

Top Hat

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In the context of contemporary music videos where jump cuts punctuate hip-hop rhythms, where lyrics and garb leave little to the imagination and where dance moves simulate sexual gyrations, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers may strike some as quaint relics of mummified Victorianism.

Revisit their stylized series of 1930s musicals and you're spellbound by movies that are, like the standards they introduced, incomparably sinuous and melodic. Astaire and Rogers are the guerrillas of eros, holding the camera hostage and dancing with it in real time.

At the moment when talking pictures were relatively new and synchronization of sound and image was imperfect, shooting a dance number in a single take – as Astaire insisted – was revolutionary. No cheating. Not shooting dances (or body parts) in segments. One of the beauties of their moves is that of whole figures navigating real space. Another beauty: clothes that are suggestively tailored rather than explicit. Likewise the music and lyrics, alternately playful and plaintive. (Written by the likes of Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, and Cole Porter), all variations on one of life's Two Big Themes. These would be Seduction and Love, which are a lot more enduring, not to mention universal, than simulated sex.

From flirtation to consummation to transcendence, Astaire and Rogers express the variety of romantic and sexual experience without ever taking their clothes off.

While neither the most rhapsodic of their films (that would be "Swing Time") nor the giddiest (that would be "Follow the Fleet"), "Top Hat" (1935) is the most iconic. This, the fourth musical of the nine they made together during the 1930s, is the Irving Berlin tunefest in which Astaire, that man about town, and Rogers, that girl next door, become Astair Rogers, avatars of continental sophistication and romance who dance away Depression woes. (Not bad for vaudeville workaholics respectively born in Omaha, Nebraska, and Independence, Missouri.)

Their RKO colleague Katharine Hepburn famously cracked of the partnership between the insouciant patrician and saucy prole that "she gave him sex and he gave



Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in one of their most famous dance numbers. Courtesy Library of Congress

her class." Well, yes. But just as essential to the irresistible alchemy of Astair Rogers is how physically and temperamentally the two complement each other. You'd draw him as a straight line; her as a corkscrew curl. His character is unfailingly direct; her characters think the shortest distance between points is around the world. (Or in the case of "Top Hat," these two Americans on adjacent floors of an English hotel that the shortest distance between them is fly from London to Lido.) Another fundamental of their appeal is how, against some of the most artificial and stylized sets ever imagined, they project a healthy naturalism – like apples in an orchard of candied fruit.

Their "Top Hat" characters are Jerry Travers, a Broadway dancer making his London debut, and Dale Tremont, an American mannequin modeling the diaphanous wares of Beddini (Erik Rhodes), a tony designer. Jerry and Dale travel in society but are not of it, functioning as entertainers to the aristocracy and thus retaining at least a centimeter of ironic distance from the swells who wear dinner clothes in the daytime and who are blissfully untouched by that economic debacle called the Depression. It goes without saying that Jerry and Dale work for a living, while the rich play. It also goes without saying that Jerry and Dale have considerably more fun than those top-hatted boulevardiers.

The title number is performed on a theater stage as Astaire/Jerry, a drill sergeant in fancy dress, shoots down a chorus line of similarly clad men who ape his moves. His tapes firing like gunshot, Jerry symbolically ridding the field of professional and romantic competition (which presages his elimination of Dale's other swains).

Musically and narratively, the film is about a guy who imagines himself a lone eagle but who is in fact a love-bird. Ensnared in his producer's fancy hotel apartment, Jerry sings and dances "No Strings" ("I'm fancy-free/and free for anything fancy"), only to hear from management that he's disturbed the sleep of Dale, slumbering upon what resembles a white lacquer Ark built for a Moderne Noah. When lovely Dale herself disturbs Jerry's Terpsichorean reverie, he instantly changes his tune about permanent attachments.

Choreographically, the film opposes Jerry's unfettered joy in dancing solo with his unexpected ecstasy in dancing duets. The operative metaphor of the duets is romance as force of nature. Jerry pursues the elusive Dale to a park where a sudden storm has the pair seeking refuge under a gazebo. He serenades her with "Isn't It a

Lovely Day to Be Caught in the Rain?" The change in the weather musically and emotionally conveys his change of heart. He explains that lightning and thunder are the effect of a cloud kissing another cloud, generating romantic electricity.

At first she resists his pickup line, and also his two-step. But Astaire and Rogers are lightning and thunder. For every lightning patter of his feet, she responds with a thunderous echo, trying to top him. For minutes they do not touch. But in this try-and-catch-me duet, he does catch her, sweeping her into his arms, consummating their dance romance.

The weather motif is echoed in "Cheek to Cheek," the floatiest of all their numbers, but Rogers's feathered frock, which makes her resemble a cumulus cloud partnered with a lightning bolt.

Astaire and Rogers were among the first to bring eloquent physical movement to moving pictures. To watch "Top Hat" is to know that they remain the greatest.

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