

JOSEPH EPSTEIN

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## Fred: The Astaire Way to Paradise

### Preface

Federico Fellini's 1986 movie *Ginger and Fred* is about Fellini's deep distaste for the pervasiveness, and concomitant vulgarity, of television in modern life. Very Felliniesque, it contains lots of gentle freaks, wonderful cityscapes, and many moments both goofy and touching. In the movie, a television show called *We Proudly Present* books various oddballs—spiritualists, mystical clergymen, midget dance troupes, retired admirals, transvestites, a woman who breaks down after going a full month without watching television—who speak with an Italian Bert Parks-like master of ceremonies about their zany and pathetic lives.

Among the acts booked is that of a couple who thirty years before used to make a living on stage impersonating Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The Ginger impersonator is played by Fellini's wife Giulietta Masina, the Fred Astaire impersonator by Marcello Mastroianni. In the movie, she is still in decent repair, but he is on the edge of extinction: seedy, a heavy drinker, profane, with a fine cigarette cough, easily winded, ready to pop off into death at any moment. Each has been paid 80,000 lire to appear on *We Proudly Present*. But, as the movie plays out, we discover that they are both really there because of their longing to see each other once again.

Giulietta Masina's character is named Amelia Bonetti, Marcello Mastroianni's is Pippo Botticella. She is efficient, orderly, the brains and backbone of the act, though not without the sweet mischievousness that Signorina Masina so often brought to her art; he is anarchic, with strong political views, capable of all sorts of craziness, full of artistic temperament, the kind of Italian who has never had his arms in the sleeves of his coat but wears it always draped dramatically over his shoulders. At one point before they go on the show, he does a bit of toe tap, showing that

with his feet he can imitate a train, a typewriter, a machine gun, while claiming that he can also do classical, modern, comic, romantic, and pastoral dances.

When their turn to appear on the television show arrives, they dance to a medley of Astaire-Rogers songs: “Cheek to Cheek,” “The Continental,” “Dancing in the Dark.” The dancing is not great but is somehow very moving, with a slight hint of menace about it that derives from the distinct possibility that the Mastroianni character could drop dead out of exhaustion right there on the stage. But as one watches it, especially the Fred Astaire part, one recognizes that there is something faintly, perhaps more than faintly, ridiculous about these dances, the funny moves, especially those Mastroianni makes with the arms. (“Put your arm down, Pippo,” Masina whispers to him as she guides him through their old routine.) And then one realizes that there is something absurd, too, about a man in tails who does tap and ballroom dancing with a woman in a dress that only makes sense on stage. “I’m going to sneeze,” Mastroianni says, “I have a feather [from her dress] up my nose.” (The real Fred Astaire encountered a similar difficulty with one of Ginger Rogers’ dresses while dancing to “Cheek to Cheek” in the movie *Top Hat*.)

Watching these two aging, magnificent Italian actors do their Fred and Ginger in this sad, charming movie causes one to wonder why the originals, and especially Fred Astaire, were themselves so captivating. “When I was a boy,” the middle-aged president of the television station in the movie says, “I spent hours in my room trying to imitate the sublime Fred Astaire.” But, then, most men not completely brutes at one time or another have also tried to imitate Astaire. And a great many females, young girls to older women, have longed to dance with him.

Now here is some good news: so did Fred Astaire spend hours—and hours and hours and more hours—trying to imitate Fred Astaire, if not in his own room then in movie company studio rehearsal halls. What is more, he had little taste for social dancing; and though almost every woman he ever met socially longed to dance with him, most found him, when he could be got to dance with her at a social event at all, less than dazzling, if not even a bit uninterested. We cannot know what pleasure his

dancing gave Fred Astaire—one assumes that it was the high delight that doing something blissfully well gives anyone able to operate at his level of mastery—but it can be said that he was less interested in dancing *per se* than in overall dance performance, at which, the world has long since come to agree, nobody ever did it better.

About Astaire's sublimity there seems to be little argument. Of what does this sublimity consist? Why does this far from traditionally good-looking man singing these light songs while doing intricate and smooth steps in splendidly tailored clothes make so many men wish, however briefly, they had been he, and so many women wish they had been his partner? Whence derived Fred Astaire's sublimity, his magic? That is the great, happy question at the center of this essay.

## Like Kissing Your Sister

Astaire—something in the name suggests brilliance, dazzle. Astaire implies “a star”; so, too, a stairway, perhaps one leading to Paradise (“add a new step every day”); Astarte is also, the mythologies report, the name of a minor goddess, one of high and productive energy. The name Astaire enlivens even the otherwise somewhat stodgy name of Fred. “Ladies and Gentlemen, the Academy is proud to honor that greatest of all dancers, male or female, classical or modern, ballet or ballroom, rap or tap, break or flake, highbrow or low, Mr. Fred Astaire.” Thunderous, nearly unrelenting applause follows.

In fact, Fred Astaire's name at birth—he was born, on May 10, 1899—was Frederick Austerlitz, II. His father, Frederic (without a K) I, known to family and friends as Fritz, was rather a bust. He had left the Austrian army in 1892 and, departing Vienna, came to the New World to strike it rich. He struck it, from most accounts, scarcely at all. After shoring up in Omaha, Nebraska, Fritz Austerlitz (the name rhymes in a way that suggests unseriousness) took a series of dead-end jobs: in the leather business, as a cook, as a drummer of fancy goods, and eventually as a salesman for a brewery. (His son claimed he prospered at this last job, though there is no strong evidence about whether this is true.) Not without charm, the twenty-five-year-old Fritz Austerlitz

met and in fairly short order knocked up and married a fifteen-year-old girl named Johanna Geilus; no one seems to know the precise fate of the child of this early pregnancy, who is thought to have died either in a miscarriage or in childbirth. Two years later the Austerlitzes had a daughter Adele, and two-and-a-half years after that a son Frederic, Freddie, Fred (hold the Fritz), the subject of the slender disquisition now in your hands and, not at all by the way, by general consensus the world's greatest male dancer.

Turn of the last century Omaha may have had its virtues, but the absence of snobbery evidently wasn't high among them. Nowhere near the top of such social heap as the city mounted were the Austerlitzes to be found. From Frederic *père's* shaky hold on his job, from photographs of the family's modest house, they look to have been closer to lower-middle class, with some danger of sliding a touch or two further down the splintery pole of the early twentieth-century American class system. The Austerlitzes appeared to be a family going no place fast.

The children seemed normal and happy enough. They did decently in school; they enjoyed each other's companionship. Johanna decided to enroll Adele, who early showed promise of being a great beauty, in a local dancing class. Her younger brother Freddie tailed along. A bad moment came when Adele and Freddie lost out in a contest to be among the attendants for a King and Queen parade put on by a local lodge called the Kings of Ak-Sar-Ben (Nebraska spelled backwards, clever buggers). The reason they lost was not owing to want of talent but because only the well heeled and well born, by the Omaha standard of the day, were picked. The experience gave Johanna Austerlitz an overpowering sense that her children's fortunes were best sought outside Omaha.

A modest woman, given to backing completely, though not bragging unduly about, her children, Johanna Austerlitz had the thought of grooming her beautiful daughter for a career as a dancer, with her son Freddie, at least at this point, going along for the ride. So when her daughter was not yet eight, her son still five, she herself twenty-six, she took them off to New York to go to dancing school where they might prepare for a living in show business. The radical plan was to leave her husband back in Nebraska, whence he would send them money to keep the

enterprise afloat, though it is unclear whether he was able to do so for long in a sustained way. One of Fred Astaire's biographers even claims that Fritz had a child with another woman in Nebraska, a second Mrs. Austerlitz, though Astaire, who always defended his father, held him up as a solid and good man. One is reminded here of the filial feelings of another great dancer, Mikhail Baryshnikov, who had truly awful parents but who once told an interviewer, "I blame for every fuckups in my life my parents—I don't think so."

The Astaires (*mère, soeur, et frère*) arrived in New York knowing no one but the name of a dancing teacher given them by the children's dancing teacher in Omaha. They checked into a hotel near the dance studio at 23<sup>rd</sup> Street near Eighth Avenue. On the advice of their new dance teacher, the children's surname was changed to Astaire; the mother later dropped the Joh, and became Anna, later Ann, to friends. The director of the dance school, a man named Claude Alviénne, thought that Adele and Fred were talented, though was not about to say for certain that they had a real future in show business. Ann in effect "home-schooled" her kids, except for a two-year lull in their career when they attended a regular school in New Jersey. If there was disharmony, or even sadness, among this brave little trio, it was never mentioned, then or later. Somehow or other they made their way.

Claude Alviénne worked up routines for Adele and Fred as a brother-and-sister act, and such an act they would remain until Adele's retirement in her early thirties. In one of their childhood numbers, Adele, then the taller of the two, played Cyrano to Fred's Roxanne. Alviénne arranged bookings at small fees for them at second-line New Jersey theaters. Soon enough they went on the road, where their bookings were neither plentiful nor hugely rewarding. They continued their dance education; in New York they lived in a small furnished hotel apartment. Adele was the natural among the two children, all shimmering beauty and spontaneity, with great spirit; Fred, who had to work harder at it, took everything more seriously. Most theater managers who booked them felt Adele the one with the smashing career ahead of her.

Through practice and persistence they eventually connected with the Orpheum theatrical circuit, which sent them on the

road for a fee of \$150 a week plus expenses. A dance teacher and director named Ned Wayman wrote a new act for them, at the price of \$1,000, payable in installments. In big-city theaters the glow of their act was dimmed by such glamorous names on the same bill as Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. (later a friend of Fred's in Hollywood). They continued to work hard, grind it out, appearing alongside animal acts, acrobats, and low comedians. It was onward and upward, but in what must have seemed excruciatingly slow motion.

Ann Austerlitz Astaire was a careful money manager, and she worked things out so that, when they weren't touring, she and her kids stayed at swank resorts. Social mobility was part of the grand plan. As adolescents, Fred and Adele developed a taste for the good, even the high, life. At one such resort, a place called Water Gap House in Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania, Fred reports in his memoir, *Steps in Time*, he "first learned to play golf, swim, and ride." Boys took a powerful interest in Adele, who seemed to give off fumes of sexual promise the way Eula Varner, that luscious girl in Faulkner's *The Hamlet* did, Eula who could transform anywhere she went into "a grove of Venus." Mary Pickford, shooting a film nearby, stayed at Water Gap House the second year the Astaires were there. Peter Arno, *The New Yorker* cartoonist, was another guest. The allure of the posh was not lost on the Astaire kids. By the time they were in their early twenties, Fred and Adele would rate as pretty damn posh themselves.

They acquired a new dance teacher, a man named Aurelia Coccia, a veteran vaudeville performer who streamlined their act, getting rid of their old skits and turning Fred and Adele into a straight song-and-dance act. They revised and rehearsed, polished and honed, found fresh songs, altered and added new dances. They played New England, where Adele attracted the boys from Yale. Thinking Fred her older brother, the Yalies took him up, as a way to get to Adele.

The contrast between Fred and Adele showed up early in their career as a team. Along with being hard working, a perfectionist, Fred was a worrier: worried above all about little screw-ups in performance that would get in the way of his modest but relentless ambition, which was, as he would tell Edward R. Murrow much later in his life, "to knock 'em in the aisles as often as I could."

Adele was beautiful, effortlessly talented, candid, one of those women who could be attractively coarse. She was the perennial live wire, highest possible voltage. From an early age she knew that men were interested in her, and she could tell you, with precision, why. At seventeen she allowed that “I’ve already got quite used to people grabbing my fanny backstage—that is, when they weren’t all homos.” She didn’t mind calling a stagehand “a stupid fucker,” or when she caught someone looking up her skirt asking if he saw “the ace of spades.” When her brother apologized for her raw frankness, she might add, “Why the fuck shouldn’t I say what I feel?” One of the reasons that to this day some people think Fred Astaire is Jewish is that, during the 1930s, with Hitler in power and anti-Semitism spreading, someone made an anti-Semitic remark about Adele’s friend the actress Lilli Palmer, causing Adele to tell the offending person to take it back and quick since she, Adele, was Jewish, too.

If Adele was utterly at ease with men, Fred was careful with women and waited until his middle thirties to marry a woman who was not in show business and who had a four-year-old son. He adored her. Let the record show he was always faithful to her despite what must have been endless opportunities. Adele, on the other hand, was stimulated by worthlessness in men. She is said to have lost her virginity to George Jean Nathan, the theater critic who was H. L. Mencken’s partner on the *Smart Set*, a man many years older than she, and, from various accounts, far from an appetizing specimen. She later bedded Cecil Beaton, providing him a pause (evidently not one that much refreshed) in an otherwise largely gay life (though he, Beaton, and Greta Garbo were often thought, in the phrase of the day, an item).

When Adele married at thirty-four she chose an English nobleman, Charles Cavendish, the sixth child of the Duke of Devonshire, nine years younger than she and a dedicated drinker who pegged out with cirrhosis of the liver before he was forty. She was gutsy, Adele, gallant, amusing to be with, and generous in spirit. John Green, who served as musical director of two Fred Astaire movies, *Easter Parade* and *Royal Wedding*, remembered Adele as “able to be pert without being precious; cute without being coy; hokey, when appropriate, but never corny; moving without being maudlin. She had an uncanny sense of the fine line between sentiment and sentimentality, was sexy but never vulgar,

and always utterly beguiling.” Noel Coward, who loathed falsity, adored Adele. Her spirit is nicely captured in a needlepoint cushion she made for her brother and sister-in-law: on one side there was a floral design, on the other the words “Fuck Off.”

Fred was much tighter, in every way. Once married, he was a homebody. His wife was his dearest friend, and perhaps his only confidant. His politics were apparently Republican, though he never made a big thing about them; politics bored him. He was churchgoing, religious in a way he never cared to speak about, though his religion was evidently important to him. But then he never made a big thing about any aspect of his personal life. He gave dull interviews, making journalists feel—who is to say wrongly?—his private life was his business. He golfed, for God’s sake, and in great earnest. As soon as he could afford them, he kept race horses, and one of them, a horse named Triplicate, turned out to be a big prizewinner for him. But above all he put effort, relentless effort, into making his own vision about the art of the dance look perfectly effortless.

Without Adele Astaire as his partner at the beginning of his career, Fred Astaire might have ended up a suburban husband, selling swank high-line cars (for which he had a lifelong taste). In their earlier years as a dance team, Adele supplied the main magic. But the commitment to perfection was not in her in the way that it was in her brother. “It was different for me,” she is quoted saying in the Tim Satchell biography of Fred Astaire, “but show business and dancing and worrying were in my brother’s blood—it was not just his work, it was his life.” Endless hard work is more than a theme in Astaire’s career; it was the reason his career ascended to the heights it did.

The dance team of Astaire & Astaire slowly rose on the marquee of the theaters they played as did their fees, soon hitting \$350 a week. This was the age of the impresario, of Abe Erlanger, Flo Ziegfeld, and the Brothers Shubert, with their revues and extravaganzas. The Astaires were bidden by the Shuberts to appear in a show originally called *The Nine O’Clock Revue*, because of a plan to start half an hour after most theatrical performances in New York, a show later retitled *Over the Top*. This was it, Broadway, the big time. No smash, the show nonetheless did do decent business, in New York and afterwards when it was taken on the road. In his memoir, Fred Astaire quotes the verdict of Louis Sherwin, the critic of the *New York Globe*: “One of the

prettiest features of the show is the dancing of the two Astaires. The girl, a light, spritelike little creature, has really an exquisite floating style in her caperings, while the young man combines eccentric agility with humor. . . .” Not exactly “I greet you at the beginning of a great career,” this review, but a start.

The Astaires did another show for the Shuberts, *The Passing Show of 1918*, from which they garnered more praise. The journalist Heywood Broun, that human unmade bed, awarded them this gentle kiss: “In an evening in which there was an abundance of good dancing, Fred Astaire stood out. He and his partner, Adele Astaire, made the show pause early in the evening with a beautiful loose-limbed dance. It almost seemed as if the two young persons had been poured into the dance. . . .” Poured into the dance is a metaphor that, like Broun himself, could use a little pressing, but the praise comes through.

Once the Astaires arrived on Broadway, it really was onward and upward. They appeared on bills with such great names of the day as Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, and Charley Ruggles. Their price went up to \$550 a week, enough for Fred to think about acquiring a sports car. Alexander Woollcott, spelling their name wrong, noted that “there should be a half dozen special words for the vastly entertaining dances by the Adaires, in particular for that nimble and lackadaisical Adaire named Fred. He is one of those extraordinary persons whose sense of rhythm and humor have been all mixed up, whose very muscles of which he seems to have an extra supply, are facetious. . . .” Facetious muscles aren’t easily visualized, but let that, too, pass. Hey, as long as they spell your name wrong!

By 1920, the Astaires were making \$750 a week. They spent lots of their free time in smart nightclubs. A choreographer in a dud show they did called *The Love Letter* taught them a dance in which they ran round, shoulder-to-shoulder, as if on a six-day bike race-track, which later came to be called the “Oompah Trot,” and which they used over and over again because it was an unfailing showstopper. When reviewers panned shows Adele and Fred were in, exceptions tended to be made for them. “When they dance,” Robert Benchley wrote in *Life*, “everything seems brighter and their comedy alone would be good enough to carry them through even if they were to stop dancing (which God forbid!).” Now that is what real praise looks like.

Backstage one night in their dressing room appeared a

brilliant young Englishman named Noel Coward, a contemporary who would become a lifelong friend and who suggested the Astaires take their act to London, where they were, he felt no doubt, certain to be a knockout. A young not yet fully-fledged producer named Alex Aarons, whom Astaire met when Aarons was working at Sulka's, the men's shop noted for its robes and neckties, later pushed them to take his show *For Goodness Sake* to London, which they agreed to do. Their English success was instantaneous. "Your success here is assured," Coward told Adele. "You've got youth, energy, humor, looks, and fun. That's exactly what the English like"; *autre temps, autre moeurs*; as we have sadly come to learn, there wasn't always to be an England, at least not of the kind Noel Coward described.

Soon Fred Astaire—in his accent, his clothes, his general manner—came to appear mid-Atlantic, so strong did the English influence on him seem, while his sister married an Englishman and eventually became Lady Adele Cavendish. At one of the Astaires' early shows in England, Prince Albert—son of King George V, and, at his brother David's abdication to marry the dour Mrs. Wallis Simpson, one day to be King George VI—turned up. He adored the Astaires, and brought his friends and family to see them. He began inviting Fred and Adele out to dinner and parties after performances. The King of England is supposed to have said of the Astaires: "They seem a decent sort of American." They couldn't possibly have been any more *in*. England still had what the journalists called Smart Society—a blend of pedigree, money, and talent, the *beau monde* and the *haut monde* combined—and Fred and Adele Astaire found themselves very much part of it.

Fred acquired an English valet, began his habit of buying race horses, shopped Savile Row, eventually acquired a small black Rolls Royce, known as a baby Rolls. The Astaires could have served as characters in an Anthony Powell novel, though perhaps Adele's raucous candor would have made a better fit in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*. They were comfortable in England and the English were comfortable with them, on and off the stage. The Prince of Wales claimed to see their show *Stop Flirting* no fewer than ten times, while Fred made a note of the elegant cut of the lapels on his white waistcoat, which he had English tailors imitate for him. James Barrie and George Bernard Shaw were both quite

gone on Adele, with Barrie suggesting she consider playing Peter Pan.

In America, Jock Whitney and Alfred Vanderbilt were part of their circle, or, more accurately, the Astaires were part of theirs; Tallulah Bankhead, Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward, and Gertrude Lawrence were also friends. In the old cliché, they were the toast of two continents. Even Fred, with his imagination of disaster, as Henry James called the dubious talent of always being able to see the worst of things, had little about which to complain. They were leading the good life, the high life, a fine breeze stirring them gently on their way in the fast lane.

The Astaires didn't suffer greatly during the Depression, which in fact was good for show business, causing people to seek out escapism more ardently than ever. In America, Flo Ziegfeld paid them \$5,000 a week to be in one of his shows. They scored in *The Band Wagon*, a Broadway hit that Fred would later redo, with major surgery, as a movie with Cyd Charisse. The reviews they received sounded as if they had written them themselves. Brooks Atkinson, the then still quite young *New York Times* theater critic, wrote, "this revue is without flaw." Other papers spoke of Fred's graduating from mere hooper to a genuine comic talent. In the Astaire partnership, Fred was emerging from his role as the lesser, younger brother; some reviewers thought he had surpassed his sister in energy and flair.

The last time Fred and Adele danced together on stage was March 5, 1932, in a road-company version of *The Band Wagon*. Nearly thirty-five, Adele was ready to toss in the taps, and did so by marrying the aforementioned dipsomaniacal Charlie Cavendish. Adele was in most ways her brother's perfect partner; just the right size (5'3" and 106 pounds), with great physical charm centering on her large eyes, wittily pouting mouth, and easy comic gifts. Their increased fame as a brother-and-sister act allowed them to ignore the need to dance romantically as a couple—"it's like kissing your sister" being an old saying suggesting an experience of the utterly thrill-free sort, unless of course one's taste runs to incest.

The only complaint Fred Astaire ever had against Adele was that she was not so hard a worker as he nor, apparently, much given to the ardor for perfection that was central to his character. He was a man who lay awake at night working out ideas for new

dances. She found rehearsals a drag and perfection nice enough in its way though scarcely worth giving up the charms of social life for; certainly nothing to lie awake at night for, at least not alone.

Fred Astaire now faced the question of whether he could he make it on his own. Before taking up that problem in earnest, he had met and fell (perhaps the only serious fall in his adult career) in love with a divorcée named Phyllis Potter. She was roughly the same height as Adele, slender, and also, in looks, again like his sister, the type of the *gamin*. She was socially well connected, brought up by an aunt and uncle, when her mother remarried. The uncle, Henry Bull, was president of the Turf and Field Club; she pronounced her *r*'s as *w*'s, as in "Fweddie, Fweddie, dawling." According to him, when they first met, at a golf luncheon given by Mrs. Gloria Fair Vanderbilt, she had never heard of him. He was thirty-two, she twenty-four, and he applied the full court press to her, though with delicate tact. His mother was less than pleased, thinking her son would make his way more easily in the world unencumbered by a divorced woman with a four-year-old son. Fred, not his mother, prevailed. He and his wife would have two children of their own, Fred, Jr. and Ava, neither of whom ever danced professionally.

Not much is known about Fred Astaire as a ladies' man. No stories exist about him as a masher, roué, or even a serious chaser. The man who taught America to dance "The Continental" ("You kiss while you're dancing"), who held Ginger Rogers, Rita Hayworth, Paulette Goddard, Audrey Hepburn, Barrie Chase, and other beautiful women in his arms, bending them backwards, whirling them about—but who himself didn't often kiss onstage, saying that he did his lovemaking with his feet—this same man seems to have been too well-mannered and otherwise centered on his work to give women other than second place in his life. He was a faithful and good husband, whose life almost came apart when his wife died of lung cancer at the age of forty-six, leaving him a widower at fifty-four. He married again, in 1980 at the age of eighty, this time to a woman who was a former jockey named Robyn Smith. She was forty-three years younger than he and previously the squeeze of Alfred Vanderbilt, whose horses she sometimes rode. Robyn Smith, as the English say, saw Astaire out at his death at eighty-eight.

Lots of stories are told about Fred Astaire's entrée into Holly-

wood. The best known—alas, never authenticated—has to do with the unidentified studio operative who, after watching Astaire's screen test, is supposed to have reported: "Balding. Can't sing. Dances a little." In different versions the wording is altered slightly.

In fact, David O. Selznick, then the head of RKO, though soon to become an executive at MGM, where his father-in-law Louis B. Mayer most powerfully presided, thought Fred Astaire likely to be a great movie performer. "I am tremendously enthused about the suggestion New York [by which he meant his agents there] has made of using Fred Astaire," he wrote in 1933 to two underlings at RKO. "If he photographs (I have ordered a test), he may prove to be a really sensational bet . . . Astaire is one of the great artists of the day: a magnificent performer, a man conceded to be perhaps, next to Leslie Howard, the most charming in the American theater, and unquestionably the outstanding young leader of American musical comedy." Selznick later showed some hesitation, but didn't finally back down: "I am a little uncertain about the man, but I feel, in spite of his enormous ears and bad chin line, that his charm is so tremendous that it comes through even in this wretched [screen] test, and I would be perfectly willing to go ahead with him [in a movie then in the planning stage]."

RKO signed Fred Astaire to a three-week contract at \$1,500 per week. He was to dance, playing a character with the name of Fred Astaire, with Joan Crawford in an eminently forgettable flick called *Dancing Lady*. They gave him, in other words, a shot. He volleyed it back at them for an authoritative winner. Whatever his screen test might have shown, whatever his physical deficiencies, Fred Astaire came across splendidly on the screen. He was the masculine equivalent of what the French call a *belle laide*, a feature-by-feature homely woman who is somehow nevertheless stunning. His attractiveness may have resided partly in his clothes and the way he wore them; it had a great deal to do of course with the way he moved, including his most casual moves. Whatever the magic that made for movie charm, he possessed it. He lit up the joint—any joint he may have been in—turning the silver screen golden.

Of what did his magic consist? Why even now, more than twenty years after his death, more than fifty years since the days of

his prime as a dancer-singer-actor, why do his old movies still shimmer with glamour, why do so many people still find the sight and sound of him enchanting, why does the very idea of Fred Astaire continue to cast its own lovely liling glow? We are, my dear Watson, in the presence of a mystery.

## A Litvak Passes Through

A group of songs and more or less energetic dances strung out over a generally preposterous plot, such is musical comedy, a purely American art form. Along with jazz, it is one of the few original American contributions to the world's stock of entertainments. From the 1920s through the 1950s, it flourished, owing to a small number of talented and prolific songwriters, some of whose names, it may well be, will live longer than that of the country's greatest poets: Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Richard Rogers, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein, the Brothers Gershwin, and a small number of others. Talent of the kind that went into these Broadway musicals, and of musical movies, flashed across the sky and, *whoosh!*, was never to appear again.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Romantic poet and critic, who wrote no Broadway show tunes whatsoever, did indite the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief." Although not a phrase one can dance to, it has its uses: applied to the reading or viewing of works of art, it means that, to appreciate many of them, one must close off one's normal skepticism, even sense of reality. Watching *Oedipus Rex*, for example, it won't do to ask how a young man can be so stupid as to marry a woman much older than he without bothering to ask where she came from or whether she had been married before or—might it just be?—had any children. Ask these questions and the play never gets out of New Haven. Probability must not be consulted; disbelief must be suspended.

With musical comedies, disbelief must not be merely suspended but guillotined. (The situation is not much better in opera, where vastly overweight men and women, when stabbed, or as like as not having stabbed themselves, begin to sing loudly.) Many people are easily able to make this suspension of disbelief. I have seen men with Mafia connections much moved by *Pajama Game* or *My Fair Lady*; female divorce lawyers, scrap-iron dealers,

brought near tears by *A Chorus Line* and beyond tears by *Fiddler on the Roof*. Go figure.

Putting musical comedies on film first resulted in spectaculars: above all, the geometrical-minded Busby Berkeley and his dancers coming out of fountains, down from clouds, peeping out of immense pools, with feathers, fans, boots, headdresses flapping and flying all over the joint. The effect was cheerleading to the highest power, marching bands without the instruments, the result less entertaining than amazing. Two questions, though, arise: Who would want to do this? And why am I watching it?

Soon enough it became understood that the real advantage of film, *contra* Busby Berkeley, for musicals was the close-up. Close-ups permitted facial expressions. The close-up allowed men and women to sing into each other's faces at a distance of six inches or less. Being sung to, loudly, at such close distance by a man whose first name is Nelson or Ezio would not, let us agree, be everyone's idea of a corking good time, but at the time it was thought highly romantic. The suspension of disbelief button had here to be pressed with real force.

But the close-up camera also allowed one to focus on two dancers, or one dancer, or the dancer's feet doing astonishing things. Fred Astaire came to be a genius at knowing how the camera caught each part of his body. But while he was dancing he did not permit the camera to cut away to focus on his feet or switch to his face; he made sure it took in all his body.

As for the plots of movie musicals, they call for a willing suspension of rationality. James Agate remarked of the Astaire-Rogers movies that, "apart from the dancing of these two artists, they are deserts of witlessness." He saw their movie "*Roberta* on a wet night in Blackpool" and vowed that "rather than drown in another dose of such inanity I would climb the Eiffel Tower hand over fist and commit suicide in someone's backyard. I will go farther and say that not for twenty minutes of Irving [not Berlin but Sir Henry] or Sarah Bernhardt would I again endure such drivel." This is strong but not entirely out of line.

Consider *Roberta*, the movie that drove Agate so bonkers. RKO made it just as the success of Astaire and Rogers' *Gay Divorcee* was resoundingly ringing the gong of commercial success. So many of these movies pivot on mistaken identities, goofy misalliances, even malapropisms. *Roberta* begins on the latter: a heavily-accent-

ed, half-crazed White Russian who runs a nightclub in Paris hires Huck Haines (Astaire) and his band, the Wabash Indianians, under the impression that they are actually American Indians. When he finds out that they aren't Indians but Hoosiers, he wants nothing to do with them. Randolph Scott, a football All-American, who happens to be traveling with the band, also just happens to have an aunt in Paris who has become a famous couturier, running an exclusive shop called Roberta's. One of the customers at Roberta's is the Countess Tanka Scharwenka, who is in fact Lizzie Gatz, the former neighbor and girlfriend of Astaire back in Indiana. (Yo, you still there?) Lots of White Russians, snobbish Americans, balalaika music, comic drunks appear. (As S. J. Perelman, in his parodies of screenplays, used to note, "A Litvak passes through.") I could continue with this plot summary, but why should I insult both of us? Suffice to say that it all ends in a fashion show with Fred Astaire singing "Lovely to Look At," and Fred and Ginger dancing for the second time to "I Won't Dance." Randolph Scott goes off with a white Russian princess (played by Irene Dunne), Astaire with Rogers. The larger point is that the theater of the absurd started well before the advent of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and the rest of the dark playwrights—absurdity to the highest power really began in the musical comedy movies of the 1930s and '40s.

Of course the plot in most movie musicals is only the excuse to set up the songs and dances and comic bits. "What do you expect from a musical anyway?" asked the movie and jazz critic Otis Ferguson, who, answering his own question, replied: "A musical rarely attempts to be more than a ragbag of various show tricks; and even when it does, there is no relation between its comedy, which is mostly wisecracks, and its songs, which are mostly sugar."

Ferguson goes on to report that there are essentially two plots in movie musicals: "the Hymie-the-Hoofer type, where the boy makes the grade with his act; the My-Gal-Daisy-She-Durrives-Me-Crazy type, where the boy makes the girl." A variation on these is that the girl finds some reason utterly to loathe the boy, causing the boy of course to bring her all the way round to falling helplessly in love with him. (A big song-and-dance number, if you happen to have one on you, usually does this particular trick.) The rest has to do with the not very arduous task of finding a way, in the first number, to elide from regular conversation into song, preferably accompanied by a highly energetic tap dance.

In most of his movies, Astaire plays a variation on Hymie-the-Hooper. Sometimes he is also a bandleader or a trumpeter (as in *Second Chorus*), or a hooper in the navy (as in *Follow the Fleet*), or a con man (*Yolanda and the Thief*), or a gambler (*Swing Time*), or a multimillionaire businessman who just happens to keep a full set of drums in his office for a big drumming while dancing number (in *Daddy Long Legs*), or (most frequently) a professional dancer (*Top Hat*, *You Were Never Lovelier*, *You'll Never Get Rich*, and others), an air force ace (*The Sky's the Limit*), or sometimes a retired hooper making a comeback (as in *Band Wagon*); in *Carefree* he is a shrink, and in *Funny Face* a professional photographer. The plots of these movies run into one another, so that, even for someone who has thought a fair amount about them it isn't easy to keep straight which is which. But, *mirabile dictu*, whatever his profession, Astaire always seems to go to work in shoes with taps on them, and somewhere in the background a twenty-five piece orchestra hovers at the ready.

Like Maurice Chevalier before him, Astaire in his movie roles is essentially the type of the *boulevardier*, a man who, whatever his ostensible work, is fundamentally unserious, without a lot on his mind except dressing nattily, dancing dazzlingly, and winning the girl handily, which inevitably of course he does. But in his movie roles Astaire could be a dentist or certified public accountant or funeral director or even on crutches, and the boys in Hollywood would have found a way to get him onto the dance floor, where he would proceed to blow everyone away.

The overriding point of the absurd scripts of all these movies is that, in the end, talent will tell, and charm disarm—and, with Astaire in command, both do exactly that, just about every time.

## Charmed, I'm Sure

Gifts come from God, presents from men and women. Serious talent is largely a gift from God. Charm is a present men and women bestow upon one another. No one is born charming, though charm comes fairly easily to some and is apparently quite impossible for others.

Charm has to do with pleasing, light-handedly, sometimes to the point of fascination. He or she “turned on the charm,” we say, by which we mean that a man or woman cast a spell, however

fleeting. Temporary enchantment is the state to which a charming person brings us. Charm is a performance of a kind; it is virtuosity of the personality. Charm is confident, never strained, always at ease in the world. Charm is not pushing; it has a fine sense of proportion and measure, never goes too far, never stays too long. Charm is Noel Coward, entering a party wearing an ordinary suit and discovering every other man in the room dressed in white tie and tails, and blithely announcing, "Please, I don't want anyone to apologize for overdressing."

Charm is elegance made casual, with emphasis on the casual. Charming mustn't seem too studied, forced, overdone. So many of the letters of Marcel Proust, during his youthful days of sucking up to the aristocracy, provide examples of charm overdone. They are heavy handed, go on too much. Here is Proust writing to Robert de Montesquiou, in the summer of 1894 (Proust is twenty-three at the time): "I have no need to tell you that you were spoken of constantly with affectionate veneration and that your memory is much to be thanked for so graciously and nobly accompanying or rather guiding us on this excursion, which it diverted and embellished." I don't think so; I don't think anyone, least of all the sly and malevolent Montesquiou, likely to have bought it. Charm is never so creamy, so smarmy; putting it on a bit thick is what our little Marcel is guilty of here and in a number of other letters to those he took to be his social betters. He would later learn otherwise, and only became charming when he acted in true character: the character, that is, of the penetratingly brilliant social analyst.

As Fred Astaire knew in his bones, charm is light, bright, breezy, pleasing in and of itself. Charm knows when to turn itself off, when to depart, which is why it is invariably invited back. Charm puts things interestingly, amusingly, surprisingly, sometimes originally, but never heavily; charm is the young Truman Capote, not the older Richard Wagner. Charm avoids cliché; it is ever fresh. Uncharming, if not untrue, is to say that D. H. Lawrence was a writer with many pernicious and ugly ideas. Charm (speaking here through Max Beerbohm) says, "Poor D. H. Lawrence. He never realized, don't you know—he never suspected that to be stark, staring mad is somewhat of a handicap for a writer."

So many traditions of charm are European or Oriental in their

provenance. English charm, French charm, Italian charm are perhaps the chief variants. One doesn't, somehow, think of Germans as charming, though perhaps Marlene Dietrich and Oscar Werner came close to putting this stereotype out to pasture. The Chinese and Japanese are of course not without their own elegant, perhaps more formulaic traditions of charm.

Cary Grant, who despite his immitigably English accent often played Americans, was English charm at its bounciest and least effete; Ronald Colman was English charm at its most suave. Charles Boyer was French charm in its romantic vein; Maurice Chevalier in its frivolous, frothy one. Marcello Mastroianni was a marvelous exemplar of Italian charm, and he could do charm in a thousand guises: elegant, comic, seedy, world weary, and just about any other that was required. Russian charm is George Balanchine, a great artist who could do light and heavy charm, with an equally authoritative touch, and who could seem intimate while remaining coolly impersonal. Vladimir Nabokov worked much the same act.

Americans can be amusing, hilarious, winning, immensely attractive yet seldom full-out charming. Bing Crosby could exhibit a limited charm in the casual manner; Sinatra could do tough-guy charm, though I, for one, stopped being susceptible to it by the time I was thirty and preferred he just shut up and sing. Charm tends to the aristocratic, and American charm, in the nature of the case, doesn't quite qualify. When it attempts an aristocratic tinge, it comes off as fake English or stuffily European. American charm, to be truly American, somehow has to combine the aristocratic with the democratic, but without a trace of snobbery.

American charm, at least as on exhibit in the movies, was best portrayed by Fred Astaire. Although he dressed English-aristocratic, in his movies Astaire always bore boy-next-door American names. In most of Astaire's movies, his manner was sometimes just slightly wise-guy, big-city but also small-town, gee-whiz.

Contrast Fred Astaire with William Powell, whose suavity made the *Thin Man* movies so delightful. Powell in his movie persona is sophisticated in a way Astaire in his movie persona is distinctly not. Powell's character is world weary, properly cynical, looking forward only to another perfectly confected cocktail. Astaire breaks out the champagne from time to time, and in one of his

movies (*The Sky's the Limit*) he actually gets drunk, but his drunkenness turns out to be no more than an excuse to do another dance. Like Astaire, Powell is always handsomely tailored, lives in starkly white plush apartments, drives flashy cars. But the good life, one might say, is all that is left to him, his having previously seen the rest of life for what it really is. Powell's lack of enthusiasm is one of the chief marks of his sophistication; Astaire, urbane but not sophisticated, retains his enthusiasm, for the girl, the song, above all for the dance. You can't dance the way Astaire did and be cynical, too—it's not possible.

And yet, regular guy though he is supposed to be in his movie roles, there is also always something more than a touch aristocratic about Fred Astaire in these roles. (Nobody loves an aristocrat more than do democrats. Recall the gaga reception of the late Princess Diana in America, the fuss made when the Queen shows up on our shores.) His clothes give him away, and so does his mid-Atlantic accent. Astaire is above all an aristocrat of talent. Balzac says that a true artist is a prince, and there is a lot to it. The real aristocrats of art are those who make their art look easy. This Astaire did, incomparably. It was a great fraud, of course, since no one worked harder than he to make what he did look easy. But this kind of fraud is at the center of art—may indeed be intrinsic to art.

One of the first rules of American movies, as any crass Hollywood producer will be pleased to inform you, is that in them there must be someone for whom the audience can root. One roots for Fred Astaire in his movies in good part because he isn't all that sexy. Unlike Clark Gable, he can't ever say that frankly he doesn't give a damn, pick the girl up in his arms, and head off up the impressive staircase to get on with the business of delayed rape (*Gone with the Wind*). Unlike Gary Cooper, he can't win the girl through his manly reticence and unflinching courage in the face of danger (*High Noon*). Unlike Cary Grant, he can't bring off the dazzling talk and brute handsomeness that wins through over steady affection (*His Girl Friday*).

Fred Astaire had none of these things going for him. He was this little guy, skinny, with big ears, a long chin, and too wide a forehead, whose only chance is to get the girl onto the dance floor, where he will let his feet do his seduction for him. And yet root for him, we do. We do so because he is almost always coming

from behind. Part of Fred Astaire's charm is that in many of his movies he is something of an underdog. In the scripts of the movies he appears in, one or another kind of misidentification, bungled opportunity, or other bit of bumbling occurs, which, in the football phrase, gives Astaire very poor field position from which he is under the necessity of making up ground. The point is that if only he can get these lovely women on the dance floor, victory will be his, and everyone will dance happily ever after. (Living with such a jumpy fellow after marriage might be something else, but let that go.)

Once he is on the dance floor, of course, Fred Astaire is no longer an underdog. He becomes, as they say in Vegas, an oddson, a positively prohibitive, favorite. On the dance floor—just him and the night and the music—his charm kicks in. The girl is gone, the movie's over, you walk out of the theater—or, nowadays, rise from your couch before the television set—and, humming the flick's final song wonder why in the hell it wasn't given to you to be able to move as lightly, as wonderfully, as charmingly as Fred Astaire.

## Who Needs a Partner?

Beaumont and Fletcher, Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Rodgers and Hart—Fred and Ginger qualify as another of these famous pairings, with one proviso. Although in their splendid movie performances they never gave any sign of it, neither was entirely content to be linked with the other. Astaire felt he had had the great partnership of his career with his sister Adele; and Ginger Rogers, though hers would probably by now be a nearly lost name but for her partnership with Fred Astaire, sensed that he somehow eclipsed her; what's more, she wished to be thought, more than a mere dancer, a great actress.

At the 1988 Democratic Convention, then Texas Governor Ann Richards, giving a boost to feminism, said that, on the dance floor, Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did, but "backwards and in high heels." Katharine Hepburn remarked that to the Fred-and-Ginger partnership Rogers brought sex and Astaire brought class, the combination thought to supply a winning mix. A strange word "class," one always to be suspicious

of, especially in a democracy, which is supposedly dedicated to eliminating all evidence of social class. What this baggy-pants word usually means is style on what is taken to be an upper-class level of elegance. Ann Richards and Katharine Hepburn's are amusing remarks, but does either have a very high quotient of truth?

Tension was never quite missing from the Fred-Ginger relationship, even though both Astaire and Rogers, putting the best face on things, often pretended otherwise. He was twelve years older than she, and they began, pre-Hollywood, as, potentially, what the gossip columnist Walter Winchell would have called an item. After being called in to offer choreographic advice on a Broadway show she was in, Astaire, then in his man-about-town bachelor stage, later phoned her for a date. Both were in shows at the time, and he picked her up at midnight for dinner at the Casino, one of those smart supper clubs of the day, where Eddy Duchin's orchestra played. They danced, and he passed the test as a social dancer: "You could put yourself in his hands and trust his feet," she said. A chauffeur was driving his Rolls-Royce town car, and the evening ended on a kiss that "would never have passed the Hayes office code!" according to Ginger Rogers in her autobiography. "If I had stayed in New York, I think Fred Astaire and I might have become a more serious item," she said. "We were different in some ways but alike in others. Both of us were troupers from an early age [she was born Virginia McMath of Texas to a Gila monster (those lizards said never to let go) of a stage mother], both of us loved a good time, and, for sure, both of us loved to dance." In the account in Astaire's autobiography, they went out on dates a few more times, but there was neither spark nor fan to flame it.

When they were assigned to do their first picture together, *Flying Down to Rio*, in which they each had second banana roles, much had changed: Ginger Rogers had appeared in a few movies, and Fred Astaire, now married and without his sister Adele as his partner, had determined on a career in the movies. She felt that "Fred looked the same but acted differently. He was not as open, far more formal." She thought this was owing to his new wife, who, in her view, made everyone uncomfortable. "One thing for sure, she [Phyllis Astaire] never warmed up to me . . . and she didn't want her husband to either. Other than on the dance floor, Fred and I rarely embraced in our films. Fred said he

couldn't stand mushy love scenes and felt like a fool kissing for the camera. I think Phyllis didn't want him kissing other women." Henceforth in her autobiography, Ginger Rogers' account of her relationship with Fred Astaire will be by no means barbed but less than fully appreciative. In his autobiography, he refers to her as "Gin," but his treatment of her and their partnership is generally cool, more than a touch distant.

Always the perfectionist, Astaire liked to have a say in the selection of his partners' dresses, chiefly to see if they were dresses that "danced well," by which he meant flowed and didn't go against the rhythmic grain of the dances he and Hermes Pan had devised. The first time this became a problem was in *Top Hat*, for the dance to the Irving Berlin song "Cheek to Cheek." Ginger Rogers chose a dress covered with blue ostrich feathers. Astaire thought the dress a mistake. According to David Niven, who was at the studio that day, Astaire's wife Phyllis, who had a tough time pronouncing her *r*'s, said, "She looks like a wooster." Mark Sandrich, who directed many of the early Fred and Ginger movies at RKO, attempted to get her to change her mind. It was non-negotiable. "Fred didn't like the dress," she wrote. "That was the root of the problem." She called in her mother to defend her position. "Why don't you just get another girl," her mother told Sandrich.

The show, as it invariably and usually rather boringly does, went on. "It's true," she wrote, "some of the feathers did flutter and annoy Fred." Astaire's account of the great feather dress episode has feathers flying everywhere. "Everything went well through the song," he wrote, "but when we did the first movement of the dance, feathers started to fly as if a chicken had been attacked by a coyote." In Rogers' version, a few loose feathers adhered to Astaire's suit coat. In Astaire's version, "It was like a snow-storm. They were floating around like millions of moths. I had feathers in my eyes, my ears, my mouth, all over the front of my suit, which just happened to be a white-tie-and-tails outfit." That was a first take. Things, according to Astaire, didn't improve all that much on further takes.

Then there was the dance with the beaded dress with bell sleeves Ginger Rogers wore to dance to "Let's Face the Music and Dance" in *Follow the Fleet*. "Fred had to face a little music concerning my dress, too," she writes, for her sleeves slapped against his jaw when she whirled, and continued to do so after several

takes. In Astaire's account, in each of twenty different takes he took blows to the jaw and eye, and all he could do was keep "ducking and dodging that sleeve."

Pandro S. Berman, the producer of most of the RKO Astaire-Rogers movies, claimed that Ginger Rogers' wardrobe was a continuing problem. "Whenever Fred came to me to register a complaint about her appalling taste in gowns her mother would jump into the fray and we'd have a real Donnybrook."

Things were made more complicated by Ginger Rogers' feeling that she wasn't getting the attention she deserved from the director Mark Sandrich. On other occasions she complained that he, Astaire, was the central figure, once calling a song, "The Yam," that she was assigned in the movie *Carefree* as "another hand-me-down from Fred." She remarks how much more money Astaire made on the RKO musicals than she. Although she attempts to downplay it, what comes through in her autobiography is that in the Astaire-Rogers partnership she, rather like a much more beautiful Rodney Dangerfield, didn't get any respect.

She may have been right. Tim Satchell, one of Fred Astaire's biographers, claims that Astaire "knew that Ginger Rogers was a champion Charleston hooper and was a hard-working professional but not for a second did he consider her to be anywhere near the kind of partner that he wanted or needed: she simply didn't have the dance technique to match his." Hermes Pan said: "Their rhythms were just different. I wouldn't decry Ginger as a dancer. She is truly wonderful, but [with] a totally different style to [sic] Fred." Yet she learned his style, copied it fairly exactly in many of their tap-dance numbers together, and danced with him more harmoniously than any of his other partners.

Perfectionist is another word for great worrier, and Fred Astaire probably over-rehearsed, which meant that his partners had to rehearse quite as much as he did. He appears to have worked Ginger Rogers hardest of all. There was talk of bleeding feet. Her work on the Astaire-Rogers movies, she said, was "murder for me. Oh, I adored Mr. A. . . . but all the hard work . . . the 5:00 a.m. calls, the months of non-stop dancing [in rehearsals], singing and acting." Granting that she hung in there, Astaire allowed that "she had guts."

In her autobiography, Rogers mentioned his displays of temperament on the set while simultaneously saying that he wasn't very temperamental; she retells an anecdote about his

losing his cool when his top hat fell off in the filming of the movie *Top Hat*, revealing that he had neglected to wear his toupee—in other words, she dings him whenever possible. He in turn always writes with what one feels is a slightly strained courtesy about her, but, one notices, he seems frequently to compliment the dancing of other of his partners—Eleanor Powell, Rita Hayworth, Judy Garland—more than he does hers. At the American Film Institute award ceremony in his honor, conspicuous by her absence among the people offering tributes to him was Ginger Rogers. Which was, apparently, all right with Astaire. She apparently was hurt not to have been invited. According to Tim Satchell, “Astaire let it be known that he would rather she was not present—otherwise the great scene-stealer would undoubtedly have done something dramatic.”

The not so plain fact seems to be that, however much American moviegoers loved them together, however earnestly each tried to put the best face on things, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, without despising each other, probably did not all that much like each other either. Although their social class origins were not so very different, he had climbed higher in the world than she, and she may have felt that he, with his socialite wife, his somewhat Anglophiliac manner and style, looked down on her. She was pure show biz, which is to say rather gaudy, in a way that he, though in show business all his life, somehow avoided being. She was over-, he under-, stated.

Neither much liked the notion of being subsumed as part of a team: Astaire had already done that with his sister; Rogers thought of herself as much more than a mere dancer (she did, after all, go on to win an Oscar for her role in *Kitty Foyle*) and doubtless sensed that, good as the two of them were together, Fred Astaire somehow outshone her. Astaire even wrote to Leland Hayward, his agent, after the success of *Gay Divorcee*, that he wished never again to be part of a fixed team in his movie career, and especially not with Ginger Rogers:

What’s all this talk about being teamed with Ginger Rogers? I will not have it Leland—I did not go into pictures to be *teamed* with her or anyone else, and if that is the program in mind for me I will not stand for it. I don’t mind making another picture with her but as for this *team* idea it’s *out!* I’ve just managed to live down one partnership [with his sister Adele] and I don’t want to be bothered with any more. I’d rather not make any more pictures for Radio [RKO] if I

have to be teamed up with one of those movie “queens.” This is no flash of temperament on my part Leland and does not call for one of your famous bawling out letters—please understand that I’m just against the idea—that’s all and feel that if I’m ever to get anywhere on the screen it will be as *one* not as two.

Astaire even had a contract drawn up with a clause that Ginger Rogers could not appear in more than three of the five movies he had signed on to do for RKO. In fact, they did ten movies together; in their penultimate one, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, Mrs. Castle, who had a right of control over the movie and who disliked Ginger Rogers, claimed that “Fred has begged me not to let her do it,” though no one can say for certain whether or not this story is true.

How, then, explain the relative longevity of their partnership? The motive of profit heightened by their popularity cannot be discounted. The success of their early movies together—*The Gay Divorcee*, *Roberta*, *Top Hat*, *Swing Time*—were said to have been the single reason behind the financial rescue of RKO Studios. As a team they were long atop or near the top of various popularity polls for movie stars. Astaire drew a salary of \$100,000 for the earlier of his Ginger Rogers movies and had a share in the gross, which made him a rich man. Money and fame are not bad reasons to bury tensions or even hide complicated feelings. Yet can one fake charm of the kind that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers combined to exude in their marvelous dancing flicks?

My guess is that they could, and that they did, supremely well. It’s called being a pro. Many are the theories of acting—Stanislavsky’s, the Actors Studio’s, to name only the more modern—but an older theory of acting, one devised by Denis Diderot, the Enlightenment writer and editor of the great French *Encyclopédie*, holds that the truly superior actor, far from feeling more than the rest of us, far from being able to delve into the well of his deep feeling when it is required by his art, the truly superior actor actually feels nothing. In his *Paradox of the Actor*, a book written in the form of a dialogue, Diderot writes: “It is extreme sensibility which makes a mediocre actor; mediocre sensibility which makes the multitude of bad actors; and a total lack of sensibility which produces sublime actors.” The feeling man or woman, in other words, was likely to be the less successful artist. Feeling gets in the way; it isn’t finally what the art of acting is primarily about.

Where Fred Astaire always spoke of his movie roles as just a job, humdrum, a way to make “a pretty good buck,” was he being modest? Or was he, as a great artist, of a limited but genuine kind, being entirely truthful? My guess is that he was being truthful. He acted the part it was given him to act, and at the end of the day, like a good artisan, packed up his tools and went home. The feeling in his performances was not displayed in the mostly inane dialogue that was written for him but in his dancing. He didn’t have to love, or even be in any way emotionally engaged with, the woman he was dancing with at the moment. He was instead dedicated to making her look good, which, magically enough, almost inevitably resulted in making him look even better. He could feel a mild disdain for Ginger Rogers, and she in turn more than a touch of resentment toward him, without it in the least getting in the way of their dazzling performance before the cameras. Now that is show business.

## Must You Dance, Every Dance

Which brings us back to Ginger Rogers. Why should this rather hollow actress, a Hollywood type not far off the standard, with no special training as a dancer, have been the best of all Fred Astaire’s partners, and in many ways the making of his film career and perhaps the chief guarantor of his place in the history of entertainment and, many would say, of terpsichorean art?

In the reality of Hollywood, all of Astaire’s objections to being teamed with Ginger Rogers, mentioned earlier, were finally beside the point. The television sports producer Don Ohlmeyer, when approached by a young reporter saying that he had a question for him, replied, “If the question is about sports, the answer is money.” The same applies, redoubled, to the movies. The RKO producer, Pandro S. Berman, in response to Astaire’s protestations about continuing his partnership with Ginger Rogers, replied, “Ginger Rogers seems to go rather well with him and there is no reason to assume we will be making a permanent team of this pair except if we can all clean up a lot of money by keeping them together we would be foolish not to.” And only until they ceased to clean up a lot of money—about six more films out—was anything like serious thought given to breaking up the Astaire and Rogers team.

Of the partnership, Arlene Croce writes: Ginger Rogers “brought out his toughness and also his true masculine gallantry . . .” She could also act while dancing; only with her did there seem to be genuine emotions passing between partners while on the dance floor. “Rogers was outstanding among Astaire’s film partners not because she was superior to the others as a dancer but because, as a skilled, intuitive actress, she was cagey enough to realize that acting did not stop where dancing began,” wrote John Mueller. “She seemed uniquely to understand the dramatic import of the dance, and, without resorting to style-shattering emoting, she cunningly contributed her share to the choreographic impact of their numbers together. The point of many of these was joy; indeed, the reason so many women fantasized dancing with Fred Astaire is that Ginger Rogers conveyed the impression that dancing with him is the most thrilling experience imaginable.”

Sheila Graham, the Hollywood columnist and great good friend of F. Scott Fitzgerald, who knew Astaire fairly well, wrote: “He danced later with other girls who were better dancers than Ginger, like Cyd Charisse and Eleanor Powell and Rita Hayworth, but none of them came off like Ginger came off. She was a beautiful doll who looked innocent and very happy. The combination was terrific. Fred was never as good with anyone else . . .” Or, as Arlene Croce, apropos of Astaire without Rogers, wrote: “. . . it was a world of sun without a moon.”

Despite all the talk of Fred Astaire bringing “class” to the partnership, it might be closer to the truth to say that it was Ginger Rogers who brought class—specifically, something of the lower-middle or maybe even the working class. In pursuing Ginger Rogers in the movies they did together, Astaire may have been going a bit downmarket, in the way that Charles Swann goes after Odette de Crécy, the cocotte of Marcel Proust’s great novel. Not that the Ginger Rogers’ roles resembled in the faintest the character of Odette in complexity, but there is a common masculine fantasy about the pleasures promised by girls of a lower class than one’s own: the fantasy being that they are more passionate, somehow wilder than those of one’s own class; there is the accompanying fantasy that one can bring such a girl up to one’s level and show her, as they say, the finer things. (There is of course nothing to any of this, as poor Charles Swann learns to his

chagrin, but the presence of hard evidence rarely kills a fantasy.) Conversely, many girls from the middle classes and below must think that life spent with a man of the upper classes, which Astaire seemed to represent (even though Astaire's own origins in Omaha, Nebraska, as we have seen, were very far from upper class), was the highway to heaven. Ginger Rogers could play feisty, perky, sassy, cute, ticked off, sensitive, vulnerable, but there was also a vulgar streak to her—and this touch of vulgarity, when she was young, could translate as sexy. When she grew older, heavier, used thick makeup—as a Christian Scientist, cosmetic surgery was never an option for her—the vulgarity, alas, dominated and the sexy faded away.

The young Ginger Rogers was the perfect size for Astaire: perhaps 5'3" or 5'4", she weighed 105 pounds, which made it easier for him to lift her. She seemed to fit into his arms more snugly, more perfectly, than any of his other partners. She could look marvelously slender in slacks, which she often wore for dance numbers, yet pleasingly fleshy in gowns. She had the perfect dancer's body—perfect, specifically, for the combination of ballroom and tap dancing that was Astaire's specialty. She didn't tote around a big bosom, she had good legs, a lovely back, a slenderness that seemed pliant, sensual, never bordering on the skinny.

She was also twelve years younger than he, in some ways the perfect age separation, making him seem more the man of the world, her the young woman coming into full bloom. A reviewer in the *New York Herald Tribune* of *The Gay Divorcee*, their first full-blown movie together, wrote that it "gives the freshly charming Miss Rogers an opportunity to prove she's almost as perfect an example of feminine desirability in musical comedy as Myrna Loy is in drama." This doesn't feel quite right. Myrna Loy was more reserved, more naturally refined, hence somehow more sexually concealed than Ginger Rogers, who was more in the mode of a what-you-see-is-what-you-get girl. But what you were likely to get wasn't bad at all; it was pretty damn fine, in fact.

Sexy outside of steamy—sexy as fun, joyous, not heavy breathing, bouncy but not sweaty—this is what the young Ginger Rogers conveyed. Such kittenish sexiness, with a strong aroma of the witty behind it, is what Fred Astaire needed to play against to show himself to greatest advantage. Not for him to push a grape-

fruit into a complaining woman's face, or to ask why "of all the gin joints in all the towns of the world, she has to walk into mine?"—this kind of thing wasn't available to Fred Astaire. Although when required he could sing and dance to "Night and Day" (the beat of those damn tom-toms) and went in for a bit of "Dancing in the Dark," he did his best dancing as energetic, joyous, honest fun. Ginger, as the name suggests, provided the perfect seasoning in this great chef's salad.

That Ginger Rogers was not a professional dancer, with long experience in ballet or tap, was an added benefit. What it meant, in practice, was that Fred Astaire, through relentless rehearsal, in effect trained her—and trained her above all to dance his way and with him. In a great many stills of the two dancing, one notes Astaire's large hand around Rogers' waist, rather like a short but firm leash, always in place lest she wander too far away. Ann Richards' feminist joke that holds that Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did except she did it backwards and in high heels doesn't quite hold up, for without his instruction she may not have been able to do it anywhere near so well forwards, even in Michael Jordan Nike Flyers.

A good measure of the success behind the Astaire-Rogers partnership is also owed to the fact that they came together at a time when an extraordinary clutch of great songwriters were at work—many of them at the peak of their powers. Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, the Gershwins, above all for Astaire and Rogers, Irving Berlin were, as the psychobabble crowd says, there for them. Most of these songwriters took pleasure in writing for Astaire, and George Gershwin and Irving Berlin came to be his friends.

No one has ever been able to explain the clustering of talent that shows up at certain points in history: the genius composers who arrive in Austria and Germany in the eighteenth century, the great Russian fiction writers in the middle to late nineteenth century, the brilliant German physicists in the early decades of the twentieth century. At a perhaps lower level of significance, the men and women who wrote for—who really created—musical comedy through the medium of the jazz song is another example of the phenomenon of talent appearing in clusters, then, *bang!*, vanishing forever.

Without this impressive songwriting talent supporting him,

Fred Astaire might never have achieved what he had. He for his part greatly promoted the work of these songwriters by giving their work the widest possible hearing in his movies. (Astaire himself is mentioned by name in a number of their songs, the most famous such reference being Cole Porter's, from "You're The Top": "You're the nimble tread of the feet of Fred Astaire," Astaire next rhymed with Camembert.) But it was not his voice alone but the rhythms he felt in his body that meshed so beautifully with the work of these songwriters. Symbiosis is probably too strong a word to describe the relationship between Astaire and the songwriters of the era, yet Irving Berlin said that "I never would have written 'Top Hat, White Tie and Tails,' or 'Cheek to Cheek,' or 'Isn't This a Lovely Day' if I didn't have Astaire and Rogers to write to." Astaire said: "I just loved his music and I was delighted when they got him to do this [the score for *Top Hat*]. And Irving thought the same about getting me to do it because he liked the way I did things." That's not immodest; it's just true.

The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers partnership was not the work of careful calculation by the movie moguls, as they used to be called. She just happened to be available when his early pictures were about to be made. For their first movie together, *The Gay Divorcee*, Astaire didn't even want Ginger Rogers, thinking a woman with an English accent better suited to the part. Critics of intellectual standing who reviewed their early films—James Agate, Alastair Cooke, Graham Greene—also missed their magic. Only moviegoers seemed to understand that in this pairing something out of the ordinary was going on. *The Gay Divorcee* was a great hit at the box office. The young Pandro S. Berman saw that the Astaire-Rogers coupling was the white donkey upon which he, and RKO, could ride into Jerusalem. Like Astaire, Berman soon acquired a 10 percent share in the gross of these movies, and so perhaps he rode into Jerusalem in a Rolls-Royce instead.

Berman lined up movie after movie for the two—well, actually, seven of the ten movies they did together—and he brought in the right supporting comic actors to serve as their foils: Edward Everett Horton, Eric Blore, Erik Rhodes, Helen Broderic, Victor Moore, Franklin Pangborn, Alice Brady, Walter Brennan, and others. The Art Nouveau sets of plush hotel suites and lush

lobbies and staterooms on luxury liners, in pellucid black and white done by Van Nest Polglasse, provided the perfect background—for the smart life that most of the characters in these movies are supposed to represent. Although Astaire longed to work in Technicolor, black and white seemed to bring out the glittering best in his talent. (Something there is inherently glamorous about the combination of black and white, tuxedo colors and the colors, too, of Truman Capote's great celebrity party for 540 of his closest friends at the Plaza Hotel in 1966.) "That Black and White Baby of Mine" is the title of a Cole Porter song of the day; someone even named a once popular scotch whiskey Black & White.

Arlene Croce felt that Astaire and Rogers first really clicked artistically as a team in *Roberta*, their third movie together, when, in rehearsal clothes, they do their first zowie dance number together to "I'll Be Too Hard to Handle." That number, she writes, "is the big event of the film, the number in which 'Fred and Ginger' become fixed screen deities. The wonderful secret they seemed to share in 'The Continental' [the big final number in *The Gay Divorcee*] becomes here a magical rapport that is sustained through three minutes of what looks like sheerest improvisation. It begins with some light banter punctuated by dance breaks, continues with music and more dance breaks—tap conversation with each other taking eight-bar 'sentences' (his growing more impudent, hers more indignant) and ends in a chain of turns across the floor and a flop into two chairs."

This was the dance, according to Miss Croce, that marked the occasion when Astaire and Rogers had effectively worked out genuine screen personalities against which each could play off the other, for wit, laughs, conflict, romance. Hard enough though it is to create an individual style, what they had succeeded in doing was developing differing styles that somehow blended into a duet, or couple, style—one that would never be equaled in the history of dancing, in the movies or anywhere else.