

*Singin' in the Rain.* USA, 1952. 103 min. Cast: Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, Debbie Reynolds, Jean Hagen, Cyd Charisse; Songs: Nacio Herb Brown and Arthur Freed; Choreography: Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen; Produced by: Arthur Freed; Written by: Betty Comden and Adolph Green; Directed by: Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen

and romantic life. Professionally, his work is characterized as a “whole lot of dumb show.” When the success of *The Jazz Singer* forces Monumental Pictures’ awkward transition to sound, the technology lays bare the artificiality of the Lockwood-Lamont films. The attempt to convert the *Dueling Cavalier* into sound film is a disaster, because the dialogue is maudlin, the projector breaks down, and Lamont’s voice contrasts with her on-screen image.

*Band Wagon.* USA, 1953. 112 min. Cast: Fred Astaire, Cyd Charisse, Oscar Levant, Nanette Fabray and Jack Buchanan. Songs: Howard Deitz and Arthur Schwartz; Choreography: Michael Kidd; Produced by: Arthur Freed; Written by: Betty Comden and Adolph Green; Directed by: Vincent Minnelli

By the early 1950s, Hollywood sensed a sea change. Due to suburbanization, television, and a Supreme Court antitrust ruling against the studios, movie-making had to become a more efficient enterprise. While the other major studios cut overhead—dropping contract players and disbanding their armies of salaried technicians—MGM remained dedicated to lavish musicals, and it was at this time that Arthur Freed’s production unit made two of the last masterpieces of the studio era.

The musical has always been Hollywood’s most self-conscious genre. The majority of Hollywood films respect the fourth wall, leaving viewers to appreciate a spectacle that doesn’t acknowledge them, but the musical—especially its backstage variant—often addresses the audience and the act of performance. The musicals produced by Arthur Freed for MGM during the 1950s exhibit an especially high degree of self-reflexivity, often taking as their theme entertainment itself.

Both *Singin' in the Rain* and *Band Wagon* were conceived as showcases for decades-old songbook catalogues, and the writing team of Comden and Green were to provide just enough plot to motivate each film’s diverse set of numbers. However, their scripts do much more than this; these backstage stories celebrate the studio era’s brand of entertainment through a dual process of demystifying “bad” art while mystifying “good” art.

The introduction of sound provides the premise for *Singin' in the Rain*’s thematic opposition, honesty and deception. The opening scenes of the film reveal Don Lockwood (Kelly) to be in possession of a fabricated backstory

In the end, both Gene Kelly and Monumental Pictures are saved by Debbie Reynolds, who is integral to remaking the film as a musical. When she and Kelly come together, he overcomes his fake charm and hamminess, and filmmaking itself is validated. Because she and Don are in love, she can convincingly dub songs in *The Dancing Cavalier*. “You Were Meant for Me,” the film’s main romantic number, reveals the machinery of mass entertainment—fake sunset and wind machines—only to move into closer shots, concealing the artifice. Because we’ve already been shown the hardware behind movie magic, Kelly and Reynolds’s dance must be a spontaneous expression of feeling.

The late 1920s setting allows the logic of *Singin' in the Rain* to privilege the musical and sound as modern and authentic relative to the primitive deception of the silent era. The opening scene of *Band Wagon*, an auction where Astaire’s iconic top hat and cane don’t receive a single bid, marks our hero as a washed-up hooper, whose form of entertainment is a thing of the past. This film’s contemporary setting and acknowledgement of the musical as somewhat anachronistic, requires a different opposition: popular art versus elite art.

Like the earlier film, *Band Wagon* presents two versions of the same show, and our most explicit view of backstage workings—that is, the view from the wings—is reserved for the “wrong” type of entertainment. The version of *Band Wagon* produced by the pretentious Cordova (Buchanan), an adaptation of *Faust* with “meaning and stature,” is, much like the *Dueling Cavalier*, overly determined and rife with technical mis-

haps. When Cordova’s show leaves the audience in stunned silence, Astaire takes over, reworking the show into a “light and intimate” entertainment. Here, the backstage workings are concealed; the succession of finished numbers appear loose and improvised.

Again, the libido that unites lovers is equated with the energy that puts a successful show on stage. Astaire’s dance partner, a prim ballerina (Charisse), reinforces the elite/popular dichotomy, and their differences are reconciled by “Dancing in the Dark,” the best courtship number of Astaire’s late films. However, unlike Kelly, Astaire is from the start an idealized figure, thus we need only see that he and his partner can dance together. Rather, Astaire’s arc moves from singing “By Myself” on a deserted train platform to improvising “I Love Louisa” with the chorus, after leaving the first show’s official cast party; he recaptures his audience by joining the community. In the final scene, Charisse proclaims her love for Astaire in theatrical metaphors, speaking through the collective voice of the company. Astaire regains his audience by joining the utopian community of the theatre.

Thomas Schatz has called the Freed Unit musicals the “last gasp of the studio era.” With it’s dying breath, MGM exhaled its own brand of entertainment. *Singin' in the Rain* mythologizes the past to glorify a moment about pass, and *Band Wagon* is a reverie for the classical musical. In the latter film, Astaire’s art is acknowledged as belonging to a bygone era, replaced by the likes of Nijinsky and Brando, but, in the end, the film has convinced us that the musical is eternal.

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