

SINGING IN THE RAIN 1952 – MRS PRINCE'S FILM SUMMARY

SINGING IN THE RAIN: FILMING AND FILM TECHNIQUES/INFLUENCES

Gene Kelly's aim was to transfer the kinetic energy of a live theatre dance performance onto the screen, so that it didn't look flat. He worked on this issue in all his films by experimenting with camera placement and movement, adapting his choreography accordingly. As well as looking for effects that would only be possible on screen. Soon Kelly came to see film dancing as full of potential, rather than the initial problem he felt it presented.

Collaborating with Stanley Donan Kelly relied heavily on Donan to be his third eye behind the camera. His contribution lay not only in the choreography but in knowing how to manoeuvre the camera to capture the dance effectively. Donan had the technical expertise and in his understanding of how to film dance.

The two met when Donan joined the chorus of Pal Joey; Kelly then subsequently helped Donan find other dance parts on Broadway, eventually taking him as his assistant in Cover Girl, and thereafter directing his first dance 'Take me out to the ball game' with Frank Sinatra.

The Kelly-Donan partnership achieved more than the production of film musicals-rather it brought the art of film dancing to that of 'cine-dance', a melding of dance and filmmaking that had never been seen before and encouraging the both the photographer and choreographer to significantly contribute to the creation and final effectiveness of the dance.

For Kelly, creating dance for a film was more like an intellectual exercise. He began by working out the basic steps in his head, starting with the beginning and end of the dance, then

referring to the storyline and script. Kelly had to conceive the choreographer always with the camera in mind-in relation to certain camera set-ups.

Collaborating with Comden and Green on SITR

He and Donen worked closely with the writing duo on script revisions for SITR, working it out shot by shot. Kelly's contribution was vital in ensuring the fluid transition from plot and narrative into song and dance.

SITR was filmed in Technicolour as were all MGM musicals since meet me in St. Louis in 1944. Technicolour was very expensive-a method of true-colour photography, rather than tinting or hand painting film. Starting out with a two-strip process in the 1920's and developing into a three-strip process by the 1930's which added a blue range that made images seem more real; the Wizard of Oz and Gone With The Wind both used the three-strip process. Most movies were still black and white in the 1950's.

Use of props (see page 79 of The making of an American masterpiece).

Use of costume (refer to page 80).

One crucial ingredient needed to guarantee the success of **Singin' in the Rain** was the right cinematographer. John Alton, who had won an Oscar for his colour photography on *An American in Paris* (1951), had been assigned to the picture, but Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen soon had him replaced with Harold Rosson, who had worked with Kelly and Donen in *On the Town* 1949.

Filming the title dance

Kelly thought the dance wasn't difficult technically in the number SITR, that it could be done by any dancer: "It is a dance which has to be *played* more than it's danced". He and Donan planned the camera movements to keep the dance coming in to the camera and to accomplish

this they created a large set on which to film the number. It cost more money but allowed the director to keep the dance moving down the street.

The penultimate moment of the dance involved a “a fast pullback and dolly up combined with the sweeping motion of an open umbrella twirled in space”. This moment defines the entire number and its purpose of expressing joy of life and love. The dance is not performed directly into the camera, rather slightly to screen left, which seems to increase the sense of movement rather than diminishing it. The setting of this number was also crucial to camera work. Kelly wanted to do it on a real street and found a suitable venue on the East Side. They then hauled a piano there so that Kelly could work out the steps in situ. As he did for ‘You Were Meant For Me’, Kelly used whatever props were available on the street and built them into the choreography. (refer to lamppost and iron railing which, like a child, Kelly rattled his umbrella along). He also added the spring section, up and down the curb in situ.

The technical difficulties of dancing in the rain were great-Kelly needed slight puddles at key locations to incorporate splashing choreography; “we would draw a circle where a puddle had to be built” Art Director, Randall Duell recalled, and the crew had to dig into the pavement to let the water accumulate. (he planned 7 puddles). There was an elaborate system of pipes using water directly from the Culver City water system to simulate rain for 6 hours a day. Technicolour film making demanded a great deal of light and the rain couldn’t be seen when filmed in a straightforward fashion, so the cameraman was forced to arrange lighting indirectly, placing it behind the rain instead of in front of it.

The impact of this number wasn’t anticipated, but it has become so memorable because of its simplicity-Kelly had known that the best way for this number to work was to keep it simple and joyful. It touched the audience for this reason, but also because of Kelly’s sheer charisma in this scene.

The Broadway Ballet

The lines between popular dance and ballet were becoming blurred in the 1930's--jazz and other popular music began to appear in modern ballet, and ballet elements began appearing in Broadway musicals and Hollywood films. Within the context of movie making the term *ballet* was often applied to the long dance numbers not usually associated with a specific song. Rather they became opportunities for choreographers and directors to explore the psychological dimensions of their characters, giving rise to the term 'dream ballet'.

Seen first in: 'Yolanda and the Thief' (Fred Astaire 1945)- an 8-minute nightmare sequence.

The Red Shoes 1949 featuring a 17-minute surreal dream sequence.

An American in Paris featuring a 17-minute sequence. AAIP was in many ways a precursor to SITR. The story of an American painter living in Paris and falling in love with a young French woman. Kelly chose and trained unknown Leslie Caron, a classical ballet dancer from France. She was 19-and her long career in Hollywood began with AAIP. The film was brash and colourful and features the famous end ballet scene, which used French painters and their work as the context for the dance. This end sequence took 6 weeks to film.

This 13-minute Broadway Ballet was filmed in 56 camera set-ups. (Refer to pages 162-169 of The Making of an American Masterpiece)).

Within this ballet was the 'Crazy Veil Dance', referred to as such by the crew because of its complexity and challenges in filming then the vast 'prop' (the scarf). It used 3 airplane motors to create the wind for the movement of the scarf. Kelly wanted it to be the major visual element of the dance and experimenting with trying to move the fabric to the beats of the music, not haphazardly. Cyd Charisse was on the receiving end of the force of these

'fans', and to dance into them at times; "I could hardly keep on my feet when the fans were turned way up, and the enormous scarf tugged at me".

Assistant director called it the 'infinity set' since it was very bare and deliberately inspired by the paintings of Salvador Dali, helping to create 'a placeless void of pure emotion' Gerald Mast (

The ballet ends with an interesting technical achievement consisting of 2 pieces of film-a close-up on Kelly's face, and a long shot of the crowd via a crane-up. This has the effect of separating Kelly from the gaggle of 70 extras and also isolating his character as a singular star. This was achieved by superimposition in the lab.