, the position of the gay man as not quite fitting in with the rest of society jelled well with the sentiments of both the American teenager and in many ways the universal teenager who is trapped between the bliss of childhood and the harsh reality of adulthood (see the quote from Danish-born dancer Peter Martins at the beginning of this chapter). This sensibility thus arguably gave him great insight into the growing youth culture in America. But perhaps even more importantly, American dance as a larger movement was poised to tackle this challenge of representing the nuanced American teen. Jerome Robbins grew up in an era of great dancers and visionary choreographers; particularly influential was the innovation of American ballet/modern technique. Ballet giants such as George Balanchine and Agnes De Mille created groundbreaking, seminal pieces for companies and shows around the world (such as Balanchine's choreography for the 1936 production of the Broadway show *On Your Toes*, accomplished while he was still the acclaimed ballet master of the Metropolitan Opera,<sup>150</sup> and Agnes De Mille's ballet *Rodeo*), and they inspired a global army of disciples. In film, as stated, one could already see the influence of ballet and jazz seeping into the popular tap genre in postwar era cinema with Gene Kelly, and this opened the door for stage choreographers to bring new work to the silver screen.

By the time Robbins emerged as a highly prominent choreographer, tap was no longer part of the equation. The new wave of choreography was decidedly lighter and thus more effeminate, but not necessarily emasculating. This is, of course, partly due to mechanics. Tap requires heavy movements to make the necessary sounds (though post-dubbed in films), and the look of the dance matches this necessity; ballet, modern, and jazz often thrive off of silence, the continuous rise and fall of fluid movements that quietly and quickly shock without warning. The

---

<sup>150</sup> Bernard Taper, *Balanchine: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 179.

overall shift in aesthetics, however, was certainly grounded in something deeper than the absence of metal slats on shoe soles. Modern American jazz, ballet, and modern, crafted by those countercultural visionaries introspecting and immersing themselves in the art world of New York, reflected the sensitivity of an increasingly self-aware, complex, and metamorphic society. Therefore, the changing popularity of dance styles seems to parallel the rapidly evolving social and cultural climate of the 1950's and 1960's. More specifically, the smooth, graceful movements, matched with sharp poses and acrobatic, expressive leaps, all of which defined Jerome Robbins' style, both represented and were shaped by the actions and emotions of the young generation for whom and about which Robbins choreographed.

But how did Robbins personally develop his signature style? Similarly to Astaire, Robbins began studying dance because of his sister. He was initially trained to be the musician of the family, but his passion for dance became apparent quickly.<sup>151</sup> His dance education began in the modern technique, but soon after leaving New York University (which he attended very briefly) to pursue a career in dance, he started taking classes in an eclectic assortment of styles which he would ultimately integrate into his choreography. These included Oriental, interpretive, and Spanish, the latter being particularly apparent in *West Side Story* with the vibrant Sharks numbers ("America" being the most notable).<sup>152</sup> His years in New York certainly exposed him to cultural movements (art, music, social) that were at the forefront of innovation in that era. Though he also took classes in choreography, his choreographic style did not begin to develop until he worked at the Tamiment Playhouse, a camp in the Poconos that fostered the talents of many soon-to-be-famous performers. The experience he gained there as a choreographer and dancer helped him enter the Ballet Theatre company, where he was featured as a character

---

<sup>151</sup> Robert E. Long, *Broadway, The Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors, 1940 to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 61.

<sup>152</sup> Ford, *Legends of American Dance and Choreography*, 57.

dancer. The turning point in his career came in 1943 with *Fancy Free*, the first ballet of his own conception. Leonard Bernstein's jazzy score for that show set the tone for Robbins' later works.<sup>153</sup> What followed was a series of Broadway shows and ballets, arguably climaxing with *West Side Story*, premiering on stage in 1957 and then again on film in 1961.



Spanish and Latin influence in “America,” *West Side Story* (1961). Note the men in a classic matador pose, while the women flick up their skirts in Spanish flamenco-fashion, nodding their heads towards their kicking legs with the vivacious looseness associated with Latin dance.

While Jerome Robbins did not have as illustrious a career in film as Busby Berkeley, Fred Astaire, or Gene Kelly, he was still one of the most influential choreographers of the 1950's and 1960's. His influence stems primarily from *West Side Story*, a modern adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* centered on two rival street gangs, the Jets (white, working-class) and the Sharks (Puerto Rican immigrants). The story was originally conceived by Robbins as simply a racial clash destroying a young relationship, but the teen gang element was added in once this phenomenon began cropping up in cities across America.<sup>154</sup> This juvenile delinquency conceit is only one facet of *West Side Story*'s cultural relevance. As a result of his spot-on interpretation of the experience of the American teen, *West Side Story* undeniably places Jerome

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 64-68.

<sup>154</sup> Long, *Broadway, The Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors, 1940 to the Present*, 96.

Robbins amongst Hollywood's most important film choreographers, despite it being one of his only film efforts. While director Robert Wise is certainly to thank for many of the stylistic and structural successes of the film, Robbins' pervasive and attention-demanding choreography elevated the film to a different level of both status and meaning. What was so iconic and resonant about Robbins' work, particularly when translated on film (most of the stage version's choreography went into the film, though Robbins tinkered with the numbers a bit to fit with the cinematic plot, as well as in reaction to the artistic limits and advantages of the screen<sup>155</sup>), was the feeling of contemporary, everyday people doing extraordinary and yet – this is the key – familiar things with their bodies. While Gene Kelly's everyman choreography worked to define his personal stardom in human terms, thus propelling him into popularity, Robbins' jazz-modern-ballet choreography attempted to create a world of dance in which there was no divide between performance and reality, between dancers and everyone else. When he accomplished this, dance seemed to become a part of life, rather than just a display of evocative skills.

For *West Side Story*, this came through in the choreographed routines for the rival teen street gangs. These main characters reflect the more extreme side of the growing youth culture as rebellious, violent teenagers, forced into lives of crime by circumstance and a desire to forsake everything America was supposed to cherish. Somehow, their dancing, which could easily translate as effeminate or overly-theatrical, does not feel out of place. The softer, graceful sways and turns, sometimes even in arabesque, ground the Jets in the emotionality and passion that result from lives full of hard-knocks (indeed, his style was described by Agnes De Mille as "American urban," capturing the true essence of the inner-city experience<sup>156</sup>). These movements, such as the forward-moving jazz-style *ronde de jambes* in the Prologue (Robbins called this

---

<sup>155</sup> Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*, 285.

<sup>156</sup> De Mille, *The Book of the Dance*, 190.

move the “sailing step”<sup>157</sup>), in which a Jet will run forward and circle his leg from the front to the side as he surveys the land, arms outstretched and commanding, can simultaneously represent the cockiness, masculine bravado, and feelings of invincibility that accompany the “give ‘em hell” ideal and ultimately doom the gang members. More explicitly, the sudden, explosive poses and jumps, angular and aggressive, speak to the anger and violence they feel they must exhibit to prove themselves as real men. This can be seen in “Cool” in particular, when the anger over Riff’s death explodes out of the boys as they strike grounded poses mimicking fight stances; this number, which will be discussed in detail further on, is punctuated with movements of more explicit pain and emotion, speaking to the complicated position of American youths.



*Ronde de jamps in West Side Story “Prologue”*

Additionally, and feeding off of the idea of the main characters’ dance style emerging organically from this cultural moment and thus the very world in which they live, the choreography is often directly and physically connected to their environment. They climb fences

---

<sup>157</sup> Jowitz, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*, 286.

and jump off with pointed toes and outstretched limbs; they bounce and twirl with basketballs, intimidatingly leaping around onlookers. They walk down the street, snapping and shrugging their way through life. They are, at their core, teenagers, filled with emotion and confusion, trying to navigate a world that they both know so well and yet do not fully understand. In this contemporary piece, Robbins also integrated more popular dance styles into his choreography, giving the film an increasingly realistic, exciting aesthetic that helps to situate the more fantastical elements in a reality that viewers could understand. The viewer feels this youthful and vibrant quality particularly well in the social dancing shown in the film. At the high school dance, Jets and their girlfriends fling their arms up and slink back down in exaggerated jazz poses, bobbing to the blaring trumpets. These kids are of the moment, and art is their gateway to self-expression.



Dance and basketball



Social dance

In order to successfully allow for dance to be one of the driving forces of this youthful statement, Robbins breaks from the traditional treatment of dance in movie musicals. Coming from the ballet tradition, integrated dance numbers were the norm for Robbins, as ballet is essentially one long, integrated number with many movements. *West Side Story* is not a

traditional ballet (though his dance style is categorized as a version of ballet) – stand-alone routines certainly separate themselves from the narrative progression by way of musical and visual indulgence, not to mention the presence of dialogue – but the film manages to maintain the same feeling of constancy as a formal ballet would. Of the stage version, Carin Ford notes, “West Side Story was the first show to be built around the choreography, instead of having the traditional emphasis on story and songs.”<sup>158</sup> Because of this, the fictional world of *West Side Story* is very different from those of *Dames*, *Summer Stock*, and *Top Hat*. None of the characters are performers, and so their dancing is inherently different by nature and in meaning; as discussed above, dance is just a part of their lives. Aesthetically, *West Side Story* also treats dance differently. The numbers do not transcend reality and emerge only when the characters cannot express their emotions in any other form; instead, the numbers simply represent arcs in emotion within a world that thrives on, exists through, and is inextricably tied to, dance. The musical nature of the film is not escapist (certainly not creating a utopia), but rather evocative. Perhaps Dyer’s breakdown of utopia partially applies here, though, in his concept of “intensity.” Dyer describes intensity as a representation of negative emotions in a “direct and vivid” way, contrary to everyday life, “without self-deception or pretence.”<sup>159</sup> By grounding the film in this unwavering world of dance, Robbins created an unfailing intensity that successfully conveyed the turmoil of these trouble teens in no uncertain terms. Even during dialogue, the actors hold and conduct themselves as dancers, standing in exaggerated poses and emphasizing words with appropriate, small lyrical motions; then, every so often, a graceful and powerful movement will burst forth. Additionally, Robbins paid particular attention to the acting performances of his dancers, demanding that they express the emotions of the dances with their faces, as well as their

---

<sup>158</sup> Ford, *Legends of American Dance and Choreography*, 60.

<sup>159</sup> Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 25.

bodies.<sup>160</sup> This intertwining connection between dance and everyday manifestations of feeling cements the dancers in this surreal reality where their expressive dancing is both art and, simply, life.



Dance in dialogue

This level of integration makes Robbins' choreography all-the-more expressive, in terms of its thematic impact. Another key element of Robbins' choreography that makes it so powerful is its connection to the other artistic elements of the film, particularly music. Bernstein's exciting and eccentric score is in itself a part of the cultural movement that makes the film such an effective and relevant piece of art. Growing out of the New York "jazz-pop-rock" and bebop scenes and integrating Latin rhythms to both bring in a certain amount of flair and comment on a very real racial struggle of the time, Bernstein's dynamic music was both bold and

---

<sup>160</sup> Ian Driver, *A Century of Dance: A Hundred Years of Musical Movement, from Waltz to Hip Hop* (London: Octopus Publishing Group, 2000), 174.



contemporary.<sup>161</sup> The seamless integration between the two, as well as with the gritty urban landscape shown on screen, was all part of Robbins' vision. In a letter to co-director Robert Wise, Robbins states, "The problem now is to find a new set of conventions, inherently cinematic, which will also convey the essence of a show whose essence is not in any of its separate elements...music, movement, sets etc...but in their organic unity."<sup>162</sup> Robbins' choreography matches Bernstein's score in terms of tone, structure, and texture so distinctly that it indeed becomes hard to determine if they can ever be viewed entirely separately, and the filmic qualities that accompany this blend create the feeling that Robbins strove to elicit.

A key number that illustrates this is "Cool," sung by the Jets. At this point in the film, Riff has just died, and the Jets are trying to plan their next move. Sad, hurt, and above all furious, the Jets can hardly contain themselves. After bringing them all inside a garage, where they cannot cause trouble, the aptly named "Ice" cools them down through this number. This dance is all about conflicting drives and emotions, and it works to reflect the larger crisis of masculinity and identity occurring in America. Choreography in "Cool" fluctuates between many types of movements. Complex group movements, switching between being synchronized and varied, highlight both the urge to be a distinct individual and the comfort of camaraderie. Individual, cathartic expressions of emotionality speak to the sensitive, confused side of the youth cultural movement. Finally, equally cathartic outbursts of aggression (often indistinguishable from showings of grief) show the male dancers' urge to present themselves as tough and masculine, but these steps are also reigned in and suppressed so that they can later be used, coolly and confidently, against the Sharks in true "give 'em hell" fashion. Simultaneously, Bernstein's music both expresses this frantic, multidimensional swelling and suppression of emotion and

---

<sup>161</sup> Long, *Broadway, The Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors, 1940 to the Present*, 68.

<sup>162</sup> Jowitz, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*, 284.

captures the spirit of the rebellious youth movement through its own experimental form. Each sound sets off a movement, or perhaps each movement sets off a sound, with the song and dance building together, further immersing the Jets into the artistic world of teenage anxiety and confused masculinity.

The number begins with the Jets standing in a circle, with Ice instructing them to keep cool. Boys in the crowd intermittently break their straight stance and suddenly crouch down into fighting poses, fists clenched. These violent fits, as noted earlier, simultaneously represent their pain. Aside from Baby-John's tearful episode just before this number, a Jet's only outlet is his anger; as such, these poses recur throughout the dance. The first musical section of the number is decidedly as calm as Ice's advocacy – slow, soft, with a “cool,” jazzy, rhythmic drum pattern setting the resting beat to which the dancers must return if they want to keep their cool. Ice sings the major melody of the song, with strong musical accompaniment, but no one dances. Urging the boys to hone their anger, stifle their emotion, and prepare for manly battle, he sings such lines as,

*Keep coolly cool, boy!  
 Don't get hot,  
 'Cause man, you got  
 Some high times ahead.  
 ...  
 Turn off the juice, boy!  
 Go man, go,  
 But not like a yo-yo schoolboy.  
 Just play it cool, boy,  
 Real cool!*

He finishes this vocal solo, a slang-ridden treatise of the modern, aggressive, and masculine beast that was the teenage experience, and the drums emerge as the only sound; Ice walks amongst them, snapping the rhythm out as instruction.

The group dance begins when the rest begin snapping along, solidifying their connection

with and dedication to each other, and a quick, creeping bass riff from the vibes sets them in motion, walking in calm, self-directed circles. This riff recurs throughout the song, each time eliciting a different reaction from the gang (sometimes calm, sometimes angry). As the riff consists of the same three notes, reminiscent of the distinctive Jets whistle heard throughout the film, perhaps it simply serves as a reminder of the situation in which they find themselves. Their gang is being attacked, and one of their own (as a reminder, coincidentally named Riff) just died because of it. Setting off responses fluctuating between anger, pain, and resolve, this bass riff both haunts and motivates them. Just as quickly as the third and final note of this first prominent expression of the riff ends, a muted trumpet (the stifled sound perhaps reflecting the unacceptability of the emotions it represents) slowly slinks in and crescendos. With the trumpet, one Jet, “Action,” breaks away from the group, tensing up; with the sudden and emotional climax of the trumpet’s crescendo, he collapses onto a nearby car, slapping it on the beat. He is the first to lose his cool since the beginning of the number, and so Ice puts him in his place – all of the dancers stop and whirl around as this moment of tension plays out, with only the drums playing as the background to this frozen stance, a constant reminder of how the Jets should be behaving despite their emotions.



Action's first outburst, Ice's admonishment

The bass riff returns, again signaling a return to movement; they literally shrug it off and continue walking and snapping – until the next outburst, again marked by a trumpet crescendo. This time the outburst is carried out by two Jets, furiously kicking at the floor into a lightning-fast, bent double pirouette that ends with them bent-kneed, lunging into the ground, with the bass riff again emerging at the end. Immediately after, a riff signals three of the Jets to strike exaggerated vertical poses – an arm outstretched, the head thrown back. As Ice shushes them into “coolness,” they slowly clench their fists and bring their arms down. A-rab cannot contain himself and begins punching his own hand as a rebellious trumpet breaks rhythm. Ice tells him to “cool it,” and a jazzy melody plays over another trumpet crescendo. A-rab rides it out, overcoming the trumpet by maintaining low, fluid, jazzy movements. He wiggles his fingers in front of him, sashaying and slowly turning; just when you think he has controlled his temper, the trumpet blares without warning and he strikes another anguished pose (one arm outstretched, head thrown to the side, knees bent) and yells “pow!”



Landing out of the double pirouette

This sets off a major movement of the dance, in which the gang splits up into groups that perform synchronously but distinctly from the rest of the Jets. At this point in the music, the song begins to build texturally, as well. “Cool” is marked by a “polyphonic” texture, in which a number of melodies and rhythms occur simultaneously, without one layer of texture becoming the most prominent. This frantic musical form works thematically in a couple of ways. Firstly, it represents the strongly conflicting emotions and drives that the group experiences during this number. The punctuated and exaggerated individual movements in the choreography reflect this. Secondly, in terms of the youth culture, a polyphonic texture is highly appropriate. As mentioned, youths in this time strove for individuality, and yet they also thrived off of a sense of camaraderie, namely against adults or society. The independent layers of music that fit together into one coherent piece mirror the sentiments of this cultural movement. Choreographically, this manifests in the complex and ever-changing group structure of the rest of the number. Each person belongs to any number of groups, having their own unique number to dance, and eventually these groups all dance simultaneously. The camera captures all of this texture by maintaining wide shots at these key moments of overlapping choreography, giving the viewer as

equally strong a visual experience as an auditory one.

This effect builds in the next portion of the dance, with mini groups establishing themselves. A-rab dances over to the girls, who swing their legs and arms in mourning, throwing their heads back; they are less aggressive than the boys, but they are still trying to control hysterical outbursts. Throughout their section, a series of emotional crescendos again marks large movements – these include, most notably, exaggerated ball-changes with an arm stretched forward and the head thrown back with the rock (seen below), as well as a double clap that leads to a kick/head throw-step-knee kick, the latter of which makes them look as if they have been punched in the gut. The double clap signals the rest of the gang into movement, a small group of boys first mimicking this gut-punch movement, a glimpse into the pain that they cannot fully control, and then going into a partner section with the girls, again marked by throwing the head back. A group of boys slowly and calmly emerges from the back of the space and bursts forth with the music into their own solo section, highlighted by a high kick jump with arms stretched overhead, landing with a stress-releasing head-roll. Bernstein inserts an emotive, rising violin element for this moment, climaxing and ending abruptly with a quick bang of the drum as they peak in the air. Only one flittering texture remains as they roll their heads, dismissing this loud outburst of musical and choreographic emotion. But then the feelings build once more. Ice claps out yet another texture – an ominous Hispanic rhythm, warning of the impending combat with the Sharks – as the boys slide forward and then break into the same double pirouette from the beginning.



Girls dancing with passion



Boys jumping in anger

Just as before, this move marks a shift, and the groups break up as the Jets frantically run in all directions, a majority of them then maintaining a crouched walk, punctuated with snaps. Isolated Jets jump up and kick with spurts of notes and cymbal crashes, eruptions of feelings that cannot be contained. The music has also exploded at this point, with the drums becoming much more prominent and the overall rhythm picking up. A few unified movements, a circular arm raise and side-ways *battement* (in which the leg, completely straight, swings out and up), for example, temporarily unify the group, but members still kick and jump at their own accord (but still always with the music). They fall, with the music and in unison, out of a single turn onto the ground as the girls run behind them. As they rise up and every member strikes the same pose – a jazzy, bent-legged angular pose of “coolness” with shoulders hiked and arms low – the textures fall away to reveal one layer of repeating riffs, shrieked out by brass and winds, violently reminding the boys of their duty as Jets. Two boys lose it, break free, and perform exaggerated kicks and jumps briefly before catching themselves and returning to the same pose, marked by the same musical expression. Overcome once more, the gang breaks up again into three groups as three words “crazy,” “cool,” and “go” are repeated one by one, each group dedicated to a word. This again seems to speak to the camaraderie inherent in a youth movement, but also to the individualization that falls in line with this particular one’s goals. At this moment, the individualization here is categorized by explorations of grief and anger, feelings too prominent to ignore. The kids strike and hold poses with the music - which is fractured and not melodic - a different pose each time they are shown. They are all aggressive, large poses, showing arguably a peak of the outbursts that mark this section of the song. They want to fight, to get even, to “go,” but they have to get “cool” first.





Standing out from the crowd



Ultimate “cool” pose

In solidarity, the gang comes together as the music again reverts to melody (the ultimate reminder to stay collected and restrained), and they run towards the camera, their bodies low to

the ground, showing that they have returned to their desired “cool” status and that they are a force to be reckoned with. From this point on, the movements are almost entirely unified, representing a sort of resolution to the issue at hand. They have risen above the aggressive/hysterical individual outbursts that could get them into trouble when they deal with the Sharks. Although their movements are still large and expressive, they are not destructive in their suddenness, and they are group efforts. Their fury is controlled but palpable. When they jump, they jump together, and when they fall, they fall together. Fittingly, the polyphonic texture of the music has completely faded away to a homophonic one, in which all of the layers stay relatively unified. The sound stays big and booming, matching their gusto, but is no longer confused through this polyphony. This portion could be seen as a group catharsis, as though they are getting the aggression out completely now that they are unified once more. This is not to say, however, that individuality is completely lost. Although they continue their balletic jazz movements - many lunges, pirouettes, and jumps into the same arms-to-the-heavens poses – in synchrony, the direction of their movements varies. They dance the same choreography, but they bounce like atoms around each other, weaving through the crowd. Only the girls stand alone, but that is because of their distinct role in this battle; they are not fighting.



Running towards camera in unison

This extended dance sequence ends with the same jazz-style *ronde de jamba*s from the prologue (though this time landing in a jazz split), as if to say, “the Jets are back in power.” Ice stands in the middle of his reinvigorated gang as they all sing

*Boy, boy, crazy boy  
Stay loose boy.*

With a quick crescendo they build in intensity, jumping out of the split to land on their knees, now rocking with the rhythm of snapping from the beginning of the song as they remind themselves,

*Breeze it, buzz it, easy does it  
Turn off the juice boy.*

With one last large outburst they enter into the final dance movement – a double kick, a small over-the-log leap (one leg jumping over the other) with exaggerated arms, and finally an attitude turn. This is their last cathartic movement, their final exploration of grief and emotion and unrestrained anger; as they strike their final pose, with Ice crouched down and the rest with their arms up and heads back, the music comes to a screeching halt. Only Ice’s voice comes forth, saying one final time,

*Just play it cool, boy  
Real cool.*

As he sings, the soft, slow music from the beginning of the song returns and the boys slowly snap on the beat, lowering themselves back into regular standing positions with their arms at their sides. They walk to Ice, settle in a circle, and the music and movement stop. They are now the restrained, masculine Jets, ready to fight. As Ice decides, “okay, let’s go,” they walk and snap with the drums softly playing behind them. Scattered members burst out with “pow!”s, but

overall they have temporarily succeeded. They calmly emerge from the low-ceilinged garage, where anger and fear brought the camera down to their level (notice how the camera is positioned in the images from this dance, almost hunched in pain with them), and stare up at the now-elevated camera strongly, defiantly, daring anyone to cross them.



Final jolt



Staring at the camera with resolve

Robbins worked with Bernstein to create an extremely influential and dynamic work of art. As the seminal musical of the early 1960's, *West Side Story* represents a true departure from the films previously investigated. Creating a world of dance in which young men could express their conflicting feelings about society, masculinity, and identity, Robbins captured the feelings of the nation's youth, the nation's future. The new emphasis on aggression in masculinity was counterbalanced by increasing emotionality and a distinctly androgynous touch, despite efforts to conceal it. These young boys (and the rest of America) were not done experimenting with and changing the shape and color of society, though. The late sixties would erupt in counterculture movements, contributing to the largest shift in America's masculine identity yet.

## Choreographing Sex: Post-1960's Cultural Revolution Eroticism and Bob Fosse

When [Jessica Lange] and I were going together – there was a time when we saw each other a couple nights a week – I always had this feeling there was Someone Else. Had the feeling I wasn't her Number One Man. And, see, I got this idea: I thought if I could just get her into the studio...get on my little dance shoes...strut around, then she'd just, y'know, fall.

Bob Fosse<sup>163</sup>

American masculinity was in crisis starting in the 1960's. The emotional expression and slight feminization of the aggressive male form, as catalyzed by the youth movement of the early sixties and seen in the choreography of Jerome Robbins, were just hints at a shifting paradigm that would paradoxically both solidify and unravel in the coming years. The nebulous and precarious state of masculinity in society as a whole manifested itself in the worlds of both film and dance. Bob Fosse represents a unique but resonant marriage of these pressures and arts, in fact metamorphosing in line with these changes over the course of his multi-decade career.

But what was shaping masculinity in the 1960's and 1970's, and what forms did masculinity take? In *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Michael Kimmel outlines the shifting climate. The 1960's represented the failure of the ideal man. As already described, the post-war (and then New Frontier) eras introduced the 'suburban breadwinner' male archetype.<sup>164</sup> While still masculine, the state of complacency which accompanied its fulfillment caused the youth of the nation to question this ideal, which was manifested through explorations of both violence and emotional expression, as seen with Robbins' work. This youth movement at the beginning of the 1960's bubbled over and blossomed into something much more revolutionary, and this challenged the validity of not only this conception of masculinity, but all conceptions of

---

<sup>163</sup> Kevin B. Grubb, *Razzle Dazzle: The Life and Work of Bob Fosse* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 219.

<sup>164</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 262-263.

gender roles.<sup>165</sup>

A series of rights and liberation movements among minority groups reshaped the social dynamics in America, bringing men along with them. Women's liberation shattered the suburban family model, which relegated the feminine to the submissive. Working to shed the restrictive identity of the demure, passive housewife, women in turn called their father-figure counterparts' positions into question, emasculating the man by strengthening the woman.<sup>166</sup> The sexual liberation movement, marked by the introduction of "the pill," both liberated women from the burden and fear of fertility and severed men from their primal role as seed-planter; sex became at once an act of freedom and the representation of the endangerment of the traditional familial structure, as intercourse was now openly practiced outside of the bonds of marriage.<sup>167</sup> The civil rights movement brought black men into the equation, no longer excluded from the definition of the true "American man." The gay liberation movement similarly opened up the definitive nature of manhood, questioning the hard, paternal prototype, taking the biological drive to procreate with a woman out of the definition of manliness, and allowing for a more varied representation of masculinity. Finally, the counterculture movement rejected basically everything that the 1950's and early 1960's stood for in terms of what love, gender, society – life – should be.<sup>168</sup> From all of this disruption came no real resolution. As Kimmel describes it, "it was as if the screen against which American men had for generations projected their manhood had suddenly grown dark, and men were left to sort out the meaning of masculinity all by themselves."<sup>169</sup>

Enter Vietnam. With the explosion of changing ideas and fights for equality dismantling

---

<sup>165</sup> Petigny, *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965*, 179.

<sup>166</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 262-263.

<sup>167</sup> Mary Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve After the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2012), 14-17.

<sup>168</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 262-263.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

the American man, the true destruction of the masculine paradigm came with the war that left so many of these men either dead or traumatized. Soldiers were victimized in a number of ways, squelching whatever masculine dignity they had left; they were portrayed as victims of an unfair draft or cowardly evaders of the same (from this other perspective, necessary) draft, victims of a betraying and corrupt Vietnamese population, and victims of their own weaponry, namely Agent Orange – not to mention that the United States was losing, and soldiers were blamed for this loss.<sup>170</sup> This forced descent into such a vulnerable position did not fall in line with the strong, “sturdy oak” archetype of previous wars (such as with World War II), and so soldiers, once the emblem of American masculinity, now epitomized its very downfall. Susan Jeffords paints the portrait of a reactionary masculinity in the Reagan era, more stringently gendered and entirely independent of femininity (a regression to the glorification of the “no sissy stuff” ideal male, but this time expressed through the male instead the ultra-feminized female), as exemplified by characters such as Rambo.<sup>171</sup> But how did American masculinity get there?

Explorations of the nature of manhood in the 1970’s, resulting from the confusion of the 1960’s, paved the way for an emphasis on hypermasculinity in the 1980’s. Kimmel connects this 1960’s crisis in masculinity to the small but arguably important men’s liberation movement, finally solidifying midway through the 1970’s, which accepted the abandonment of traditional sex and gender roles and instead called for men to live *with* abandon and not be constrained by the position society constructed for, and then knocked down from beneath, them. A direct reaction to the women’s liberation movement, the men’s liberation movement looked critically at the societally-defined ideals of masculinity and contrasted them with basic human truths –

---

<sup>170</sup> Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 122-124, 145.

<sup>171</sup> Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America*, 168.

The discourse of men's liberation sketches out the contours of a new masculinity: a masculinity defined by the pain of emotional blockage but one defined, as well, by the painful necessity of restraining the "primitive" impulses that always threaten to emerge...men *must* release their blocked emotions, but men *cannot* release them. It is in the space between the "must" and the "cannot" that the physically and psychically wounded man emerges, *not* as a pathological, or even "failed" man, but as the norm of masculinity that can only attempt to be healthy.<sup>172</sup>

In other words, the American man was trekking through unexplored territory, redefining masculinity without any true ideal beyond some form of satisfaction and fulfillment. Kimmel argues that this movement, though largely ineffectual on a social scale, manifested in the arts through deviations from the traditional masculine roles and relationships; an example would be the reincarnation of the buddy film, as seen in *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), both tinged with homosocial themes, if not homosexual.<sup>173</sup> As Leonard Kriegal poignantly explains of the destruction of the suburban, masculine ideal, "And then he looks into his neighbor's empty lawn and discovers that he can no longer reconcile his role as a man with what he actually is...And when he looks for help to the writers and artists and myth-makers, he discovers that the shaping power of their imagination is limited by the same confusion he feels."<sup>174</sup>

For Bob Fosse, it was showtime. Beginning his career in the 1950's, Fosse's characteristic style was well matched with, and then further adapted to, the societal changes already described. He grew up in the burlesque and vaudeville traditions (he trained initially in tap but then switched his focus to jazz), integrating these styles into his own choreography, and then finally exploiting them full force in his later work. Fosse's characteristic choreography fits

---

<sup>172</sup> Sally Robinson, "Men's Liberation, Men's Wounds: Emotion, Sexuality, and the Reconstruction of Masculinity in the 1970's," in *Boys Don't Cry: Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.*, ed. Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 225-226.

<sup>173</sup> Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 287.

<sup>174</sup> Kriegal, *On Men and Manhood*, 84.



within the framework of dismantled masculinity by reverting to this primal abandonment advocated in the men's liberation movement, independent of social expectations; what rises to the top is the human sexual experience, the ultimate biological goal behind gendered performance, perhaps as a way to reclaim this masculinity, perhaps as a way to distract from the collapse of manhood. Fosse may represent a precursor to the aforementioned hyper-masculine phase outlined by Jeffords, or perhaps a middle ground – somewhere between the helpless desolation described by Kimmel and Kriegal (as he does have some vision and direction, however devoid of meaning) and the complete rejection of the feminine with Stallone and Schwarzenegger. Through dance, Fosse utilizes both the male and female forms to assert this new version of masculinity that rejects previous standards. He does this by integrating men into sexualized dances with women, thus defining masculinity through men's sexual interactions, and occasional crossover, with women. Fitting with the men's liberation movement, the masculinity asserted here is one without ideals, not fitting with any of Brannon's traditional male roles. There exists in this masculinity no goals of completely rejecting the feminine ("no sissy stuff"), appearing to be the ideal bread-winner ("the big wheel"), displaying physical strength ("the sturdy oak"), or acting out aggressively ("give 'em hell"). The goal here is simply the search for some form of fulfillment and concrete identity, and he attempts to do this through the sexual discourse of eroticized dance. Of course, the social acceptability of sexual representation made this possible, interestingly helped, in part, by the women's liberation, sexual liberation (particularly the introduction of the pill), and other countercultural movements of the 1960's; tied to this, the adoption of the new motion picture rating system in 1968 (created in part to allow for more artistic freedom in a changing society) effectively brought an end to the Production Code, meaning that these new explorations of sexuality could now freely manifest on film.<sup>175</sup> These

---

<sup>175</sup> Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production*

cultural moments thus worked to form the cause and the “solution” to the masculine problem by questioning masculinity and then allowing for the artistic freedom to explore its new manifestations.

Fosse used these artistic freedoms to create a distinct atmosphere. The aforementioned burlesque and vaudeville traditions that defined his upbringing emerged not only in the choreography, but also in the narrative nature of his numbers within the films. Although a protégé of Jerome Robbins, Fosse did not follow Robbins’ vision of fully-integrated musicals.<sup>176</sup> Many of Fosse’s numbers are fully-articulated, highly stylized stage performances, not well-integrated into the stories, but certainly resonant in many ways. This fits well with the nature of the sexuality seen in his later pieces; in many ways, the eroticism of his choreography harkens back to the spectacle provided by Busby Berkeley – a celebration of the erotic female form. In the case of Fosse, however, the spectacle is much more explicit and much more accessible; male dancers often interact with female dancers (thus sexualizing the male form, as well), and gawking, often aroused audience members are almost always acknowledged through direct address or emanating sounds, if not through an actual camera shot. This, again, works to define masculinity in its sexual relationship to femininity. Additionally, the sexual content of these pieces speaks to a shift in the American film musical that mirrors the social revolution of the 1960’s. Even in the extremely sexualized world of Berkeley, classical musicals still strove to portray the heterosexual monogamous relationship, with the ultimate goal of marriage. For Fosse, the orgy-like presentation of male and female dancers embracing their eclectic sexual preferences reflects the larger trend of film musicals abandoning the heterosexual marriage ideal in favor of exploring other parts of life. In *A Chorus Line*, for example, characters sing about

---

*Code*, revised edition (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 273-274.

<sup>176</sup> Long, *Broadway, the Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors, 1940 to the Present*, 149.

their homosexual identities, discovering their passion for dance, and realizing the importance of having perfect female form in landing jobs, among countless other issues. In Fosse's work, the marriage ideal was tossed aside and replaced with pleasures of rampant, anonymous sex.<sup>177</sup> This manifests most clearly in his later pieces. The development of his dance style will be tracked, paying close attention to the ultimate hypersexualization of his choreography in the 1970's.

Fosse's choreographic career took off on Broadway; he made a name for himself with *The Pajama Game* in 1954, and most notably with its stand-out number "Steam Heat."<sup>178</sup> He would go on to stage the numbers for the film version in 1957, with the iconic "Steam Heat" performed by Carol Haney, Buzz Miller, and Kenneth LeRoy. His early work, such as in *The Pajama Game* and *Damn Yankees!* (1958), though quite different from his later choreography, still had the same stylistic essence. His type of jazz was at times very quiet and minimalistic, suddenly punctuated by large, sharp, dynamic angles or sweeping movements. He fractured the body, isolating a finger, or the hips, or the head in small, repetitive movements. Every part of the body was alert and primed for movement, even arguably tense if not stiff in its resting state. This made any softness stand out dramatically. His style, he has stated, was based on his own faults as a dancer. "Because his own knees and toes turned in, so did his dancers'. When he began losing his hair and took to wearing hats, so did his dancers. Even Fosse's hunched shoulders were reflected in his dancers' postures."<sup>179</sup> This tendency to choreograph in reference to flaws would manifest as explorations of his self-disappointment related to the emptiness of his sexual encounters, particularly through the eroticization of dance. In "Steam Heat," though, because the masculine ideal had not yet collapsed, the distinctly "Fosse" body movements produce a feeling

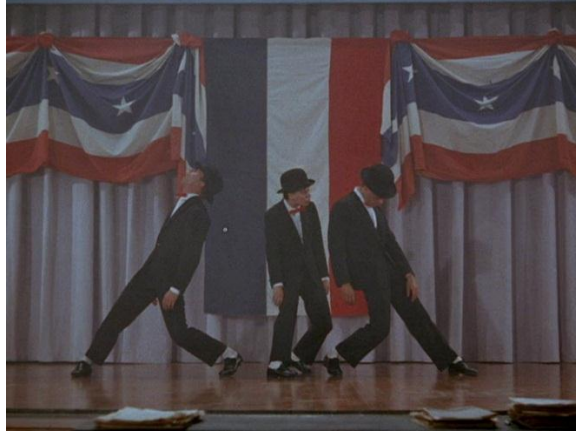
---

<sup>177</sup> Kelly Kessler, *Destabilizing the Hollywood Musical: Music, Masculinity, and Mayhem* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 121.

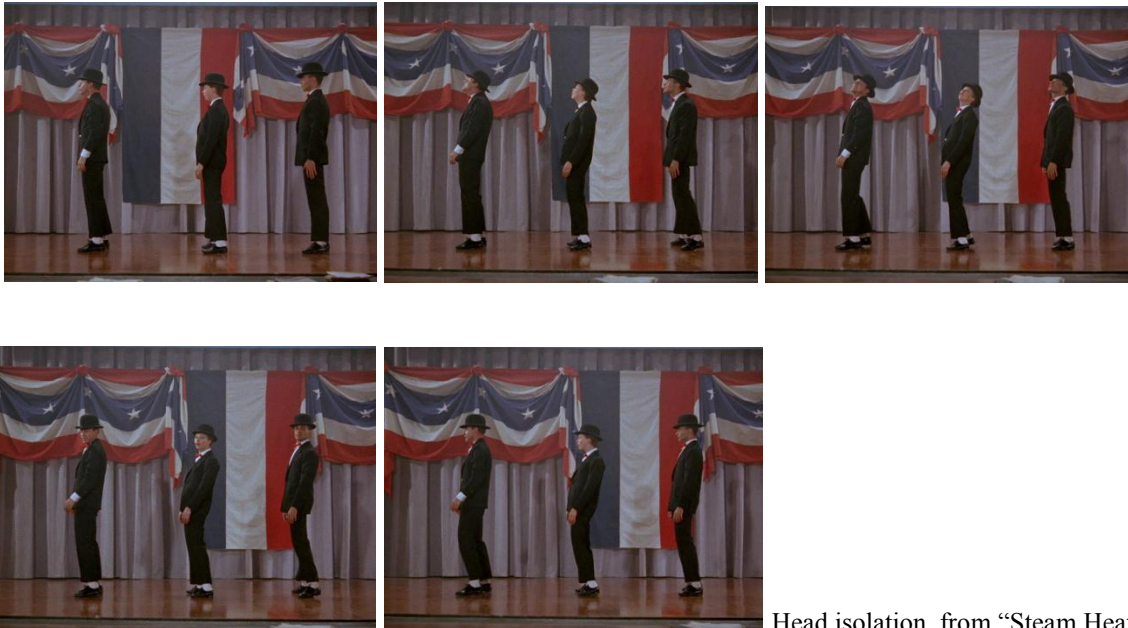
<sup>178</sup> Long, *Broadway, the Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors, 1940 to the Present*, 145, 150.

<sup>179</sup> Ford, *Legends of American Dance and Choreography*, 68.

of androgyny, as the choreography is neither distinctly masculine nor feminine, nor is it sexual in nature.



Dramatic pose, “Steam Heat,” *Pajama Game* (1957)



Head isolation, from “Steam Heat”

Through these moments of softness, and in some of his careful manipulations, the sexuality of his choreography came through in this early work. Though many of the movements in these pieces could be categorized as goofy or eccentric, such as the waddling, hunched steps of Gwen Verdon in “Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets” from *Damn Yankees!*, they were part of a

larger tableau full of sexual undertones (and sometimes more explicit sexuality). “Whatever Lola Wants,” for example, is extremely provocative, with Verdon shaking her backside at her prey and flinging herself into sexual poses, though all in the name of humor. Interestingly, the more sexualized numbers in these pre-1970’s Fosse works arise in conjunction with a conflict in the narrative.<sup>180</sup> Fosse’s use of sex in times of doubt, dating back to these early films, perhaps foreshadows his extreme reaction to the major masculine conflict of the coming decades. At the same time, these fun and playful numbers (take “Hernando’s Hideaway,” from *The Pajama Game* as another example) represent a somewhat constrained version of Fosse’s vision, as they were functioning within the social framework that would be dismantled by the end of the following decade. The sizzling, provocative touches to these earlier numbers would soon explode into a pattern of overt hypersexuality, a fitting change to match the shifting gender dynamics of the nation.



Silly and sexy Lola in “Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets,” from *Damn Yankees* (1958).

<sup>180</sup> Kessler, *Destabilizing the Hollywood Musical: Music, Masculinity, and Mayhem*, 120.



Fun, sexy “Hernando’s Hideaway,” *The Pajama Game* (1957)

Looking at his next foray into filmmaking, *Sweet Charity* (1969) (marking his directorial debut) represents a somewhat large departure from the more subtle sexuality of his earlier numbers. The most notable number from this film, “Big Spender,” is bawdy and startlingly sexual. Scantly clad women, prostitutes in fact, drape their limbs over railings, beckoning men with twitching hips and curling fingers. Stylistic markers remain true to early Fosse; dancers repeatedly, subtly isolate body parts, breaking their stiffness intermittently to slouch into a dynamic pose. This time, though, the isolations and the poses are so much more erotic, even perverse.<sup>181</sup> The men in the audience gaze on at the spectacle. This is true of all of his later work, notably *Cabaret* (1972), in which all dance numbers take place on the Kit Kat Club’s stage, with women in excessive makeup and practically no clothing gyrating and purring to the audience at the behest of the MC (Joel Grey). The viewer can recognize the exploitation of the feminine form in a way that is effective in asserting the MC’s, the audience’s, and the choreographer’s masculinity. But, again, this masculinity is only defined in sexual terms relating to the female, not opposing her. The MC, for example, is extremely androgynous, and the sexual promiscuity

---

<sup>181</sup> Kessler, *Destabilizing the Hollywood Musical: Music, Masculinity, and Mayhem*, 121.

of both the men and women in the film (both heterosexually and homosexually) negates any male-over-female power dynamics created through Fosse's manipulation of the female body. The female dancer becomes a slut at his behest, but so does the male. As Fosse himself explained,

People think that sexual experimentation was something exclusive to the Sixties. But, in *Cabaret*, you're talking about another sexual revolution that ended with Hitler. Men and women were trying *everything*. So you could have someone who looked like Michael York sleeping with a man. It was perfectly logical.<sup>182</sup>

He was simply experimenting with representations of sex and manhood by looking back in time. Although *Cabaret* looks back at a unique and tragic time in history, marked by desperate, uncouth decadence; the eroticism of the numbers is universal and timeless. Indeed, Fosse's directorial use of mirrors further illustrates the intended universal nature of the film, reflecting back on the contemporary audience undergoing its own sexual exploration. In exercising the metaphor of dance as life, Fosse makes it clear how he lived and viewed the world.<sup>183</sup>

---

<sup>182</sup> Grubb, *Razzle Dazzle: The Life and Work of Bob Fosse*, 144.

<sup>183</sup> Zachary A. Dorsey, "Dance and Choreography," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 345.



Slow, suggestive pelvic isolations from “Wilkommen,” *Cabaret* (1972)

A film that looks at sexuality quite explicitly is the autobiographical *All That Jazz* (1979). Fosse’s counterpart, Joe Gideon (Roy Scheider), is a famous choreographer who dies over the course of the film, all the while exploring the nature of his relationships and his life in general through Fellini-esque introspection. While his death is the centerpiece of the film, a marked departure from the successes of Astaire’s and Kelly’s leading male roles and a symbol of the waning strength of the modern man, the film delves deeply into his sexuality. Fosse was a notorious philanderer, and his trysts are exposed as profoundly meaningless through the course of the film.<sup>184</sup> This speaks to the detachment of eroticism from other gender-specifying traits; sex does not assert any strength, independence, or heroism, but instead simply fills the void left by a disruption of traditional gender roles. Sex rises above in his numbers – never entirely pleasant (indeed numbers such as “Big Spender” and “Wilkommen” from *Cabaret* are depressing in their

---

<sup>184</sup> Long, *Broadway, The Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors, 1940 to the Present*, 175.



explicitness), and ultimately empty, its utilization nevertheless paints a portrait of what it meant for Fosse to be a man.

One number from *All That Jazz* that is particularly interesting in this sense is the Air-Otica sequence. This again represents a non-integrative spectacle of sexuality, this time as a rehearsal performance for Gideon's new Broadway show; he is testing out this number for the producers, who find halfway through the number that Gideon has been consumed by his exploration of sexuality. The humorous conceit of the routine that soon turns dark with the second half is that the song was presented to Gideon as a sellable, fun Broadway number. He riffs on this, turning the whole sequence into a double entendre, and then ultimately going overboard. The first half of the number, though not as explicit, is still highly sexual, and speaks to the post-Vietnam representation of masculinity through manipulations of both the female and male forms. In this sequence, men and women alike indulge in the erotic acts Fosse projects onto them, solidifying the eroticism of the female in a way that, say, Berkeley never could and asserting the men's "masculinity" through their own sexual movements.

As with many of the numbers that Fosse both choreographed and directed, the filmic techniques highlight this sexuality. To accentuate the dynamic and explicit isolations and dancer configurations, puzzle-like editing further deconstructs the dancers into representations of pure sexuality. One notable characteristic of this editing style is its fast-paced cuts; shots do not last more than a few seconds in this number, and are actually generally much shorter, highlighting the excitement of the number. Additionally, the cuts always occur on the beat, which is often quite explicitly accentuated by a snap or a loud drum. This sets a rhythmic pace to the visuals independent of the choreography, adding to the eroticism of the sequence.

The number begins with an effective illustration of this, cutting on the slow beat,

beginning with a lone hand snapping, cutting to the seductively-posed lead singer, tapping her fingers on her knee, cutting back to the hand, then to a seductive female dancer with her leg held up towards and over the camera, and then finally to the whole company in a complex arrangement. The low angle shot used here is common in Fosse works (such as *Cabaret*), emphasizing the performance aspect by placing the viewer in the audience, below the dancers. The viewer can see one female form, her back turned to the audience, arms slightly outstretched with snapping, flexing hands. Two men flank her on either side in the background, statuesquely bent over, with hands draped over scaffolding. The rest of the cast hides behind the woman; all the viewer can see are their arms and hands, snapping in unison with her. Arms and hands, which of course carry out many sensual acts, are of particular importance in this number, an examination of physical connection. Throughout the number, arms interlock dancers; fingers splay out in vaguely orgasmic excitement; and limbs flutter and sway in the jazz/burlesque tradition.



As the lead singer, a sexy blonde in nude tights, heels, and a skimpy two-piece dance

outfit (not to mention the cutesy pilot hats, a contextually relevant play on a Fosse classic, that are later shed as the number becomes more sexual), beckons to the audience, “*take off with us*” (the first of many mundane lyrics drenched in double entendre – pay close attention to them as they are quoted throughout this discussion, both for meaning and a good chuckle), the interplay between male and female dancer begins to be illustrated. Throughout this number, male dancers freely express their sexuality through dance (both hetero- and homosexual in nature), and this switches between matched and opposing movements in relation to the female dancers. This can be viewed in line with the artistic manifestation of masculinity described above. The dance is comprised of representations of opposed, gendered sexualities that feed off of each other and define each other, met with moments of overlapping sameness. The androgyny is further accomplished through costume, with some girls dressed as boys (with more “conservative” tops) and some boys dressed as girls (one has a cutout top revealing much of his chest). Additionally, the general skin-tightness and skimpiness of the costumes already makes the dancers androgynous, caused by the diminished opportunity to differentiate the genders when desired smoothness and simple lack of fabric leave little room for embellishment.<sup>185</sup> The only overwhelmingly feminine girls are the star (the intended object of gaze and realization of overt sexuality) and the chorus girl with whom Gideon had an affair (wearing an open red blouse, the most revealing of the group); through this affair, the girl’s femininity is thus undeniable and is exploited through the rest of the film. All of the dancers wear hats and gloves, though, which unifies them in this semi-androgynous state. Aside from the girl Gideon sleeps with, all of the chorus members remain relatively anonymous (even the lead singer is not credited with a name, listed only as “Primary Dancer”); this places them all on the same level, as well, marking a clear departure from the strongly individualized male dancer-characters of group numbers-past.

---

<sup>185</sup> Stephen Rooks, Professor of Dance at Vassar College, personal interview, December 12, 2011.

Sexuality does not occur in a vacuum for either sex, and, when represented cohesively, it realistically depicts a basic *human* quality. The deviations from this cohesion represent the *gendered* nature of eroticism, which is the only way to define masculinity when everything else falls away. In the initial “*take off with us*” section, this manifests in the division of movements between men and women. It seems that in order to make the configuration symmetrical (because the ensemble consists of one more female dancer than male dancer), Fosse placed one woman where a man would be, but she is on the floor, and one cannot easily tell that she is a woman; additionally, this dancer’s male counterpart for the first section of the dance is the most effeminate male dancer, clearly identified as homosexual. Aside from this mixture of genders, the movements of men and women are clearly separate. Men latch onto the scaffolding, still grounded on the floor, striking strong poses that accentuate their torsos and arms. Women in the background hang off of scaffolding, gracefully and sexily swinging, the lead singer sitting atop the scaffolding, just coming out of a suggestive leg lift. In the foreground, two women wiggle their hips and wave their arms in a way that a male dancer never would. This part of the introduction plays like a slow blossom of an exotic flower, and as such the editing is slow to match; the elongated movements are captured in multi-second-long shots, and the whole ensemble is shown fairly often.



As the song begins to pick up with the introduction of the upbeat, repeated tri-note melodic phrase, editing picks up a bit. In the “flight,” moment, for example, the ensemble sings “*NY to LA,*” and the star follows with “*going all the way.*” At this point, the two girls in front have struck a jazzy pose; their legs spread and straight, bent forward, arms thrown low behind them, they roll their hips from side to side with each quick descending note of the melody. The men stand in the background, bent kneed, leaning forward, and nodding aggressively in time with these hips. A clear divide exists between male movement and female movement here, with the girls being represented in traditionally sexy terms and men, looking on from behind, embracing their sexuality as both spectators and participators in this erotic spectacle. A quick cut to a close up of the star shows that she is preparing for a big moment; another quick cut and the viewer sees that the girls are strutting out of the foreground with waving arms as the men strongly plant themselves in front of the now rising star. The camera cuts to a very short shot of the star plummeting into the arms of the men in a swan dive, and then it cuts again to see the men quickly lowering her to the ground. By leaping into, and being held up by, the men, which is a distinctly feminine act, she seems to tip the scale and set off a dance section which blurs the

gendered lines. The next quick shot is a flurry of dancers twirling in front of the camera. The star lies alone as her fingers envelop her face in Fosse-fashion; the rest of the cast gives signature jazz hands with elongated fingers as they sway from side to side as one, neither masculine nor feminine. The song has slowed down again, and so the shots are long, allowing the visual representation of the gendered unity to sink in.

The star tells the audience to “*meet our friendly eager crew,*” and does another sexy leg lift, her legs now open to the rest of the cast. She, as expressed in the second half of the number by having her be the noticeably topless performer with the most sexual and stripper-like choreography, seems to be the epitome of female sexuality in this number. Fosse makes it so that her legs are constantly opening to the other dancers and to the audience. She represents the ultimate manipulation of the female form at the hands of the masculine choreographer – a hypersexual being there to stand in juxtaposition to the masculine dancer and the motionless, gazing audience. She is thus a modern adaptation of the 110 per cent woman of Berkeley spectacles that Wills describes,<sup>186</sup> though she is not necessarily rendered inferior to men in her femininity. In a post-women’s liberation movement world, and particularly within Fosse’s investigation of his own masculine failings, she is simply part of the erotic melee, the ideal upon which men act out their sexual desires. As she formally introduces the viewer to the “eager crew,” the male dancers seem to express their appreciation of her sexual femininity. The girls bend over (one fanning her buttocks with gloved hand), wrap themselves around the men, and sexily greet the audience (one winks). The men raise their hats high above their heads, as if to say “yes, hello there, I am draped in beautiful, writhing women – how do you do?” Their own movement is not marked by sexuality yet, but it will be, for they are in fact ‘eager’ to act out their masculine impulses.

---

<sup>186</sup> Nadine Wills, “110 Per Cent Woman’: The Crotch Shot in the Hollywood Musical,” 122.



A series of crotch shots

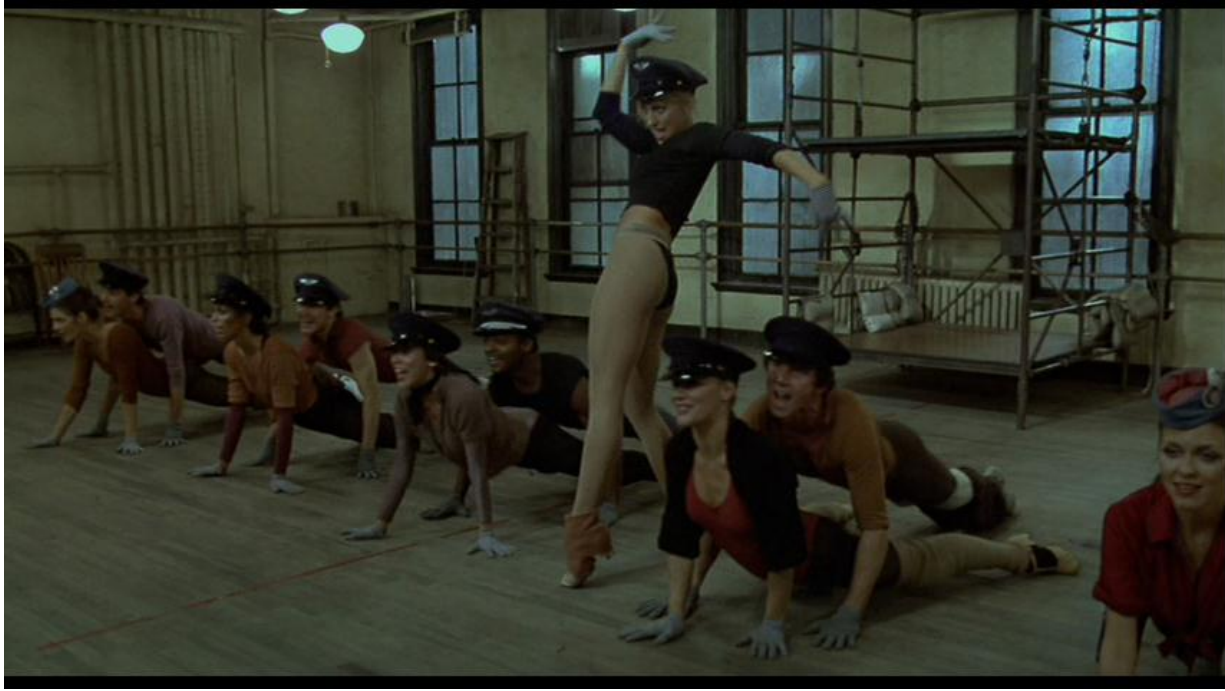


The eager crew

With the line “*they only live to service you,*” the whole chorus falls in line with the same traveling motion, led by the star, signaling the sexualization of male and female alike. Arms at their sides, wrists rotating in circles, they side step across the floor, starting a circle with their hips with every leading step. Quick cuts between a frontal view and a framed view of anonymous backsides from between drum cymbals works to both build up the intensity of the song as they repeat “*service*” suggestively and to unify the men and women in the objectification and eroticization of their swiveling hips. They break up again with the refrain melody, men and women this time doing separate movements. The women fall to the ground, the men stand behind them, and then they get into pushup positions, man on top of woman, walking backwards with their hands. The women’s legs are spread, and then men plant themselves between them. This positioning asserts an erotic interplay between the sexes, with men in the obviously dominant position. However, at the same time, the star stands in the middle, doing a seductive series of movements highlighting exaggerated hip movements, romantic and suggestive arm flares, and intentionally fiery stares at the diegetic audiences. Her elevated position and the sheer power communicated in this moment negate the brief execution of the more traditional gender dynamic. This long shot (no cuts occur once they drop on top of each other), looking down on the stacked dancers (seen below), is perhaps the most illustrative of the representation of sexuality and masculinity in the first half of this number. The men perform sexual movements that are unified with but distinct from those of their female counterparts, and this simple representation of a sexual relationship is indicative of a collapsed gender hierarchy in which men and women simply romp in sexual unity. Playing with this idea again, Fosse then transitions into a sequence of partner lifts, while the star twirls in front. First on top of women and now below



them, the men's roles are switched once again. This is presented in a series of quick cuts between low angle shots, another reversal of preceding interaction.



Men on top of women with an equally strong woman above them

Until the very end of this half, the rest of the movements are more-or-less unified between men and women. Often having each dancer do his or her own movements in a collage of individualized choreographic choices, Fosse calls for quick isolations of wrists and hips in quiet moments. They drop to their knees, isolating forefinger waves; they lunge to the audience with outstretched arms and demand “*are you gonna come? To the...*” The song builds to a climax with a series of increasingly quick cuts between individuals striking a variety of large, exaggerated poses as they repeat “*coolest, hottest.*” Again, the dancers are in unison with barely any distinctions between the sexes. This eroticization of the male dancer on the same level as the female dancer allows him to express his masculinity through the implied orgy. This unified movement accompanies the collaborative rise to the climax of the song, which can be seen as a

sexual climb towards orgasm, with synchronization facilitating this ascent.

The flight is affirmed as the “*coolest hottest trip that’s ever been,*” the final line of the song sung by the star and the beginning of the orgasmic climax, marked by her hitting the sustained high note on “*been.*” Underlying repetitions of “*don’t you/don’t you wanna go higher now?*” add a breathless quality to this orgasmic outburst; they build as the shots get even shorter and the male/female movements differ one final time, allowing the dancers to complete the sex act. The girls flap their arms in a balletic fashion and take small shuffles to the side, always maintaining a popped hip and sexily posed bent leg. The men each strike a pose like a jazzy-Adonis, facing the women they stand behind, shuffling after them with muscular bent leg to the audience. The women are open, objects of gaze, though empowered leaders whom the men follow; the men, while still performing, conduct their movements as interactions with these beautiful female forms in order to act out their masculinity. As the shots cut violently between the dancers, the musicians, and the audience, the men overtake the women, and in the final moments, with an outcry of “*lean back, relax,*” engage in one final orgasmic movement. The women lean back in a forced arch, their hips pushed forward to the men in a pelvic thrust, whose hips and heads are thrown back in orgasmic bliss. The star opens her arms and legs, turning her head from the audience in one final act of self-presentation. And then the section is over, abruptly, completely devoid of meaning.



At this point, the routine changes and becomes an even more explicit representation of sexual relations between men and women. They writhe partially naked and sweaty against each other in the dark studio to the horror of the producers. The telling final line of the sequence, spoken by one of the male dancers, is, “Our motto is: we take you everywhere but get you nowhere.” The jarring section provides a glimpse into the depths of Fosse’s sexual vision, in which erotic encounters are the only way to assert one’s manhood, but they never amount to any

real fulfillment. *All That Jazz*, at its core, is about Fosse's view of his own life. Arguably catalyzed by the national confusion related to masculinity, Fosse hid behind torrid heterosexual affairs. His shame and self-contempt related to that manifests in all of his films with orgy-like numbers carried out by androgynous figures, such as in "Two Ladies" from *Cabaret*, but *All That Jazz* epitomizes these sentiments. Extremely self-aware in his choreographic choices, he manipulates female dancers and makes them sluts; he takes male dancers, has them inject femininity into their movement, but also makes them figuratively have sex with the girls. His position is powerful, his motivations confused, and his vision strong. The fluctuation between gender-specific and gender-unified movement, as well as the varied pacing of editing in "Air-Otica" works to illustrate the complex state of masculinity in America at the time. With the collapse of the American masculine paradigm in the 1960's and 1970's, Fosse's choreography worked to represent a new form of masculinity. Manhood was now defined by sex, carried out by an active male participant who neither subscribed to nor was driven by the traditional conceptions of masculinity that defined earlier eras. This realization was not a happy one, and it perhaps was not a fulfilling one, but Fosse was not necessarily trying to actively redefine masculinity through his dance. His dance merely reflected his vision of manhood, having seen the same problems as all American men. As Kriegal stated, the shaping power of his imagination was limited by the same confusion that everyone felt.<sup>187</sup> The product, influential and unique, represents one artist's effective imagination in the wake of a national crisis.

---

<sup>187</sup> Kriegal, *On Men and Manhood*, 84.

## Conclusion

In answering the question, “What is the most beautiful dance?” noted American contemporary choreographer Erick Hawkins poetically concluded, ““Dance that knows dance can be, should be, and is a way of saying now.”<sup>188</sup> Dance is in the moment, and dance is of the moment. The five choreographers I have focused on, as well as the noted ballet choreographers, created dances that said “now,” capturing the historical moments in which they were formed through their distinct representations of shifting masculine ideals.

Without imputing deliberate or conscious intentionality to promote social messages to these five men, we can agree that their creative processes were modes of self-expression, and that they aimed to create something new, relevant, and resonant through their dances. For Berkeley, that was an opulent shrine to feminine beauty that combated the feelings of forsakenness plaguing the depression-era man; the aesthetics of abundance which define his numbers stood in direct opposition to the scarcity of jobs, money, and masculine dignity. Astaire’s sophisticated love story duets, establishing him as the perfect lover, provided an escape from the harsh reality of men not being able to provide for their families anymore. Kelly fought to maintain the strong masculine zeal that arose during the war, lost in the monotony of a nation in peace, turning towards a suburban ideal, by integrating powerful athleticism into his movement. The world of American ballet simultaneously fought its own battle against the stigma of the effete and Europeanized ballet star, eventually developing into a mixture of styles and traditions that would allow for more traditionally masculine performances, though these were almost exclusively segregated from the other numbers in Hollywood musicals – until Robbins. Robbins rode the waves of a growing youth movement that explored violence, camaraderie, and

---

<sup>188</sup> Erick Hawkins, “What Is the Most Beautiful Dance?” in *The Dance Has Many Faces*, ed. Walter Sorell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 243.

reluctant-emotionality and gave the world a jazz-ballet that exhibited these facets. Finally, Fosse honed the confusion and anger related to the collapse of the American male ideal and created a depressed, vapid, stylized exploration of the one thing he had left to cling to – sex.

Were the choreographers self-aware in these processes? Most likely not, but that does not mean that these social pressures did not affect these men as both individuals and artists. Their successes in their own times speak to the relative accessibility and appropriateness of their work. Would Bob Fosse's androgynous orgies have been appreciated by a population emerging out of World War II and hungering for their days of masculine glory and heroism? Would Jerome Robbins' emotional male be respected by the already emasculated Great Depression-era men? No, those dances worked because those dances said "now." Because those "now"s have all already happened, and with the clarity afforded by hindsight, viewers today can both appreciate the pure self-expression represented in this choreography and wonder at these distinct and resonant time capsules, windows into pasts we may or may not have known ourselves.

So, three stories have played out in these pages. The Hollywood musical began in the early sound era, stemming from its vaudeville-inspired, non-integrated roots and exciting audiences with pure spectacle and a chance to escape the harsh realities of life outside the movie theater. Then, riding the wave of success, it developed into studio-designed, star-propelling perfection. Fueled by the American public's continued fascination with the genre, directors and choreographers (and director-choreographers) experimented with new forms of integration through serious artistic exploration at the height of the musical's popularity. They approached the aesthetics of escapism and (with the case of musicals such as *West Side Story*) a sort of allegorical realism, through the creation of a whole musical world within a film, in whole new ways by playing with cinematography, editing, and music. Eventually, however, as disillusion

with society translated into an appreciation of more critical (less escapist) forms of art, the musical came to mock itself with empty and over-the-top routines and a regression to mostly non-integrated numbers.

Similarly, dance as it appeared in the Hollywood musical began with vaudeville-inspired hoofing and the visual spectacle of complex arrangements of “dancers.” It blossomed into more refined expressions of tap as mixed with both ballroom and jazz/ballet. The execution of these was driven by a dedication to impeccable technique, executed by the masters of the respective styles. Dance continued to genre bend, weaving jazz/ballet into everyday motions (and thus a way of life) as well as experimenting with the integration of other dance styles and motives, such as the familiar touches of Americana injected into ballet. Then, however, dance in the musical reached a tipping point and became completely stylized with Fosse’s jazz, arguably to the point of self-deprecation and satire. Its transformative qualities faded away to an emptiness, albeit a beautiful and intriguing one.

Finally, the ideals of American masculinity travelled a similar path – the American man began by striving to preserve past ideals in a changing time that challenged the idea of manhood. In reaction to the emasculating destruction of the job market, his masculine sanctum, he tried to eliminate all signs of femininity from the male identity as per the “no sissy stuff” ideal. He simultaneously clung to the “big wheel” archetype, the successful breadwinner, when he found he could no longer provide for his family. He gained strength with WWII, but promptly lost it in the whitewashed suburban neighborhoods and office buildings of peacetime America – he desperately wanted the glory of “the sturdy oak” back, though. Then, the American man’s son joined the other sons and violently “gave ‘em hell” as he questioned the cookie-cutter life laid out before him, all-the-while trying to mask the emotions that drove his actions. Then he

completely fell apart, grasping for whatever semblance of manhood was left after the cultural revolution and war that defined the 1960's and 70's.

Thus, the historical progressions of both dance and the Hollywood musical build and collapse in tandem, with conceptions of the American masculine ideal constantly shifting, rising and falling, to meet the two art forms at an illuminating intersection. All three stories, running in parallel and creating illustrative individual narratives, fit together in such a way that determining where any causality or influence may play a part becomes extremely difficult.

Where do these stories go from here? In a way, their journey together ends just where the chapters end. Susan Jeffords' story of American manhood in the post-Vietnam era continues on, though. As discussed in the Fosse chapter, the disillusionment and alienation that resulted from the American man's involvement in the Vietnam War resulted in a need for a new masculine ideal. Fosse fell into that timeframe of the second lost generation, but there was a quick turnaround shortly thereafter. With men like Ronald Reagan, Oliver North, and J.R. Ewing leading the charge, American men got their identity back. This identity, though, was over-the-top. Founded on strength, independence, muscle, and a complete lack of anything feminine, this renewed version of masculinity was a complete reversal from the emasculating 1970's.<sup>189</sup>

At about the same time (the early 1980's) musicals practically disappeared from American film. Musicals geared towards a younger audience (Disney animated films such as *The Great Mouse Detective* (1986), which actually has barely any music, and Muppet movies) served as the most promising reminder of Hollywood's once proud musical past. Aside from some lackluster attempts - the half-hearted, campy routines in *Grease 2* (1982) and the unsuccessful adaptation of *A Chorus Line* in 1985 - dance in musicals all but vanished. Gone were the days when an audience could be enthralled and inspired by melodious expressions of inner thoughts

---

<sup>189</sup> Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*, 169.



and feelings – America wanted guns. America wanted destruction. America wanted little dialogue, even less singing, and no dancing.

Of course, dance itself did not disappear from America or even from films completely. It merely pulled up its Hollywood musical roots, settled comfortably back on the stage and in studios, and also found itself immersed in the more realistic sub-genre of the modern dance film. Modern dance films, often categorized as “teen-dance films,” introduce dance into the narrative but do not integrate it. In films such as *Save the Last Dance* (2001), *Fame* (1980), *Flashdance* (1983), *Step Up* (2006), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987), dance arises from diegetic and explained sources (often socially or as a professional performance) in realistic occurrences neatly and expectedly contained within the narrative, which may even refer back to the Hollywood musical’s backstage beginnings. Additionally, these films are not without their own thematic resonance, usually using dance as a way to show the conflict between the traditional and the new/experimental (such as ballet versus hip hop in *Save the Last Dance* or modest ballroom versus sexy partnering in *Dirty Dancing*).<sup>190</sup> However, backstage musicals of the 1930’s, as well as the rest of the Hollywood musicals, provided spectacles of escapism and utopia, or at least of exaggeration and transcendence; teen-dance films lose this quality by presenting their dance in believable, unquestionable terms. Dance is simply no longer elevated to a particularly artistic level in these movies; it becomes a cool trick, a feel-good interval, rather than a tool. This shift makes itself apparent through the almost exclusive use of teenage characters as the performers, usually acting out social rituals of dance or teachings of mentors from the old, classical days. We know, of course, that teenagers can show great depth, but films usually do not characterize them with as much self-awareness as adults, and this takes the implications of truly meaningful artistic

---

<sup>190</sup> Jade Boyd, “Dance, Culture, and Popular Film: Considering Representations in *Save the Last Dance*,” *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (2004): 81.

intent and profound meaning away from many of these routines (the fact that no major choreographers emerge in this period to add gravitas to these kiddie performances enhances this effect). While these kids might be going through the same kinds tribulations as The Jets in *West Side Story*, their dancing is not a unique and fantastical manifestation of their turmoil or triumphs; their dancing is their passion and pastime, not their entire world. They do it because it is something that kids do. This realist tradition in dance film speaks to the same social and filmic trends that killed the classical Hollywood musical. Dance timidly crept back onto the silver screen in this arguably lesser form because there was no place for shuffling chorines, waltzing gentlemen, tapping giants, cowboys in arabesque, balletic delinquents, or androgynous sex fiends in the hypermasculine worlds of *First Blood* (1982) or *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Instead, there was only room for shirtless bodybuilders and explosions. The complexly interconnected relationship between the three stories of musical, dance, and man ended, quite literally, with a bang.

The intertwining narratives presented in this thesis provide a telling example of the ever-present, complicated connections that the film industry forms with varied facets of life. This singular, highly-specific example of masculinity as represented through dance in the Hollywood musical from the 1930's through the 1970's represents but one way in which films do so much more than simply tell stories. Through the contexts of their geneses and their relationships to shared forms, the explored films each create their own portraits of the same image. Their only commonality is the unending relationship between the different forces that shape them. To render these films, even these dance numbers, down to one final statement seems a disservice to the unique and varied experiences they create for the viewer; and so, in conclusion, here are the final frames of each of the analyzed dance numbers, perfectly encapsulating the marriage of genre

characteristics, dance, socio-historical influences, and filmic technique that made them successful in their own time and classics today.



## Bibliography

- Abelson, Elaine S. "Women Who Have No Men to Work for Them: Gender and Homelessness in the Great Depression, 1930-1934." *Feminist Studies* 29 (2003): 104-127.
- Adshead, Janet, ed. *Dance Analysis: Theory and Practice*. London: Dance Books, 1988.
- Altman, Rick. *The American Film Musical*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Boyd, Jade. "Dance, Culture, and Popular Film: Considering Representations in *Save the Last Dance*," *Feminist Media Studies* 4 (2004): 67-83.
- Brady, Anita, and Tony Schirato. *Understanding Judith Butler*. Los Angeles: Sage, 2011.
- Brake, Michael. *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*. London: Routledge, 1985.
- Brannon, Robert. "The Male Sex Role: Our Culture's Blueprint of Manhood and What It's Done for Us Lately." In *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*, edited by D. David – R. Brannon, 1-14. New York: Random House, 1976.
- Burt, Ramsay. "The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity." In *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, edited by Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shaw. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Butler, Judith. "Performativity Precarity and Sexual Politics." Lecture given at Universidad Complutense de Madrid. June 8, 2009.
- Carter, Alexandra and Janet O'Shea, eds., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, second edition. London: Routledge, 2010.
- The Codes of Gender: Identity and Performance in Popular Culture*. Directed by Sut Jhally. DVD. Northampton, MA: Media education foundation. 2009.
- Collins, Jim. "Toward Defining a Matrix of the Musical Comedy: The Place of the Spectator Within the Textual Mechanisms." In *Genre: The Musical*, edited by Rick Altman, 134-146. London: Routledge, 1981.
- Croce, Arlene. *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1972.
- De Mille, Agnes. *America Dances*. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1980.
- De Mille, Agnes. *The Book of the Dance*. New York: Golden Press, 1961.
- Dorsey, Zachary A. "Dance and Choreography." In *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, edited by Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf, 335-350. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

- Driver, Ian. *A Century of Dance: A Hundred Years of Musical Movement, from Waltz to Hip Hop*. London: Octopus Publishing Group, 2000.
- Dyer, Richard. *Only Entertainment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Eberstadt, Mary. *Adam and Eve After the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution*. San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2012.
- Edley, Nigel and Margaret Wetherell. *Men in Perspective: Practice, Power, and Identity*. Hemel Hempstead, UK: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995.
- Epstein, Joseph. *Fred Astaire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Faludi, Susan. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. New York: Perennial, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2000.
- Fischer, Lucy. "The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of *Dames*." In *Genre: The Musical*, edited by Rick Altman, 70-84. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Fisher, Jennifer. "Maverick Men in Ballet: Rethinking the 'Making It Macho' Strategy." In *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, edited by Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shaw, 31-48. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Ford, Carin T. *Legends of American Dance and Choreography*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 2000.
- Fordin, Hugh. *MGM's Greatest Musicals: The Arthur Freed Unit*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1996.
- Foster, Susan. *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986.
- Gaines, Jane. "Costume and Narrative: How Dress Tells the Woman's Story." In *Fabrications: Costumes and the Female Body*, edited by Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog, 180-211. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Garafola, Lynn. "Russian Ballet in the Age of Petipa." In *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, edited by Marion Kant, 151-163. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*. DVD. 2002. Directed by Robert Trachtenberg. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video.
- Giles, Sarah. *Fred Astaire: His Friends Talk*. London: Bloomsbury, 1988.
- Goffman, Erving. *Gender Advertisements*. New York: Harper Collins, 1987.
- Grant, Barry K., editor. *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film, Vol. 1*. Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007.

- Grant, Barry K., editor. *Schirmer Encyclopedia of Film, Vol. 4*. Detroit, MI: Thomson Gale, 2007.
- Grubb, Kevin B. *Razzle Dazzle: The Life and Work of Bob Fosse*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.
- Hawkins, Erick. "What Is the Most Beautiful Dance?" In *The Dance Has Many Faces*, edited by Walter Sorell, 242-244. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966.
- Hess, Earl J. and Pratibha A. Dabholkar. *Singin' in the Rain: The Making of an American Masterpiece*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009.
- Jackson, Naomi. "Dance Analysis in the Publications of Janet Adshead and Susan Foster." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 12 (1994): 3-11.
- Jeffords, Susan. *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Jewell, Richard B. *The RKO Story*. New York: Arlington House, 1982.
- Jowitt, Deborah. *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- Kessler, Kelly. *Destabilizing the Hollywood Musical: Music, Masculinity, and Mayhem*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Kessler-Harris, Alice. *Gendering Labor History*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007.
- Kimmel, Michael. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: The Free Press, 1996.
- Kozloff, Sarah. *Overhearing Film Dialogue*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.
- Kozloff, Sarah. "Wyler's Wars." *Film History* 20 (2008): 456-473.
- Kriegal, Leonard. *On Men and Manhood*. New York: Hawthorne, 1979.
- Laing, Heather. "Emotion by Numbers: Music, Song and the Musical." In *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond*, edited by Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell, 5-13. Portland, OR: Intellect Books, 2000.
- Leff, Leonard J. and Jerold L. Simmons. *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code*, revised edition. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001.
- Long, Robert E. *Broadway, The Golden Years: Jerome Robbins and the Great Choreographer-Directors, 1940 to the Present*. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Luckett, Moya. "Girl Watchers: Patty Duke and Teen TV." In *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, edited by Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin, 95-118. New York: Routledge, 1997.

- Martin, John. "Dance on Film." In *The Dance Has Many Faces*, edited by Walter Sorell, 164-168. New York: Columbia University Press, 1966.
- Martindale, Don. "Conformity, and the Search for Personal Identity." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 378 (1968): 83-89.
- Mueller, John. *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films*. New York: Knopf, 1985.
- Parker, Andrew and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. "Introduction." In *Performativity and Performance*, edited by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1-18. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Parkinson, David. *The Rough Guide to Film Musicals*. London: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Petigny, Alan. *The Permissive Society: America, 1941-1965*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Pike, Bob, and Dave Martin. *The Genius of Busby Berkeley*. Reseda, CA: cfs books, 1973.
- Rauchway, Eric. *The Great Depression & The New Deal: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Risner, Doug. "What We Know about Boys Who Dance: The Limitations of Contemporary Masculinity and Dance Education." In *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders*, edited by Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shaw, 57-77. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Roach, Joseph. "Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World," In *Performativity and Performance*, edited by Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Robinson, Sally. "Men's Liberation, Men's Wounds: Emotion, Sexuality, and the Reconstruction of Masculinity in the 1970's." In *Boys Don't Cry: Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.*, edited by Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis, 205-229. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Rubin, Martin. *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Savage, Jon. *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*. London: Penguin Books, 2007.
- Smiley, Gene. "Great Depression." In *The Concise Encyclopedia of Economics*, accessed January 2, 2012. <http://www.econlib.org/library/CEE.html>.
- Smith, Ernest A. *American Youth Culture: Group Life in Teenage Society*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962.
- Spivak, Jeffrey. *Buzz: The Life and Art of Busby Berkeley*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011.

- Strauss, Marc R. *The Dance Criticism of Arlene Croce: Articulating a Vision of Artistry, 1973-1987*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005.
- Sutton, Martin. "Patterns of Meaning in the Musical." In *Genre: The Musical*, edited by Rick Altman, 190-196. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Taper, Bernard. *Balanchine: A Biography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996.
- Terry, Walter. *Ted Shawn: Father of American Dance*. New York: The Dial Press, 1976.
- Thomas, Bob. *Astaire: The Man, The Dancer*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.
- Vettel-Becker, Patricia. *Shooting from the Hip: Photography, Masculinity, and Postwar America*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Wills, Nadine. "'110 Per Cent Woman': The Crotch Shot in the Hollywood Musical." *Screen* 42 (2001): 121-141.
- Wolf, Stacy. "Gender and Sexuality." In *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, edited by Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf, 210-224. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Wolf, Stacy. "Introduction." In *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf, 1-6. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Wollen, Peter. *Singin' in the Rain*. London: BFI Publishing, 1992.
- Yudkoff, Alvin. *Gene Kelly: A Life of Dance and Dreams*. New York: Back Stage Books, 1999.



## Filmography

- 42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, directed by Lloyd Bacon (1933). Warner Bros. Pictures. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.
- All That Jazz*, directed by Bob Fosse (1979). Columbia Pictures Corporation and Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. DVD. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2003.
- An American in Paris*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1951). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000.
- Anchors Aweigh*, directed by George Sidney (1945). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000.
- The Best Years of Our Lives*, directed by William Wyler (1946). Samuel Goldwyn Productions. DVD. MGM, 2000.
- Billy Elliot*, directed by Stephen Daldry (2000). Arts Council of England and BBC Films. DVD. Universal Studios, 2003.
- Breakfast at Tiffany's*, directed by Blake Edwards (1961). Jurow-Shepherd. DVD. Paramount, 2001.
- Brigadoon*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1954). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.
- The Broadway Melody*, directed by Harry Beaumont (1929). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2005.
- Cabaret*, directed by Bob Fosse (1972). Allied Artists Pictures. DVD. Warner Home Video, 1998.
- Carefree*, directed by Mark Sandrich (1938). RKO Radio Pictures. DVD. Turner Home Entertainment, 2006.
- A Chorus Line*, directed by Richard Attenborough (1985). Embassy Films. DVD. MGM, 2003.
- Daddy Long Legs*, directed by Jean Negulesco (1955). Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. DVD. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2006.
- Dames*, directed by Ray Enright and Busby Berkeley (1934). Warner Bros. Pictures. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.
- Damn Yankees!*, directed by George Abbot and Stanley Donen (1958). Warner Bros. Pictures. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2004.
- Dirty Dancing*, directed by Emile Ardolino (1987). Great American Films Limited Partnership. DVD. Live/Artisan, 2001.
- Easy Rider*, directed by Dennis Hopper (1969). Columbia Pictures Corporation. DVD. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 1999.
- Fame*, directed by Alan Parker (1980). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2004.

- First Blood*, directed by Ted Kotcheff (1982). Anabasis N.V. and Elcajo Productoins. DVD. Live/Artisan, 1998.
- Flashdance*, directed by Adrian Lyne (1983). Paramount Pictures. DVD. Paramount, 2002.
- Follow the Fleet*, directed by Mark Sandrich (1936). RKO Pictures. DVD. Turner Home Entertainment, 2005.
- Footlight Parade*, directed by Lloyd Bacon (1933). Warner Bros. Pictures. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.
- For Me and My Gal*, directed by Busby Berkeley (1942). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.
- Full Metal Jacket*, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1987). Natant, Stanley Kubrick Productions, and Warner Bros. Pictures. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2001.
- The Gang's All Here*, directed by Busby Berkeley (1943). Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. DVD. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 2007.
- The Gay Divorcee*, directed by Mark Sandrich (1934). RKO Pictures. DVD. Turner Home Entertainment, 2006.
- Gold Diggers of 1933*, directed by Mervyn LeRoy (1933). Warner Bros. Pictures. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.
- Grease 2*, directed Patricia Birch (1982). Paramount Pictures. DVD. Paramount, 2003.
- The Great Mouse Detective*, directed by Ron Clements, Burny Mattinson, David Michener, and John Musker (1986). Walt Disney Feature Animation. DVD. Walt Disney Video, 2002.
- Invitation to the Dance*, directed by Gene Kelly (1956). MGM. DVD. MGM, 2011.
- King Kong*, directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack (1933). RKO Pictures. DVD. Turner Home Entertainment, 2006.
- Mary Poppins*, directed by Robert Stevenson (1964). Walt Disney Productions. DVD. Walt Disney Video, 2009.
- Midnight Cowboy*, directed by John Schlesinger (1969). Jerome Hellman Productions. DVD. MGM, 2000.
- My Fair Lady*, directed by George Cukor (1964). Warner Bros. Pictures. DVD. Paramount, 2009.
- Of Human Bondage*, directed by John Cromwell (1934). RKO Pictures. DVD. Alpha Video, 2002.
- Oklahoma!*, directed by Fred Zinnemann (1955). RKO Radio Pictures. DVD. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1999.

- On the Town*, directed by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly (1949). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000.
- The Pajama Game*, directed by George Abbott and Stanley Donen (1957). Warner Bros. Pictures. DVD. Warner Home Video, 1999.
- The Pirate*, directed by Vincente Minnelli (1948). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2007.
- Rebel Without a Cause*, directed by Nicholas Ray (1955). Warner Bros. Pictures. DVD. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005.
- Save the Last Dance*, directed by Thomas Carter (2001). Cort/Madden Productions. DVD. Paramount, 2001.
- Shall We Dance*, directed by Mark Sandrich (1937). RKO Pictures. DVD. Turner Home Entertainment, 2005.
- Singin' in the Rain*, directed by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly (1952). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2002.
- Step Up*, directed by Anne Fletcher (2006). Touchstone Pictures. DVD. Touchstone/Disney, 2006.
- The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, directed by H.C. Potter (1939). RKO Pictures. DVD. Turner Home Entertainment, 2006.
- Summer Stock*, directed by Charles Waters (1950). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2006.
- Sweet Charity*, directed by Bob Fosse (1969). Universal Pictures. DVD. Universal Studios, 2003.
- Swing Time*, directed by George Stevens (1936). RKO Pictures. DVD. Turner Home Entertainment, 2005.
- Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, directed by Busby Berkeley (1949). MGM. DVD. Warner Home Video, 2000.
- Thousands Cheer*, directed by George Sidney (1943). MGM. DVD. MGM, 2009.
- Top Hat*, directed by Mark Sandrich (1935). RKO Pictures. DVD. Turner Home Entertainment, 2005.
- West Side Story*, directed by Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise (1961). Mirisch Pictures. DVD. MGM (Video & DVD), 1998.
- The Wild One*, directed by Laslo Benedek (1953). Stanley Kramer Productions. DVD. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 1998.
- Wonder Man*, directed by H. Bruce Humberstone (1945). The Samuel Goldwyn Company. DVD. HBO Home Video, 1998. Screenshot from youtube.com, "Vera-Ellen In 'So in Love' Scene," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWUbnIU7cbw>.