



The Structure of the American Film Musical

NO SINGLE INTERPRETIVE PROCEDURE CAN ENSURE PROPER analysis of every individual work throughout an entire genre. Unless we have a general sense of a genre's characteristic configurations, however, we are likely to misconstrue the structure and meaning of individual texts. This is particularly true in the case of the American film musical, which has suffered from a singular lack of careful and methodologically self-conscious criticism. At the risk of oversimplification, therefore, I will in this chapter provide a detailed analysis of the musical's fundamental dualistic structure. A set of four propositions will serve not only to define the components and relationships characteristic of the American film musical, but also implicitly to describe a four-step interpretive procedure.

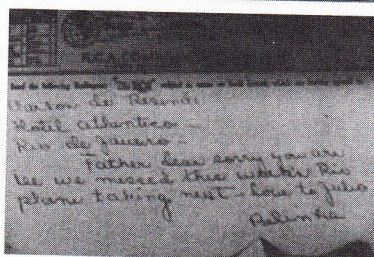
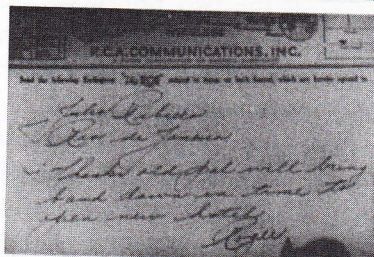
The film progresses through a series of paired segments matching the male and female leads

The musical invites us to forget familiar notions of plot, psychological motivation, and causal relationships; we must learn instead to view the film sideways, as it were—arresting the temporal flow and sensing the constant parallels between the principals' activities. The sequence of scenes is determined not out of plot necessity, but in response to a more fundamental need: the spectator must sense the eventual lovers as a couple even when they are not together, even before they have met. Traditional notions of narrative structure assume that chronological presentation implies causal relationship (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*); in the musical, chronological presentation and causal relationships alike are at climactic moments eschewed in favor of simultaneity and similarity.

apart: identical activities, clothes, colors, and angles, culminating in parallel scenes in small hotels, each star reading *Variety* about the other. When their quarrel is finally ended, it is of course by parallel phone calls. At no point is the spectator allowed to lose sight of the relationship between the two principals, for neither can move a muscle without inducing the camera to record the other's corresponding muscle movement.

Few musicals are as blatant as *Sweethearts* in their establishment of male/female alternation and parallelism. Most are content to submerge the similarities beneath a veneer of difference, thus reserving for the viewer the pleasure of discovering the hidden links. *An American in Paris*, for example, uses an unusual but effective method of introducing the female lead, Leslie Caron. We have already watched Gene Kelly awaken in his Paris flat; with customary style and grace he manipulates the room's many Keaton-like devices as he cleans up and prepares breakfast. In the next scene Oscar Levant sits in the café below with Georges Guitary, who proceeds to describe his fiancée; as he outlines her many qualities and moods, Leslie Caron appears in the café's mirror and acts them out, demonstrating her versatility and grace. Now, at this point Kelly and Caron have not even met, yet director Minnelli has already begun linking them in our minds by devoting the first two extended scenes to sequences which demonstrate their shared grace, style, and versatility. Subsequent scenes continue this practice—characteristic in Minnelli's work—of disguising or displacing parallelism. In the café scene just described we learn that Caron is engaged

In the most conventional musicals, such as those starring Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy in the late thirties, the parallelism between paired scenes is unmistakable. Sets and situations, costumes and movement, even dialogue and shots are replicated in such a way as to telegraph the film's structure to even the sleepest viewer. *Sweethearts*, for example, opens on MacDonald and Eddy giving the sixth anniversary performance of their celebrated Broadway operetta. For all the couple's harmony on stage, however, the subsequent scenes suggest that something is amiss. We first see MacDonald in her dressing room, admitting that she squelches her own ideas in order to do what others want. Cut to Eddy in a rigorously parallel dressing room. Not only is the set similar, but the camera is positioned the same way for both scenes. Now back to MacDonald, who receives a phone call from her aunt, a scene soon matched by Eddy's phone call from his mother. And so on throughout the film: if she is seen with a black dachshund, he must immediately be seen with a white bulldog; if she wears white and sings to string accompaniment, he must be shown in red and sing with brass accompaniment. Neither dressing room scene *causes* the other; instead, their parallelism serves to identify the MacDonald-Eddy relationship as primary, to draw our attention to the alternation between the two and away from the rather conventional break-up/make-up plot. Even the partners' separation provides an excuse for still more parallel scenes. As each goes off with an understudy of the other, Slavko Vorkapich's montage stresses the similarity of their careers even while they remain



to Guétary; in the sequence which follows, we watch as Kelly meets a potential romantic partner (Nina Foch). Rather than pointing up the parallelism of the two love affairs through similar camera work or carbon-copy sets, Minnelli depends entirely on the positioning of the scenes, the age difference between Caron/Kelly and Guétary/Foch, and eventually, the younger lovers' increased resistance to the advances of their older suitors. In the same way, the scenes leading to and following the first declaration of love between Caron and Kelly conceal rather than advertise the fact that each must disregard a date with the older suitor in order to keep the rendezvous with the younger one. Indeed, the entire "plot" is built on submerged parallelism: Guétary constantly pushes Caron toward marriage while Foch encourages Kelly to prepare for an exhibition. Each of the two young lovers owes a great deal to the older partner (Guétary protected Caron during the war, Foch is financing Kelly's show), but each desperately tries to put off the event that threatens to confuse gratitude with love. The situation is saved only when the older suitors learn about their young charges' true feelings. Here again Minnelli disguises the parallelism, preferring a carefully planned but seemingly chance juxtaposition to the more immediately recognizable formal opposition characteristic of MGM's MacDon-

Parallel shots, parallel actions, parallel messages, and symmetrically split images—the musical perpetually reveals its capacity for creating and reinforcing duality. Here Gene Raymond and Dolores del Rio cable home in *Flying Down to Rio*.

[pers]

ald/Eddy films or Berkeley's Warner extravaganzas: Guetary overhears the young couple's declarations of love immediately after the scene in which Levant tells Foch how Kelly really feels.

The difficulty of establishing such formal similarities is often complicated by a variety of historical or incidental factors. A scene-for-scene analysis of *An American in Paris* reveals that Kelly receives more than double the screen time of Caron, a virtual unknown in 1951. When the two principals have radically different personalities or talents, a similar problem occurs, especially when their roles seem to include few shared attributes. *The Music Man* solves this problem in a number of interesting ways. Robert Preston plays a con artist who hawks expensive instruments and band uniforms on the false pretense that he will teach the town's children to play music and form a band. Shirley Jones works as a librarian whose prime purpose seems to be keeping noise out of the library. To complicate matters, Preston is an accomplished song-and-dance man, while Jones is primarily a sweet-voiced singer, entirely lacking in dance talent. Even here, however, the film is easily conceived as a series of parallel scenes. The main characters are both given academic names, each used as the title and primary motif of a song ("Professor Harold Hill" and "Marian the Librarian"). A scene in which Marian oversees her little sister's piano practice provides an opportunity to oppose her regimented methods to Hill's lack of method. Each character begins by severely criticizing the other's principles, but slowly, in a series of paired scenes, each comes to appreciate the other's values.

An even more radical problem is created by the presence of performers who are not suited to a love-interest plot, either because they are too young or too wacky. In this situation one of two methods is commonly used to set the musical back on its couple-conscious course: 1) the young girl is paired with an older man (or men) who becomes her co-conspirator(s) rather than an amorous partner (e.g., Shirley Temple in *The Little Colonel*, Deanna Durbin in *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, or Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*); or 2) a secondary pair are in love, the principals serving as catalysts (e.g., Shirley Temple in *Little Miss Broadway* or Abbott and Costello in *Ride 'Em Cowboy*).

An interesting variation on the traditional paired-scene arrangement involves couples. At the beginning of the film the alternation seems to designate a particular male for a specific female, yet as the film progresses we recognize that these are not the two who are "Fated to Be Mated," as Fred Astaire puts it in *Silk Stockings*. "It's fate, baby, it's fate," sings Betty Garrett to Frank Sinatra in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*—couples are by convention not made during the course of a musical film, they are pre-ordained (made in heaven, maintains the popular audience; yes, but according to the current constellation of stars, responds the critic.)

Proliferation of couples provides the most important method of ensuring a steady alternation between male and female elements without at the same time producing too great a sense of repetition and sameness. Many musicals set up a secondary couple in order to relieve the

monotony and—just as important—to provide work for their older stars or create an image for a new face. The Kelly-Sinatra musicals (*Anchors Aweigh*, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, *On the Town*), for example, provide an opportunity to treat the male principals as a couple as well as to create a second male-female couple (a strategy used again years later in *Paint Your Wagon*). The same approach in *Anything Goes* permits Paramount to play Bing Crosby and Donald O'Connor off against each other as well as against their respective girls. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* does the same thing with Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell. In *Thousands Cheer*, on the other hand, MGM doubles the main couple (Kelly and Grayson) with older actors (John Boles and Mary Astor) fondly remembered by the previous generation of musical devotees. Other films raise the ante to three independent couples, usually spanning generations or representing different styles of life, dance, or song (*Bye Bye Birdie*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Born to Dance*, *Ziegfeld Girl*, many others). But why stop at three? If there are seven boys in the family, there must be *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. In fact, hardly a musical exists that does not at some point literally cover the screen with dancing couples. The American film musical seems to suggest that the natural state of the adult human being is in the arms of an adult human being of the opposite sex. Pairing-off is the natural impulse of the musical, whether it be in the presentation of the plot, the splitting of the screen, the choreography of the dance, or even the repetition of a melody. Image follows image according to the nearly iron-clad law

requiring each sequence to uphold interest in male-female coupling by including parallel scenes and shared activities.

Each separate part of the film recapitulates the film's overall duality

By definition, popular art appeals to a large and varied audience. As one of Hollywood's most popular genres, the musical has traditionally drawn its spectators from the widest possible spectrum of the public. For every spectator interested in the structure and meaning of the musical, there are thousands of others who are out only for a good time. Seeking entertainment and not a message, the average spectator of musicals cannot be expected to analyze the film he or she is enjoying. According to many critics, the musical has refused to meet this implicit challenge, simply abandoning any claims to meaning in favor of a wholehearted surrender to entertainment. This position, however, simply begs the question of entertainment's meaningful role in American life. A more fruitful approach assumes that the musical inscribes its message in such a way as to reach even those spectators unwilling to engage in a process of conscious interpretation. The key technique in the musical's approach to meaning is repetition, across the genre as well as within individual films.¹ The same configurations are ceaselessly repeated, with only the context changing. Even before anything approaching meaning can be ascertained or established, this process of repetition has created the pattern within which meaning will be inscribed. By transferring the male-female

gamut. The backstage plot has often provided male and female stars with similar dressing rooms (*Sweethearts, Broadway Melody of 1940, The Barkleys of Broadway, A Star Is Born* [1976]). The adolescent stars of the late thirties often retired to parallel houses at the end of the day (e.g., Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland in *Strike Up the Band*), while their older counterparts had similar apartments or hotel rooms (as in *Chocolate Soldier, For Me and My Gal, Easter Parade, Take Me Out to the Ball Game*). Long parallel sequences are often constructed around symmetrical sets, specially conceived to underscore the similarity of the principals' positions. In *The Band Wagon*, for example, Jack Buchanan (the director) attempts to persuade the potential backers to support his show while Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire (the performers) observe from mirror-image rooms opening on to the living room where Buchanan is selling the show. The symmetrical nature of the set, as well as the similarity of the stars' activities and the repeated use of parallel shots, serves to prepare the confrontation between Astaire and Charisse, which takes place, predictably, in the neutral ground between the two waiting rooms. When the musical went on location in the fifties, the problem of providing parallel backgrounds became somewhat different. Instead of constructing similar sets, Hollywood now turned to associating each of the main characters with a specific and highly differentiated locale and activity. The most common solution was to borrow a chapter from American tradition, identifying the woman with the house and showing the man riding the range, working the mine, or simply en-

parallel settings have run an enormous matching backgrounds. In the musical, set-builders have understood the value of similarly shaped and furnished rooms, placed the good guys and the villains in parallel sets. Ever since D. W. Griffith first has always had a genius for constructing (1) setting. The American film industry music, dance, and personal style. five major realms: setting, shot selection, but viewed in perspective these all contribute secondary categories contributing to but viewed in perspective, manners, and so forth, competence, attitudes, professions, competence, manners, and so forth, about this departure from accepted practice). Other areas include attitude, profession, competence, manners, and so forth, those of Fred Astaire and Mickey Rooney, who both often worry out loud the woman in almost every case, except *Story*, and size (the man towering over Beymer and Natalie Wood in *West Side Band Wagon*), national origin (Richard Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse in *The Moon*), age and background ("We're from two different worlds, two eras"—Eddy's valet livery contrasting with Jeanette MacDonald's fancy gown in *New scenes of Carousel*), costume (Nelson Jones in white throughout the opening Macrae in black opposite blond Shirley male duality: color (dark-haired Gordon underscore the musical's basic male-female duality). Almost any category can be used to deal with the transformation of the sexual opposition into a more clearly thematic duality. The following section will detail the various ways in which the film's thematic oppositions. This section that eventually serves as a model for duality to every aspect of the film experience, the musical sets up a redundant pattern that eventually serves as a model for

needs to be paired with another solo of the opposite sex in order to achieve its ultimate function. Sailor musicals (*Born to Dance, Follow the Fleet, Anchors Aweigh, On the Town*, and more) traditionally begin with a mixture of individual and group solo shots. Until these shots are matched by corresponding female solo shots, however, the film can go nowhere. (It's not that a plot cannot be devised without them, but that a couple cannot be created without them, and in the musical *the couple is the plot*.) The group solo calls for either a corresponding group solo or for an individual solo of a representative member of the opposite sex (Kathryn Grayson or Judy Garland with an all-male orchestra or band, Eleanor Powell or Ann Miller with a male dance chorus); the close-up solo, particularly in a love scene, all but requires a matching close-up solo. Good dance directors like Charles Walters or Stanley Donen are adept at mixing paired solos with duets in order to achieve an overall balance both of the sexes and of shot types. The third type of shot might be called *unmarked*, since it includes both men and women without marking any particular pairings. In general this rather unbalanced shot involves secondary characters and is more closely related to traditional notions of plot than are the other two types. Even here, however, where the love interest may seem absent, the viewer remains aware of the importance of any given shot or scene for the ultimate coupling.

A quick look at Ernst Lubitsch's *Love Parade* (1929) will reveal how one early masterpiece succeeds in varying its sexual iconography without ever letting sexual

Opposite: Contrasting black and white costumes highlight the opposition of men to women in one of The Great Ziegfeld's massive production numbers.

joying himself away from home (as in *Oklahoma!*, *Paint Your Wagon*, *The Music Man*, and *Carousel*). Perhaps the most effective use of American scenery occurs in a musical that was not shot on location, however. The set for *The Harvey Girls* represents the main street of a western town along the main line of the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe. On the left is John Hodak's Casino, hangout of all the town rowdies; on the right is the Harvey House restaurant, where Judy Garland works with a company of prim and proper Harvey House waitresses. Sets like this one hardly need a plot to expound their latent symbolism.

2) *shot selection.* Three basic strategies guide the musical's attempt to keep the male-female duality constantly in view. The first and most obvious we might call *the duet*, a shot in which all the performers are paired off. This can be a simple two-shot of the lovers, a four-shot (like the split-screen parallel-rehearsal number in the 1956 version of *Anything Goes*), or a mammoth fresco shot covering the entire screen with couples (as in the "Pettin' in the Park" number from *Gold Diggers of 1933*). The duet is complete in itself and thus nearly always serves as the film's concluding shot. The *solo*, on the other hand, is only half of a dipych, for it presents only one sex (either a single individual or more than one person of the same sex). Whether in close-up, medium shot, or large group long-shot, the solo



The duet shot—Fred Astaire and Lucille Bremer are backed up by a screen full of couples in Vincente Minnelli's "This Heart of Mine" number from *Ziegfeld Follies*.

[MOMA]

interplay disappear from the screen. This tongue-in-cheek story of Maurice Chevalier's marriage with the Queen of Sylvania, Jeanette MacDonald, begins in Paris, where Chevalier is quarreling with one of his mistresses. These early shots have nothing to do with the plot, such as it is, but they do serve to define the subject from the very start: whatever the subject, it has to do with a man and a woman sharing the screen. Before Chevalier and his valet (Lupino Lane) leave Paris, Lubitsch gives us a delightful throw-away sequence—or rather, it would have been

thrown away if the plot rather than the couple were central. Chevalier is seen on his balcony. The next shot appears to represent Chevalier's view of a group of girls on the balcony across the way. Such pretense at realism soon gives way, however, since throughout Chevalier's song ("Oh Paris Please Stay the Same") Lubitsch regularly intercuts to a different group of women. Are all these beauties within Chevalier's line of vision? Are they figments of his imagination? His memory? No matter, for one thing is sure: Lubitsch has cleverly provided us with a series of



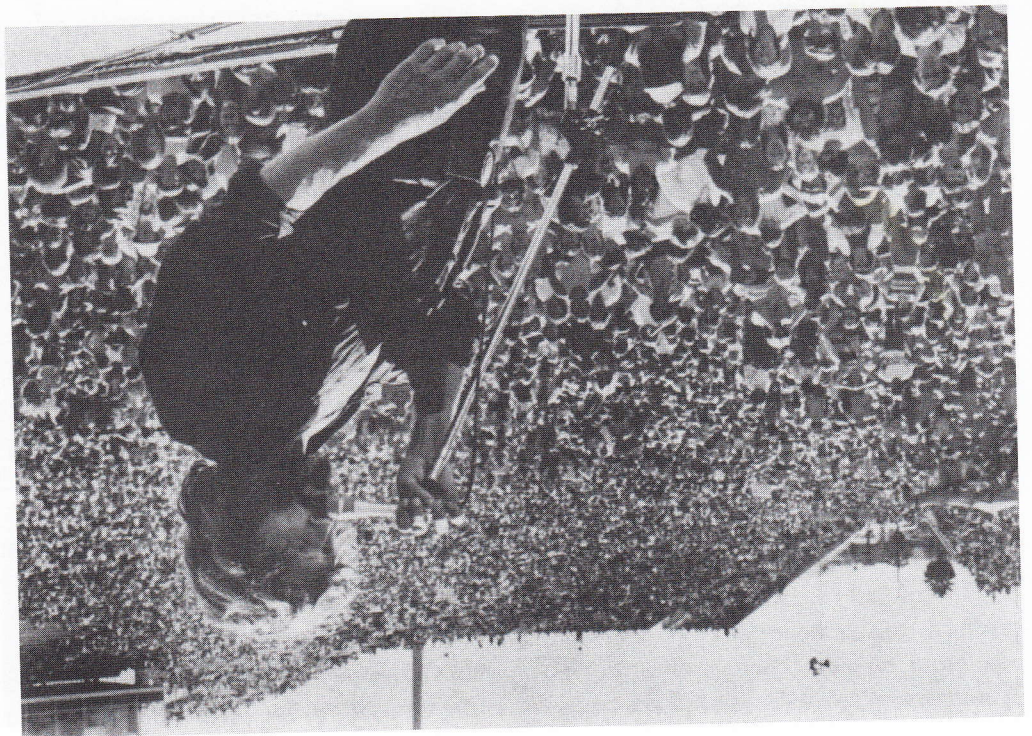
Matched solo shots—Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson in mirror-image shots with similar backgrounds, chosen by MGM to publicize the 1976 version of *A Star Is Born*.

[MOMA]

fective in setting up the male-female duality than the many songs which are delivered in echo fashion: one line for him, one line for her, and so on alternately until the voices merge in a final embrace. Songs like “People Will Say We’re in Love” (*Oklahoma!*), “If I Loved You” (*Carousel*), “Every Little Movement” (*Presenting Lily Mars*), and “Make Believe,” “Why Do I Love You?,” and “You Are Love” (*Show Boat*) represent the minimal form of the echo duet, for here the lovers alternate verses rather than individual lines, as in true echo duets like “Anything You Can Do” (*Annie Get*

Your Gun), “No Two People” (*Hans Christian Andersen*), “I Love You More” (*Pajama Game*), “Paris Loves Lovers” (*Silk Stockings*), “I Remember It Well” (*Gigi*), and “Bess You Is My Woman Now” (*Porgy and Bess*).

The last song, one of George Gershwin’s many outstanding contributions to the American film musical, provides a particularly clear example of the multiple and subtle ways in which music contributes to the audience’s overall impression of the film’s sexual structure. *Porgy* begins with twelve bars in B major (a), followed by eight bars in F# major (b). *Bess*



Porgy echoing Bess's song while she hums. An embrace covers two bars leading to a short unison sequence and a harmonic climax.

Now on the surface, this short analysis seems to present a strikingly symmetrical arrangement. Porgy's sections (a) and (b) are reflected in Bess's sections (c) and (d), with (e) serving as a first meeting point. Then (f) and (g) repeat the same material, this time as a harmonic rather than an alternating duet, leading ultimately to a conclusion which matches emotional and musical harmony. The intriguing aspect of this duet, however, is not the rather

then takes up the words and melody which Porgy sang in (a), but she sings it in D major and reverses all the sexual designations (c); she too now modulates into F# major but this time keeps neither Porgy's words, his rhythm, his tempo, nor his accompaniment (d). Her final measures in F# major nevertheless are echoed by Porgy in the same tune and the same key (e). At this point Bess begins again, repeating her sections (c) and (d), while Porgy harmonizes, singing new words and rhythms (f,g). The final sixteen bars (all in F# major) have Porgy humming while Bess sings for two bars, then

pat antiphonal setup, but the tension beneath. The song's alternation serves to set up a sexual duality, thus creating a context in which each phrase is sensed not just for itself but as a function of its counterpart, sung by the other member of the couple. Because we alternate between Porgy and Bess, we feel each as a function of his/her differences from the other. When Bess changes Porgy's words (e.g., from "Bess" to "Porgy") we unconsciously sense the difference in gender. Far more important, when Bess suddenly speeds up (*subito più mosso*) in part (d), abandoning not only Porgy's words but his lilting self-assurance, we take notice, even if only subconsciously. At the same time Bess's melodic line becomes syncopated and chromatic, whereas Porgy's was regular and full of elated ascending jumps; the accompaniment turns eery, becoming more insistent and dissonant, repeating eighth notes in a downward chromatic slide (whereas Porgy was accompanied by light, ascending arpeggios). Excitement, fear, and a sense of forced emotion emerge from these measures. No matter that the duet should end on a musical and physical embrace, Gershwin has admirably succeeded in telegraphing Bess's misgivings, her mistrust of herself, her fear of the future. Like all artists who work within the musical genre, Gershwin has achieved his effect through a structure of sexual duality which alone permits us to measure the distance separating the principals. That Bess should run off and leave Porgy in the final sequence comes as no surprise to those who have listened carefully to the music along the way.

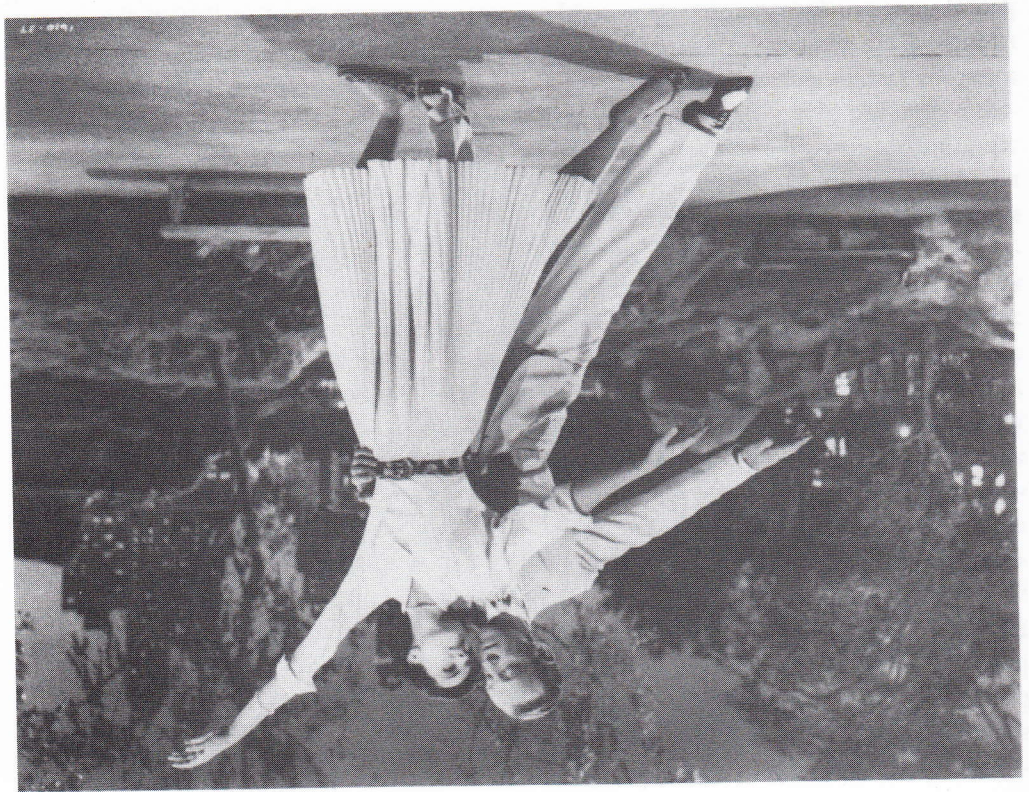
The antiphonal style of "Bess, You Is My Woman Now" calls to mind the musical's distant ancestry in pastoral poetry. From Theocritus to Virgil and on to the Italian Renaissance, a type of verse termed "amoebic" (or "amoeban") characterizes pastoral composition. Whether between two shepherds in a singing match or two lovers competing in fun against each other, the basic principle of this type of verse is contained in its name: *amoibe* or change. Creating a mirror effect, the formal similarities of succeeding verses invite the listener to conceive the world as fundamentally dual and to contrast the male and female principles underlying that duality. Now, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that musicals adhere to amoebic principles from beginning to end. In fact, it is interesting to note just how carefully most musicals are designed to move from a preponderance of sexually unmarked novelty or comic numbers in the opening reels to a heavy concentration of paired or antiphonal songs toward the end. Quite apart from questions of plot, then, the tendency of the music is toward the amoebic, toward sexual definition of the film's fundamental principles.

4) *dance*. The beauty of dance is that it needs no words—indeed, it escapes words, surpassing any description which we might devise. Filmed dance is doubly difficult to evoke in words, for Hollywood's directors have become unusually adept at making the camera dance along with the actors. The filming of dance has come a long way since the early days of filmed vaudeville, when the camera remained bolted to the center seat of the

performers—they must establish on their own both the male-female duality and its amorous resolution.² Astaire and Rogers are of course up to this task, using the ballroom style to perfection as she molds herself to his lead, replicating with perfection his every gesture. Lesser performers, different technique. Busby Berkeley is largely responsible for discovering an alternate method more easily suited to the average hooper. Instead of tying a stationary camera to the fluid movements of a single duet, Berkeley

lays a heavy responsibility on the proverbial fifth row. This simple procedure with the camera-spectator sitting in that Astaire and Rogers appear to be on stage, couple, but always returning to center. Astaire and Rogers return to center, pan-ning left and right to follow the dancing. This symmetrically organized space, pan-camera is placed along the center line of dance on an empty ballroom floor. The willing Ginger Rogers to join him in Day" (1934), Fred Astaire induces an un-*noir*'s classic version of "Night and fifth row of the orchestra. In the *Gay Di-*

Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse seem to have been created out of the same mold in *The Band Wagon*'s rendition of "Dancing in the Dark." [MOMA]



relegates individual dancers to the status of constitutive elements in an overall pattern, whose changes he captures from the vantage point of a mobile camera on a crane or a track located above the stage. This technique calls for constant substitution of one symmetrically organized duet shot for another. In *Strike Up the Band*, a characteristic example of Berkeley's later work, he applies this stage technique to a ballroom number, "La Conga." From Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney singing and dancing together we move to a high-angle (crane) long shot of the whirling couples filling the floor. As the camera remains stationary the couples separate and form two rows, men and women facing each other across the screen's center line. This switch from multiple single-couple duets to a single group duet is followed by a sweeping movement ending in a low-angle medium shot of the lead couple—Garland and Rooney—who then go through a vaudeville-inspired kicking routine as the camera moves back to frame them in the midst of the other dancers, who soon form into concentric male and female circles, and finally pair off once more into the original couples. This long number demonstrates both the various types of duet available to the creative director (single couple, multiple couple, paired lines, concentric circles, and so forth), but also the different possible relationships between dancers and camera (dancers regroup for stationary camera, camera moves to pick out new duets). With Astaire and Rogers individual steps were highlighted; here it is the male-female patterning that stands out, almost independently of the dance steps employed.

Another approach to dance, characteristic of MGM in the forties, combines solo and group dancing, realistic sets and empty stages, as well as narrative and ballroom dancing. Minnelli's "This Heart of Mine" number, from *Ziegfeld Follies*, is an outstanding example of this technique. In this mimed story Fred Astaire is a jewel thief intent on stealing the expensive bracelet worn by the radiant Lucille Bremer, whose white gown contrasts with his black tails. Their first steps together take them from a crowded ballroom floor to a specially prepared empty set. After Astaire's song, Bremer tries to escape on a conveyor belt; then Astaire hops on a second conveyor belt, replicating Bremer's movement. They continue to alternate on the conveyor belts, trading steps until the two belts, now moving in opposite directions, give them an opportunity to dance their paired steps simultaneously—but in opposite directions. They are soon joined by a circle of couples who dance around and behind them, highlighting the male-female duality. The sequence ends as Astaire and Bremer return to the more realistic ballroom set, where he takes both a kiss and the bracelet; she then matches his actions and his desire by *giving* him her necklace along with a kiss. As in *Yolanda and the Thief*, of which "This Heart of Mine" is like a mimed summary, Astaire wants Bremer's jewels and will gladly pay a kiss in order to get them; Bremer, on the other hand, wants the kiss and happily pays for it with her jewels. The resolution—in which we find out that their goals are less divergent than we might have thought—has been fully prepared by the dance's movement from separate activity to alternating paired

movement and finally to shared movement reinforced by the background of sixteen other harmonious couples. This little-known dance deserves to take its place with "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" (*Words and Music*) and "The Girl Hunt Ballet" (*Band Wagon*) as one of the musical's most elegant narrative dances. It owes its class not only to the superb artistry of Bremer and Astaire, but also to Minnelli's ability to vary the methods which he uses to keep the idea of a couple foremost in the audience's mind—and eye. Paired solo close-ups are mixed with duet long shots, lavish multiple-couple shots with simple takes of a single couple against a neutral background, moments when the camera simply follows the main couple with instances where the camera's choice of scale or angle intensifies our notion that the two dancers are best sensed as a couple.

5) *personal style*. This final major category derives its importance from its all-pervasiveness. Just as setting, iconography, music, and dance function to keep the male-female duality constantly in the forefront of the spectator's mind, ear, and eye, so the actors' personal styles serve to reinforce the film's fundamental sexual dichotomy. The most common use of stylistic juxtaposition occurs, predictably, in the omnipresent song-and-dance numbers. In the numerous films which Maurice Chevalier made with Jeanette MacDonald, for example (*Love Parade*, *One Hour with You*, *Love Me Tonight*, *The Merry Widow*), the entire story might be summarized by the stars' singing voices: she has a sophisticated opera voice, versatile and mellifluous; he, on the other hand, has the rasping

but personable voice of a Paris *chansonnier*—pleasantly natural rather than sophisticated, carefree and happy-go-lucky rather than trained. This opposition constantly presents the potential lovers' differing backgrounds to our ears, even when the camera shows them to our eyes only one at a time. Even when the musical style is not so prominently displayed, it makes its presence felt, sometimes as a simple accompaniment (e.g., strings for MacDonald, brass for Eddy in *Sweethearts*) or as a source of comic relief (when Buster Keaton becomes a Hollywood king in his first musical, *Easy Go*, his whispered words to the queen come out as low notes on the tuba, while her responses are heard as muted high notes on the trumpet, thus exaggerating the normally different speaking registers of men and women). The same opportunities for differentiating stylistically between the sexes occur in dance as well. A typical juxtaposition sets popular tap-dance or ballroom styles against the ballet routines of high art (e.g., Kelly and Caron in *An American in Paris*, Astaire and Charisse in *Band Wagon*, Travolta and Gorney in *Saturday Night Fever*).

Personal style is by no means limited to the rhythmic forms of song and dance, however. Talented directors play multiple aspects of each actor's performance against the style of the corresponding actress. Often this stylistic pairing is a necessary part of the script: what would *My Fair Lady* be without the disparity between the language spoken by Rex Harrison and that muttered by his young charge? What would be left of *The Music Man*'s plot and theme

Writing a serious book about a form which appeals precisely because it does not seem serious can create problems. I have just spent the better part of a chapter analyzing the components of the American film musical, demonstrating the multiple methods used to inscribe sexual duality on the film's surface. In sum, I have been engaged in the paradoxical activity of proving the uselessness of my analysis: if sexual duality is so prominent in the musical then any spectator—deaf, blind, or color-blind—will without the least bit of difficulty sense the couple's structural significance. The whole point in overdetermining the musical's dualistic structure is precisely to make sure that the spectator will sense the film's overall patterns without analysis. The analysis presented here has nevertheless allowed us to perceive an increasing complexity in the development of dual-focus structure. From setting and iconography I moved to the considerably more complex realms of song and dance, finishing with a type of stylistic juxtaposition that borders on the mathematics. As I dealt in turn with each category, I spoke as if each separate parameter served to reinforce a sense of sexual duality. The time has come to admit the limitations of that approach. In fact, it is quite the opposite process that actually takes place: informed of the impor-

The basic sexual duality overlays a secondary dichotomy.

disposition of some parent figure to oppose it (e.g., Lionel Barrymore in *The Little Colonel*)? Style is style, no doubt, but in the American film musical, style comes in matched pairs.

if Robert Preston were not a faker and Shirley Jones not a very serious young woman? Still more often, however, an actor underscores through his own personal style an opposition only latent in the script. The outstanding practitioner of this approach is surely Gene Kelly, who can't seem to help exuding confidence and charm, a style easily paired with the reserve of Esther Williams (*Take Me Out to the Ball Game*), the nervous naïveté of Judy Garland (*The Pirate*), the responsible work ethic of Kathryn Grayson (*Anchors Aweigh*), the shy and retiring manner of Leslie Caron (*An American in Paris*), or in a unique—and largely unsuccessful—experiment, the even greater self-confidence and selfishness of Marie McDonald (*Living in a Big Way*). The same configuration can be found, slightly altered, in Mickey Rooney's many movies, where his natural egotism spills over into his screen persona, often juxtaposed to Judy Garland's selflessness and practicality. The point to retain is not that headliners of the American film musical have "style." All good actors have some kind of style, whether in Hollywood, on Broadway, or at Stratford-on-Avon. What distinguishes the musical is its ability to pair personal styles, providing yet another way to keep the male-female duality constantly before us. What good is a bashful Frank Sinatra without an over-eager Betty Garrett (*Take Me Out to the Ball Game, On the Town*)? What would Julie Andrews's vivacity mean if it were not opposed to Christopher Plummer's reserve (*The Sound of Music*)? Where would Shirley Temple's childish excitement have gotten her without the sour

rance of sexual duality by every possible indicator, we soon begin to notice other parameters suggested by their relationship to the already perceived sexual duality. In other words, as soon as we have become firmly aware of the coupling motif—which occurs extremely early in a musical—the pattern of sexual duality leads us to the secondary dichotomies determining the film's thematics and defining the categories which the film ritualizes.

By way of example, *Silk Stockings* (Mamoulian's 1957 musical remake of *Nimotchka*) pits the happy-go-lucky Hollywood director Fred Astaire against a serious Cyd Charisse, khaki-clad, businesslike, and devoted above all to her country—the U.S.S.R. Now we could establish a long list of paired qualities associated with the two stars—he is frivolous, she is serious; he seems to have nothing to do, she is always on her way somewhere; he makes his own decisions, she takes orders from Moscow. At one level, Cyd Charisse's cold and calculating manner represents the Russian mentality, as seen from the vantage point of the Cold War, while Fred Astaire's debonair joyfulness figures America's vision of itself during the caretree Eisenhower years. With its never-ending five-year plans, its ironclad chain of command, and its women dressed in men's clothing, the U.S.S.R. has always appeared to the American populace as an aberrant colossus, characterized by the cold of Siberia and the ruthlessness of the Party. To that stereotyped portrayal, Mamoulian opposes an equally simplistic view of Western life, dominated by shapely women, noisy

parties, and vulgar entertainment. Indeed, it is the film's fascination with popular entertainment that catapults its thematic concerns beyond a rather partial and oversimplified opposition between Russian and Western practices. Whenever she goes, whatever she does, Charisse remains fundamentally businesslike. Everything is business, right down to the lights of Paris. For Astaire, nothing is business, not even his job. Instead, his characteristic light touch transforms everything into entertainment. On the one side business (use value defined from the point of view of the reality principle), on the other side entertainment (use value seen from the standpoint of the pleasure principle). Every scene, every character, every dialogue contributes to this overall thematic dichotomy which is gratified, as it were, onto the basic male/female duality. Resolution comes when Hollywood's sleight of hand dissipates the dichotomy altogether, proving with the establishment by Charisse's henchmen of a night club ("La Vieille Rus-sie") that good entertainment is good business.

A similar motif provides the secondary thematic context in *The Sound of Music* as well. Here, however, the roles are reversed: Christopher Plummer is the discipline-conscious ex-Navy officer who has lost all contact with his children, while Julie Andrews is the joyous one, the nun always ready to burst into song and thus to bring some excitement into the lives of her employer's children. Whereas he wears the uniform of the aristocracy, she wears the uniform of the aristocracy, has friends from Vienna, and values order over all other qualities, she dresses in the

simple garb of the folk, prefers mountain pastures to rich city dwellers, and would rather sing than sip cocktails. In other words, not only are the primary qualities of these two characters matched (one is male, the other female), but their secondary attributes are paired as well, permitting the establishment of a complex of thematic motifs running parallel to the love plot.

Yolanda and the Thief introduces another variation on the same basic serious/fun motif. Yolanda Acquaviva (Lucille Bremer) is the only heiress to the multi-million-dollar fortune of Patria's richest family. She lives in a palace, owns half the country, possesses a beautiful face and figure. She has one problem, however: she suffers from an overabundance of money. Her responsibilities force her to abandon her own desires. As a con-artist who preys on unsuspecting young lovelies, wooing them with his clever wit, his debonair manner, and his expertise on the dance floor, Johnny Riggs (Fred Astaire) has fled to Patria because it has no extradition treaty with his own country. The pattern is quickly established: whereas Bremer is trusting and rich, Astaire is entertaining but conniving. As in the "This Heart of Mine" sequence from *Ziegfeld Follies*, Astaire and Bremer represent polar opposites, each one having something which the other cannot do without. The same pattern operates again in *Let's Dance*, where Betty Hutton's Boston Brahmin family tries to keep her away from the theater and her former partner, the ever-present Astaire, whom she had abandoned because of his unreliability. Now that Hutton is associated with money and Astaire with mad get-

rich-quick schemes which never succeed, she recognizes the extent to which she is incomplete without his spontaneity. Astaire, on the other hand, has in the meantime become painfully aware of his need to settle down and hold a steady job.

At first glance it might seem that these thematic oppositions have little in common. *Silk Stockings* opposes a Russian worker to an American playboy, *The Sound of Music* sets a pixie against a martinet, *Yolanda and the Thief* juxtaposes an heiress and a crook, *Let's Dance* confronts a woman who has just married into a good family with a bachelor who can't even keep a job. *Carousel* brings together a loose-living carnival barker and a virtuous young working girl who dreams of a husband, a home, and a family. *Stormy Weather* reverses this relationship, making Lena Horne the one who lives for her career on stage, while Bill Robinson yearns for a more permanent home. *Meet Me in St. Louis* identifies all the happy-go-lucky women folk with the Midwest, while their ambitious men yearn for college or a job in the East. *Funny Face's* female star (Audrey Hepburn) works in a bookstore and studies French philosophy, thus opposing her to the male lead (Fred Astaire) who spends his time in the comparatively frivolous world of fashion photography. *My Fair Lady* sets Eliza's Cockney energy against Professor Higgins's suave concern for order, rules, and proper pronunciation.

The list can go on endlessly. Each musical finds its own specific thematic pairing to support the main male-female coupling. In spite of the tremendous variety in

Hotel—inexpensive haven for actors and vaudeville performers of all sizes, shapes, and incomes—Shirley helps to organize a show designed to save the hotel's occupants from the eviction threatened by the hotel's neighbor and owner, Edna Mae Oliver. Shirley's crusade leads her into the landlady's palatial residence, where she befriends Oliver's good-looking young nephew, George Murphy (who soon falls in love with the daughter of the hotel proprietor). The two parallel sets (fancy apartment and rundown hotel) help to establish the film's primary thematic duality setting money and good business practice against the arts and the unforgettable pleasure provided by good entertainment. The long final courtroom scene brings this opposition to a head. The performers succeed in turning the courtroom into a stage, constantly drowning out the judge's requests for order in the groundswell of laughter and, finally, from the judge himself. Against a funny joke or a thrilling performance, even an alliance of money, law, and order is powerless. Yet as Edna Mae Oliver recognizes in the scene's final words, good entertainment is good business—and so she herself buys the show, thus saving the hotel from ruin at her own hands. The entire film is built around a simple variation on the basic work/entertainment duality. Work produces riches, which must be defended by law; this complex of values is opposed to vaudeville and its radically different concomitants: talent, fun, togetherness. In the end, of course, the two sets of values no longer seem so distant; like George Murphy and his girl, they have achieved a matrimonial pact

this thematic material, however, one constant remains. In every case, one side of the thematic dichotomy is closely associated with the work ethic and its values, while the other is devoted to those activities and qualities traditionally identified with entertainment. Self-conscious of its status as "only" entertainment in a world where work alone merits full value, the American film musical has adopted society's work/entertainment dichotomy as its own thematic center. Now, American entertainment involves a curious tension between cultural and counter-cultural values. In the musical this tension is worked out through the thematic material identified with the members of the couple, one partner representing the thoroughly cultural values identified with work and a stable family structure, the other embodying the counter-cultural values associated with entertainment. It goes without saying that these two categories are not in fact mutually exclusive: working or raising a family can be fun, just as dancing is hard work. The musical's strategy requires the suppression of such nuances, however, in favor of an initial clearcut dichotomy (which, as we will see in the next section, is set up only to be resolved later).

Two further examples should help to illustrate this rather radical hypothesis. I have chosen two films sharing several superficial similarities—their Broadway location in particular—in order to show how much variation is possible within the basic work/entertainment framework. *Little Miss Broadway* stars an almost grown Shirley Temple (she was ten in 1938) at her very best. As an orphan adopted by the proprietor of the Variety

catalyzed by little Shirley Temple, "Little Miss Broadway."

The Barkleys of Broadway need no such Cupid. From the very first close-up of their dancing feet, Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire are married, dancing their third successful show together (in real life, their tenth film). Nevertheless, they still quarrel and indulge in occasional flights of jealousy: she is in a huff about the shapely understudy with whom Fred must practice daily, he is concerned about the suave French playwright who seems to have captured Ginger's imagination. Eventually Rogers, piqued by Astaire's criticism and flattered by the Frenchman's praise, leaves the world of musical comedy for the dramatic stage (breaking up the team for the same reason she had in real life separated from Astaire a decade earlier). Up to this point we had been alternating between Rogers and Astaire, setting up the couple's respective spheres of influence; now that Rogers has aligned herself with serious theater, abandoning Astaire's song-and-dance fare, we begin to alternate instead between the two theaters, implicitly comparing Astaire's numbers, his audience, and his genre, to Rogers's high-brow counterpart. As the young Sarah Bernhardt, Rogers has every opportunity to portray the very aspects of the stage world that are foreign to Astaire: a conservatory education, an aristocratic public, and absolute dependence on a text made up primarily of words.

This opposition between "high" and "low" forms of art is of course dealt with in anything but an objective fashion. We see the rather poor rehearsals of Ginger's play, whereas we are given a polished performance of Fred's heavily

edited dance "Shoes with Wings On"; Ginger acts in street clothes, while Fred has a costume; Ginger's set has not been built yet, Fred benefits not only from a set but from many special effects as well. In general, everything is done to make *Young Sarah* seem like a lot of work, while the Astaire show just naturally happens, with even the most complex steps coming spontaneously. Now, the opposition of serious theater to musical comedy is a far cry from the business/art duality central to *Little Miss Broadway*. If anything, musical comedy is run as a business, while serious theater is considered an art, yet *Barkleys* manages, by a slick rhetorical effort common to all the Comden and Green scripts, to make the high-brow/low-brow distinction seem just as much a part of the work/entertainment paradigm as was the riches/pleasure opposition in *Little Miss Broadway*. From film to film the specific incarnation of the work/entertainment duality may change, but in one way or another every musical somehow manages to build its thematic complex around its very status as a form of entertainment.

The marriage which resolves the primary (sexual) dichotomy also mediates between the two terms of the secondary (thematic) opposition

When people go to a film to be entertained, they don't want to be told that they are wasting their time. Justifying the entire entertainment enterprise, the musical demonstrates that people who are insensitive to entertainment somehow miss

Thematic resolution in the musical takes place in as many different ways as there are variations on the fundamental work/entertainment opposition. In *Little Miss Broadway* the representatives of law, order, and money reveal during the long courtroom scene their sensitivity to a good show; by the same token, the Variety Hotel's performers demonstrate the financial possibilities of their entertainment. The tycoons and judges become an audience, the performers become business men. This crossover represents a characteristic configuration of the musical's closing moments: the values once associated with one of the partners are finally adopted by the other. The *Barrelers of Broadway*, for example, avoids the easy solution of simply debunking high-brow art. Instead, Fred Astaire admits that Ginger Rogers can act well in any type of play—as long as she has the proper direction. This is just what Astaire proceeds to give to his estranged wife (over the phone and in a disguised voice). With Astaire as director, Rogers's performance is a hit—but only because Astaire directs serious theater the way he handles musical comedy. Astaire's concession to Rogers's career on the legitimate stage is immediately met by her decision to return to the world of song and dance. Now that each knows that the other respects his/her talents and tastes, they are free to kiss and make up—and continue producing their peculiar mixture of good theater and joyous entertainment. In both these films, the final peace treaty is symbolically represented by a song or dance which combines two different styles. In *Little Miss Broadway* the pact between the old fogey aristocrats and the performers led by

the best part of life. In an important sense, the American film musical constitutes an apology for its own existence: by setting up the work/entertainment polarity in such a way as to demonstrate the incomplete and potentially destructive nature of work ("All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy") as well as the desirable qualities of entertainment, the musical justifies its own existence. Instead of simply supplanting the work ethic, however, entertainment values complement it, providing an able and energetic partner for the work ethic's more sober and conservative approach. The musical's typical romantic resolution, which depends on the harmony of a couple originally at odds, is thus matched by a thematic resolution in which opposite life styles or values merge. In most cases, to be sure, we are not permitted to verify whether this apparent solution is actually a workable one: the couple is united, the film ends, and we must accept on faith the implied assertion that they lived happily ever after. By convention, time stops when the couple kisses, and change is forevermore banished from their life together. The conventional American willingness to make courtship the paradigm of life itself is used to good effect by the musical's thematic component. Just as romantic problems are considered definitively solved once they result in marriage, so the resolution of the musical's thematic dichotomies is presented as permanently efficacious. The ecstatic, uplifting quality of the musical's final scene permits no doubt about the permanence both of the couple and of the cultural values which the couple simultaneously guarantees and incarnates.

Shirley Temple is symbolically sealed by a performance of "Swing Me an Old Fashioned Song," a combination of old and new, of classical and modern, just like the *Barkleys's* "Swing Trot" (a technique also used for the "Girl Hunt" jazz ballet in *The Band Wagon*, the final opera/pop number of *This Time for Keeps*, the combination ballet/tap finale of *An American in Paris*, and the chansonnier/opera duets of Chevalier and MacDonald).

The musical's thematic resolution is often symbolically figured by a trading of styles on the part of the principal characters. In *My Fair Lady*, Professor Higgins's very profession and class define him as a man who can control his voice and his movements; Eliza, on the other hand, has too much energy and too little education to control much of anything. The final scenes, however, demonstrate the strong effect which each of these well-defined personages has had on the other. Professor Higgins has taught Eliza the restraint of polite society; at the same time, some of her impetuosity has rubbed off on him. Eliza Doolittle, in perfect control of her voice and body, now confronts an easily perturbed Higgins, who rants and raves at every provocation. Not until the film's thematic dividing line is thus crossed can the film hurry to its conclusion. Now that they not only understand each other's values but actually adopt each other's attitudes and characteristic patterns of action, Higgins and Doolittle are finally ready for romantic resolution as well. Precisely the same pattern presides over *The Sound of Music*, where a sedate older man is lured out of his shell by an energetic young woman, while she, out of a desire to appeal to him, takes on

new responsibilities along with the sobriety of the older generation. As an outward sign of this new attitude, Baron von Trapp finally joins his young wife and children in song. *Gigi* adopts exactly the same configuration: Gaston suddenly breaks into song and dances through the streets of Paris (as *Gigi* had done earlier) while *Gigi* becomes subdued and proper, nearly motionless (as Gaston was in the opening carriage ride with his uncle). All three of these films successfully translate into movement or sound the thematic reversal of position that accompanies the successful conclusion of the love plot.

The Music Man provides a particularly clear example of the process whereby the couple's romance becomes synonymous with the film's thematic resolution. Harold Hill is a traveling salesman; Marian is a librarian, surely the world's most sedentary occupation. He represents noise for the sake of noise (the instruments he sells make sounds but not music); as a librarian, Marian represents quiet for the sake of quiet. He teaches music according to the "belief" method (just think the note and play), thus encouraging creativity at the expense of precision; she advises her sister Amaryllis to limit her piano playing to rote repetition and sheer imitation, thus enforcing precision by stifling creativity. Morally speaking, Harold has a history of loose women and pool halls, while Marian plays to perfection the part of the archetypal virgin. He wants to seduce her and move on to another town and another woman; she wants to convert him to sedentary life devoted to home and family. The pattern is a familiar one, about which more will be said in the chapter devoted to the American folk

land-use laws, inspired by the ecology
 eral government and the states. Recent
 certain balance of power between the fed-
 tion. Our federal democracy ensures a
 tion of Independence with the Constitu-
 Founding Fathers balanced the Declara-
 ensure both freedom and order. The
 tent problems: how at the same time to
 resolving one of America's most persis-
 value structures merge as well, thus
 As Jones and Preston embrace, their
 ting an end to his liberty.

seems the grasping woman bent on put-
 to her serious purpose, she no longer
 pursuit. He is no longer seen as a threat
 leave town on the run with a posse in hot
 Harold must relinquish is the freedom to
 and enjoy its fruits; the only liberty which
 about her work and yet reveal passion
 Marian can still continue to be serious.
 we see that no such trade is necessary.
 riousness with passion. Now, however,
 for stability, he wanted to replace her se-
 from one. She wanted him to trade liberty
 fighting for a man rather than running
 suddenly becomes radiant now that she is
 ing parents all over town. Shirley Jones
 thing approximating music, thus delight-
 voice. Even the band itself makes some-
 the Music Man has restored his normal
 was raised), but now his relationship with
 the repressive atmosphere in which he
 stuttering (no doubt the outward sign of
 ian's little brother could not talk without
 place, the results are instantaneous. Mar-
 duct. As soon as this compromise takes
 least temper their previous code of con-
 nes, both characters must abandon or at-
 In order to achieve this marriage of val-
 brass band.

civilization cannot do without its wilder-
 ness, so a town needs both a library and a

musical. The man, with his wandering
 ways, preference for entertainment over
 work and promiscuity over fidelity, ap-
 pears as a fitting representative of wilder-
 ness values, while the woman exhibits all
 the trappings of civilization. Taking place
 in turn-of-the-century Iowa—an East-
 erner's version of the frontier between the
 civilized East and the barbarian West—
The Music Man encapsulates one of the
 most important and persistent themes of
 American history.

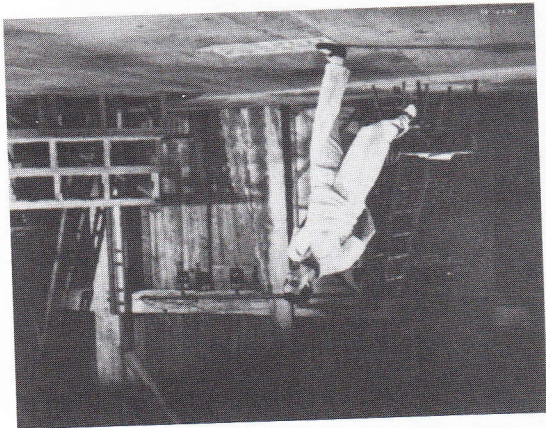
In typical musical fashion, *The Music
 Man* refuses to decide between the dia-
 metrically opposed values represented by
 Robert Preston and Shirley Jones. Instead
 of permitting either partner to control the
 relationship, director Da Costa reveals in
 turn each character's doubts about his/
 her own moral code. When Jones discov-
 ers that Preston has lied about his gradu-
 tion in Gary Conservatory's "Gold Medal
 Class of Ought-Five," she hides the evi-
 dence from the town's mayor. Has she
 been hooked by the handsome Preston?
 Or is she beginning to sense the joy and
 energy which he has brought to River
 City? When he is warned that his crooked
 schemes have been discovered, he hesi-
 tates instead of taking his customary
 flight. Is he tired of running? Or has he
 recognized the many pleasures—figured
 by Jones and the dream of a family which
 she represents—which his errant life pre-
 cludes? Whatever the psychological moti-
 vations may be in these parallel cases, the
 thematic effect is apparent: each set of
 values is shown to be incomplete, to be in-
 desperate need of other virtues which its
 present structure forbids. Just as man
 needs woman and woman needs man, so
 sound and silence are interdependent, so

movement, attempt to establish a proper balance between land development and preservation of wilderness areas. In no way, of course, does *The Music Man* actually solve these dilemmas, as our legal system attempts to do, yet in a very real sense, the film does provide a solution to the age-old either/or dichotomy opposing the values of freedom to those of order (as well as those of entertainment to those of work). The solution proposed by *The Music Man* is a ritual one, a hypothetical case which furnishes the spectator both a model for the coexistence of these seemingly mutually exclusive values, and an actual experience of that coexistence. By sharing the process by which Jones and Preston recognize the necessity of *both* values, the spectator not only recognizes the shortsightedness of neglecting one or the other value, but he/she also rehearses the merging of those values, thus experiencing, albeit in a ritual manner, the actual possibility of resolving what seemed like an unsolvable problem.

Just as individual musicals may be characterized by the dualities which they resolve, so certain performers have, by the careful development of a characteristic screen persona, become identified with particular dualities. Perhaps the most interesting case in point is Gene Kelly, certainly one of the most important influences in MGM's revitalization of the film musical form in the post-war years. Kelly's peculiar charm has often been commented upon by musical fans, most of whom see him as a self-confident and energetic individual whose talent and style turn the entire world into a realm of gaiety and dance. Watching him dance makes us want to dance, seeing him express his joy makes us joyous in turn. In

short, Kelly does what every performer does, just more so and better, and in a particularly American way. No doubt this is an apt characterization of the quality of Kelly's dancing, but it says little about the thematic dimension of Kelly's character. After all, Kelly does more than dance in his movies. A closer look should permit us to discover the more specific polarities first established and then mediated by the presence of Gene Kelly within the musical world.

One fact seems immediately striking: unlike other male dancers, Gene Kelly never had a stable female partner with whom he could establish a standard duet style, as Astaire did with Ginger Rogers. Indeed, it is hard to think of a single female partner with whom Kelly danced more than a few numbers. He danced with Vera-Ellen in *Words and Music* as well as *On the Town*, but the former appearance was limited to the well known set piece "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue." In *For Me and My Gal* he does the title number with Judy Garland, yet he never danced with her again until the closing number of *The Pirate* (as well as later in *Summer Stock*). In *Cover Girl* he danced with Rita Hayworth, with Debbie Reynolds in *Singin' in the Rain*, with Cyd Charisse in *Brigadoon* and *It's Always Fair Weather*—yet for all of these numbers we don't remember Gene Kelly for the dances which he did with women. In fact, in numerous major movies Kelly dances continually, yet never does an extended number with a woman (*Thousands Cheer*, *Anchors Aweigh*, *Living in a Big Way*, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*). In *An American in Paris* Kelly dances with Leslie Caron, to be sure, but he also finds the time to do numbers with Georges



Gene Kelly romancing a lone newspaper and a squeaky floor board in *Summer Stock*. [MOMA]

Gene Kelly in his element—singing “I Got Rhythm” to (and with) a bunch of kids. Compare this ode to inter-generational unity in *An American in Paris* with the original film version in *Girl Crazy*, which serves to further the romance between Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. [MOMA]

Aweigh, Living in a Big Way, and *An American in Paris*, with a mop in *Thousands Cheer*, with a statue in *Living in a Big Way*, on roller skates in *It’s Always Fair Weather*, as a circus performer in *Thousands Cheer*, under stormy skies in *Singin’ in the Rain*, with cartoon characters in *Anchors Aweigh* and *Invitation to the Dance*. The list could go on and on: in *Cover Girl* Kelly even dances with his own reflection. These many examples suggest that for Kelly dance is not primarily a sexual activity, as it is for Fred Astaire, Ann Miller, Eleanor Powell, Cyd Charisse, and most of the musical’s finest dancers.

Guétary, a bunch of kids, and an old woman, as well as a solo number on Oscar Levant’s piano—not to mention the non-stop clowning in the final ballet sequence. The Gene Kelly who stands out, performing numbers which only he could bring off, is not a Gene Kelly making love, but a Gene Kelly showing off. Always confident of his own abilities, Kelly seems at his best when he is clowning: with Sinatra in *Anchors Aweigh*, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, and *On the Town*, with Phil Silvers in *Cover Girl* and *It’s Always Fair Weather*, with children in *Anchors*



Gene Kelly in his element—singing “I Got Rhythm” to (and with) a bunch of kids. Compare this ode to inter-generational unity in *An American in Paris* with the original film version in *Girl Crazy*, which serves to further the romance between Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. [MOMA]

For Kelly dance is instead a silly, clowning, childish activity, an expression of the eternal youth which seems even today to be fixed in Kelly's smile. From film to film Kelly's partners and his style may change, but his adolescent energy and ego never disappear. Like a child, Kelly seems always to be looking out for himself. In *For Me and My Gal* he plays a spoiled brat who puts his own success above patriotic duty. In *Thousands Cheer* he tries every trick to escape his service obligations, even using romance as a road to personal advancement. In *Anchors Aweigh* he is lulled to sleep by Frank Sinatra's lullaby; the next morning he awakens late in an obvious replica of the fetal position. He clowns from one end of *The Pirate* to the other, even walking the tightrope and posing as a pirate. He recovers his job in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* by getting the local kids to clamor for his return. He attracts Leslie Caron's attention in *American in Paris* by constantly showing off, as he does throughout the "Nina" number in *The Pirate*.

Now the presentation of a major film character as a childish figure who needs to grow up is nothing new. Kelly does in fact "grow up" in a number of his films. Taking on new responsibility, he learns to limit his affections to one chosen partner whom he now considers as an equal and no longer as simply a stepping stone for his personal advancement. The Kelly who needs to become a man, however, is only half the story. No matter how childish Kelly's behavior sometimes appears, it is always joyous and somehow appealing in spite of its egotism. In short, Kelly's peculiar combination of childlike qualities and childish self-centeredness poses a special problem which is hardly peculiar to Kelly but which he represents in a particularly clear fashion: we want children to grow up and thus lose their childish faults and limitations, but by the same token we want to preserve youth's childlike naïveté and enthusiasm. It is this very quandary that Kelly's various love relationships must solve. In general, he is paired with a woman endowed with reserve and a sense of responsibility. During the course of the film her mature concerns rub off on him while his energy and enthusiasm are eventually invested in her. In this way Kelly's childlike qualities are preserved, while his childish egotism is dispersed. He achieves the impossible feat of becoming a man without ceasing to be a child, just as his female counterpart recovers some of her girlish vitality without ceasing to be a woman. Their union celebrates and symbolically represents this marriage of two ages.

The key notion in this view of Kelly's screen persona is the idea of *clowning*. What is a clown but a grown man playing a child? The clown somehow manages to overcome the age-old dichotomy between childhood and adulthood—he is neither and both. In *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* Esther Williams tells Kelly she doesn't like his clowning. When Kelly finally returns to the team he is mad at Sinatra, who is on base; the only way Kelly can reach him is to get a hit and chase him home. It turns out Kelly was right—only by clowning can the team win the pennant and Kelly steal the hearts of his viewers. Even with women, clowning is Kelly's most successful approach—a technique immortalized by the final number of *The Pirate*:

Be a clown, be a clown
 All the world loves a clown
 Be a crazy buffoon
 And the demoiselles'll all swoon
 Dress in huge baggy pants
 And you'll ride the road to romance
 A butcher or a baker ladies never
 embrace
 A barber for a beau would be a social
 disgrace
 They'll all come to call if you can
 fall on your face
 Be a clown, be a clown, be a clown.

The song's suggestion aptly summarizes Kelly's *passepartout* solution to life's many problems.

It is not difficult to understand why Kelly's approach should be especially appealing to the American public. No country on earth so prizes childlike qualities as the United States. The child star is a peculiarly American phenomenon: when Europe had the war we had Mary Pickford, when Europe had Hitler we had Shirley Temple, when the war returned to Europe we had Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. Across the Atlantic the femme fatale, on this side the child-woman; France had Jean Gabin, we have Gene Kelly. American ideals, styles, and morality all glorify the cult of youth, all testify to our desire to retain the qualities of childhood past the age of maturity. The screen persona of Gene Kelly demonstrates that the task is not an impossible one. As Gene says to Jerry, his cartoon partner in *Anchors Aweigh*, anyone who is happy can dance. There lies the secret of eternal youth, as embodied by Kelly himself. Be happy, dance, and clown—and somehow the impossible can be achieved. Man and child *can* coexist in

the same body. Unwilling to accept the flow of time which changes us from children into adults, we long to recapture certain qualities of childhood. Gene Kelly shows us the way.

The interpretive process proposed here by no means pretends to unlock the multiple meanings of all Hollywood musicals. In particular, the above analysis acknowledges duality alone as an organizing principle, providing no space for plot, motivation, and chronology, which common sense recognizes as important components of numerous musicals. While traditional concepts no doubt deserve some room in the analysis of a genre as wide-ranging and diverse as the musical, we should, however, guard against a too rapid return to familiar notions, even as partial components of an interpretation. To take but a single example, the presence of psychological development by no means undermines the precepts developed here, for the musical's dual-focus organization regularly removes psychological development from the realm of the chronological and the causal simply by doubling that development. While the tools of traditional narrative analysis no doubt help us to recognize the signs of psychological change, only the duality-oriented approach presented above can properly locate and interpret that change—by setting it in the context constituted by the other lover's parallel and inverse change. When one change is thus balanced against another, questions of plot, motivation, and chronology tend to disappear in favor of the musical's characteristic formal and thematic concerns.