

USA, 1949. 98 min. MGM.  
Cast: Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra,  
Betty Garrett, Ann Miller,  
Jules Munshin; Music: Leonard  
Bernstein, Adolph Green, Betty  
Comden; Choreography: Gene  
Kelly; Produced by: Arthur  
Freed; Written by: Adolph Green  
and Betty Comden; Directed by:  
Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen

Stanley Donen was never nominated for an Oscar, so in 1998, the Academy did what was right and awarded him an honorary Academy Award. Donen danced with his Oscar on stage before declaring the secret behind his directorial success. "You show up," he said. "You show up, and you stay out of the way. But you gotta show up or else you can't take the credit and win one of these."

If you started your career as a director as Donen did, with Gene Kelly dancing on rooftops in *On the Town* (1949) and Fred Astaire on the ceiling in *Royal Wedding* (1951), you probably did want to stay out of their way. Having said that, if MGM had a Golden Age of Musicals, it was in large part due to Stanley Donen.

It is hard to imagine a 19-year-old Stanley Donen arriving at MGM in 1943 as a choreographer and assistant to Gene Kelly. Donen was a member of the chorus of the 1940 stage comedy musical *Pal Joey* which starred Kelly. This marked the beginning of their friendship which would move to Hollywood with collaborations starting with *Cover Girl* (1944) and finally ending with *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955), which in some ways marked the end of the MGM era of musicals.

In 1949, Donen's career took off when he co-choreographed and co-wrote the Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra musical *Take Me Out to the Ballgame* for legendary producer Arthur Freed. Donen recreated the magic of that combination by co-

directing (with Kelly) *On the Town* at the age of 25.

*On the Town* was a breath of fresh air into the old musical genre. It was one of the first films to be shot on location. Most musicals prior to 1949 were confined to studios, but Kelly and Donen took to New York rooftops and landmarks. Even the crowds in the city were surprised to see a Hollywood film being shot in their midst and random bystanders are visible waving in the film. Gene Kelly later considered *On the Town* to be one of the best showcases of their talent and in 1949, it was the second-highest grossing MGM film of all time behind *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944).



After *On the Town*, Donen and Kelly became major players within the highly successful "Freed unit" of MGM. Their next collaboration, the 1952 film *Singin' in the Rain*, would prove to be their longest lasting legacy. *Singin' in the Rain* was a unique musical with a fully fleshed out plot, exuberant dance sequences and unleashed the phenomenon that was Donald O'Connor in "Make 'em Laugh". It was the pinnacle of the MGM musical era, though it was judged inferior to some others at the time.

Stanley Donen was also one of the major proponents of amalgamating cinematic special effects with dance. Starting with his assistant choreography in *Cover Girl*, where Gene Kelly dances with a reflection of himself, Donen has always made dance in his films so distinct and unique that it could never be replicated on stage. He was also instrumental in the *Anchors Aweigh* dance by Gene Kelly with Jerry mouse and had visited Walt Disney to see if Mickey Mouse was interested in the role. Of course, Mickey was not, but the show went on. One of the great dance sequences of all time is Fred Astaire's sequence from *Royal Wedding* (1951), which was directed by Donen, where Astaire dances on the walls and ceiling of a room. The room and the camera were rotated around Astaire to create the fantastic sequence, and the effect that was later replicated for the famous zero-gravity scenes in *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

By the time he was 30, he had directed seven films including *On the Town*, *Royal Wedding* with Astaire, the classic *Singin' in the Rain*, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* and choreographed even more. Donen co-directed three features with Kelly: *On the Town*, *Singin' in the Rain* and *It's Always Fair Weather*. As the era of great musicals ended, Stanley Donen's films were met with less success.

In 2005, John Williams and the Boston Pops held a Film Night out at Tanglewood where they had a tribute to Stanley Donen, with the great director and choreographer present. As he bantered with John Williams between clips from his films played to a live score, it became clear that even though he had directed slick Hollywood thrillers and drama, at heart he was always a dancer, a choreographer.