

(USA, 1945. 142 min. MGM. Cast: Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, Kathryn Grayson, Dean Stockwell; Music: George E. Stoll and Jule Styne; Choreography: Gene Kelly; Produced by: Joe Pasternak; Written by: Natalie Marcín and Isobel Lennart; Directed by: George Sidney)

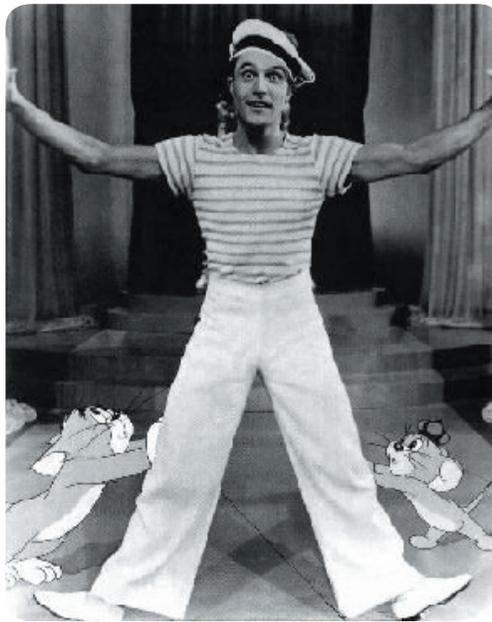
There is an old Hollywood story that goes something like this: only three years and six movies into his acting career, Gene Kelly had a novel idea for his next film, 1945's *Anchor's Aweigh*. He wanted to dance with an animated character and his first choice, unsurprisingly, was Mickey Mouse. Kelly and his assistant Stanely Donen brought it before Walt Disney. Walt was impressed and encouraging, but Mickey Mouse would never work in an MGM film.

Around the same time, two young Amen, who arrived at MGM around the same time as Kelly, named William Hanna and Joseph Barbera, had created a comic cartoon cat and mouse duo named Tom and Jerry. In 1944, when Kelly was looking for a dancing partner, the *Tom and Jerry* series was coming off back to back Academy Award wins in the Animated Short Film category. When Walt turned Kelly down, the other mouse became the obvious choice. Gene Kelly danced with Jerry Mouse in 1945's *Anchor's Aweigh* and made cinematic history as the first dance with an animated character. The animation was a painstaking process, and to his credit, it is said that Disney got MGM to take the risk on the sequence. Everything down to Jerry's dancing reflection was perfected. It proved to be a good career move for all involved. *Anchor's Aweigh* garnered five Oscar nominations. *Tom and Jerry* went on to win a total of seven.

Of course, special effects in choreography were nothing new to Kelly who had danced with his ghost-like reflection the previous year in *Cover Girl*. From his great dance on roller skates in *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955) to his singin' and dancin' in the rain in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) to the masterpiece that is the final 20 minutes of *An American in Paris* (1951), Gene Kelly kept the innovation coming and

always made it look like he was having a ball.

Of course, part of the credit for the frantic pace of innovation in Kelly's dance must be given to another force in dance that had arisen a decade earlier in the form of Fred Astaire. Gene Kelly's rise to fame coincided with Astaire's temporary retirement, and, ironically, it was an injury to Gene Kelly that brought Astaire back from retirement in 1948 to star in *Easter Parade*. But it was a friendly rivalry between Astaire and Kelly from 1948 to 1957 that led to many classic moments Hollywood musical history.



At the age of 5, Fred Astaire started appearing in vaudeville acts with his sister Adele and by his 20s he had made it to Broadway. After being turned down by Paramount and underappreciated at MGM, he found himself at RKO Studios in 1933 and paired with Ginger Rogers for some of the most successful movies in his career.

One of Astaire's great dance sequences came, in fact, under the direction of an old Kelly collaborator. Stanley Donen had been Gene Kelly's assistant on many of his early projects and later went on to co-direct films such as *On the Town* (1949) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Donen directed Astaire in two films including *Royal Wedding* in 1951.

The idea for the dance to "You're All the World to Me" in *Royal Wedding* had come to Astaire about a decade before the film was made. This song had Astaire dancing on the walls and ceiling of his room. This was achieved by placing the camera and its operator in a cage that rotated with the room so that Astaire was dancing where he chose as the room rotated around him. This was in keeping with the tradition of the time of merging film techniques and special effects with dance to come up with some of the most memorable sequences in film from that era, and the same device was later used, albeit to somewhat different ends, in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Astaire believed—and for most of his films enforced—that his dances should be filmed with a stationary camera, with the dancers in view the whole time and in one shot. "Either the camera dances or I do," he would say. This suggested a stage mindset that was later challenged repeatedly by Kelly who is largely credited with transforming musicals from filmed stage plays into musicals that were choreographed specifically for the camera.

Kelly and Astaire only danced together on screen once, in *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946). Where Astaire was all about his top hat and coat tails, Gene Kelly danced in working men's clothes. Astaire's dancing was light-footed, poised, and controlled while Kelly's style was more energetic, emphasizing athleticism and physicality. Each was a man of his time. To quote Roger Ebert, "If we cannot picture him (Kelly) in an art-deco flirtation with Ginger Rogers, by the same token we can't imagine Astaire leaping from the rigging of a pirate ship - or singin' in the rain." While Astaire's films were built so that he could dance, Kelly's films developed characters that had reason to burst into song and dance. Kelly always hated the comparisons between them, and maybe some of his choices were made so that they could be set further apart. Astaire set the stage and Kelly cut his own path. Together, they made sure the Hollywood musical was alive and well for nearly 30 years.

- Written by Devanshu Mehta