

THE MOVIE MUSICAL AND JAZZ DANCE: REFLECTIONS ON NOSTALGIA  
IN 21st CENTURY AMERICA

Alexandra L. Bilodeau

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## **Abstract**

This research is an in-depth look at dance in movie musicals that were prominent in the United States during the Golden Age of Hollywood. The careers of three movie musical stars during this period: Fred Astaire, Cyd Charisse, and Gene Kelly, are analyzed as their roles in these films were crucial to popularizing tap and jazz dance on screen. The Black choreographers and performers who originated the form of jazz dance, but were left out of this history are acknowledged as the true innovators. Connections are made between my personal dance history and the relevance of this research in American culture today. Finally, reflections on nostalgia and the renewed interest in the genre are highlighted.

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## Introduction

My interest in the movie musicals produced during the Golden Age of Hollywood began when I was in high school. I went through a period where I would watch every video I could find of Judy Garland singing and dancing. My fascination with her life and career eventually led me to discover Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire, two performers that she collaborated with. At the beginning of the pandemic, I found myself watching many musicals on Turner Classic Movies (TCM). I am not sure if it was because I was longing for the pandemic to be over, or if it was simply the elegance and glamor of the Golden Age that drew me in, but my interest in dance on the big screen has permeated my choreographic work. The seductive “Broadway Melody” duet featuring Cyd Charisse and Gene Kelly from *Singin’ in the Rain* is what inspired me to restart this research both in writing and movement.

The production company Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) produced 188 musicals over thirty years between 1929-1959 (IMDb). This was the most prosperous era for the production company. The most popular musical films were often adaptations of Broadway musicals or based entirely on one composer’s music. After 1960, the public was not as interested in musicals because of factors such as the rise of television, the cultural and political shift in the United States, and the Vietnam War. Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and Cyd Charisse became among the most well-known multi-talented performers during this thirty-year period. Fred Astaire became regarded for his comportment and elegance as a tap dancer. He often represented the upper-class American man in the musical films he starred in. Conversely, Gene Kelly represented the working class man, particularly in his roles in musical films. Kelly, along with fellow dancer James Cagney “gave the impression that they had to fight for everything they got”, as described by Cynthia and Sara Brideson in their biography, *He’s Got Rhythm: The Life and Career of Gene*

*Kelly*. He was also known for his athleticism as a performer and his perfectionism as a choreographer/director. Cyd Charisse was one of the few dancers who had the opportunity to work with both Astaire and Kelly. She was racialized and sexualized primarily in the roles she was cast in at the beginning of her career.

Concurrently, jazz dance was in the process of being codified by white male choreographers, and jazz dance hybrids were more commonly seen on the big screen. As mentioned in *Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz Dance*, the numerous academics who were interviewed in this documentary cited *Singin' in the Rain*, along with various other movie musicals, as their first exposure to jazz dance at a young age and have inspired them to become dancers (*Uprooted*, 2020, 24:39). It is clear that the use of jazz dance in movies was one of the first times that dance was documented or archived through film and able to reach a much wider audience. Jazz is a uniquely American form of dance that has origins in African Diasporic dance. Since its beginnings, it has evolved and reflected the cultural attitudes in American history. It has also been commodified and commercialized in movies, often at the expense of the Black performers who created the form. Similarly, the movie musical reflected an idealized America and was used as an escape from reality. This is especially true when thinking about the events occurring at the time that these musicals were prosperous, such as the Great Depression and World War II. I explore the commonalities between the rise and evolution of both jazz dance and movie musicals.

My choreographic thesis applies this research to performance. I would describe the work as a homage to movie musicals. A lot of the choreography in the movies I have been viewing has been influencing the movement vocabulary I am using. I am also acknowledging that the dancers in my work do not look like the female stars that were seen in the movie musicals of the period. I

feel the project as a whole is commenting on the stereotypes associated with jazz and dance in the movies, while also honoring the artists who contributed to the form.

This writing is divided into four chapters, with the themes of race, gender, and class carried throughout. Chapter I focuses on the anatomy and structure of a movie musical, using *Singin' in the Rain* as an example of a film that represents the genre. Chapter II is an in-depth look at the intertwined careers of Astaire, Charisse, and Kelly, highlighting the innovations that Kelly and Astaire brought to the film industry. Charisse provides a unique perspective, having had the opportunity to collaborate with both men. She provides insight in her memoir co-written by her husband, Tony Martin, and biographer, Richard Kleiner. Chapter III highlights the accomplishments of the Black artists who until recently, were left out of the history associated with these musicals, through the lens of jazz dance. Comparisons are drawn between the white stars who perform on screen and the Black entertainers working behind the scenes. Finally, Chapter IV brings this research into the 21st century. The film *La La Land* and the television show *Schmigadoon!* serve as examples of two modern-day musicals.

## Chapter I: The Anatomy of the Movie Musical

In the 1952 movie musical *Singin' in the Rain*, Don Lockwood leaves Kathy Seldon's home in the pouring rain. He is gleaming with joy both with his new idea to turn the talkie (a movie with sound), *The Dueling Cavalier*, into a musical called *The Dancing Cavalier*, and his admiration for Kathy. Lockwood makes his way down the street, splashing in puddles, singing, and dancing in the rain. *Singin' in the Rain* is widely considered to be one of the greatest musical films in American cinema, ranked number five on the American Film Institute's 2007 list called *100 Years...100 Movies 10th Anniversary Edition* (IMDb). Often described as the epitome of all musicals, *Singin' in the Rain* recounts the actual shift in the late 1920s from silent films to talkies. This chapter serves as a breakdown of the structure and early function of musical films, giving insight into the reasons behind their popularity. It will also highlight the innovations made by actors and directors including Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and Busby Berkeley. Finally, *Singin' in the Rain* will be used as the primary example, connecting all the parts of the structure.

### Breakdown: The Structure and the Studio System

The movie musical is a genre where the narrative plot is interwoven with song and dance numbers that either move the plot forward, develop the characters, are simply a break in the storyline, or are elaborate production numbers (Cohan, 2002). The first musical cited in film history is MGM's *Broadway Melody* (1929), although Raymond Knapp cites Warner Brothers' *The Jazz Singer* (1927) as the first "talkie" with musical elements (Knapp, 2006). *Broadway Melody* was successful in attracting moviegoers which proceeded to launch a trend of backstage musicals that were originally Broadway productions now being adapted for film. Other musicals that were adapted for film included non-narratives. These are musicals that do not follow a

narrative structure and were modeled after variety shows which offered unconnected song and dance numbers. Some early examples of these films include MGM's *Hollywood Revue* (1929) and Warner Brothers' *Show of Shows* (1929). A later example of a non-narrative musical, *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946), included in Chapter II, united Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and Cyd Charisse. These compilation musicals were not as successful at first, primarily because the same stars were cast and the plots were recycled, if there was even a plot to follow. After *42nd Street* (1933) was commercially successful, production of movie musicals began occurring at a consistent rate until the late 1950s. Choreographers, directors, actors, dancers, singers, songwriters, and screenwriters were imported to Hollywood from Broadway to make these films (Cohan, 2002).

The five major studios: MGM, Paramount, Warner Brothers, Fox, and RKO, all had similar labor, production, and distribution protocols. However, they were able to distinguish themselves in terms of musical structure, which was based primarily on the director's style. For example, at Warner Brothers, Busby Berkeley created spectacular dances with a focus on camera movement, angles, and editing, making the dance itself secondary. At RKO, especially when Fred Astaire was a contracted player (actor), the choreography demanded more careful attention to the camerawork to enhance the flow and continuity of the dance. There were no cuts, Astaire wanted the dance sequences to be shot in one take (see more in Chapter II). The genre of the movie musical itself was established at RKO with Astaire, the formula being: musical equals song plus dance. Berkeley at Warners originated this style with musical numbers serving as unrelated highlights to the plot, and Astaire at RKO established the approach of marrying song and dance to the storyline, MGM under Arthur Freed was a combination of the two. An example of a musical from the Freed unit that is both integrated and aggregated is *Words and Music*

(1948). This musical is about the partnership between composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Lorenz Hart, where the plot functions only to link the musical numbers together. Another type of musical is the catalog musical, where the music from one composer or team of composers is featured. Examples include *An American in Paris* and *Singin' in the Rain*, both starring Gene Kelly. *An American in Paris* is exclusively the music by George Gershwin and *Singin' in the Rain* has music by Nacio Brown and Arthur Freed. Finally, the chronological history of musicals within a production company can be charted based on the stars at the time. Each studio had its own contracted stars that would be in multiple works, although they likely played a slightly different version of the same character (Cohan, 2002).

#### Utopia, Escapism, and the Star Persona

In *Singin' in the Rain*, Kelly's character, Don Lockwood, describes the idea for *The Dancing Cavalier*. He outlines how it begins before the audience witnesses the dream ballet sequence called "The Broadway Melody". Lockwood is a hooper (professional dancer) trying to make it on Broadway. Throughout the sequence, he meets a series of obstacles, partners with Cyd Charisse's vamp character in a steamy dance sequence, and finally "makes it" while also dancing with the girl of his dreams, Cyd Charisse again, this time playing an entirely different sexualized character. Throughout this eight-minute sequence, the audience witnesses Lockwood realizing his star persona, which is mirrored in the actual plot of the film as well. The fictional character versus the star persona is a recurring idea that is a staple in the plots of musicals. The fictional characters are often people trying to "make it" in show business who transition into their star persona in the realm of a musical number, but do not come to realize it fully until the end of the film (Dyer, 2002).

Entertainment represents utopia. A utopia is an imagined place or fantasy world where everything is perfect. The magic that occurs in the movies is not reality. The Great Depression and World War II were both major events occurring in the United States at the same time these musicals were being produced. They were a form of escapism, a place where dreams could come true and wishes would be fulfilled, not at all reflecting reality (Dyer, 2002). Musical often reflected show business. The characters in the films were stars from minstrel shows, vaudeville, Broadway, Tin Pan Alley, jazz, and swing clubs. All of these places are expressions of American-ness or more specifically white American-ness (Cohan, 2002). In *The Band Wagon*, Fred Astaire plays Tony Hunter, a disgraced performer who makes a comeback.

There are several non-representational signs in movie musicals that make the audience feel like they are entering a utopia. These signs include color, texture, movement, rhythm, melody, and camerawork (Dyer, 2002). Examples of artificial enhancement in musical films include the costuming, dubbing of taps, and pre-recording songs all of which moviegoers do not see on the screen. *The Wizard of Oz* is one of the first examples of a musical that uses color to distinguish between the real world and the fantasy world (Knapp, 2006). The muted, sepia-toned Kansas reflects the dullness and mundaneness of everyday life whereas the vibrancy of Oz is a stark difference, representing the excitement and escapism into the fantasy world. Song and dance numbers also represent escaping from the real world and its constraints. Singing and dancing solve the character's problems or reveal their best ideas, making musical numbers the solution. Dance can become self-expressive when entertainment elements are added. For example, a tap dance may take on different meanings depending if a Black man or woman, a white man or woman, or a white person in blackface is performing it. Context is important (Dyer, 2002). Finally, entertainment is an alternative to capitalism even if it serves capitalism, therefore

contributing to the cycle. White men who worked in the studio system were responsible for providing this entertainment. In the plot of these musicals, white men create a utopia (Dyer, 2002). Don Lockwood creates the utopia in *Singin' in the Rain*.

### *Singin' in the Rain*

“If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all”(Chumo, 1996). This quote validates the idea that all musicals follow the same plot, to the point of exhausting the plot and perhaps boring the audience, although MGM and other studio systems were highly successful for about thirty years with their recycled plots. In the 1950s, the genre began a period of self-reflection, evident in the plot of *The Band Wagon*, but most commonly associated with *Singin' in the Rain*. The plot of *Singin' in the Rain* describes the transition from silent films to talkies, reflecting factual anecdotes of that transition. The film includes silent films, sound/song, and dance elements, all three having the ability to move the narrative story along, even in the more dramatic moments, without the use of spoken dialogue (Chumo, 1996). Don Lockwood reflects on his time in vaudeville, essentially going back to Gene Kelly’s actual roots in the dance community as so many other musical film stars at the time could relate to. In the introduction to this chapter, when I described Lockwood’s expression of his happiness by singing and dancing in the rain, this was an example of the musical element solving the character’s problems. Lockwood, Cosmo Brown, and Kathy Selden needed to figure out how to make a successful film that competes with the other studios’ talkies, and they decided on a musical. The titular solo, choreographed by Kelly, is not just an entertainment interlude, but an expression of his feelings. Kelly highlights the uniquely American style of choreography, combining elements of ballet and tap. Finally, the camera and Kelly worked in harmony, the transitions matched Kelly’s energy from when he swings on the lamppost to when he splashes in the puddles (Wollen, 2001). The scene ends with

Kelly walking happily down the road as if the preceding four-minute dance sequence never happened.

This leads to the dream sequence where Lockwood describes the plot of the musical where he performs a sexual dance with Cyd Charisse's vamp character. This is his awakening into manhood, validation as a dancing man and as a star, reaching his true potential. All are qualities described as an anatomy of a musical, but what makes this film different or unique? The plot shows the story behind the scenes and somewhat parodies what goes on behind closed doors in Hollywood. This subtle dig gives the film a sense of realism, which is not usually seen in musicals. Additionally, the choreography pushed the limits of what could occur, particularly through Donald O'Connor's character, Cosmo Brown, in the acrobatic sequence for "Make Em Laugh". Finally, the dream sequence I described before had no dialogue and not much singing, but it conveyed the narrative with the dancing. So the correction to the opening quote is "If you've seen *Singin' in the Rain*, then you've seen them all" (Chumo, 1996).

The movie musical is meant to take audiences to a different world, a perfect world. The thirty-year period where movie musicals were most popular was a time of turmoil in the world, making them an ideal escape. Several prominent stars who were responsible for creating these utopias are highlighted in the next chapter.

## Chapter II: The Stars

The camera pans to two men in matching white suits and wide-brimmed hats sitting on a bench, closing the newspapers they were reading and revealing themselves to be Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire. They launch into a three-part musical dance, two sections choreographed by Kelly and the final section choreographed by Astaire, called "The Babbitt and The Bromide". They play meta versions of themselves, poking fun at their partnerships at that time with female dancers/actresses Ginger Rogers and Rita Hayworth by pretending not to know who the other person is. This number was in the musical *Ziegfeld Follies* which was filmed in 1944 and released in 1946, a few years before both would famously partner with Cyd Charisse. This would be the only collaboration between them in their prime, the next time would be thirty years later in the retrospective compilation film *That's Entertainment Part II*. In the opinions of many, these two men represent the epitome of the "White American Man" in cinema during this time. If you search Fred Astaire in the dictionary you will find that he has been called the greatest popular-music dancer of his time. Meanwhile, Kelly was known for making dance accessible to the general public, performing dance for the "common man". The innovations of dance in film and theater were important to putting jazz dance on the map for increasing numbers of viewers. As stated earlier, the first exposure to dance for many of the academics featured in the documentary *Uprooted* was through witnessing dancers on the big screen, specifically Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain*. I am not only interested in their extensive careers and innovations, but I am interested in how they danced and why they inspired people to dance. Both Kelly and Astaire shared the experience of working with Cyd Charisse, the tall, long-legged dancer who appeared in often uncredited specialty dance roles for MGM before her big break, *Singin' in the Rain*. This chapter highlights the intertwined careers of Astaire, Charisse, and Kelly, primarily speaking to

the collaborations from Charisse's perspective as she had the unique experience of dancing with both men.

### Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire: Apples and Oranges

Gene Kelly began his dance career on Broadway, with his casting of the lead role in the musical *Pal Joey* serving as his big break into stardom. Kelly soon began a contract with MGM, his first film being *For Me and My Gal* with Judy Garland. After a brief stint in the military, Kelly came back and was able to showcase his athleticism in *The Pirate*, another collaboration with Judy Garland, under the direction of Vincente Minnelli. This movie famously features Kelly's collaboration with the Nicholas Brothers in the number "Be a Clown" (Brideson & Brideson, 2017). It was after this experience that Kelly wanted to transition into co-directing, in addition to choreographing and starring in musicals. He was finally able to do this with Minnelli in *An American in Paris* and with Stanley Donen in *Singin' the Rain*, both regarded as two of the greatest musicals of the time. Minnelli would go on to direct *The Band Wagon* starring Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse.

Fred Astaire began his career dancing with his sister, Adele, in vaudeville and later on Broadway. Their partnership ended in 1932 and from there Astaire moved on to making musical films with RKO in a famous partnership with Ginger Rogers. He retired for the first time just after his duet with Kelly in *Ziegfeld Follies*. This retirement was not long as he eventually replaced Kelly, due to an injury, in his first film with MGM, *Easter Parade*; his only collaboration with Judy Garland. This film revived Astaire's popularity with the public. In 1953, he co-starred with Cyd Charisse in *The Band Wagon*: his "screen-defining" moment with Charisse was the twelve-minute number "The Girl Hunt Ballet". Michael Kidd was the choreographer and according to Levinson's biography on Astaire, Kidd mentioned that he wanted

to set the choreography before Astaire saw it. This was because Astaire did not want to leave any room for improvising and was known for his habit of learning every aspect of the movement perfectly, an aspect that calls on his previous experiences in vaudeville and on Broadway. His final musical film with MGM was also his second collaboration with Cyd Charisse in *Silk Stockings*. Both films lost money at the box office, perhaps echoing the decline in the popularity of musicals. The final musical number in *Silk Stockings*, “The Ritz Roll and Rock”, features Astaire smashing his trademark top hat. This alluded to his second retirement from movie musicals, something he would later confirm after the release of the film (Levison, 2009).

#### The Long-Legged Woman with Louise Brooks hair

Coincidentally, Cyd Charisse’s first credited role was in a musical with MGM, *Ziegfeld Follies*. She was in the opening number, headlined by Fred Astaire, and she starred as “the ballerina”. Charisse was a classically trained ballet dancer, having trained in Los Angeles with Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo. In her memoir, Charisse alludes to the fact that she did not necessarily want to transition from the stage to the movies, but this seemed to be the logical next step in her career as a dancer due to the rise in popularity of movie musicals (Martin, Charisse, & Kleiner, 1976). Before her big break with Gene Kelly in *Singin’ in the Rain*, Charisse played “exotic” (non-white) characters in five films with Ricardo Montalbán between 1947 and 1950: MGM deemed her dark hair and complexion to be more Latina than white (Bergan, 2008).

By 1950, Charisse described Hollywood to be very glamorous. Her rise to stardom and her first opportunity to dance with Gene Kelly was in *Singin’ in the Rain*. Because Debbie Reynolds was not a trained dancer, Charisse was chosen by Kelly to dance in “The Broadway Melody” production number. This is where Kelly’s character, Don Lockwood, describes how to make the film, *The Dancing Cavalier*, into a musical. The formal title of her role in the film (per

IMDb) is “ the long-legged woman in the green sequined dress and Louise Brooks hair who vamps Gene Kelly in the ‘Broadway Melody’ sequence”. A year later she would have her first of two collaborations with Fred Astaire, the first being *The Band Wagon*. She describes Astaire as a perfectionist (Martin, Charisse, & Kleiner, 1976). Astaire, concerned about working with a dance partner who is as tall as him, was unsure about working with Charisse at first, but eventually agreed (Levison, 2009). In *The Band Wagon*, Fred Astaire plays Tony Hunter, a once-famous musical film star who is trying to reinvigorate his career. This is one of Charisse’s first major starring roles, and she once again plays a ballerina. A running joke in the film is that Tony Hunter does not want to work with a woman who is too tall for him, perhaps reflecting his real feelings about Charisse’s height in relation to his own. She describes “Dancing in the Dark” as being a classic number and “The Girl Hunt Ballet” as being “ahead of its time”, both were staged by Michael Kidd (Martin, Charisse, & Kleiner, 1976).

Charisse comments on the fact that she is one of the few dancers to work with both Kelly and Astaire. Judy Garland is another actress who co-starred in films with both men, although she was not featured in these longer dance scenes. Because Charisse had this opportunity, she provides readers with a comparison of her experiences with both men in her book. It is clear that she highly respects both men, and she says that they are “two of the greatest dancing personalities who were ever on screen” (Martin, Charisse, & Kleiner, 1976).

Charisse describes Kelly as the more inventive choreographer, citing the number “Baby, You Knock Me Out” from *It’s Always Fair Weather* as an example of his daring choreography. She also mentions that Kelly was stronger when referring to the partnering they did. In an interview with the New York Times in 2002, Charisse said that “if she came home with bruises then she had been working with Gene, but Fred was much gentler” (Berkvist, 2008). Charisse describes

Astaire as being more coordinated and having an “uncanny” sense of rhythm (Martin, Charisse, & Kleiner, 1976).

In the last part of the chapter in Charisse’s memoir that covers her experiences in the movies, she talks about some of the final musical roles and collaborations with Kelly and Astaire. *Brigadoon* was a disappointment and did not live up to expectations. A year later *It’s Always Fair Weather* was released and is now considered to be one of the last dance-oriented musicals from MGM. Her final collaboration with Astaire was *Silk Stockings* in 1957, where she played a Russian dancer. She described “The Red Blues” number, choreographed by Hermes Pan and Eugene Loring, as brilliant, and the film as a whole as one of the best films she did (Martin, Charisse, & Kleiner, 1976). Charisse then alludes to the downturn of public interest in musicals, saying that MGM put their priorities elsewhere, with an eventual decline in the production of musicals.

Her long legs have become somewhat of a cultural phenomenon and a distinctive feature. MGM had a \$1 million insurance policy on her legs (Evans, 2008). She has been described as being taller than most women Astaire and Kelly had partnered with, although they were not very tall men. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, she was cast in non-white roles at MGM, which was common among brunette women in the industry. It is not a coincidence that her natural appearance was sexualized. During “The Broadway Melody” in *Singin’ in the Rain*, her first appearance in the film is when the camera pans across her outstretched leg after her foot caught Don Lockwood’s hat. A similar image served as the theatrical release poster for *The Band Wagon*, where Astaire is seen holding her outstretched leg as she wraps her arms around him. This is now a famous image associated with her and the movie, revealing more about how her body was commodified.

## Innovations in Dance in Film by Astaire and Kelly

It was during the time that movie musicals were gaining popularity that some innovations were made in how dance would be seen in these musicals. Fred Astaire and Hermes Pan were frequent collaborators. Pan choreographed MGM's *Silk Stockings*, having previously choreographed seventeen of Astaire's musical films (Levinson, 2009). Together, Astaire and Pan maintained control over filming musical numbers, both expressing that musical numbers needed to be shot and edited in a way that respects the integrity of the choreography. Astaire demanded that the camerawork enhance the flow and continuity of the dance and that the whole body must be in the frame. Finally, Astaire was known for introducing the idea of the musical number moving the plot in the musical itself along, not just as a placeholder or means for spectacle as Busby Berkeley was famous for (Cohen, 2002). Kelly and Astaire were also known for their prop dances. A notable example is the "newspaper dance" from the movie musical *Summer Stock*, a dance that Kelly said was the most challenging in an interview with Johnny Carson that originally aired in 1975 (Carson, 1975). Lastly, both brought a distinctive version of masculinity to dance on screen, therefore reaching a wider audience. In the documentary *Uprooted*, many of the male contributors state that seeing Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain* validated their interest in dance because of both his athleticism and grace.

The intertwined careers of these three stars represent the peak popularity of musicals produced during the Golden Age of Hollywood. I do want to note that these stars are not representative of all of the innovators that were behind the scenes in developing the use of dance in musicals, but they had access based on privilege and race politics of the period. The next chapter will highlight the Black artists who have been largely excluded or "forgotten" in history, but their accomplishments are brought to light again because of the documentary *Uprooted*.

### Chapter III: The Untold History

Two well-dressed men are called to the dance floor by Cab Calloway. They begin an elaborate tap routine; in perfect unison with each other and almost conducting the band as well. These men are the Nicholas Brothers, two of the most famous Black tap dancers to grace American cinema and among the few Black dancers to get screen time. The movie is *Stormy Weather* (1943), one of the only MGM musicals to feature an all-Black cast. The Nicholas Brothers perform “Jumpin’ Jive”, doing their famous leapfrog where they jump over each other and into splits down large stairs. Fred Astaire is quoted saying that this was the greatest musical sequence ever performed (Mackrell, 2016). I give the Nicholas Brothers as an example because I know that they are well-known for their contributions to the dance community, specifically with their contributions to tap and jazz; but, they do not represent the entire community of Black artists. They got the most screen time and even still, it was very little. This chapter will highlight the contributions of Black artists to jazz dance, but also dance on screen. In a way, this section gives a more accurate history and lineage of the forms I discussed in previous sections. Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly are mentioned again, but this time in the context of where they got their dance steps from. Finally, the documentary *Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz Dance* will be mentioned, as this work is the basis and inspiration for this research.

#### Stolen Steps

Charles “Honi” Coles was a Black tap dancer and actor whose career parallels that of Fred Astaire, although he never saw the same success (Gottschild, 2000). The only movie contemporary audiences may know him from is *Dirty Dancing*. This was the final role of his career before he died in 1992. It was not a dancing role, rather he played Tito Saurez: the leader

of the band (Dunning, 1992). Audiences may remember him towards the end of the movie, just before Jennifer Grey and Patrick Swayze perform the famous “I’ve Had The Time of My Life” dance routine. Fred Astaire did make contributions to dance in cinema, as mentioned before. However, it is hard to ignore that although he added his own embellishments, grace, style, and class to tap dance, the steps that he was doing were not his own. Gottschild points out the obvious: “His (Astaire’s) work is based on the black tap dance tradition and aesthetic that were developed by tap dancers whose names have been forgotten” (Gottschild, 2000). Fred Astaire got to dance in the spotlight while Charles “Honi” Coles remained relatively unknown; or “danced in the dark”, as Gottschild says. Another example from *Singin’ in the Rain* is the scene where Donald O’Connor, playing Cosmo Brown, performs “Make Em Laugh”. He does a series of backflips and acrobatic movements that originated from Harold Nicholas, one of the Nicholas Brothers. It was mentioned before that the Nicholas Brothers were among the most visible Black artists of the period. The point is that white male dancers seemed to legitimize on screen the steps that were created by usually unseen Black artists.

It is important to point out the lack of copyright laws associated with the ephemeral art of dance. How can someone own a way of moving? Anthea Kraut highlights the attempts of Black tap and jazz dancers to copyright their “original” moves or the moves that were signature to them. The Nicholas Brothers’ leapfrog, first seen on screen in *Stormy Weather*, was original to them. The attempt of these Black artists to copyright their moves was thwarted by the fact that their ways of moving were seen as “natural”, meaning not invented or even intellectual. Is it only intellectual if a white man is performing the movement? Kraut and Gottschild both agree that white men in positions of power were set up to legitimize these dance forms. As noted in Chapter I, the distribution and production of dance in the movies were controlled by white men. This left

the Black artists behind as simply entertainers or as caricatures of themselves as performers in minstrel shows and in blackface (Gottschild, 2000). Later, white male choreographers, such as Jack Cole, Bob Fosse, and Jerome Robbins, would create their own “jazz” techniques that were copyrighted and seen as intellectual.

White-only establishments that had Black entertainers and jazz depicted in movie musicals further marginalized these entertainers. In addition, in the thirty years when movie musicals were successful, Black performers could not have starring roles with white performers. This explains the need for the all-Black cast in *Stormy Weather*; but very few of these all-Black productions were ever made (Jones, 2015). On top of this, the marketing of these films which made jazz a commodity, was conducted by white men, as noted in Chapter I.

#### *Uprooted: The Contributions of Black Artists*

The documentary *Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz Dance* is a reclamation of those who are forgotten in dance history, specifically jazz dance history. As mentioned in the introduction, the subjects of this documentary frequently cited *Singin' in the Rain* as their first exposure to dance or to even seeing a male dancer on screen. Musicals took public exposure of the form to wider audiences, but the form and its branches had been existing within the Black community for many years before in venues such as the Savoy Ballroom. The form itself originates from African Diasporic dance, reflecting rituals, rhythms, sounds, and community. Jazz is described as political and mirrors the period. Many innovators are named such as Dunham, Cole, Bethel, Horne, Giordano, Luigi, Fosse, Swayze, Robbins, Baker, etc. Most of the documentary associates these innovators with the period they were prominent in, and this gives insight into how jazz dance was interpreted, codified, and taught. Melanie George states that ballet legitimized jazz dance and that mostly white male choreographers were able to codify their

technique, which makes the list of founders incomplete. There are so many people that contributed to the form that are relatively unknown.

White choreographers, such as Cole, Fosse, Luigi, Giordano, and Mattox had the power to codify their techniques. Katherine Dunham's technique was seen as "ethnic", and as a Black woman, she was left on the periphery in historic accounts of both concert and commercial dance, which reflected the period in American history. White ideas of artistic value projected on the isolations and pelvic movements associated with vernacular jazz deemed these to be outside the scope of the technique. This further promotes erasure and racism in the way that these forms are codified and taught. French ballet terminology was used to access the technique, once again using ballet to legitimize jazz (Jones, 2015).

Jazz dance was first performed to jazz music, marrying the music and the dance. This is seen and heard in musicals, as the dance sequence often danced to big band, orchestral jazz music, which was popular at the time. Over time, commercial trends influenced where and how jazz dance was performed. Now, jazz dance is no longer solely performed to jazz music; instead, it is also paired with disco, funk, and pop-rock music. Michael Jackson's "Smooth Criminal" pays homage to Fred Astaire in *The Band Wagon*. This time, the jazz choreography is performed to pop music (George, 2015). The choreography featured in music videos on MTV was jazz dance. This caused jazz to be associated with pop culture and therefore evolve just as pop culture trends evolve.

The documentary *Uprooted* is a groundbreaking scholarly work that honors the forgotten Black artists in history while also bringing attention to the continued racism within the dance field. Jazz dance evolved and fell out of circulation for some time during the height of the AIDS epidemic in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This event mirrors the movie

musicals falling out of circulation to the increased popularity of television programming in the early 1960s. The last chapter highlights the function of musicals in American society today, while also looking at the continued obstacles to diversity and accurate representation in Hollywood.

## Chapter IV: Musical Presence in the Media Today

As televisions became more of a household item, movie musical popularity began to fizzle out. By the 1960s, 90% of households in the United States had television sets (McLaughlin, 2014). Studios like MGM stopped the production of musicals, and dance returned to Broadway. Stars like Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, and Cyd Charisse either retired from dancing, like Astaire famously did at the end of *Silk Stockings*, or they shifted the focus of their careers. Kelly focused on directing and Charisse retired from dancing, instead taking roles in television shows. It seemed too soon for MGM to release a retrospective film on the musicals produced during the Golden Age. However, in 1974 *That's Entertainment!* was released, the first of three compilation films highlighting these musicals. The invention of MTV in the early 1980s, as well as music videos, allowed for dance, specifically jazz dance, to find a new home, although jazz dance is now performed to popular music (pop, disco, funk) rather than jazz music (George, 2015). This chapter primarily focuses on the resurgence of the popularity of musical films and television shows, specifically in the last decade. The movie *La La Land* and the Apple TV show *Schmigadoon!* will be two modern musicals that I will focus on. The last part of the chapter contains reflections on my nostalgia and the reality of the entertainment industry.

### The Resurgence of Musicals: MTV, Streaming Services, New Hollywood

With its debut in 1980, MTV was a channel at first devoted to showing music videos: a new place where dance lived. Rather than film techniques I talked about in Chapters I and II, particularly the innovations of Fred Astaire who demanded that dance numbers be filmed in one sweeping shot, choreography in music videos was often cut and edited in ways similar to a montage. This was a new way of viewing dance. From here, the 1980s saw a different form of

the movie musical, this time with more dramatic elements and reflecting popular music of the period. This is unlike the musicals of MGM's dominance, particularly because they do not follow the recycled plot of the classic musicals. Additionally, there are no song and dance numbers, but rather mostly extended dance numbers. The musicals I am thinking of are *Dirty Dancing*, *Flashdance*, and *Staying Alive*. All are in some sense about dance itself, whether it be social dance of the period or the dance industry. There tend to be more dramatic moments, and the plot itself is not light or a form of escapism as seen in MGM's movie musicals.

The film *La La Land* is a special case. Damien Chazelle, the writer and director, called back to the similar aesthetics of the studio musical era. This is particularly seen in the casting of attractive white leading stars, and how the dance numbers were shot. In a way, this brings the classic into the 21st century. It retains similar race and gender issues that the older utopian movies seem to set up: older is better, older is original, and the modern/contemporary is unauthentic. Ryan Gosling's character, Seb, is a jazz purist and seeks to preserve the authentic. This is an interesting turn of events because in the other classic films and in white American culture, the drive to modernize, codify, and white-wash is prevalent in all forms. This is relevant to what I described in Chapter III about white male choreographers who took jazz dance and made it their own. In this film, the roles are reversed: the Black jazz/pop star, played by John Legend, wants to add pop elements into jazz music in keeping with the trends. Whereas, Seb wants to honor the authentic and original versions of jazz. This is an example of the white hero honoring the black jazz artists, something that rarely happened during the Golden Age and never happened on screen nor was a large part of the plot of the movie (Gabbard, 2019). Fred Astaire did praise the Nicholas Brothers for their artistry, but this did not happen on screen. The question remains, is *La La Land* a musical that reflects the 21st century? Yes and no. The casting choices

reflect the fact that to make a successful film in Hollywood, white actors are needed (Gabbard, 2019). This provides additional evidence about the racism that still exists in Hollywood.

However, what makes *La La Land* different is that the Black artists who were responsible for creating jazz were honored.

*Schmigadoon!* is a musical comedy television show featuring original music. The first season, released in 2021, follows a couple named Josh and Melissa. They get lost on a backpacking trip and find themselves in the town of Schmigadoon where they are trapped in a Golden Age-style musical (Lyons, 2021). The title itself parodies the MGM film *Brigadoon*, which starred Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse. Additionally, many of the town's residents are parodies of characters from films such as *The Music Man*, *Oklahoma!*, and *The Sound of Music*. The upcoming second season, set to be released in April 2023, follows the same couple, this time trapped in Schmicago, where the plot mirrors musicals produced in the 1960s and 1970s (Lyons, 2021). This show was filmed and released during the COVID-19 pandemic. The producers and actors who worked on the show, Broadway stars such as Alan Cummings, Kristin Chenoweth, Ariana Debose, and Aaron Tviet, all expressed the need for this show during a time when Broadway was completely shut down (Lyons, 2021). What stands out about this TV show is not only the fact that they bring these Golden Age musicals into the 21st century, but also that it features a more diverse cast, breaking the stereotypically white musical. It also pokes fun at the recycled plots and the corniness featured in those musicals. The plot of the show itself says how “corny” and unoriginal the plots of the Golden Age musicals are. Keegan Micheal-Key, who plays Josh in the show, said this about *Schmigadoon!* when reflecting on his relationship with musicals: “My relationship with classic musicals is actually a very fond one. They excite me. They give me a little bit of solace because they always end beautifully” (Collins-Hughes, 2021).

Key goes on to say that *Singin' in the Rain* is one of his favorite musicals because it is approachable and “is this wonderfully exuberant piece of work” (Collins-Hughes, 2021). The accessibility of *Schmigadoon!* and the passion that the actors and producers share about movie musicals is what makes them still relevant in the 21st century.

### Reflections on Nostalgia

As I reflect on the extraordinary impact that nostalgia has had on my dance history, I am left wondering if it is even valid, given that I was not alive during the initial release of these films and did not experience firsthand the political, economic, and social conditions of the period. My thesis choreography, in some ways a translation of these feelings into performance, explores the origin of my nostalgia for movie musicals from the Golden Age. Yet as I delve more deeply into this rabbit hole, I wonder if my choreography has only evoked more questions than it answers. Are my feelings merely a product of my white, suburban upbringing? Are they programmatic, representative of the ease with which Golden Age musicals exploited common white values? What is it about the quality of these musicals that draws me and the stars of the TV show *Schmigadoon!* like Keegan-Michael Key, to them? Maybe I am simply a member of the targeted demographic. These questions are perhaps beyond the scope of this research, but I feel it is important to raise them as I try to explain the reasons behind my nostalgia.

## Conclusion

This research has not only brought context to the importance of movie musicals to American society, but it has also highlighted the contributions of the Black artists who have been largely forgotten in history. They were the true innovators of dance in the musical genre. The white men in power were responsible for distributing this form of entertainment to the public and allowing it to receive widespread recognition. The contributions of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly to how dance is shot in musicals today are important to highlight, but these two men are not representative of the entire community of dancers who were left uncredited. Cyd Charisse represents how many women in the industry were racialized and sexualized. Her perspectives on working with both men are invaluable. The renewed interest in musicals, specifically in musical television programming, validates the importance of this research and the relevance of this topic in 2023.

My personal connection to musicals came at a time when I wanted to escape. I was nearing the end of high school, craving the world outside of my small town, and musicals were a distraction from reality. I found my way back to them again in 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, when I, along with the rest of the world, was forced to stay home. I watched *Singin' in the Rain* for the first time during this period. Now, seeing that scholars and producers continue to write, adapt, and parody these musicals, makes it clear to me that this research is ongoing and current.

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