Dance, Flexibility, and the Renewal of Genre in "Singin' in the Rain"
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Dance, Flexibility, and the Renewal of Genre in *Singin’ in the Rain*

by Peter N. Chumo II

In *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), dance and physical flexibility become metaphors for generic flexibility, the ability to move among different forms of entertainment and survive Hollywood’s transition to talkies.

“If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all,” Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds) tells silent-screen star Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) as they discuss movies during their first meeting in *Singin’ in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952). This line is repeated later in the film when Don’s best friend, Cosmo Brown (Donald O’Connor), mentions the way in which the movies they make are all alike: “Hey why bother to shoot this picture? Why don’t you release the old one under a new title? If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen ‘em all.” The repetition of these words not only poses a challenge to Don’s self-image as an actor but also challenges Hollywood moviemaking itself by acknowledging a potentially problematic feature of genre films, as defined by Rick Altman: “Both intratextually and intertextually, the genre film uses the same material over and over again. ‘If you’ve seen one you’ve seen ‘em all’ is a common complaint leveled against the western or the musical; in fact it is a very good description, at least in a limited sense.”¹ If so, then Hollywood has reached a point of exhaustion. The silent films from Monumental Pictures recycle the same plot lines and generic conventions so that each new production is already old. The assembly line-like sets past which Don and Cosmo walk on their first day of work (generic jungle film, football movie, western) attest to the formulaic nature of such filmmaking. One question this film poses, then, is indeed, “Why bother to shoot this picture?” Can an original film be produced, and if so, how?

Scholars of the musical have analyzed the way in which *Singin’ in the Rain* and other musicals of the early 1950s investigate the issue of genre itself. Jane Feuer, for example, points out, “Historically, the art musical has evolved toward increasingly greater degrees of self-reflectivity. By the late forties and into the early fifties, a series of musicals produced by the Freed Unit at MGM used the backstage format to present sustained reflections upon, and affirmations of, the musical genre itself.”² *Singin’ in the Rain* takes part in this meditation by simultaneously pulling in two opposite directions. It looks back fondly on the musical tradition by setting itself at the time of the birth of the musical, and yet the recycling of old songs from

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the Arthur Freed/Nacio Herb Brown catalog that forms the heart of the film aligns it with the tensions in the musicals of this era, as if the film were admitting that the tradition has run out of new material.

The attempt to make the old new again, to recuperate the past for the present, becomes the project of *Singin’ in the Rain*. Indeed, while the actual narrative of *Singin’ in the Rain* focuses on the transitional moment when Hollywood turned from silent to sound films, the scope of the film spans the whole twenty-five-year film-musical tradition. It makes explicit reference to *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), the first talkie and the first musical, has a Busby Berkeley–style dance montage, a Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers–like number in “You Were Meant for Me,” and Gene Kelly performing in his own athletic style throughout the film. Seeing one musical, *Singin’ in the Rain*, then, to some extent does mean seeing them all. The film in essence is a compendium of various musical styles, all merging in this film at the moment when sound films and the musical were born. As Robert Stam points out, the film “revels in its own intertextuality at what Kelly himself called a ‘conglomeration of bits of movie lore,’” and, in its use of Freed’s old songs, becomes “an anthology of self-quotations.”

The innovation within the narrative, then, is the birth of the musical, and the innovation of the film itself is dance numbers that defy the parameters normally set for such numbers. Jane Feuer points out that “in *Singin’ in the Rain*, spontaneous talent distinguishes Don, Cosmo, and Kathy from Lina Lamont”;

I would add that physical “flexibility” also distinguishes the true show people from the untalented Lina (Jean Hagen), whose movements are a series of poses for the camera, suitable for the silent films she is accustomed to, but hopelessly inadequate for the birth of the sound film, and especially inadequate for the musical that ultimately will be the solution to the problem facing Lockwood and Lamont’s new film, *The Duelling Cavalier*.

Thus, the overarching issue of musical ability, especially dance, stands as a metaphor for the larger issue of generic flexibility. Just as dance requires physical flexibility in body movement and spontaneity, so does vital filmmaking require generic flexibility, the ability to move easily among different genres and forms of entertainment. This versatility is linked to the talent to perform very physical dance numbers, notably “Make ‘Em Laugh” and “Singin’ in the Rain,” in which Cosmo and Don, respectively, take on their whole environment and defy all boundaries, whether they be the walls that Cosmo dances up and breaks through or the rain that Don splashes in.

**Generic Flexibility and the Birth of the Musical.** From the beginning of the film, we see that Don’s athletic ability and flexibility go hand-in-hand with his ability to move freely among different forms of entertainment and even among different genres. While athletic ability and dance are not synonymous, they do have a close relationship in *Singin’ in the Rain* since many of the dances are filled with acrobatics and stunts that we might not normally expect in a dance number. Because *Singin’ in the Rain* collapses such distinctions in the
very physicality of the dances, Don’s early stuntwork is a kind of precursor to his and Cosmo’s dancing.

In the vignettes we see at the beginning telling the story of Don’s rise in the entertainment world, Don and Cosmo perform a very physical routine full of slapstick and comic violence in a burlesque house. The scene dissolves to a song-and-dance routine to “Fit as a Fiddle,” which visually enforces the compatibility of outlandish slapstick entertainment and musical performance. Don and Cosmo play fiddles as they dance in an energetic routine that allows them to do various tricks with their instruments, like dancing in tandem while playing each other’s fiddle. At one point, Cosmo’s bow gets stuck in Don’s hand, and so Cosmo plays his fiddle as if it were a guitar; he thus gives the impression of spontaneously improvising a new move right on the spot. Together they dance over the whole stage—two friends clowning around and reveling in their energetic moves while remaining in sync with each other. This short dance number, then, is a precursor to their later work in its athleticism and flexibility, both in their bodily movement and in the variety of moves they appear to make up right on the spot.

In Hollywood, Don’s first job is doing mood music for a western, and he gets his first role in front of the camera when the stuntman, Bert, is injured and Don volunteers to take his place. The director accepts his offer and commands, “Get this guy into Bert’s suit,” thus showing the ease with which Don is able to change

*Singin’ in the Rain*’s “Fit as a Fiddle” number exhibits Cosmo and Don’s generic flexibility. Photo courtesy The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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roles. Once he is in Bert’s costume and is punched during the scene, he does a somersault over the saloon’s bar. While Bert crashed into the bar and fell down senseless, Don is able to carry out the stunt and even turn the moment into an event that shows off his athletic prowess. From the beginning, then, Don’s ability to move ahead in the business, to change roles, and to be flexible in the moviemaking process are all connected to his own brand of athleticism, which he will bring to the dance numbers and which is a trademark of the Kelly persona. In contrast, Don’s first personal meeting with Lina in these flashbacks occurs when she is lying on a board while she is having her nails done. She is passive, immobile from the outset, and lacks the movement that is the hallmark of Don’s musical ability and by extension the ability to make transitions within the film industry.

Don’s athleticism is seen later when, in order to escape his fans on the street, he runs away, climbs on a car and then onto a trolley car, and then jumps down into Kathy’s car. His athletic movement brings him his first meeting with his romantic interest in the film. Later that night at the party, Kathy, angered at how Don is mocking her serious theatrical pretensions after she has jumped out of a huge cake, throws a cake at him and declares, “Here’s one thing I’ve learned from the movies.” Don ducks and Lina ends up being hit in yet another example of Don’s agility and Lina’s seeming immobility, a frozenness that will doom her to annihilation when posing for the camera is no longer acceptable. Kathy also shows her own kind of flexibility, her ability to move from singing and dancing in the floor show to slapstick comedy. Moreover, the “pie-in-the-face” joke is a staple of slapstick comedy, particularly associated with the silent comedy of the Keystone Kops. If Kathy has learned this joke from the movies, then so has Don. This cute little joke, then, makes a serious point in suggesting that Don and Kathy share an ability for “low,” physical comedy and a kind of knowledge of Hollywood conventions, and this “knowledge,” coupled with physical agility, saves Don from getting hit, just as his talent will later save his career. Lina, however, has no knowledge of Hollywood’s past, slapstick comedy, or “low” vaudeville humor, and, in a film in which those characters who survive are those who turn to the past to adapt to the future, she is the one hit by the cake and later struck down when she cannot adapt to Hollywood’s changes.

These changes are manifest in the making of The Duelling Cavalier, where the problems that plague Lina and Don can best be observed. Lina’s problems are that she cannot speak properly and her movements lack the grace to overcome the problem of the microphone placement. Don’s problems are very different and do not surface until the film premieres: his tight pants make noise as he walks, and his cane makes a loud thud when he throws it. Also, the words he says, particularly his seemingly endless repetition of “I love you,” sound silly. It should be noted, however, that the quality of his voice is not the problem; rather, his words, acceptable during silent film production, are ridiculous in a sound film. The proper words for him will be song lyrics and even silence during the more dramatic parts of his dances. His silence, however, should not be confused with silent film.
is a first language of the movies and sound a second, then dance can be seen as a third as it combines movement with music, and, in its most dramatic moments, does not rely on words. Fluid movement is the key, again, that separates posing for silent films from dancing in a musical.

Don’s clothing problem is a separate issue and highlights the fact that Don Lockwood/Gene Kelly should not be in tight clothes, which can be associated with ballet tights and thus high-brow dancing. Rather, he should be in clothes for low-brow entertainment, a costume that gives him freedom of movement. Even Lina notes that her French aristocratic wig “weighs a ton,” a remark that not only demonstrates her complaining nature and lack of a historical sense, but also shows the oppression of the costumes. They literally and figuratively weigh down the actors.

The movement of the film, then, will be to get Don to go backward to his roots, to the musical form in which he started, and away from the silly costume drama that constricts both his body and his talent, and this movement will happen when *The Duelling Cavalier* is turned into *The Dancing Cavalier*. Lina’s problem, however, cannot be solved; she is doomed to be one of the “waxworks” from *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), more at home in Norma Desmond’s decaying mansion than in Gene Kelly’s vibrant musical.

**The Vaudeville Tradition.** Don fears that this will be his fate. The night that *The Duelling Cavalier* opens to the ridicule of its audience, Don laments, “Picture’s a museum piece. I’m a museum piece,” as if he were being relegated to live among the waxworks. What rescues him is the musical form, more specifically a reminder of his vaudeville days:

Don: No kidding, Cosmo. Didja ever see anything as idiotic as me on that screen tonight?
Cosmo: Yeah. How about Lina?
Don: Huh, all right. I ran her a close second. Maybe it was a photo finish. Anyway, I’m through, fellas.
Kathy: Don, you’re not through.
Cosmo: Why of course not. Why with your looks and your figure, you could drive an ice wagon, or shine shoes.
Kathy: Block hats.
Cosmo: Sell pencils.
Kathy: Dig ditches.
Cosmo: Or worse still—go back into vaudeville. (He sings and dances to a few lines of “Fit as a Fiddle.”)
Don: Too bad I didn’t do that in *Duelling Cavalier*. They might’ve liked it.
Kathy: Why don’t you?
Don: What?
Kathy: Make a musical.
Don: A musical?
Cosmo: Sure. Make a musical. The new Don Lockwood. He yodels, he jumps about to music.

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The “new” Don Lockwood is the old Don Lockwood about to find his true self through the musical; specifically, he is reminded of his musical roots through his vaudeville experience with Cosmo. He can be innovative by turning back to his past, just as Singin’ in the Rain can be innovative even as it turns to old songs for its structure; Feuer points out that one can “tell the history of the genre as the story of a continuing cycle of conservation within innovation, or, to put it in a more radical perspective, of innovation as conservation.”

The characters of Singin’ in the Rain ultimately are not trapped by genre but rather find the right genre, the musical, to solve their problems.

The musical, then, can rejuvenate Don’s career and Monumental Pictures. The Duelling Cavalier becomes The Dancing Cavalier when a title change is needed. Cosmo first suggests The Duelling Mammy, which is a silly joke that refers to the success of The Jazz Singer. On a serious level, however, The Duelling Mammy is unacceptable because “Duelling” remains in the title and suggests the film is still a swashbuckler. “Duelling” must be removed and “Dancing” replace it for the musical aspect of the film to be emphasized since the musical form will mean salvation for Don and the studio. After the title has been determined, a storyline must be created that will accommodate musical numbers. Cosmo makes a suggestion to R. F. Simpson (Millard Mitchell), the studio head, that points up the arbitrariness of this proposed film’s construction:

Cosmo: How’s this? We throw a modern section into the picture. The hero is a young hoofer in a Broadway show. Right?

R.F.: Right.

Cosmo: Now he sings and he dances, right?

R.F.: Right.

Cosmo: Well one night backstage he’s reading The Tale of Two Cities. He’s in between numbers, see? And a sandbag falls and hits him on the head, and he dreams he’s back during the French Revolution. Right?

R.F.: Right.

Cosmo: Well this way we get in the modern dancing numbers—Charleston—Charleston—but in the dream part we can still use the costume stuff.

The notion of creating a story around musical numbers reflects the creation of Singin’ in the Rain itself, which had a similar genesis as Betty Comden and Adolph Green were brought in to write a script that incorporated the Arthur Freed/Nacio Herb Brown catalog of songs.

Moreover, Cosmo’s proposal is a version of a film within a film or, more specifically, a dream sequence inspired by the hero reading a romantic novel. In effect, the plot creates another level of fantasy that comments on the main plot of Singin’ in the Rain. While Don needs to look backward to his own vaudeville past to escape the limitations of silent films and not to the historical past of France in 1789, nevertheless both the French Revolution and the Hollywood transition to sound are eras of revolution so that in some loose sense they tell similar stories that share massive upheaval and change as their main theme. Moreover, when The Duelling Cavalier is screened and the image and voice go out of synchronization, “the villain now speaks with Lina’s

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voice, while she employs the villain’s—a nice touch enforcing the image of Lina as the villain of the movie Singin’ in the Rain. Early in the film before production on The Duelling Cavalier has begun, Cosmo tries to guess the plot when Don tells him it is a French Revolution film: “Don’t tell me. You’re a French aristocrat, and she’s a simple girl of the people, and she won’t even give you a tumbrel.” Since Lina plays a noblewoman in The Duelling Cavalier, Cosmo is not guessing correctly. However, he is accurately describing Singin’ in the Rain, in which Don is a Hollywood “aristocrat” and Kathy a chorus “girl of the people” who at that point has indeed rebuffed Don. Thus, both possibilities for a French Revolution film, the one described and the one filmed, tell the same story as Singin’ in the Rain (which is a function of genre, to tell the same story in different ways), and so the relationship of our film to the films within the film becomes a subtle commentary on issues of genre itself.

The Quest for Identity. To escape the historical epic that failed, Don turns to a genre that focuses not on a nation but rather the individual, the biographical film. The extended “Broadway Melody” sequence that Don begins to describe to R.F. and Cosmo will be a musical section of The Dancing Cavalier; and, through this number, Don tells the story of his idealized self, his alter ego’s adventures in New York. In the number, he begins as a vaudeville man coming to Broadway and looking like a country bumpkin who screams “Gotta Dance” to all the theatrical agents. The words “Gotta Dance” express his desire as if it were a compulsion. The agent who finally accepts Don takes off his coat and throws it away and takes off his glasses. Shedding the wrong costume once again will help Don find his proper identity. They enter a speakeasy, and, during Don’s dance, he throws away his hat, which he later finds dangling on Cyd Charisse’s foot.

His most important encounter in the sequence is indeed with a woman played by Cyd Charisse, who perhaps stands for an idealized woman who can transform Don Lockwood into his true self, the dance man. The Cyd Charisse character is very sexual: it is her long leg that first freezes Don in motion, and their very sexual dancing throughout the scene transforms Don. During the course of the dance, Cyd Charisse kicks away his hat and glasses (which he had previously put back on to examine her closely), those parts of his costume that are unglamorous. Don soon loses her to her gangster boyfriend, who flips a coin in a parody of George Raft’s gangster in Scarface (Howard Hawks, 1932). Don thus loses the girl as the gangster genre intrudes on the musical.

We then see Don dancing in several musicals on Broadway in various costumes, culminating in a tuxedo; Charisse, it appears, has transformed Don into the toast of Broadway. She appears for a second time, and Don has a fantasy of a romantic dance with her; however, Don loses her yet again, and, as she leaves, she herself is flipping a coin in gangster style, as her gangster lover and his henchmen had done before. She tosses the coin to Don, however, and he in turn gives it to the hat-check girl, who has brought him his top hat and cane. On a symbolic level, then, what he takes from Charisse brings him the trappings of his musical persona.
Charisse, it should be noted, does not utter a word throughout this beautifully performed dance sequence, which suggests that graceful body movement, not voice quality, is the ultimate proof of talent in *Singin’ in the Rain*. Indeed, the way Charisse is made to resemble silent-screen star Louise Brooks, in her short black hairdo and bangs, even hints that Charisse’s character is a link to the silent era; the ability to dance, this sequence suggests, will allow such a figure to make the transition to sound.8

While the gangster genre, built on violence and suspicions about American success, would seem to be antithetical to the musical, built on optimism and fulfillment of romantic dreams, it is important to remember that, when Donfirst jumps into Kathy’s car, she mistakes him for a gangster: “You are a criminal. I’ve seen that face some place before. You’re a famous gangster. I’ve seen your picture in the paper, or in the post office with a lot of numbers on your chest.” Perhaps in some sense, then, the gangster and the romantic actor/song-and-dance man are not very far apart. Both the gangster and musical genres came of age during the Great Depression. While the former casts a critical eye on American society and the latter provides an escape from reality, the similarities are striking. Both are anchored in a notion of physical energy that is repressed and eventually must explode, for the gangster in violence and for the music man in dance numbers, and such outbursts ultimately are invigorating for the audience and are the defining moments for a given film in these genres. As Leo Braudy points out, “The attractiveness of Jesse James, the outlaw beneath the banker’s respectability, parallels the attractiveness of Fred Astaire, the musical-comedy exuberance beneath the fashionable dinner-jacketed cool of the social surface. James Cagney as both eccentric crook and George M. Cohan again brings the two images together in a single visual personality.”9 *Singin’ in the Rain* complicates this equation, moreover, by linking Cyd Charisse’s sexual energy to the gangster’s threat of violence.

Another issue linking the two genres is illegitimacy. Both the gangster and the song-and-dance man are on the fringes of society. The gangster is a criminal who tries to gain respectability through such things as wearing expensive clothes and becoming boss of his gang. The vaudevillian finds his status is questioned because his art form is considered low or vulgar and not really an “art” form at all. The intrusion of the gangster genre, then, comments on the musical tradition and forms a kind of hybrid of the two genres, at least for this part of the film.

Both genres are part of the Hollywood tradition, and the infusion of one genre into another can enliven that genre, even transform it into something original. However, in gangster films, these genres are often depicted as two separate and distinct worlds. In *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930), for example, one of the earliest gangster films, Joe Massara finally escapes the gangster world by becoming a song-and-dance man and so flees one genre for another. The last scene, which shows Rico Bandello’s death, also features a billboard advertising Joe’s musical show. Later gangster films also feature this dichotomy. In *Bonnie and Clyde*
(Arthur Penn, 1967), after their first successful bank robbery, the gangsters take refuge in a movie theater showing Gold Diggers of 1933 (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933). For a short period of time, then, they escape, both literally and figuratively, into the fantasy world of the musical. In The Godfather Part III (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990), Anthony Corleone escapes his father, Michael's, gangster world through a career in opera. The musical, then, is a form of escape from the gangster world in gangster films, and the two worlds are distinct, even antagonistic, entities that do not merge but rather remain separate.

The musical Singin' in the Rain, however, is innovative in incorporating the gangster genre into its form. While the gangster poses the threat of violence and so produces a certain tension within the “Broadway Melody” number, this tension ultimately invigorates Don and so illustrates the musical’s capacity to incorporate other genres, especially one that, upon close analysis, shares certain affinities with the musical. Moreover, Don’s flirtation with the gangster’s moll even empowers him and effects his transformation.

Despite losing the girl, Don is still on Broadway at the end of the number and, through his new debonair costume, has been changed into a dashing song-and-dance man. At the very end of “Broadway Melody,” Don sees the arrival of a country hick, dressed exactly as he was at the beginning of the sequence and screaming “Gotta Dance.” The cycle will continue, then, as new hopefuls arrive on Broadway, thus ensuring the future of the musical form. More importantly, Don and we are seeing an earlier version of himself, and so we can see how far he has come from vaudeville to Broadway. His transformation is complete in “Broadway Melody,” just as Don is changed in Singin’ in the Rain into the dance man he is meant to be. Don’s film, then, tells the same story we are seeing in the larger film. However, it is an idealized version of himself, just as the lies Don told to the gossip columnist at the film’s beginning were meant to create an ideal self. Whereas that ideal self, however, was rooted in phony pretensions to high art (Shaw, Molière, training at a conservatory), this idealized self is rooted in the “truth” of dance. It proves Don’s talent, the necessity of his impulse to dance, to become the “dancing” cavalier and shows us the “real” Don Lockwood, not the phony Don Lockwood of the film’s beginning.

When the number is over, we return to the room where Don began describing the sequence to R.F., who has not seen what we have but presumably has heard a description of the sequence. His reaction is “I can’t quite visualize it. I’ll have to see it on film first.” This is a little joke, since we the audience of the film have just seen the whole number, but this joke also points up the serious idea that film itself enacts a kind of life that mere words cannot. Somehow film gives life (it has given life to Don Lockwood the dancer), and, through this life-giving medium, Don has found his true identity.

The issue of identity is central to the Gene Kelly persona in many of his films, as Thomas Schatz points out: “All of the Freed unit musicals, and particularly those featuring Kelly, deal to some extent with the central character’s steady abandonment of his fictional identity and the gradual realization of his own transcendent
musical star persona. Thus the conflict-to-resolution progression is a movement toward self-recognition as well as an effort to ‘get the show on the road.’”\textsuperscript{10} Creating the show and creating Don’s new identity are the two central issues of Singin’ in the Rain. The personal movement for Gene Kelly/Don Lockwood toward the recuperation of his musical talent and the birth of the musical via The Dancing Cavalier come together as the film links “self-recognition” through “Broadway Melody” with getting the show on the road.

Rejuvenation of the Musical. If Don’s physical flexibility, both in stuntwork and in dance, is a metaphor for his generic flexibility, his ability to move comfortably among genres and even entirely different kinds of work in the entertainment industry, then how does Singin’ in the Rain manifest this flexibility? How does it become a unique film, one that can encompass the whole history of musical film without becoming one more film that can be overlooked if seeing “one” is really seeing them “all,” as Kathy and Cosmo both suggest? (Of course one should remember that Kathy’s statement is ultimately a lie since she has seen many of Don’s films, so that even the generic repetition they provide does appear in itself to have some value. On the other hand, she may not be interested in Don’s genre but rather Don as a movie star, so that her status as a fan of Don simply prepares us for her falling in love with him.)

Singin’ in the Rain breaks out of the old formulas through song-and-dance routines that are very extreme physically, even violent, as they defy normal environmental barriers and gently parody the usual convention of people breaking into song and dance in musicals. While Don is thinking about Cosmo’s words, “If you’ve seen one, you’ve seen ‘em all,” Cosmo tries to cheer him up through his “Make ‘Em Laugh” routine at the studio. The number is a confidence builder extolling the virtue of comic entertainment, and the dance itself is an often violent routine in which Cosmo crashes into a board workers are carrying, dances into a brick wall, has a fight with a mannequin, runs up two walls, and finally breaks through a paper wall. The dance builds up a great amount of energy as pratfalls and extreme physical action abound. The anxiety of following a long tradition of musical films means that the dances have to push the limits to be more creative and original, and such anxiety and creativity come together in this outlandish dance number. Moreover, Cosmo’s creativity appears endless as he improvises routines out of normal objects and makes his whole environment come alive in the most unexpected ways. Feuer describes this technique as a kind of bricolage: “the performers make use of props-at-hand—curtains, movie paraphernalia, umbrellas, furniture—to create the imaginary world of the musical performance.”\textsuperscript{11}

Breaking out of everyday constraints, a theme so common to the musical, then, comes at a great price, even, it seems, at the threat of bodily injury. This “violence,” albeit comical, links the musical to the gangster genre, specifically in the explosion of energy that is uncontrolled and potentially dangerous. The dance also collapses the distinction between stuntwork and dance, as it is very difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. Don’s character is defined first by his work
as a stuntman and then his work as a dancer, and this dance performed by his best friend enforces the compatibility of the two.\textsuperscript{12}

The musical is premised on the idea of freedom and breaking out of normal social conventions through song and dance. As Leo Braudy states, “The essence of the musical is the potential of the individual to free himself from inhibition at the same time that he retains a sense of limit and propriety in the very form of the liberating dance.”\textsuperscript{13} However, all sense of propriety is abandoned in “Make ‘Em Laugh,” as well as in other numbers like “Moses Supposes,” which parodies the use of diction coaches in the transition to sound films.

Don and Cosmo do great violence to the classroom in “Moses Supposes,” destroying it as if they were naughty schoolboys. It is a revolution, an overturning of the teacher’s authority that matches the spirit of the French Revolution, the subject of their eventual film. Revolt and violence, then, bring a kind of renewal as Don and Cosmo show off their abilities and overthrow the diction teacher’s authority. The extremes to which Don and Cosmo go as they dance on top of the desk, pile props like a lampshade and a framed picture on the befuddled teacher, and overturn the trash can are foreshadowed by the recitation of the tongue twisters that opens the scene as their verbal agility matches their physical agility. We see that Don and Cosmo have the musical talent that separates them from Lina, who fails miserably in her diction lesson. Interestingly enough, as Robert Stam points out, \textit{Singin’ in the Rain’s} “only two new songs are explicitly intertextual: ‘Make ‘Em Laugh’ is a song-and-dance tribute to slapstick, and ‘Moses’ spoofs the postsound elocutionist craze.”\textsuperscript{14} They also allow for the creation of antic dance numbers that liberate the performers from the more traditional kinds of numbers usually found in Hollywood musicals.

Possibly this abandonment of propriety and limit finds its fullest expression in Don’s performance of “Singin’ in the Rain.” This number follows the birth of the idea to turn \textit{The Duelling Cavalier} into a musical and to substitute Kathy’s voice for Lina’s voice in the film. Don in this dance is celebrating his initiation into musical filmmaking and the solidification of his relationship with Kathy. To sing and dance in the rain means that one can celebrate even in dreary weather. Don jumps onto a lamppost, thereby turning it into a kind of spotlight for his dancing, and virtually creates his own studio out of an ordinary sidewalk. He bows to the mannequin in the pharmacy window and then plays his umbrella as if it were a guitar. Then he does “an imitation of Charlie Chaplin’s walk (with Kelly swinging an umbrella instead of a cane).”\textsuperscript{15} He even balances like a tightrope walker on the curb, as if he were a circus performer, thus once again emphasizing his powers of improvisation and flexibility, not only in moving to a new art form but also in creating the celebration out of an ordinary curb. Jerome Delamater comments on the way in which Kelly experiments with space, specifically in this number:

\begin{quote}
Since Kelly’s numbers were rarely restricted to an on-stage performance, he was able to use space in a broader, more spread-out fashion. Not tied in, furthermore, to an aesthetic of full-figured, single-take dances, he could choreograph with a sense of using
\end{quote}
Incidentally, this principle is also used in the previous number, “Good Morning,” in which Don, Cosmo, and Kathy keep the dance moving throughout the various rooms of Don’s house and use virtually all the space and props available to them for the creation of the dance.

In “moving down the street” in “Singin’ in the Rain,” Don passes a series of buildings, an examination of which highlights the power of his celebratory spontaneity by showing the opposite, the selling of technique. He passes a clothing store, pharmacy, music studio, hat shop, book store, and art school, all of which run counter to the values of spontaneity and the bodily transcendence of dance. The clothing store and hat shop clothe the body, possibly to enhance it, but Don can dance in the rain in ordinary clothes. Likewise, the pharmacy sells cosmetics to beautify the body and so emphasizes artifice. Don makes the studio seem superfluous as he turns an ordinary sidewalk and street into his studio. The book store and art school are places of learning, but this man clearly does not need formal training to astound us with his ability. Don seemingly is able to improvise his movements throughout the sequence, and, in the emotional climax of the number, leaves the sidewalk to dance through the whole street as the camera cranes up to give us a view of a man boldly taking on his whole environment.

Moreover, this number illustrates the triumph of the “low” or vaudeville tradition over “high” forms of art. The hat shop is La Valle Millinery Shop, the book store sells first editions, and the school’s name is the Mount Hollywood Art School, all pretentious-sounding designations that stand for high culture (although the juxtaposition of “Mount” and “Hollywood” suggests a parody, as if Hollywood, the site of popular entertainment, were compatible with high art), against which Don’s vaudeville tradition operates. Don’s most manic splashing in puddles occurs in front of the school, as if he were claiming that his childlike acrobatics could take on the snobbery of the prestigious-sounding art school.

The number ends with this puddle splashing, as the arrival of a policeman makes Don realize he is acting crazy, and so he walks off, still in the throes of love and celebration. The number is quite exhilarating, both for Don to perform and the audience to watch, and is the key number to understanding the film for several reasons. It is the premise itself of singing and dancing in rain that allows the film to stretch its generic boundaries by not only taking a dance number off the stage but also taking it to a street under seemingly the worst weather conditions. Moreover, this number summarizes Don’s powers of improvisation and generic transformation. He can be a guitar player, a circus performer, Charlie Chaplin, and most of all Gene Kelly as he splashes in puddles and becomes the “new” Don Lockwood, who, as Cosmo said earlier, “jumps about to music.” While the physically extreme elements of the dance number suggest possible tensions in the musical form and gently parody the whole convention of people in a musical breaking out into song in everyday environments, Don nonetheless is able to engage in pure, energetic,
celebratory movement, even without the need of lyrics as the dance reaches a peak of physical frenzy.

The performers, then, are not trapped by narrative or generic conventions; instead, they work within the general conventions while expanding them. Coming as it does after a long tradition of musicals, SINGIN’ IN THE RAIN must go to extremes to be original and innovative, and yet, in going to such extremes, depicting moments of frenzy and even violence in the dances and gently parodying the musical tradition, it enlivens that tradition. The performers celebrate their liberation in genre, their ability to work enthusiastically in the musical tradition, and their liberation from stuffy, historical (and silent) costume films.

In all the dances, the climax of such exuberance and enthusiasm occurs without language: Cosmo moving wildly in “Make ’Em Laugh,” Don dancing through the street in “Singin’ in the Rain,” and both piling objects on the teacher in “Moses Supposes,” thus suggesting that dance itself needs no words, that the highest communication occurs in movement, not the rigid movement of silent films but rather the fluid movement of dance (as Cyd Charisse demonstrates in “Broadway Melody”). Earlier in the film, as they are walking on the backlot of the studio, Don tells Kathy that he cannot express himself without the proper setting: “Kathy. Kathy, look I, Kathy seeing you again now that I—Kathy I’m trying to say something to you but I, I’m such a ham. I guess I’m not able to without the proper setting.” Don’s stammering, his inability to express himself or deliver a complete thought, reinforces the film’s suspicion of words, which are what momentarily entrap Don. At the film’s beginning, Don uses words to lie about his background, and Lina’s reliance on words ultimately separates her from the creative people in the film.

Don proceeds to establish the setting he says he needs through the technology of Hollywood filmmaking and transforms an empty stage into a romantic evening with the help of machines that create a sunset, mist, lights in a garden, moonlight, stardust, a breeze, and a ladder substituting for a balcony so that he can sing “You Were Meant for Me.” It is the most self-conscious moment in the film as the artifice behind the Hollywood trickery is exposed. Feuer points out that, in this number,

the exposure of the wind machine figures prominently in the demystification of romantic musical numbers. Yet in a dialogue scene outside the soundstage just prior to this number, Kathy’s scarf had blown to the breeze of an invisible wind machine. Even after we are shown the tools of illusion at the beginning of the number, the camera arcs around and comes in for a tighter shot of the performing couple, thereby remasking the exposed technology and making the duet just another example of the type of number whose illusions it exposes.17

Admittedly, perhaps, this moment of exposure means that the musical cannot have the innocence it once had, and yet later we see “Singin’ in the Rain,” a number that obviously requires machinery to create the illusion of rain, an illusion the audience accepts without question. SINGIN’ IN THE RAIN, then, can expose the secrets of Hollywood and yet have faith in the illusion at the same time, an ultimate optimism in the power of belief, itself a hallmark of the musical.

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Lina Lamont and Entrapment by Genre. Don and Cosmo cannot be trapped by generic conventions because their genre is the musical, a genre that ultimately incorporates other generic material and promises liberation for the performer, even as the generic conventions are examined and stretched to their limit. Conversely, we see entrapment in the one character who lacks any sort of musical talent, Lina Lamont. She cannot talk properly, let alone sing, and, more importantly, her movements, far from those of a dancer, are static poses. While the other characters communicate with their bodies, that is, find an ideal discourse through dance, all Lina can do is rely on her studio contract and the publicity stories she has planted in the newspapers to try to stop Kathy's career and guarantee that Kathy will continue dubbing Lina's voice. She threatens to sue (a word she pronounces "syoo," illustrating that, even during her short moment of triumph, she still cannot speak correctly) and reads her contract: "Contract dated June 8, 1925, paragraph thirty-four, subdivision letter A, the party of the first part—' That's me." She can depend only on the language of the law and later her publicity as she declares, "People? I ain't people. I'm a, 'a shimmering, glowing star in the cinema firmament.' It says so, right there [the newspaper]." Lina's declaration that she "ain't people" cuts her off from the creative community and shows her dependence on written proof for her justification. Lina is very literal-minded, as if publicity columns constituted legitimate proof of her talent. Just as Norma Desmond in Sunset Boulevard tries to create her own reality by declaring, "I am big. It's the pictures that got small," so Lina, another silent-screen star whom time is passing by, tries to create her own reality but relies on legal jargon and publicity columns, "genres" whose veracity we question, especially in a musical that celebrates physical movement as the highest form of communication.

Conclusion. Throughout Singin' in the Rain, the solution to both the personal issue of identity and the larger issue of filmmaking is to go deeper into the filmic/fictional world. Don finds his identity through the roles he plays, and the film he makes is saved by having the protagonist dream he is in another story. The last scene, however, the romantic couple standing in front of the billboard of their images, goes in the opposite direction as it pulls back from the film's narrative and calls attention to the status of Singin' in the Rain as a movie that is advertised on a billboard.

At the same time, however, this last scene blurs the distinction between our world of film and the world of film presented within the film. While the names on the billboard are "Don Lockwood" and "Kathy Selden," the movie "is no longer 'The Dancing Cavalier'; it is Singin' in the Rain, that is, the film itself. This hall-of-mirrors effect emphasizes the unity-giving function of the musical both for the couples and audiences in the film and for the audience of the film." 18 More importantly, this final image fuses our world with the characters' world in what may be the film's boldest moment of flexibility—a merging of the "real" and the "fictional" in a single shot—in a billboard whose static image negates the possibility of movement.
Throughout Singin’ in the Rain, Don Lockwood has the ability to move among different roles until he finds his true self as the dance man, Gene Kelly, and, in this scene, the two identities merge so that they are now the same. They literally merge in that the face of Gene Kelly dissolves into the face on the billboard, and then the camera pulls back to reveal Lockwood/Kelly looking at his own image, a final confirmation that the hero of the film has found the proper identity, which now has been monumentalized through the filmmaking process. Don’s new identity is now offered to the world and frozen for the first time, suggesting the stability of his final position. Paradoxically, then, Don’s flexibility leads to the movie star becoming a fixture on a billboard, the necessary final step in the whole moviemaking process.

Notes

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5. In comparing the screen personae of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, Leo Braudy notes that “Astaire often wears suits and tuxedos, while Kelly generally wears open-collared shirts, slacks, white socks, and loafers—a studied picture of informality as opposed to Astaire’s generally more formal dress.” Leo Braudy, The World in a Frame: What We See in Films (1976; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 148.
8. My reading of the way in which movement overtakes the voice as the key determinant of talent in the film parallels the way dance superseded song in the making of Singin’ in the Rain itself: “Whereas it seems that Freed, as the songwriter as well as the producer, had naturally come to see the film as centred on singing, Kelly saw it as based round dancing. The balance changed decisively when the role of Kelly’s sidekick was given, not to the pianist and musician Oscar Levant, but, on Kelly’s insistence, to the ex–vaudeville hoofer, Donald O’Connor” (Peter Wollen, Singin’ in the Rain [London: BFI, 1992], 32).
12. Just as the characters in Singin’ in the Rain return to their vaudeville roots to create their movie, so did Donald O’Connor draw on his vaudeville background in creating...

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“Make ’Em Laugh” with Gene Kelly: “As O’Connor notes, ‘Gene didn’t have a clue as to the kind of number it was meant to be.’ The two of them went to the rehearsal room and brainstormed and tried things out before finally coming up with what was basically a compendium of gags and “shtick” I’d done for years—in fact, going right back to my vaudeville days. Every time I got a new idea or remembered something that had worked well for me in the past, Gene wrote it down and, bit by bit, the entire number was constructed” (Wollen, Singin’ in the Rain, 34).

16. Ibid., 139.
18. Ibid., 319.