

DANCE & MISE EN SCENE: *A dancer's abilities*

This film essay will discuss and evaluate the amount of talent which individual dance performers possess in relation to other performers in a variety of films from the same period. Mise en scene will help demonstrate to what extent performers relied on mise en scene, most particularly props and setting, by intervening in dance sequences thus highlighting or hiding the individual performer's dancing abilities. 17 pages long.

DANCE & MISE EN SCENE

The Hollywood Musical provided an array of musical numbers, which could be classified into three categories; one category involving singing only, another category involving dancing only, and another category involving both singing and dancing. These categories of musical number were often highly dependent on an individual person's talent as a singer, dancer, or all round entertainer. In part this essay will discuss the aforementioned to evaluate the amount of talent which individual performers possessed in relation to other performers in other films of the same period. In addition filmic language in terms of mise en scene will also play a determining role by emphasizing or de-emphasizing a performer's talents. Mise en scene will help demonstrate to what extent performers relied on mise en scene, most particularly props and setting, to increase or decrease their efficiency in musical numbers. This being said, singing will not be as apparent as dance because dance requires an excessive amount of physical effort, which was not required for singers. The mise en scene will be especially dominant in the way it intervenes in dance sequences thus highlighting or hiding the individual performer's dancing abilities.

The study will include the following films; *Babes in Arms*, *Babes on Broadway*, *Tea for Two*, *Lullaby of Broadway*, and *White Christmas*. The performers in this study will include three couples; Judy Garland & Mickey Rooney, Doris Day & Gene Nelson, and Vera Ellen & Danny Kaye. The mix of entertainers is peculiar because each of the three couples have very different talents and strengths yet they achieve the same ends in that they all look equally as good whether they are singing, dancing, or doing both. Garland and Rooney possess an exhilarating presence yet possess very little formal dance training especially compared to the other two couples. Day and Nelson on the other hand possess a mix of formal dance training and presence, highlighted by Nelson's dancing. Whereas Ellen and Kaye combine comedy/dance (Kaye) and formal dance training, underlined with theatre like presence (Ellen). The discussion of all of these entertainers as couples and individually will explain how mise en scene enables itself to interact with variable talent abilities thus allowing everybody to look equally as good in a variety of circumstances.

Of great importance one must also understand the meaning of formal dance training. Formal dance training implies someone who has begun dancing from the age of five or so and has done so constantly throughout their lives. In addition formal dance training relates to classical ballet as the base of all dance. In light of this, the only two performers, which have this kind of training, are Gene Nelson and Vera Ellen. The remaining performers, although provide very good dance entertainment, have not been classically trained from very young ages, on a consistent basis. The possibilities of a nature are open but highly unlikely because a person who is natural will also have to develop, to a certain extent, their raw talent into a finished product,

so to speak. One could learn the posture of a dancer but would not be able to perform the demanding movements in a dance. In essence, a "natural" will succeed in learning, a posture or various individual movements, in terms of look, but will fail when that person will be asked to perform "the look".

As dance is highlighted in this work we must first develop a workable definition as to what dance means. Dance is movement, which manifests a physical means of expression in either choreographed or improvised /spontaneous forms. These choreographed or improvised forms must be rhythmically manifested to music in order to differentiate dance from other physical forms of activity. Choreography involves movements, which are pre-planned movements done to music and improvisations or spontaneous movements involves anything from dancing freely to walking down the street which are not pre-planned or do not necessarily include music. In sum choreography, in relation to dance, serves as a term describing the design whereas dance is the physical act of this design.

Dance, in order to refrain from getting too vague, will involve only those movements, which are pre-planned and performed to music. Therefore, in relation to the sequences of this paper dance will always be discussed in terms of its choreography because the movements during the sequences will always be done to music, thus will always be choreographed. How does choreography, on the other hand, interact with mise en scene? What is mise en scene?

Mise en scene, according to Film Art (page 169 5ed.), involves the staging of an action including elements like setting, lighting, costumes, behavior of figures, and the director's control over what appears in the film frame. Of these elements the only one element which affects the physicality of dance is the setting/props. Lighting, and costumes will not affect the physicality of dance unless the costumes are heavy or composed of moving parts thus interrupting the flow of movements. Costumes do on occasion provide movements of their own however the source of the movement is always the human body. Still then the costume composed of moving parts could also categorize it self as a prop. On the other hand the behavior of people can change the choreography's movements by establishing moods, which vary from good to bad thus affecting the grace of the movement. The discussion will touch on this aspect especially in terms of Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney who tend to substitute formal dance with expressive acting. Finally the choreographer will substitute the director's role because the sequences are solely composed of dance thus falling primarily under the choreographer's jurisdiction. Although the director and producer have the last say in the over all look and presentation of the film sequences they will most probably not interfere with a dance movements as opposed to what the general content or idea the dance piece is presenting. Hence in this light the arbitrary detail of a dance movement will remain in the choreographer's hands. Furthermore the choreographer's role will be totally dictated by the dancer's ability thus once again raising the importance of individual performer's abilities. Therefore this essay will primarily concern itself with the elements which affect the physicality of dance the most, namely setting and props.

Perhaps the best couple to begin this discussion with is Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney because they employ very subtle dance movements or, at the other spectrum, make use of hundreds of people to fill the setting making their dance sequences look all the more impressive.

Judy Garland's all round talent along with Mickey Rooney's exuberant energy is

demonstrated in Babes on Broadway's song and dance number "Hoe Down". The number displays energy yet all the dancing in the sequence requires very little formal dance training other than the featured tap dance solo. The dancing in this sequence manifests itself by filling a barn with as many people possible doing some movements thus providing the illusion of extensive dancing.

"Hoe Down" was a musical constructed around the talents of Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. "Hoe Down" principle appeal was manifested by filling a barn with children focusing on comical facial and body expressions which served as vehicles for replacing formal dancing.

The dance sequence breaks itself down as follows; the introduction involving Garlands singing lasting 2 minutes, the singing and light dancing where Garland proceeds by jumping off her seat lasting 1 minute, the actual group choreography where much of Garland and Rooney's dance is done lasting 1 minute 45 seconds, a solo performance lasting 2 minutes, a sequence involving dancing with two horses lasting 1 minute, and finally the last minute giving closure to the sequence.

In essence this sequence demonstrates how a simple setting, a large open barn, could be over powered by performers who illustrate a wealth of choreographed expressions in a seemingly full fledged dance sequence where very little formal dance actually occurred. In reality all of the Garland and Rooney musical sequences are composed in this fashion. Their interpretation of "How About You" demonstrates this to the fullest and justifiably begins with the following dialogue;

Rooney: Would you do something for me?

Garland: If I can.

Rooney: Would you sing me a song?

Garland: How do you know I can?

Rooney: because you sing when you talk, when you walk, well your eyes are singing right now!

Garland's gazes begin the song with Rooney's occasional nod, which, although look very natural, are choreographed to phrases in the music. This number, and perhaps to a greater degree, this couple demonstrate how subtle movements, when analyzed, can constitute a choreography, other than traditional formal dance movements. In fact the seemingly flawless movement began once they left the piano, which in it self served as a prop, and to a greater extent the setting, for the opening minutes in the number. Their movement looks natural until they walk over, on the music, to the dictionary as they once again choreograph their number around a prop. Then the illusion is broken as they went into a brief dance sequence. No moments were lost as they quickly resorted back to using props such as a table, and chandelier in the room below, as the choreography, once again, shifted its attention around props. Immediately following the dancing on the table they make use of another prop such as a flower and imaginary kiss whose actions are choreographed and timed to the music. Finally the ending moments in the musical number consisted of leaps over furniture and the eating of apples. These props help divert attention away from formal dance to an ensemble of movements which are choreographed to music but appear and give the impression as being formal dance movements. The use of props to divert our attention could be called informal dance movements, or those movements, which are choreographed to music as stated in the above definitions.

While still on the topic of Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, another musical moment from *Babes in Arms* helps reinforce the notion of informal and formal dance movements. The title song, "Babes in Arms", at first glances looks like a number which is primarily composed of singing, however a close look at their protest walk reveals that they are marching on the beat of the music which illustrates informal dance. Furthermore as they walk through the street and various backyards and pick up boxes, bouncing them to the music, they involve setting and props. Choreography also attempts to be in the foreground as two different groups of protesters met following the exit of the last backyard. Both of these groups of people had to be timed and choreographed to the music in order to enable them to meet as precisely that point in the music. In addition the boxes which people are carrying are bounced to the music and the accents of their singing. In essence all of these descriptions helped a choreographer by enabling him to use two extremely popular entertainers, in these seemingly extravagant musical/dance number. Other elements of choreography, well worth mentioning, were used in order to present an illusion of movement on the screen. In fact the scene moves all the time which is precisely how the illusion of formal dance is constructed.

The children who were singing and playing on the swings and seesaws illustrated the other interesting and noticeable feature of the "Babes in Arms" number. The interesting point about these moments was that they were perfectly timed to the music and illustrated the harmony that the children were accomplishing with their voices. The swings and seesaws are perfectly moving in a syncopated manner. They move in a domino like pattern, which parallels the harmony in the children's voices. It's very subtle, but nonetheless adds detail to the informal dance movements which combined to create this illusion that a lot of dance was occurring in the number. Keep in mind that these revelations on Garland and Rooney's dancing does not make them better or worst then Astaire of Rogers, it just provides a different means to accomplishing the same ends, that is creating a great musical moment.

The next couple composed of Gene Nelson and Doris Day displays a very different picture then that of Garland and Rooney. They are much more expressive physically then they are through facial expressions like Garland and Rooney. *Lullaby of Broadway* provides several moments where a comparison could be made between Doris Day on her own, Gene Nelson on his own, and when they are together, in terms of how musical numbers vary according to the setting and props. "Just one of those Things" provides a moment where Day performs a solo illustrating her abilities. One always wonders how someone could keep such a big smile while they sing. It seems to me as though it can be paralleled to trying to whistle and smile at the same time. However the number makes use of subtle movements and a cane during the singing whereby Day then breaks into a dance moment. One peculiar feature of Day was her smile. It was captivating as opposed to Garland's expressiveness. The number reveals how Day is confined to a limited space illustrating dance abilities, limited as compared to Nelson, with a well rounded ability to sing act and dance effectively. The noticeable differences with Nelson are the use of props and the amount of space that is allotted to his dance numbers. His acrobatic movements coupled with his ability to fill the space he is provided with are manifested in his formal dance training. This will come to light when we compare "Zing went the Strings to my Heart" with "Just one of those things". In this number Nelson is indirectly making a pass at Day so therefore the Piano and band are rolled along the floor to provide the appearance of a Serenade. Nonetheless the piano therefore becomes an important prop in this dance sequence because the singing part in the sequence was choreographed around the piano. We can see and hear the difference

between Nelson and Day's dancing by noticing that Nelson's sounds are crisper, his movements are more brisk, exact, and more acrobatic. As odd as this may sound, when considering that sounds were post sync, the question of sounds remains a mystery until such research into production details like tap sounds are discovered or revealed. Indeed Nelson is one of the forgotten male leads as this number alone demonstrates that he very well is in the class of Astaire and Kelly. Nelson uses as many props as Day, but the props in Nelson's number only compliment his dancing whereas as Day's use of props were needed to add depth to her dancing.

In "Your getting to be a habit to me" we can see how the number is down graded to less dancing and more singing, not to mention the number's simplicity. They seem as though they are posing half the time. However keep in mind throughout this paper how all numbers look equally as good and only use different means to attain the same ends. Looking carefully at this simplistic number we can see a difference in posture as to how Day and Nelson's bodies are held. Nelson has more of an upright stance to his body and that is the most important indication of his formal dance training compared to Day. Thinking back to Garland and Rooney, we could remember that they also had a posture, which resembled that of Day as opposed to Nelson.

The Lullaby of Broadway's production and closing number titled on the film's title illustrates how very little dancing Day performs as compared to Nelson. In addition we must also notice the difference in the level of difficulty. The setting is straightforward in that it's a big open stage setting with very little props. However the use of props or setting in influencing the choreography is replaced by the large amount of people found on the stage at any one time. Doris sings and Nelson, as he comes sliding out, dances. We can also notice how the other people on the stage do not involve themselves as much as they do with Day. Nelson dances in the foreground as they chorus dancers remain in the background whereas with Day there was no discrepancy in spacing as everybody was either in the foreground or background. In fact at one point the chorus dancers were actually located in the foreground with Day in the background. Once again Day and Nelson, after descending on the stairs, dance together but the choreography is watered down in addition to the clutter of background dancers which helps in adding movement to the scene. Nelson's background dancers were on the same level as he was but when Day and Nelson dance together the dancers are raised thus exenterating their importance and presence. Even when day and Nelson dance in the stairs, which starts off looking as a duet, all the chorus dancers join in with them.

In Tea for Two, which came to be a theme for identifying tap dance as cute as opposed to impressive, we can see how cute can be confused with impressive and how mise en scene in terms of setting can involve itself in changing the look of the choreography. The opening number called "I Know" illustrates how a seemingly formal dance number can look cute. The number is simplistic as opposed to sharp and impressive like Nelson's solos from Lullaby of Broadway. In addition the setting as being part of mise en scene involved itself by using the mirror to multiply the amount of people in this cute dance number making it all the more impressive. However this being said Garland and Rooney could probably not accomplish a number that is based almost entirely on dance as opposed to expression/presence.

In "Oh me oh my" displays a group number with Day playing a very little part however it once again displays Nelson's potential as a solo dancer. It also illustrates his acrobatic ability as he skillfully dances up and down stairs and its railings. Once again the basis for his solo is the setting as his number is entirely composed by using

the stairs. At one point he even uses the stair banister as a harp thus directly linking the setting with sounds in the music that the general audience can relate to. Even the movements, which don't make sounds are cued to the music when once again he uses the stair banister to do cartwheels which are also cued to the music. This number was possible for two reasons, one being his athletic ability and secondly the setting making the choreographed movements possible. Day was involved in a shortened duet in a staircase in *Lullaby of Broadway* and as we could see the dancing was nowhere as spectacular. However returning to the same issues the setting, props, and dancers abilities are ultimate in deciding the difficulty of the number so as to allow ever participant to exploit their strengths and to hide their weaknesses so that in the end everybody looks equally as good.

One aspect of Gene Nelson's appeal as a dancer as opposed to Doris Day's dancing is his formal dance training. His formal dance training came across, not by his crisper sounds but by way in which his formal dance training allows him to fill the space in which he dances. A dancer is noticed from his waist up as opposed to waist down as tap dance might suggest. Nelson's grand arm movements, along with his leaps allow him to fill the space more eloquently than Day who can attain the same ends result but with different means.

In Garland and Rooney's analysis we saw how dance manifests itself in a variety of different formats with two performers who are not dancers per say. In Day and Nelson's analysis we saw a perfect example of how choreography gets watered down to accommodate two dancers of very different levels. In both cases the setting, by subtle ways such as actually participating in the choreography, made its presence felt in some cases and remained idle in other circumstances. The next couple however paints a different picture as Danny Kaye is primarily a comedian who can sing, act, and dance, and Vera Ellen is a dancer who can sing, act, and dance. They starred in *"White Christmas"* which featured a host of different numbers revealing their strengths and weakness in a variety of different circumstances. Curiously enough they always manage to look equally entertaining.

"The Best things happen while your dancing" from *White Christmas*, is the only neutral number featuring both Danny Kaye and Vera Ellen on even terms. The dance is composed of an Astaire and Rogers style of dance. It uses the setting's stairs, boat, and dock around which their choreography is performed. We can appreciate Ellen's posture as a dancer and Kaye's effort to be one. All of the graceful movements occur on Ellen's behave whereas anybody who knows Danny Kaye know very well that he's just ready to tell a joke. His posture is earthy whereas Ellen is sophisticated. The dancing, although their levels are very different, is sophisticated and quite precise as we can notice how Kaye's leaps onto the poles are choreographed to the accents in the flutes in the music. However this fact will not increase Kaye's ability as a dancer but will only serve to demonstrate his versatility as an all round performer. The number is simply an example of what they look in a couple dance and will be referred to when we look at some of the other numbers and compare how they do individually with other partners.

The "Sisters" routine is a classic example demonstrating what Danny Kaye is most capable of, comedy. It is primarily structured around comedy set in a neutral environment involving blue features as the only added props. The number also features Bing Crosby who is also not a formal dancer but more of a singer/comedian. Rightly so the number features lip singing, which was unheard of in that era, and comedy as they act as sisters. You can appreciate their earthiness in such a number

where no effort was made to make them look like dancers.

The "Minstrel medley" of songs which includes "Mandy" involves everything from elaborate settings to props to exquisite dancing and very appropriately demonstrates the strengths of both Ellen's dancing and Kaye's comedy all within the confines of one number. The opening is straightforward in its singing and comic relief providing another example of Kaye's comedic strengths. The routine becomes more elaborated when props in the way of tambourines, which everybody plays. Although the production number gives the impression of being filled with dance, most of the dancing occurs within the chorus. Kaye and company then proceed with their singing, which holds to the vaudeville tradition, as they sang vaudevillian style jokes. Then Ellen appears like Venus and adds the dancing to the production number. Ellen proceeds to form a trio with Kaye and Crosby where her dancing abilities are watered down and replaced with comedy in order to accommodate the Crosby and Kaye who are not dancers. We see how Crosby and Kaye are faded out and replaced by a younger dancer whose primary role is dancing as we will never see him say a word, nor sing. We see how the physicality of dance becomes less relevant with dancers because they are proficient in dance regardless of the setting or props that are used. The pair of young dancers demonstrated their exuberance as they kick their legs all the way to the heavens. Interestingly so, even the activity in the background becomes more oriented towards strong formal dance when Ellen and her partner dance. They became surrounded by a number of young male dancers with postures that are telling in themselves. Oddly enough once Ellen completes her duet accompanied by a strong set of dancers, she is cut out from the finally as a cut brings the comic relief, Crosby, Kaye, and Clooney, back to the forefront. This number provides us with an example where dance and comedy exist independently within the confines of the same number.

"Choreography" is a number that further demonstrates the ability to combine comedy and formal dance within the same number while keeping both styles completely separated. The number opens with Kaye who sings, surrounded by young female dancers, as they poke fun of modern dance, wondering where the good old days of tap dancing and vaudeville have gone. Their dance looks broken as they are representing what dance has evolved into. However, Kaye uses his comedic, Chaplin like stance along with his facial gestures to fill the number. Again Ellen is introduced as a Venus as she arrives by descending from above as opposed to being raised from below as seen in the previous number. Similarly Kaye and company are locked out of the dance sequence as her dance partner who is introduced by a leap from below quickly joins Ellen. They then dance together but the dancing of both groups remains totally separated from the other. Ironically the setting and props play a very small role in Kaye and Ellen's example because the film offers an overwhelming amount of talent in terms of both comedy and dance, therefore devices to better a performance are not needed.

Finally the last number depicts Ellen and her partner as they perform a dance which is composed entirely in the formal tradition. The "rehearsal number" makes use of no setting or prop and sticks out as being the most intense dance act in *White Christmas*. It is an illustration of this entire essay as to how formal dance training is illustrated in one's posture, and ability to dance without making use of devices, which equalize various performances.

In sum this essay attempted to illustrate various ways in which *mise en scene* involved itself as an active dance participant and played a determining role, evening

out a performer's dance abilities so that in the end everybody looks equally impressive. In studying, *Babes in Arms*, *Babes on Broadway*, *Tea for Two*, *Lullaby of Broadway*, and *White Christmas* various examples were provided depicting various entertainer's abilities in different circumstances so that evaluative judgements could be made on various performers. Three couples including Judy Garland & Mickey Rooney, Doris Day & Gene Nelson, and Vera Ellen & Danny Kaye, provided a wide range of performers making an argument such as *mise en scene's* equalizing involvement all the more feasible as their performances demonstrates that they all looked equally as good.

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