

### **BROADWAY MELODY:** *The beginning of Hollywood musicals*

This film review features a discussion on the relationship of film criticisms written at the time of the film's release and others, which were written years later. 10 pages long.

## **BROADWAY MELODY: The beginning of Hollywood musicals**

Broadway Melody's release on February 1, 1929 captures the attention of such issues as sound replacing silence and technology rather than the usual racial and political overtones like a lot of other genres. Most musicals had very simplistic plots: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy sings song, and boy gets girl. Although there was racial discrimination like the depiction of black speciality acts, such as the Nicholas Brothers and the Berry Brothers, as janitors etc., the story lines were none violent, free of political issues and always ended on a happy note pretty much until West Side Story. By 1960 the musical was but a thing of the past with only a few films a year. All this being said, it is important to understand the context of the genre in order to formulate criticism other than saying that the shots are simple and that the acting, in general, was lousy. As one analyses a musical such as Broadway Melody of 1929 one finds that the art of the movie musical is found in the star's ability to sing, act and dance effectively. By far the most frequent comment about Broadway Melody is that of its relationship with Broadway and its backstage on stage look at vaudeville performance, an activity that most of all the audiences of the 10's and 20's could relate to.

Broadway Melody as well as almost all musicals up to 42nd Street had success not because they were any good, but rather because of this knew phenomena called "talking pictures". The Musical was front and centre in this process because not only did its actors talk right out of the screen but they could also sing and tap dance out of the pictures as well. That relationship and interest came out of the pianist's customs, which accompanied silent films in the first thirty years. Finally, the most important reason why the Hollywood musical had so much success as did Broadway Melody was that its songs became instant hits which merged Broadway, radio, and the cotton clubs into a synthesis called the Hollywood Musical.

Broadway Melody was an instant hit because it was an all talking all singing pictures. In fact in the documentary film That's Dancing, Gene Kelly mentions that "most musicals weren't any good until 42nd Street and because of this, the musical was on the verge of disappearing". Kelly mentions that 42nd Street was Warner's last ditch effort to save the musical which we all know it did, and established Ruby Keeler as the first dancing star. Kelly goes on to state, "most woman in the chorus lines seemed to spend more time at the dinner table than at rehearsals". Broadway Melody was a major break because it established a new genre and not because it provided ground breaking or innovating ideas. The groundbreaking innovation, in Musicals, came in three waves, Busby Berkley, Fred Astaire, and Gene Kelly. In the articles researched there is no mention that Broadway Melody opened any doors to what was to come. No one foresaw a rise of the Hollywood Musical, like it did between 1929-1960, in 1929. Reasons for this are that Hollywood stars were shocked with paranoia because a lot of jobs would be lost and Studios on their part were scrambling to find new talents to replace the silent stars. Furthermore another scramble occurred from the technicians point of view in trying to arrange

microphones and sound stages so that all the voices would be picked up. This sense of paranoia from all aspects of the film industry was depicted later on in the parody *Singing in the Rain*.

*Broadway Melody* according to Morris Gilbert's quote "Broadway Melody is one of the few cent per cent vocal pictures to be shown" suggests quite clearly that audiences in France as well as in the U.S. were attracted to the idea of sound in pictures. Gilbert goes on to say that tickets were sold out way in advance but that people would set up long chairs in the aisles up to the last hour so that people would get a glimpse of the music. The reason being is that music was a big attraction in France as the article states indirectly because the title of the review spells out what the French thought of subtitles; "Broadway Melody attracts huge crowds, the dialogue being translated by the now despised subtitle". Therefore it is not so much dialogue but the music blended into images that attracted French audiences. Gilbert closes by saying that "Broadway Melody goes over in France because of its novelty, its richness, its sentiment, and song".

In North America the story was quite different in that we did not have to deal with subtitles as did the French and did not view the film as foreign because *Broadway Melody* depicted the American entertainment industry. Furthermore North Americans did not have to deal with subtitles as the French did. The proof of this, then and now, is visible in that foreign films run about a week or two at the box office as compared to main stream English films, not for English but American, which last months.

Jerry Vermilye looks at *Broadway Melody* as a mile stone breaker. He focuses on mentioning that it is the first original movie Musical, first talking picture to receive an academy award, first Musical to be honoured, and was MGM's first best picture statuette. He mentions how the recording of the film, "live" resulted in the film lacking mobility. Sound crews had to follow singers and dancers off camera, which was mounted on wheels, to pick up the voices. His criticism dealt with technology in terms of the off stage movement that went on to pick up all the sounds. *Broadway Melody* and the musical in general were trickier to film because of its movement involving dance, making it harder to pick up sound as opposed to a conversation in a car or in a living room where the camera could stay fixed in one spot.

Gilbert's criticism dealt with the achievements and technical difficulties rather than focusing on the acting, which he found secondary to the film's place in history. I agree. Anthony Slide's review of the *Broadway Melody* began with a description of rivalry between the east and West Coast in which both sides wanted to out cheer and out criticise the other to have the first place in the spotlight. One good example of this is MGM's rivalry between the New York desk, Nicholas Schenck and Louis B. Mayer, Studio Boss, which ended in Mayer's dismissal in 1951. He does however criticise the dialogue as being too reminiscent of Broadway. I think that Slide is forgetting that the Hollywood Musicals are for the most part stories about Broadway, as Gerald Mast points out, and the life style associated with it. I think that without Broadway there would have been no Hollywood Musical era and Hollywood would have been in serious peril because most its new talents were recruited, directly from Broadway Musicals which explained why most of the actors of the thirties and forties could sing, act, and dance. Slide concludes by saying that although the *Broadway Melody* was a good film it was not the knock out blow that would end the silent era. I think that Slide's insight and arguments could not be judged as so because in 1929 film technology was changing very rapidly and critics did not know what was to come. They knew that sound was in, but with all the paranoia, they did not know for certain where film was headed. I think that *Broadway Melody* was a knock out blow

to the silent era not because it was a masterpiece but more because of the overwhelming amounts of talent that followed in Broadway Melody's foot steps in establishing a new genre, that which we call The Hollywood Musical.

Frank N. Magill's book was written in 1980, which therefore gives us a look back with what we know today. He begins by mentioning how the Broadway Melody and the Musical genre provided a threat to live stage musicals because of the disparity in ticket prices, \$4.40 for stage and .75 cents for film. I challenge that statement by saying that Broadway was safe from being threatened because it was the single most important resource for Hollywood's new faces. I think it did just the opposite because the reward of making it big in film Musicals from stage writers to performers was now available which before 1927 was not. This meant that the film industry gave Broadway vital financial resources in that the composers for example now had sufficient funds after a hit in film to finance new musicals on Broadway. Broadway was a test ground before making it into musical films. The threat that Magill is referring to is television which destroyed much of Broadway, the Hollywood musical, and also put an end to the glorious golden age in film whose talents have never been surpassed to this very day.

Magill mentions that the film introduced all the basic clichés of the musical. What he fails to realise is that the clichés as they were called on film were reality on Broadway. He mentions the song You were meant for me because it was especially written to further the plot of the story, which was going to lead the composer's style of writing for film in the thirties and forties. He also mentions that the voices were surprisingly clear as compared to other early films. He criticised the quality of the sound of Broadway Melody because it was not as good as other films. He argues, as did Vermilye, that the nature of filming dance was a novelty at the time and because crews had to follow the dancing around with microphones just on top of performers, it was harder to obtain quality sound as in a conversation between two people.

He concludes by saying that a film critic today can clearly see the innovations that the film introduced even though in today's context the film would be predictable. I would argue that all action films today are ridicules and just as predictable as Broadway Melody.

Clive Hirschhorn is another film critic looking back on The Broadway Melody with a main difference in that he is an expert in the Hollywood Musical. He reiterates what Magill stated but spends more time mentioning Author Freed and Nacio Herb Brown. He mentions Author Freed's composing who became a leading force behind the Hollywood Musical along with other notables such as Vincent Minnelli. He mentions that the Film revolutionised the industry because it was the first all talking, all singing, and all dancing film of a new genre to make a mark on the film Industry. He also mentions that the sound track was the first to be written especially for film. He unlike a lot of other critics did not spend time on criticising the acting but talks about the other elements that make a musical different from other genres. Most notably the music and the technology as well as the dance numbers. But Hirschhorn provides no groundbreaking statements about the film like he does for other Musicals in his book. Gerald Mast is noted for one particular statement about the Hollywood musicals; "The first Musicals films were either filmed versions of Broadway shows and the second cycle of Musicals was a series of back stage stories", as I mentioned in Slide's argument. This sweeping statement about musicals gives a lot of weight in that the stories of Musicals were real life struggles that individuals had to go through to produce a show. They were not fantasies, as some people like to refer to them as,

but a part of the Broadway life style.

Tony Thomas, author of *That's Dancing* looks back on *Broadway Melody* and makes a sweeping statement against the film by saying "the backstage brand of story that *Broadway Melody* offered was going to plague Hollywood in the years to come". The question I would ask to counter this statement is what is a plague? Presenting people through films that are simple but loaded with all round entertainers or having an industry based on look and special effects? I would rather have an industry with Hitchcock, Astaire, and Grace Kelly then have an industry with action figures. He concludes by saying that *The Broadway Melody's* most important feature was that it introduced Author Freed who was to become the most prominent producers of musicals in the history of film. That statement I can agree with.

I think that there are two major themes that all of the writers and critics on Musicals fail to capitalise on. Dance is the only art that could not be recorded and stored until 1895 when film was invented. Furthermore dance still could not be totally exploited on film until the arrival of sound in 1927. Only one person succeeds in mentioning this and that is Gene Kelly in *That's Dancing*. He thought of mentioning this because he worked through out his career to promote dance and always broke budgets and rules most notably in *Singing In The Rain* and *An American in Paris*. The second important detail to understand is that most film critics are not dancers, singers or actors and have no conception of what it is to do all three effectively. Furthermore most critics are quick on their pencils to criticise a new musical release which gives the genre very little chance of bouncing back with the new generation. I think critics have to learn to take a very different approach when criticising the musical because it is in a class of it's own and it gives a good illustration of Broadway to the average person. In essence the Musical is an important narrative because it tells a story about a place called Broadway which with Television is on the verge of disintegrating. Furthermore it is a genre that is violent free, which is badly needed in today's film industry. The expectation of the critics in 1929 was not mentioned in the reviews of *Broadway Melody* because the musical genre was new and therefore had no examples to build a comparison. Furthermore there were very few dance scenes in early silent films with as much detail and precision, other then the occasional long shot with many people dancing at a party. So the expectation of the musical, for all intents and purposes was unknown. I am left to believe that the idea of the musical as being a fantasy film comes from the way critics judged them by using the same format as they did with drama. As I stated above film critics had no conception of what dance and Broadway was all about because they would call the musical anything but a fantasy film. I think the main reason why film critics criticise the musical the way they do is because they have never been on a stage themselves. The Hollywood musical is a representation of Broadway's back stage look from an on stage point of view. The soundtracks that are played are more realistic then other films because in most instances the band is right behind or in the vicinity of the singers and dancers giving the scene a sense of realism. Where as I don't believe that in "*Dances with Wolves*" there is a hundred piece orchestra playing beyond the hills where the buffaloes are running. I think that the music played in musicals is much more realistic then in other films where the song just plays simultaneously in the background.

I think that all of these taboos began with *Broadway Melody* because the film critics had the wrong representation of the genre, and because they compared it to other genres of films, which for all intents and purposes could not be done. Early film critics were blinded by all the paranoia caused by the transition to sound as far as

Broadway Melody goes. The music played a big role in The Broadway Melody's success because there had been other talkie films since The Jazz Singer and none had the success of the Broadway Melody. I think that what distinguishes the musical from other films is the sense of realism that is given to the musical soundtrack. Another important factor in that musicals employ the all round entertainer, which in today's context is virtually none existent. I would have to think hard to find someone who could sing act and dance let alone do them together effectively. Broadway Melody was the introduction of Vaudeville to film and Television was the destruction of it. That is as true as one and one is two. MGM was the musical film manufacturer beginning with Broadway Melody. The accomplishment of the Hollywood musical genre was staggering considering that MGM was the only studio to equal profits of all the other studios combined between 1931-40, a streak that has never been equalled by any other studio in history to date. Broadway Melody was the start to this empire, which only began to crumble in the late fifties with television's arrival. The musicals films is a genre that has helped MGM establish itself as a giant in the worst years of the film industry, and has helped it assemble the biggest collection of stars in history of motion pictures. Yet why are Hollywood musicals the most ignored film genre in film history?

by Pierre Hobson