Sex and the Storyworld: Narrativizing Desirability in the Early Films of Fred Astaire

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From the moment Fred Astaire arrived in Los Angeles in 1933, studio executives and Hollywood columnists wondered, both privately and publicly, whether a ‘homely,’ ‘skinny,’ ‘sophisticated’ dancer would be able to function as a leading man. The fact that the answer proved to be a resounding yes has been largely credited to the woman who danced by Astaire’s side in nine of his first eleven film outings.¹ According to John Mueller, for instance, “the reason so many women have fantasized about dancing with Fred Astaire is that Ginger Rogers conveyed the impression that dancing with him is the most thrilling experience imaginable” (8-9), while according to Katharine Hepburn, more famously and more cuttingly, the basis of Astaire and Rogers’ unprecedented collaborative success is that “He gives her class; she gives him sex” (qtd. in Levinson 75). Egalitarian as Hepburn’s quid pro quo parsing of the partnership may be, the Astaire-Rogers films do much to undermine the neatness of such a dichotomy. As Margaret T. McFadden has noted, the characters played by Astaire are often required to shake off their “effete, highbrow” ways and embrace Rogers’ earthier, more working-class aesthetic by the films’ endings (693); if anything, according to this reading and others like it, Rogers “gives” Astaire the right kind of “class” to please Depression-era viewers.² What interests me in this article, though, is the giving of sex rather than of class. While I agree with Katharine Hepburn that it was Astaire who stood as the primary

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sexual beneficiary throughout the course of his collaboration with Rogers, I want to take seriously the question of how sex was given to him—a question that cannot be answered as one-dimensionally as Mueller’s or Hepburn’s assessments imply.

The story of a young Hollywood hopeful being molded into a bankable sex symbol is, of course, hardly unique. From Rita Hayworth’s hairline alteration and Lauren Bacall’s voice-lowering lessons to Hitchcock’s intensive grooming of Grace Kelly, Tippi Hedren, et al., the Pygmalion myth reverberates strongly throughout classic Hollywood lore. Astaire’s experience differs from the typical iteration of this myth most obviously in terms of gender, since, as in Ovid’s original rendering, the vast majority of film stars who have undergone this type of sexualizing metamorphosis have been female. But it also differs in terms of the overtness and physicality of the transformation process. Beyond the hairpiece that Astaire was required to don throughout his film career (which, to his mind, “merely came under the heading of make-up and of being a nuisance” [Astaire 187]), Hollywood did not ask him to change the way he looked, dressed, spoke, or sounded. There is clearly a gendered double standard inhering to such a distinction; if a woman is to become ‘sexy,’ she must alter herself to conform to the norms of femininity, whereas a man can become ‘sexy’ by staying relatively true to who and what he is. This does not mean, however, that the studio system was uninterested in making its male stars attractive to as wide an audience as possible. What it does mean is that Astaire’s attainment of desirability was rooted more in the narrative insinuations of the films that introduced him to the movie-going public than in any kind of visual or stylistic personal makeover. Taken together, then, the films that Astaire made with Rogers for RKO Radio Pictures between 1933 and 1939 serve as a particularly salient case study in the narratological art of manufacturing sexual allure.

By focusing on the ways in which the internal, narrative elements of Astaire’s early films help to construct and establish his external, sexual persona, I position this essay at the somewhat underexplored intersection of star studies and narrative theory. In pursuing this focus, I do not mean to suggest that the kinds of extra-textual evidence more commonly mined in star studies scholarship (profiles and interviews in fan magazines and gossip columns, promotional appearances, publicity stills, etc.) did not play their own, sizable role in the construction of Astaire’s celebrity image.
as well. Indeed, as Damian Sutton has recently outlined in careful detail, RKO Pictures made use of a wide array of promotional techniques to foster ongoing audience interest in its Astaire-Rogers franchise, from gimmicky campaign books to highly publicized Radio City Musical Hall premieres to interior design and dance competition tie-ins. What I want to highlight, however, is the fact that RKO also made specific decisions about what kinds of cinematic stories would be best to tell about Astaire and Rogers from an audience-engagement standpoint. Narrative was, in other words, used as a marketing tool, too. Moreover, while the goal of most of the films’ narrative choices was to market Astaire in conventionally heteronormative ways, such goals did not always match up with results. In their ongoing efforts to project the male dancer’s viability as a sexually appealing romantic hero, the Astaire-Rogers film musicals of the 1930s both broadened and refigured Hollywood’s conception of the masculine sexual ideal. This is not to say that Astaire was the only non-normatively masculine or unconventionally good-looking movie star to enjoy great success during this (or any other) Hollywood timeframe. As Arlene Croce memorably remarked in her foundational contribution to Astaire-Rogers criticism, *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book*: “The list of male singers and dancers who have become big stars in the movies is very largely an assortment of aging, balding, skinny, tubby, jug-eared, pug-faced and generally unprepossessing men” (8). But I do believe that the role Astaire played in the cinematic history of male sexuality was a distinct and important one, and that the films he made with Ginger Rogers tell a distinct and important story about sexual desire and desirability.

The subject of Astaire’s relationship to heteronormativity has been considered by several scholars, among them Steven Cohan who, in “‘Feminizing’ the Song-and-Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the Spectacle of Masculinity in the Hollywood Musical,” points out that Astaire’s show-stopping, “spectacular” solo dance routines repeatedly position him as the primary object of the audience’s gaze, thereby imbuing him with the stereotypically feminine quality of “to-be-looked-at-ness” that Laura Mulvey famously proclaimed to be one of the most pervasive and misogynistic tropes of classical Hollywood cinema (47). “As a star text,” Cohan concludes, “‘Fred Astaire’ is a highly theatricalized representation of maleness on screen which oscillates between, on the one hand, a fictional character grounded in the static and reductive binarism of traditional gender
roles and, on the other, a musical persona whose energy choreographs a libidinal force that revises conventional masculinity and linear desire” (63-64). Much as I agree with Cohan’s oscillatory assessment of Astaire’s on-screen sexuality, my analysis of that sexuality differs from his in two key ways. I concentrate on Astaire’s RKO films of the 1930s rather than the postwar MGM vehicles to which Cohan devotes his attention (since, as he argues it, it is in Hollywood’s later, more integrated musicals that “spectatorial interest” shifts “from a musical film’s narrativity to its continuous deployment of spectacle” [65]3). Secondly, because I consider the Astaire films that do privilege “narrativity” over a “continuous deployment of spectacle,” to use Cohan’s terminology, I am more interested than he is in the multifarious sexualizing narrative elements that do not stem from or relate to spectacality. Building off of and expanding upon Cohan’s analysis, my examination suggests additional ways of thinking about how the “star text” (63) of Fred Astaire participates in and contributes to the sexual iconography of classical Hollywood film.

Historical Backdrop: The “In Spite Of” Star

By the time Fred Astaire arrived in Hollywood in 1933, he had already achieved a certain degree of stardom. Since the age of six, he had worked to build up a luminous stage career with his sister Adele, beginning on the vaudeville circuit and winding up as the toast of Broadway and London’s West End. When Adele quit show business in 1932 to marry the son of an English duke, Astaire starred for the first time on his own in the premiere of Cole Porter’s The Gay Divorce, which proved to be enough of a hit to convince Hollywood to give Astaire his first solo screen test.4 While the critique attributed to an unidentified studio executive in response to this test—“Can’t act. Can’t sing. Balding. Can dance a little” (qtd. in Croce 14)—may be apocryphal, it does capture the sense of wariness that Hollywood appears to have felt at the outset of Astaire’s film career. As previous critics have noted, the reason Astaire wound up at RKO instead of one of the higher profile studios of the period was, quite simply, that the other studios did not want him. Even David O. Selznick, then head of production at RKO who signed Astaire to his first contract just before moving to MGM, did so with a fair dose of hesitancy. “I am a little uncertain about
the man,” Selznick explained in a memo from 1933, “but I feel, in spite of his enormous ears and bad chin line, that his charm is so tremendous that it comes through even in this wretched test” (qtd. in Adler 87). No one, though, was more skeptical about the effects of Astaire’s personal appearance than Astaire himself. As he recounts early in his autobiography:

> From the first day, I figured that I didn’t have the looks to click on the screen. I’m not exactly the heroic type. But when I saw the rushes of ‘Flying Down to Rio,’ I knew that it was worse than I’d expected. My dancing, upon which I’d counted so heavily to counter-balance my lack of sex appeal, looked crude to my eyes. I was positively awkward. So when Pandro [S. Berman, executive producer of the film] refused to retake my scenes, I packed up and left for England, and I left no forwarding address. (20)

Fortunately for Astaire, Selznick’s prediction that he would become a star in spite of his physical shortcomings turned out to be right. Early reviews discussing Astaire’s screen presence recurrently (and rather callously) commented upon the flaws in his appearance even as they conceded his unique and hard-to-explain brand of magnetism. “Fred Astaire . . . isn’t handsome by any standards of male beauty,” averred a columnist for Modern Screen in 1935, “but he’s got ‘it’” (Cannon 58). “He lacks a stalwart frame and manly beauty to make him physically arresting as something good to look at,” agreed a reviewer for The Spectator in 1936, “but he has a purely masculine personality more charming than any other actor can boast” (qtd. in Knee 197). Some journalists specifically pointed to Astaire’s dancing as the basis of his surprising allure: “You never would pick Fred Astaire out of any line-up to play a romantic hero. . . . It is only when he dances that the crowd is prepared to whoop and rattle its fins” (qtd. in Astaire 178–9). Others voiced their surprise that a man so ‘light on his toes’ could become the “Sex-Appeal Sensation of the Hour”: “Not since he-man Clark Gable kicked open the gates of movie tradition has Hollywood been so shaken as it has been by the discovery that the flying feet of an accomplished masculine dancer can have a romantic appeal for millions of women” (Collins 32). Astaire was, after all, the first full-fledged member of an exclusive Hollywood club: that of dancing leading
The weight of proving to the industry that such a leading man could indeed exist was, therefore, squarely placed on Astaire’s shoulders, narrow and un-stalwart as those shoulders were so repeatedly reported to be.

In assessing a similar set of media responses to Astaire’s sexual image, Adam Knee envisions a causal relationship between the way Astaire was portrayed in the papers and the way he was portrayed in the movies: “It is perhaps evidence of a growing awareness that Astaire possessed a certain kind of sex appeal that, while he is not figured as irresistible to women in his earlier films, in both his first solo outing, the underappreciated *Damsel in Distress* (1937), and in his follow-up with Rogers again, *Carefree* (1938), there are repeated references to his immediate and strong appeal to women” (198). What is most interesting about the rendering of Astaire’s “irresistibility” in these two films, however, is that it is so emphatically artificial. In *Carefree*, Rogers’s attraction to Astaire is swayed by such external forces as drugs, hypnosis, and overeating; in *Damsel in Distress*, Astaire is chased by throngs of lustful female fans because his press agent (George Burns) has planted false stories about him being a bad-boy “destroyer of feminine hearts” in the tabloids. (“As long as these people want to believe that you’re the same [heart-breaker] character off the stage as on,” Burns’ character reasons, “what’s the difference, as long as you cash in at the box office?”). It is important to note, too, how very different this fictional publicity tactic is from the one actually deployed in Astaire’s case. Since Astaire got married two days before flying to Los Angeles to begin his film career—and stayed happily married until his wife’s death twenty-one years later—his agents and publicists could not exploit or concoct titillating tales of his romantic adventures to enhance his sexual reputation. That reputation rested, instead, on the way Astaire came across to his audience up on screen. Sex, for Fred Astaire, had to come from the storyworld.

**Serial Monogamy**

The nine films that Astaire and Rogers made together at RKO—*Flying Down to Rio* (1933), *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Roberta* (1935), *Top Hat* (1935), *Follow the Fleet* (1936), *Swing Time* (1936), *Shall We Dance* (1937), *Carefree* (1938), and *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939)—cannot properly be described as ‘serial’ in nature. Astaire and
Rogers play different (or, at least, differently-named) characters in each of the films, which are all (technically) set in different locations with (ostensibly) stand-alone plots and (slightly) varied cohorts of supporting castmates. And yet, as my need to parenthetically qualify the distinctions between the narratives makes clear, the films themselves do much to encourage the audience’s sense that they are really all part of one interconnected, packaged set—that, in Croce’s words, “The Astaire-Rogers dance films were romances, or, rather, chapters in a single epic romance” (7-8). Acknowledging the episodic feel of the films allows us to utilize insights from narrative theory about the role of seriality in readers’ or viewers’ experience of a text, such as Sean O’Sullivan’s recent contention that “Serial process across media always entails linking, breaking and re-linking, a start/stop/start process that can be seen as privileging either connection or disruption, depending on one’s critical perspective” (274). From my critical perspective, it is interesting to consider how the properties of both connection and disruption work within the Astaire-Rogers oeuvre to shape the audience’s sense of Astaire’s sexuality.

The most obvious connective tissue linking the nine films is, of course, the repeat presence of ‘Fred Astaire’ and ‘Ginger Rogers’ in their opening credits. As the films were rolled out to 1930s audiences, though, it was Astaire’s presence that functioned as the stronger connective tissue because Rogers was permitted to stray outside the franchise in a way that Astaire was not. Rogers starred in ten films without Astaire between the shooting of Flying Down to Rio in 1933 and Vernon and Irene Castle in 1939, whereas Astaire was allowed to make only one film without Rogers (Damsel in Distress) toward the end of that time span. One reason, then, why the Astaire-Rogers films felt more serialized in nature than those featuring other early screen pairings—Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald, for instance, or the less-remembered if more frequently paired Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell—was that the emerging celebrity entity of ‘Fred Astaire’ was kept so carefully contained within them. Neither Astaire nor Rogers was particularly pleased by RKO’s decision to pair them together so often, as Rogers wanted to focus more on dramas than on musicals or comedies and Astaire wanted to establish himself as a solo artist after having spent so many years as his sister’s teammate. Astaire probably also sensed that his repeated partnering with a ‘blonde bombshell’ like Rogers emphasized his need for a sexualizing counterpart; it opened the
door, that is, for precisely the kind of derision embodied in Hepburn’s “She gives him sex” remark. As Lorrie Goldensohn puts it, “Fred’s dependency on a partner for his own self-presentation remained a complicated question, partly rooted in his individual performance history and partly in the conception of masculinity foisted on him by others as well as by himself” (67). In other words, the simplest way that Hollywood could think of to make Astaire come across as a sufficiently ‘masculine’ leading man was to give him a desirable and desiring leading woman whose attraction to him is accentuated by the fact that she can be seen to meet, fight, flirt, dance, and couple with him over and over and over again.

At the same time, however, the disruptiveness of the nine-film format also means that Rogers has to learn to be attracted to Astaire over and over and over again; that, in other words, Astaire’s status as a desirable partner is something that has to be continually earned. To be sure, there are moments in the films where such a status is conspicuously not earned, typically at the plot’s opening, as in The Gay Divorcee, when Astaire refuses to help Rogers out of her skirt-stuck-in-a-trunk predicament so that he can continue to come on to her; or in Shall We Dance, when Astaire ogles a flip-book of Rogers dancing and decides that he’ll “marry her” based on her objectified body alone; or in Swing Time, when Astaire gets Rogers into trouble with a police officer and her boss as he pesteringly follows her around town. Yet what is equally conspicuous is the speed with which Astaire invariably sees the error of his ways and sheds his problematic outer layer to reveal the more desirable, because less misogynist, love interest underneath. While it might, therefore, be accurate to describe the beginnings of some Astaire-Rogers films as the formulaic, boy-chases-girl love stories that reinforce gender and sexuality stereotypes—with, as Richard Corliss puts it, “Fred courting Ginger, pursuing her in song and dance, while she ponders her ethical or emotional reservations to dancing-romancing; he approaches, she retreats”—this formula is almost always quickly undercut and replaced with a more back-and-forth, gender-balanced representation of sexual agency and desire.

There are, moreover, only four films in the series (The Gay Divorcee, Top Hat, Swing Time, and Shall We Dance) that even open with the “he approaches, she retreats” narrative structure. In three of the films, Flying Down to Rio, Roberta, and Follow the Fleet, the relationships between Astaire’s and Rogers’s characters just barely qualify as ‘romantic’ at all (in
the former, the only real Astaire-Rogers coupling that occurs is on the
dance floor; in the latter two, the pair become wryly, off-handedly engaged
in the film’s final reel). In Carefree and The Story of Vernon and Irene
Castle, meanwhile, it is the Rogers character who first falls head over
heels for the Astaire character and is, by far, the more approaching and de-
siring of the two. The question becomes, then: how might our acknowl-
dgment of these various narrative structures help us understand the devel-
opment of Fred Astaire’s sexual persona? On one level, the sequence of
RKO films follows an overall trajectory of imbuing Astaire’s characters
with more and more diegetic irresistibility, gradually transforming him
from the platonic buddy of Flying Down to Rio into the overt object of fe-
dmale desire in The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle. Yet the trajectory is
far from a smooth or systematic one; indeed, its very bumpiness generates
much of the films’ sexual energy, as we never quite know which version of
Astaire-Rogers chemistry is going to come at us next. What we do know is
that, as Martha Nochimson puts it, “the stereotypical male-female domi-
nation-submission mode” will always be “scrambled” in Astaire-Rogers
films in one way or another (140), resulting in a set of films that “effec-
tively . . . illuminate the rigidity and Alice-in-Wonderland artificiality of
social conventions that bedevil human relationships” (135).

In a related observation, Nochimson notes that marriage “is generally
(comically) rendered problematic as an institution in the Astaire/Rogers
universe in a way that ran counter to the sanctimonious attitudes about
matrimony promulgated by the Production Code Administration” (139).
Nochimson is referring here to such plot hijinks as Rogers pretending to
have an affair with another man in order to gain the legal right to leave her
husband in The Gay Divorcee, Astaire trying to lose at gambling in order
to get out of an engagement to a woman he no longer loves in Swing Time,
and so forth. But a critique of the institution of marriage is also more im-
plicitly suggested by the series’ tendency not to have its stars get married
at each installment’s end. As much as the films may concern themselves
with courtship and coupling, the only two times we actually see Astaire
and Rogers walking down the aisle are at the conclusion of Carefree
(wherein Rogers perversely sports the black eye she has gotten from As-
taire, who had to punch her to get her out of the hypnotized state that made
her believe she hated him) and midway through the married-couple biopic
The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle. These two Astaire-Rogers films, not
coincidentally, were their biggest box office disappointments and led to the dissolution of their partnership at RKO. What these last two films failed properly to exploit was the pleasure derived from irresolute resolutions; from the promise of this couple not getting bound up or weighed down by the monotony of married life; from the sense, reinforced by seriality, that Astaire and Rogers’ sexual interest in one another is both never-ending and continually, arousingly new.

**Man Among Men**

As much as the semi-serial structure of the films encourages us to compare and conflate the various iterations of the Astaire persona they present, it also invites us to compare those iterations with the other male figures that populate the series. Ever since the ‘sissy’ characterizations of these figures were first cuttingly called to task in Vito Russo’s seminal text of queer film history, *The Celluloid Closet*, most scholars have agreed that the unspoken goal of including so many ‘effeminate’ supporting players in Astaire-Rogers musicals was to make their leading man seem more ‘manly’ in comparison. McFadden, for example, finds that “Astaire’s normative, all-American masculinity is clearly distinguished from the fluttery incompetence” of the “numerous stereotypical ‘sissy’ characters” that surround him (697), while John Clum agrees that such characters “were cast as foils to Astaire’s lean androgyny. Next to them, his slim elegance looked macho” (96). Lending most credence to this type of claim are the secondary male characters who, positioned as Astaire’s rivals for Rogers’ affection, become engaged to her character before or during the diegetic action. As Elizabeth Kendall quips, the films which follow this implicitly heterosexist formula “could have been titled *The Gay Fiancé*” (108). The formula is most fully realized in *Top Hat*, as we hear repeated allusions to the queer sensibilities of fashion designer Alberto Beddini (Erik Rhodes) and then watch him propose to Dale Tremont (Rogers) near the film’s end primarily so that she will continue to model his clothes for him. To varying degrees, too, Rogers’ fiancés in *Swing Time* (Ricky Romero, played by Georges Metaxa), *Shall We Dance* (Jim Montgomery, played by William Brisbane), and *Carefree* (Stephen Arden, played by Ralph Bellamy) all serve as undesirable, because effeminized, foils to the characters played by Astaire.
The pejoratively portrayed “gay fiancé” is not the only recurrent character type against which Astaire’s masculinity is measured throughout the film series, however. In the films that cast Astaire in the secondary male role, *Flying Down to Rio*, *Roberta*, and *Follow the Fleet*, we see him juxtaposed against a hyper-masculine best friend (played by Gene Raymond in the former and by Randolph Scott in the latter two) whose skirt-chasing proclivities Astaire is called upon to curtail. The rationale for this type of juxtaposition, repeatedly employed in the series, is worth considering. Studio executives might initially have tried Astaire out in a supporting role to gauge how audiences would take to his screen image. Yet once he had so decisively proven himself a viable romantic hero in *Gay Divorcee*, why return him to secondary standing in *Roberta* the following year? And why, after *Top Hat* had been such an overwhelming blockbuster success (ranking second in worldwide box office receipts for 1935), return him again to supporting character status in *Follow the Fleet*? Robin Wood, pondering these questions, postulates,

> The key to the Astaire-Rogers image is perhaps that, in the early phase of their joint career (lingering on even into *Follow the Fleet*), there was doubt as to whether they constituted the romantic couple or the secondary couple. . . . What that doubt speaks for is the fusion of ordinariness and romance that defines them. (29)

Applied to Astaire’s side of the equation alone, Wood’s postulation suggests that because of Hollywood’s initial doubt about the actor’s sexual appeal, his persona was positioned in a liminal space between ordinariness and romance, between playfulness and passion, between humor and amour.

In the films where Astaire gets to stand more firmly on ‘romantic hero’ ground, he is still always given a close male friend, usually in the form of a manager, advisor, lawyer, or assistant who exhibits the “fluttery incompetence” McFadden describes (12). This part was most often played by Edward Everett Horton—as Egbert “Pinky” Fitzgerald in *Gay Divorcee*, Horace Hardwick in *Top Hat*, and Jeffrey Baird in *Shall We Dance*—but the role was also filled, in more muted fashion, by Pop Cardetti (Victor Moore) in *Swing Time*, Walter (Walter Brennan) in *The Story of Vernon*
and Irene Castle, and Eric Blore, who frequently played effete sidekick to Horton’s effete sidekick. In contrast to the critical tendency to view all of the films’ ‘sissy’ characterizations in the same offensively stereotypical light, Adam Knee differentiates between the derisive portrayals of the men that Rogers is about to marry and the more appealing portrayals of the men with whom Astaire chooses to fraternize; the latter, Knee explains, help to “establish another important trend in the films, that of characters and of situations that can be read in terms of homosexuality by contemporary audiences attuned to such meanings but without negative value judgments attached” (207). This lack of “negative value judgment” can be ascribed, in part, to the keen comedic savvy of Horton, Moore, Blore, et al., who imbue their queer-inflected performances with heavy doses of scene-stealing likeability. Yet we must also acknowledge the role that Astaire’s performance plays in this alternate version of comparative sexuality.

For while the Astaire character typically responds to the ‘questionable’ mannerisms of his romantic rivals by rolling his eyes at them, raising his eyebrows at them, or making jokes at their expense, his interactions with the Edward Everett Horton characters and their kin convey a deep sense of appreciation, acceptance, and homosocial bonding. Take, for example, the earliest appearance of this character type: Egbert Fitzgerald in Gay Divorcee, whose father, he tells us, “has always called me ‘Pinky,’ ever since I was a golden-haired little tot toddling about the ancestral home in pale pink pajamas.” Astaire’s character, none too subtly named Guy Holden, is clearly meant to be seen as ‘more of a man’ than his blustering and ineffectual friend Pinky; nevertheless, there are many ways in which the movie compares, rather than simply contrasts, their characters. As foolish and foppish as Pinky comes across in the film’s opening scene for having changed into a new suit on a plane and leaving his wallet in his old suit’s pocket, Guy is soon revealed to have done precisely the same thing. And as much as Pinky is mocked for playing with a female hand puppet when Mimi (Rogers) comes to visit him in his law office (“He always had the ‘mother’ instinct,” her aunt explains upon catching him in the act), the male hand that we first see cross-dressing in this way actually belongs to a quite pleased-with-himself-looking Guy. Over the course of the series, moreover, we see Astaire gamely being kissed by men (fig. 1), sharing hotel rooms with men (fig. 2), partner dancing with men (fig. 3), even partner dancing with men in drag (fig. 4).
While it is never implied in any of these moments that the characters played by Astaire are, in fact, gay, what is suggested is that the display of physical and emotional closeness among men is not problematic, de-risible, or wrong, and that masculinity is not predicated on its opposition to femininity. Even if, then, the motivation for bringing so many queer subtexts into Astaire-Rogers musicals was conservative and normativizing in spirit, the preponderance and pleasurableness of much of that queerness paradoxically works to open up a sexually diffuse space within what was designed to be a clear-cut, boy-likes-girl (and only girl) heterosexual world.
The Erotics of Equality

This is not to say that the heterosexual world is marginalized within the film musicals of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers; after all, as Rick Altman pithily puts it, “in the musical the couple is the plot” (35). He elaborates:

Two centers of power, two sexes, two attitudes, two classes, two protagonists. Instead of focusing all its interest on a single central character, following the trajectory of her progress, the American film musical has a dual focus, built around parallel stars of opposite sex and radically divergent values. This dual-focus structure requires the viewer to be sensitive not so much to chronology and progression—for the outcome of the male/female match is entirely conventional and thus quite predictable—but to simultaneity and comparison. (19)

While I agree with Altman that the “dual-focus structure” of Astaire-Rogers films encourages us to think about the couple’s relationship more in terms of “simultaneity and comparison” than of “chronology and progression,” I do not find this structure to be as oppositional as he makes it out to be. More commonly in the Astaire-Rogers universe, the man and woman appear to represent two “radically divergent” worldviews until they discover otherwise. This discovery occurs, moreover, not at the end of the films, when the two ‘become one’ through the adhesive force of marriage, but much earlier on, when they ‘become one’ through dance. In the final section of this essay, I will look at the films’ most sexually significant narrative moments—their dance numbers—to examine how simultaneity and comparativity function within them.

In objecting to a love scene that he was supposed to perform with Leslie Caron in Daddy Long Legs (dir. Jean Negulesco 1955), Astaire famously declared: “I don’t make love by kissing. I make love by dancing” (qtd. in Levinson 199). This formula certainly holds true for the RKO films he made with Rogers; the only onscreen kiss they share in the series takes place in a dream sequence from Carefree. What, though, does it really mean for Astaire to “make love by dancing”? And what does the fact that he “make[s] love by dancing” say about the kind of sexuality he represents to the movie-going public? Astaire’s first onscreen dance affair
with Rogers, the under-analyzed Carioca sequence from *Flying Down to Rio*, helps us to think through these questions. “The Carioca” is typically passed over by critics as “the true beginning of the [Astaire/Rogers] partnership” (Croce 8) in favor of the more sophisticated and overtly sexual “Night and Day” number from *The Gay Divorcee*, at the end of which Astaire offers Rogers a self-congratulatory post-coital cigarette, his making love by dancing has been so good. When critics do take note of “The Carioca,” however, they find that it offers fertile ground for close textual analysis. For example, in the recent study *Music Makes Me: Fred Astaire and Jazz*, Todd Decker provides a nuanced reading of the racial and musical elements of what he considers to be “one of the most important routines of Astaire’s career” (171). Indeed, “The Carioca” allows us to see more clearly than in any other dance number the influence that Latin and African American rhythms, movements, and other forms of musicality would go on to have upon the construction of Astaire’s sexual persona.

For as much as Astaire may have cringed while watching the rushes of *Flying Down to Rio* because of the “crudeness” and “awkwardness” of the dancing “upon which [he]’d counted so heavily to counter-balance [his] lack of sex appeal” (Astaire 20), it was the dancing in the Carioca number that first aroused the public’s sexual interest in him and activated his decades-long leading man career. The extended, almost twelve-minute-long sequence starts off by showing a Brazilian band playing a song that has been specifically orchestrated to accompany a sexy new dance step that puts the “too tame, too dull” Foxtrot to shame, primarily because it involves men and women putting their foreheads right up against each other as they dance. After watching the local dancers perform this step with an intrigued glimmer in his eye, Astaire nudges Rogers and invites her to join him on the dance floor, appropriating the hyper-intimacy of the Cariocan body positioning as he does so (see figs. 5 and 6). Then, about half way through the sequence, the tempo of the music changes and the camera shifts its gaze to a group of black dancers who engage in a “rapid execution of broken rhythms” (Decker 174) that Astaire seems to find all the more exciting and worthy of imitation. “Kinda hot. Let’s try a little of that, babe,” Astaire suggests to Rogers, and the couple enjoys, for the first time on screen, the syncopated sexuality of tap (see figs. 7 and 8).

The role that the *jouissance* of tap-dancing plays within the Astaire-
Rogers storyworld is, of course, a crucial one. As Kay Young aptly describes in her essay “Hollywood, 1934: ‘Inventing’ Romantic Comedy”:

Tap dancing, above all forms of Western dance partnering, insists on a noisy, talkative interaction of bodies, where gendered movements (like that of a woman performing on toe or a man leaping) are bypassed for the androgynous noise-making and motions of the taps. Wearing the same shoes and equally free to explore the same moves, both partners challenge one another to see how far the taps of the other will lead each to perform. . . . Astaire and Rogers, using the choreography of Hermes Pan, appropriate this as
their form of expression, their way of making romantic comedy. (268)

If, then, to return to John Mueller’s oft-cited claim, “the reason so many women have fantasized about dancing with Fred Astaire is that Ginger Rogers conveyed the impression that dancing with him is the most thrilling experience imaginable” (8–9), we must understand that thrill to stem as much from the erotics of “noisy,” “androgynous” equality as from the erotics of being swept off of one’s proverbial feet.

This erotics of equality is most pronounced in the Astaire-Rogers dances in which tapping predominates—“I’ll Be Hard To Handle,” “Isn’t This a Lovely Day to Get Caught in the Rain,” “Pick Yourself Up,” “They All Laughed,” and so forth. In these numbers and others like them, the Rogers character becomes aroused by the Astaire character as she realizes how very much in sync their dance styles and capabilities are. Astaire’s so-called physical ‘flaws’—his middling height, his slender build, his light-footedness—are appealing to Rogers (and to the viewers who are living vicariously through her) because they add to the mirroring, equalizing effect of the dances: Rogers likes Astaire because Astaire is like Rogers. This is most obviously true in “They All Laughed,” where Rogers begins to feel attracted to Astaire as she realizes that he shares her preference for tap over ballet, and in “Pick Yourself Up,” where she begins to feel attracted to him as she realizes that her seemingly inept dance pupil can mirror her every step. But the same kind of pleasure is evident in every one of the pair’s tap numbers—pleasure derived from affinity, synchronicity, and similitude.

This is not to say that such pleasure is only derived during the couple’s tap numbers, however. And it is here that my reading of the sexual and gender dynamics of Astaire-Rogers choreography differs pointedly from the reading put forth by Richard Dyer in his influential essay “I Seem to Find the Happiness I Seek: Heterosexuality and Dance in the Musical.” Dyer contrasts the “sameness” model of heterosexual happiness (which depends on “the qualities of sameness and identity, of finding what you have in common” [50]) that he sees in the side-by-side choreography of Top Hat’s “Isn’t This a Lovely Day?” number with the “inequality” model (which stems from “men relishing having power” and “women luxuriating in surrender” [50]) that he sees in the dip-and-bend choreography of
“Cheek to Cheek.” He bemoans the fact that “what seems a promise of equality and mutuality in the early dance has become a realization of ecstatic dependency, her on him, in the later one” (56). Although the famous, feathery dips in question do suggest sexual conquest to some degree, viewing them as emblematic of the Astaire-Rogers sexual ethos is problematic in several ways. In the first place, even the Astaire-Rogers dances that are more dramatic and sensual in tenor—“Cheek to Cheek,” “Night and Day,” “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” “Let’s Face the Music and Dance,” “Never Gonna Dance,” etc.—continually alternate between moves that require the man and woman to be in contrasting, gender-specific positions (dipping, twirling, lifting, leading) and moves that allow and expect the man and woman to dance in unison, either as mirror images of one another (see fig. 9) or as parallel images (see fig. 10). Dyer’s assertion that the “feminist implications” of the films’ “sporty sparring” numbers are “forgotten by the time we get to the films’ romantic numbers” (55) ignores the fact that side-by-side dancing continues to figure prominently in the latter. Just as Astaire and Rogers’ relationship fluctuates between romance and friendship throughout the series, the choreography in these dances switches back and forth between the aesthetic of sameness and the aesthetic of difference, and are just as likely to conclude in playful synchronicity as in sensual surrender.9 In addition, the dances that Dyer considers to be oppressively heteronormative in spirit—the “romantic numbers,” as he calls them—never actually come at the ends of their respective storylines. Instead, the very last dances of the films (“The Piccol-
“Shall We Dance” in *Top Hat*, “The Continental” in *The Gay Divorcee*, etc.) always bring us back to firmly equality-based dancing ground.

In truth, Irving Berlin’s lyrics notwithstanding, Astaire and Rogers spend much more time in their films dancing side-by-side than cheek-to-cheek—an alignment that is inherently comparative in nature. Even if, on a technical level, there is really no comparison between Astaire’s dance ability and Rogers’s, I would still argue that her ability to *keep up* with Astaire—to convey, at least, the impression of talent equivalence—is what gives these numbers their romantic and sexual force. In addition, we must not forget that Astaire, both as choreographer and as performer, consciously emphasized equality in his partner dancing throughout his career. As John Mueller explains in his comprehensive analysis of *Astaire Dancing*,

Astaire’s self-limiting approach is usually credited to his modesty and generosity. Without denying these qualities, it should be observed that what Astaire was doing in these duets was also plain good showmanship. A duet can only be as effective as its weaker half, and efforts to build up one partner at the expense of the other are likely to backfire. This is particularly the case for Astaire, because he liked to have the performers dance side by side much of the time, a configuration that gives maximum exposure to both dancers. (23)

Equally exposed, equally empowered, and equally responsible for each number’s physical and emotional success, Astaire and Rogers introduced the 1930s movie-going public to a new form of dancing—and, by extension, a new form of sexual intimacy—founded on balance, camaraderie, and partnership *par excellence*.

I began this essay by questioning the validity of the most famous quip about Astaire and Rogers’ partnership, and I will end by questioning the validity of the second most famous: “Ginger Rogers did everything [Fred Astaire] did . . . backwards and in high heels.” The quote, which is often mistakenly attributed to either former Texas governor Ann Richards (who paraphrased it at the 1988 Democratic National Convention) or Rogers
herself, was in fact first printed in a 1982 *Frank and Ernest* cartoon by Bob Thaves and has since been taken up as a feminist aphorism of sorts; witness, for example, the 2010 essay collection titled *Backwards in High Heels: The Impossible Art of Being Female*. While I am not disputing the extra burden that Ginger Rogers’ high-heeled dance numbers placed upon her feet,\(^1\) I do take issue with the implication that there was a clear sense of `forward’ and `backward’—of ‘leader’ and ‘follower’—in the dancing or romancing of Astaire and Rogers. As commonplace as it is to refer to Astaire’s ‘incomparableness’ (‘No one was like Astaire,’ ‘He was in a class by himself,’ etc.), comparability was in fact crucial to the sexual dynamic that informed his films with Rogers. Within this persistently comparative framework, Astaire’s sexuality was simultaneously overdetermined and underdetermined, resulting in a subtle yet culturally significant reworking of Hollywood’s conventional transcription of desire.

**Notes**

1. Before the RKO Astaire-Rogers partnership dissolved in 1939, Astaire had worked on only two films without Rogers: his first film, *Dancing Lady* (dir. Robert Z. Leonard, 1933), in which he made a brief cameo appearance as himself, and *A Damsel in Distress* (dir. George Stevens, 1937).

2. For other explorations of class dynamics in Astaire-Rogers musicals, see Cassano, Knee, McLean, and Telotte.

3. In an “integrated” musical songs and dances are incorporated into the plot of the narrative, as opposed to the “backstage” musical, in which the plot comes to a halt as we watch performances of performances. Though Astaire’s films are technically “integrated” in both the prewar and postwar years, there is a greater emphasis on smooth musical integration in the films from the latter period.

4. Fred and Adele Astaire did shoot one screen test as a pair in 1928, which did not result in a film contract for either of them. According to biographer Bill Adler, “It was thought that Adele was fine but that Fred was not a fit subject for film. Because of their team status, it was known that if one was selected and the other declined, the studio would get neither of them” (51).
5. The club’s other primary members, as catalogued recently by Todd Decker, were James Cagney, Gower Champion, Ricardo Montalban, George Murphy, George Raft, and, most famously, Gene Kelly (23).

6. “To gays,” Russo argues, the ‘sissy’ characterizations in Astaire and Rogers films “represented a pattern of oppression similar to the one suffered by blacks, long typified on-screen as simpletons and domestics” (35).

7. One other effeminated character encouraging this kind of derogatory comparison is Rodolfo Tonetti, played by Eric Rhodes in The Gay Divorcee. Tonetti is not officially vying with Astaire for Rogers’ affections; his job is to pretend to be having an affair with Rogers so that her husband will want to divorce her. Nevertheless, he is positioned as the alternative man that Rogers could choose to keep in her bedroom, thereby allowing Astaire to come across as more desirable (because less effeminate) by contrast.

8. For a more broad-ranging discussion of the difference between “dual-focus narratives,” “single-focus narratives,” and “multiple-focus narratives,” see Altman’s *A Theory of Narrative* (2008).

9. The only dances that actually conclude with the dip of conquest critiqued by Dyer are “Cheek to Cheek,” “Night and Day,” “Change Partners,” and the dream sequence from Carefree. In the latter two, Astaire’s alleged sexual power over Rogers is the artificial product of hypnosis and a food coma, respectively.

10. There were, of course, several exceptions to the high-heeled costuming rule. In “Isn’t this a Lovely Day to Get Caught in the Rain,” “I’m Putting All My Eggs in One Basket,” and “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off,” for example, Rogers’ heels (or wheels, in the case of the latter) are no taller than Astaire’s.

**Works Cited**


McFadden, Margaret T. “Shall We Dance?: Gender and Class Conflict in Astaire-Rogers Dance Musicals.” *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 37, no. 6, 2008, pp. 678–706.


