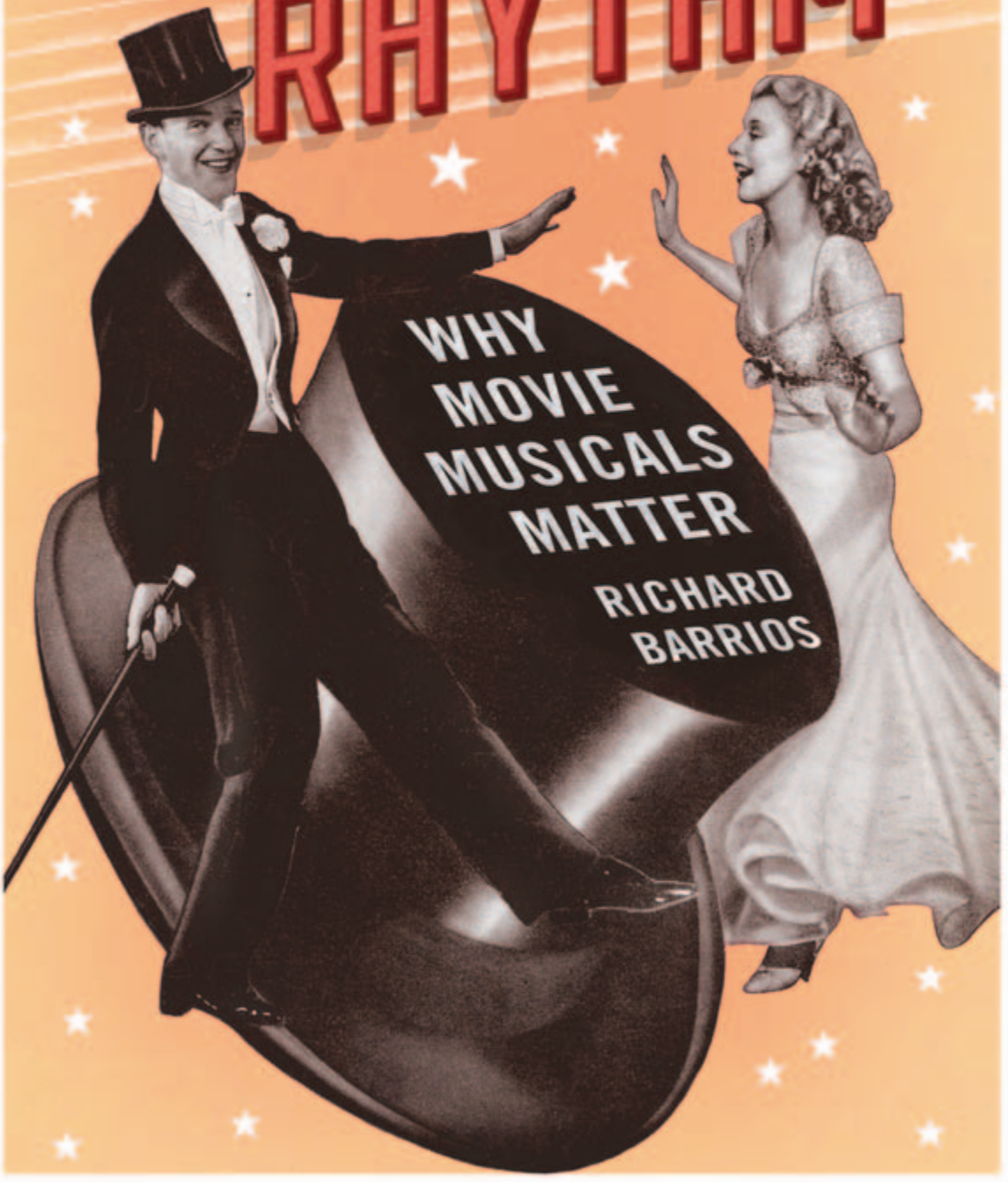
DANGEROUS RHYTHM



WHY MOVIE MUSICALS MATTER

RICHARD BARRIOS

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FOR MY FATHER

whose favorite movie was *The Jolson Story*

Contents

A Note of Explanation

The title of this book, along with all its chapter names plus those of the Introduction and Epilogue, derives from the titles or lyrics of songs performed in or written for films. The following is a list of the songs and films and creators and singers.

DANGEROUS RHYTHM

From "The Continental," in *The Gay Divorcée* (1934). Music by Con Conrad. Lyrics by Herb Magidson. Sung by Ginger Rogers, Erik Rhodes, and Lillian Miles. Danced by Rogers, Fred Astaire, and chorus.

[AND] ALL THAT JAZZ

From *Chicago* (2002). Music by John Kander. Lyrics by Fred Ebb. Sung and danced by Catherine Zeta-Jones, Renee Zellweger, and chorus.

EVERYTHING'S BEEN DONE BEFORE

[A.k.a. "Ev'rything's Been Done Before"] From *Reckless* (1935). Music by Jack King. Lyrics by Edwin Knopf and Harold Adamson. Sung by Allan Jones, danced by Jean Harlow (and dance double Betty Halsey), and chorus.

WHERE DO THEY COME FROM (AND WHERE DO THEY GO)?

From *Murder at the Vanities* (1934). Music by Arthur Johnston. Lyrics by Sam Coslow. Sung by Kitty Carlisle. Danced by chorus. [It should be mentioned that *Murder at the Vanities* was a loose—*very* loose—adaptation of a Broadway original.]

SEEING'S BELIEVING

From *The Belle of New York* (1952). Music by Harry Warren. Lyrics by Johnny Mercer. Sung and danced by Fred Astaire.

PEOPLE

From *Funny Girl* (1968). Music by Jule Styne. Lyrics by Bob Merrill. Sung by Barbra Streisand.

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

From *Evita* (1996). Music by Andrew Lloyd-Webber. Lyrics by Tim Rice. Sung by Antonio Banderas.

MUSIC MAKES ME

From *Flying Down to Rio* (1932). Music by Vincent Youmans. Lyrics by Gus Kahn and Edward Eliscu. Sung by Ginger Rogers.

WITH PLENTY OF MONEY [AND YOU]

From *Gold Diggers of 1937* (1936). Music by Harry Warren. Lyrics by Al Dubin. Sung by Dick Powell.

I GET THE NECK OF THE CHICKEN

From *Seven Days' Leave* (1942). Music by Jimmy McHugh. Lyrics by Frank Loesser. Sung by Marcy McGuire.

TURN ON THE HEAT

From *Sunny Side Up* [a.k.a. *Sunnyside Up*] (1929). Music by Ray Henderson. Lyrics by Lew Brown and B[uddy] G. DeSylva. Sung by Sharon Lynn. Danced by chorus.

PAINTING THE CLOUDS [WITH SUNSHINE]

From *Gold Diggers of Broadway* (1929). Music by Joseph Burke. Lyrics by

Al Dubin. Sung by Nick Lucas and chorus. Danced by Ann Pennington and chorus.

[I'VE GOT YOU] UNDER MY SKIN

From *Born to Dance* (1936). Music and lyrics by Cole Porter. Sung by Virginia Bruce (and evidently not dubbed).

PUT 'EM IN A BOX [TIE 'EM WITH A RIBBON, AND THROW 'EM IN THE DEEP BLUE SEA]

From *Romance on the High Seas* (1948). Music by Jule Styne. Lyrics by Sammy Cahn. Sung by Doris Day. Performed by the Page Cavanaugh Trio.

DREAM DANCING

From *You'll Never Get Rich* (1941). Music and lyrics by Cole Porter. Performed instrumentally. Recorded by Fred Astaire and the Delta Rhythm Boys.

Dangerous Rhythm

Introduction

All That Jazz

Over nine decades, the musical film has had an existence that might best be termed preposterous. From the pre-Depression 1920s to the post-millennial now, these movies have lurched from times of glory to times of scorn, greatness to ignominy, abundance to extinction, *Gigi* to *Glitter*. Where other genres simply pass in and out of style, musicals soar and careen and nosedive. Intended to seem effortless and diverting, they are, beneath those gleaming surfaces, complicated and contradictory. Small wonder, then, that they divide audiences like nearly no other kind of film: one person's Astaire will be another's anathema. The peculiarity extends as well to their history, which has been a thing less of evolution than recurrence, often regression. Their timeline is so rocky, in fact, that conventional chronology does not truly grasp exactly what musicals are about. Nor would it account for why their existence has been so odd, nor why or how they might continue to be vital and meaningful. Thus it is that *Dangerous Rhythm* seeks to explore the musical film experience less as chronicle than as reflection. A meditation, perhaps, that takes into account the musical's aspects, tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses. As its subtitle indicates, it proceeds from the viewpoint that musicals—when done right—can be pretty damned sublime. But there are no illusions or misty outbursts in these pages. Instead, it is a look, respectful yet clear-eyed, into how it can be, exactly, that musicals

can be so wonderful—can matter so inimitably—and then, with ballet deftness, lose touch and turn useless.

For all their outward accessibility, movie musicals can be so riddled with paradox that it becomes difficult to comprehend them. They can be insubstantial, trivial even, but are costly and require massive engineering. At their best they transport, even exalt, offering up a spectrum of fantasies that appear as compellingly real as the screen upon which they unfold. Then, and on a steady basis, they forget their viewers and lessons and achievements and history and era, and when this happens they deserve everyone's scorn. This wide range is what is known as the gamut, one these films run with a force that belies their glistening veneer. How, and why, have musicals been so extreme, touching greatness and then failing so massively? Why do some musicals made more than eight decades ago still enchant while others made very recently were stale before they opened? Why do musicals remain prone to sudden bouts of cluelessness, even repellence . . . and yet continue to be important and special to so many people? There are always answers, even as they often come in odd and nonstandard ways. This book, in considering these issues, celebrates and questions musicals in the light of their achievements and failures, their relevance and expendability, their pertinence and, OK, their impertinence. Most important, threading through it all like some insistent theme song, there are the reverberations of the musical's heritage and history. Sometimes remembered, often forgotten, never insignificant.

Like the people who love or hate them, musicals are balanced unsteadily between the sublime and the inane. It could be said that, with most of them, there's only been the intention to bring, in the words of the jerk diva in *Singin' in the Rain*, "a little joy into your humdrum lives." They can indeed bring that joy, yet it is their fate and nature to be precarious, with vastly rewarding rhythms that are ceaselessly in danger of failure. When undertaken by those who care, they can be transcendent, even while tottering on the edge of total absurdity—wonderfully hazardous, seldom safe. Wrench a musical film from its context or audience and it's trouble; take a good one on its own terms and there may be magic. Either way, the same extreme qualities that make them treacherous and open to ridicule also can make them magnificent. When too safe or too oblivious, they can be khaki-colored sludge; when they go far and take risks, they can be Technicolor-marvelous or *Moulin Rouge!* or, on especially blessed occasions, *Singin' in the Rain*. They've been stolen from for many years—music videos would not have occurred without them—yet remain unique and irreplaceable,

if constantly on the verge of extinction. This, then, is an exceedingly odd saga, and one way to begin to examine it comes with a visit to the Academy Awards ceremony held on March 23, 2003.

It was supposed to have been the ultimate Oscar show—the Academy's seventy-fifth anniversary, with untold panoply, stratospheric layers of self-congratulation, and the best-laid plans. Then, as sometimes happens when musicals are popular, a war started. This time it was Iraq, and the Bush administration's just-declared war against Saddam Hussein and his purported nuclear weapons had nabbed the lion's share of world attention and curtailed some of the Oscar excess. Presenters and winners were warned to keep the protests out of it, some of the more effulgent moments were eliminated and—sacrifice of sacrifices—necklines were raised on some gowns. Since the Academy Awards are nothing if not shameless, there did remain a great deal of the usual gloss, along with the hairdos and red-carpet gush, and something of a rare and unintended moment of candor as well: the big winner that year did not lay claim to the "seriousness" of a stirring drama or historical epic, and the kind of uplift that concerned it had far less to do with inspiration than with cleavage. It was glossy and flashy and filled with song and dance. It was *Chicago*. It was a musical.

At the end of those wartime Oscars, *Chicago* had tallied six statuettes, including Best Picture. While other things that evening seemed more immediately momentous or strange—the Best Director award given in absentia to a fugitive Roman Polanski, Adrien Brody as an unguardedly elated Best Actor winner, a nonplussed Barbra Streisand announcing that Eminem won the Best Song award—those of broader perception knew the chief significance. It had been thirty years since a musical film had done well at the Academy Awards, and thirty-four since one had been given the top prize.[1] Perhaps history was acting upon its weirdly persistent habit of recurring: back in 1969, *Oliver!* won the top award while a controversial war raged, and song-and-dance Dickens did seem particularly off-kilter during Vietnam. At any rate, that was a time when musicals were still the coin of the realm. They had been so for forty years, and they were about to vanish.

[1] This recounting of Oscars past does not mean to testify to the award's artistic status; a quick look at some winners and runners-up of any year will extinguish that notion pronto. Even so, Oscars offer an easy guide to the movie equation: profitable = popular = valid = worthy. In such a world, a Costner can win over a Scorsese. *Only* there.

Getting off with a bang: Catherine Zeta Jones and chorus, showing what "All That Jazz" is about in *Chicago*. For most musicals, this much heat and impact would have spelled climax—but here it was just the opening salvo.

When *Oliver!* received its award, no one thought the event to be anything extraordinary; it was, indeed, the fourth time in seven years that a musical had taken the top prize, which has to be some kind of record. All four—the predecessors were *West Side Story*, *My Fair Lady*, and *The Sound of Music*—were adapted Broadway shows, expensive, prestigious, conventionally well made. After *Oliver!* there would be a couple more big good musicals—*Fiddler on the Roof* and *Cabaret*—then silence. The movie musical had been an American institution, in some minds an essential popular art, and from 1972 onward it would die many deaths. The graveyard calm would occasionally be interrupted by flops big and small and the rare non-flop, plus one bona fide hit (*Grease*) and a few compelling novelties. Still, thirty years is a blasted eternity where film is concerned, and the period between *Cabaret* and *Chicago* was of such desolation that any attempt at resuscitation could make the corpse seem all the colder. *Chicago*, as it happened, was on the drawing board for much of that thirty-year down time. It was that extreme rarity: a planned film suffering decades of reversals and false starts, then both happening and succeeding. Again, it could only have been with a musical. *Chicago* was a special kind, sure—a dark vaudeville requiring a great deal of skilled staging, a nightmare to adapt to

the screen in any sort of cohesive manner. It was, in the event, good and successful enough to revive musical films for a time and inspire hopes for an ongoing renaissance. Eventually that time passed, and hope was tempered with much sober reflection. The truth is that in an age of media saturation and virtual realities and immediate gratification, musicals do not always fit in well. Think of it as the newest incarnation of a conundrum musicals have been presenting, endlessly so, ever since their inception: they are vital, they are necessary, and they are impossible.

All types of films go in and out of fashion. Westerns, historical epics, and romances all have their ins and outs, and there are even phases of wax and wane for those that always seem to be around: mysteries, horror, action thrillers, and low comedy. So it is also with literature, music, religion, politics, civility, and much else in the known world. But musicals—the official notice of *finis* has been hung on them at least six times: loudly in mid-to-late 1930, mutedly in the television-sated mid-1950s, and emphatically in every decade since 1970. The odd *Les Misérables* glitch will surface to give the illusion of life, and then silence follows. For such quintessentially American entertainment, they have often been disdained in their own country, even as overseas they seem to manage better. Formerly, they were a bread-and-butter staple that movie companies could do, sometimes well, in their sleep; then suddenly they were out of the question. They were hooted off movie screens even as they continued to thrive on stage and on television. When it became fashionable to admire some of the older musicals, the new ones became sparser and crummier. All these issues form the concern of this present fantasia, and the lion's share of its scope will be confined to American musicals. Granted, this choice is arguable and idiosyncratic; musicals are obviously part of a world stage, with countless striking examples that come from everywhere. Nevertheless, they originated in the United States and at their core remain uniquely American. The cinema of German operetta or French experimentalism or Bollywood or anywhere else—all worthy of their own multiple volumes—will always harken back, intentionally or no, to the stateside progenitors. Crass or philistine or mechanical or soulless they may be, and in all this they manage to embody American optimism, American enterprise, American taste and exuberance and vulgarity. Predictable and formula-bound without question, and also frequently surprising and surpassing to the point of occupying an unshakable bomb shelter in the collective heart. Many have loved to criticize what they have accomplished and what they have delivered, while others only realized how good they were, the

best of them, after they were dead and gone. Nostalgia is habitually a perilous slope, and while the musical documentary-cum-obituary *That's Entertainment!* was too rosy in many of its particulars, it did manage one clear-eyed observation. During an insanely skillful 1940 production number, it was with a gentle kind of rue that Frank Sinatra and the screenwriter noted, "You know, you can wait around, and hope, but I tell you, you'll never see anything like this again." The past can, after all, be an especially ornate prologue.

For diversions that can specifically be termed *Follies*, musicals raise controversies as endless as the colossal divisiveness they inspire. Assemble a group of knowledgeable people, and bring up the subject of the film version of *My Fair Lady* or *An American in Paris* or *The Broadway Melody* or *West Side Story* or, again, *Chicago*. The pros and cons come out in dense and heated and irreconcilable array.[2] There is also the quandary posed by an unknowable future. Are musicals too innocent for a time of contentious politics and hard economic truths, of "reality" "entertainment" and commercialized sex and apocalyptic fantasy? Does their kind of analog escapism retain any kind of currency in a digital age? Does *Nine* count for more or less than *Les Miz*? These are valid issues to raise at the time of this writing, just as similar questions were being asked at many other points in musicals' history. If there are not always steadfast answers, it might be possible to grasp why, like that tree falling in the forest, musicals sometimes keep on singing even when it appears that no one is listening.

Musicals depend vastly on the public for their existence, and that relationship has swung crazily through the years from exaltation to disdain. At the very beginning of the sound era, back when no one was sure exactly what a musical film was or would be, they were highly respected. Then the public became oversaturated—musicals, remember, seldom leave well enough alone—and began to look at them with a condescension that has never entirely gone away. "It's really good," one would hear, and the unspoken qualifier would finally drop, "…for a musical." Certainly, over the long haul, they would seldom acquire major prestige (and when they did, the results weighed tons); nor would they generally acquire, save in rare pockets, the reverent patina of respectability

[2] Even a formerly disreputable genre like martial arts is now given a more consistent respectability than musicals. (Note that they are both choreographed.) Since musicals seldom reside in the realm of the au courant or trendy—except when made by someone like Lars von Trier—their lot tends to be one of haughty contempt. Too safe or fey, too conventional or insubstantial—the rap sheet is as endless as the uncut version of *South Pacific*.

given by cinéastes to westerns or film noir. Part of the problem is that musicals are seen as a collaborative endeavor, one that does not permit an individual artist to leave a signature. The directors who inspire rabid devotion or shelves of books seldom turn to musicals—there's no body of Ford or Ozu musicals, and the one time Hitchcock did one, he regretted it forever after. Godard's sole musical is mainly *hommage* and stunt, while Bergman's *Magic Flute* is a record of a stage production. So-called respectable serious directors dabbled in musicals only reluctantly, and often with misguided zeal—William Wyler, Billy Wilder, John Huston, Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese. The directors who really took off in musicals—Vincente Minnelli, Rouben Mamoulian, Busby Berkeley, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, George Sidney, Bob Fosse, even René Clair—do not always earn the respect of the serious-minded, never mind that they usually should. Only Ernst Lubitsch, among the high-tier directors, seems immune, and few deem his musicals prime among his biggest-bang efforts.

So musicals have the auteur strike against them going out of the gate. That seems to indicate that they somehow bypass elevated criticism to communicate directly with the larger public. Well, yes and no. In some of their lushest periods, they did rake in huge grosses; a later chapter, examining the economics of musicals, includes some genuinely staggering financial figures. But does a film's huge financial success truly indicate that its makers have captured that producer's Holy Grail, the public's imagination? Not always and not anymore. When the dynamics of filmgoing changed in the megaplex boom of the 1970s, the marketing of a movie began to, and continues to, take strange precedence over its intrinsic quality. In so event-driven a culture, a film may double as huge success and profound artistic letdown. Many superhero opuses fall into this category, and it's worth noting that these big-screen comic books channel the same dynamics of many musicals: propelled less by substance than impact, relying on preset gimmicks to get their effects, intensely clued-in to formula and keyed response. (What's the difference, really, between a chorus line and an interplanetary explosion?) So, in some ways, big dumb action films are the twenty-first century's equivalent of the big dumb musicals of the late 1930s: both of them disposable, of-their-time products existing to fill up screen time and make money, then go away. And just as the likes of *Thor* will never be reclaimed as a lost gem, so also will *Rosalie* not receive or deserve more than furtive affection from a couple of misguided buffs.

No less than any other kind of movie, and more than many, musicals can be, for lack of a less polite term, utter dreck. In 1929, some observers went on

about their excessive frivolity, their seeming to not mean very much or be about anything. The complaints continued through the years, moving across the scale from irate dudgeon to faux-indulgent patronizing that holds even the best movie musicals to be lowbrow. Especially after the "serious" musical took off on Broadway in the mid-'40s, movies were deemed the gauche and inferior dauphin to stage royalty. It helped that some good shows were truly botched in their movie transfers—*Anything Goes* (twice), *One Touch of Venus*, *Kismet*, too many others to count. That made for two demerits—some people were just not going to accept musicals under any circumstances, and others were and are forever going to find them way below the Broadway standard. Even when people accept some musical movies—*West Side Story* is a good "serious" example—there is a tendency to look down on them as genial time-wasters, as insubstantial as the scenery in a dream-sequence dance. They can be fun, but don't confuse them with anything truly worthy.[3] It's unreal in the wrong way, it's not life, it's not art, ultimately it's not worthwhile. An acolyte will argue "But . . . *Love Me Tonight*, *Cabaret* . . ." in vain. Diversion can be so banal.

They can be crass, they're not always respected, they're virtually extinct—formidable truths all, which makes it fortunate that they are balanced by equally solid verities on the positive side. It can be far too easy to underestimate musicals, in part because they can give vastly more than can usually be comprehended. At their greatest, they commune with the hearts and minds and souls of their viewers in a way that puts into actual sounds and visuals things normally not a part of waking hours. They cover all temporal bases: reminders of the past that bring joy and comfort in the present, and through film's permanence guaranteeing a long future. As a result, they are retained and treasured and loved such as few works are. Once the good ones are here, they stay. "Over the Rainbow" will never go away, and Fred and Ginger dancing cheek to cheek will always be a moment of the most chic sort of rapture. The

[3] If expressing devotion to musicals draws a look down the nose from many, imagine the reaction when people learn of a book being written about them. Or, worse, a book about their beginnings.

It should be noted that while few serious (or captious) observers care to ascribe genuine relevance to musicals, *Chicago* prompted a superb *New York Times* Op-Ed piece by Frank Rich. Entitled "They Both Reached for the Gun," it equated Roxie Hart's lying assertions of innocence with the trumped-up charges then leading the United States into Iraq. By making such a brilliantly succinct point, Rich showed how a giddy piece of entertainment can impart even more meaning and significance than its creators could have intended, even apart from the O. J. trial.

big-studio system of the 1930s and 1940s was called The Dream Factory for a reason, and the craftsmanship and resonance of its finest product are, ultimately, as precious and lasting as literature or music. Leave the detritus to ghouls and mavens and confront the feast that comes with the greatest of these intricately wrought delights. Not to hector with a favorite title here, but what the hell: baldly put, does anyone wish to know someone who truly believes that their life was not made better by the existence of "Over the Rainbow"?

Perhaps the word "beguile" is too loose and too weak a description of the effect of the best musicals. Let a particularly wonderful moment in their existence serve as an example of their capability. In the spring of 1933, with the inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt, the United States was hoping for some kind of relief after three years of financial and emotional blight. Somehow, it was a movie musical that framed this national mood better than anything else. The movie was *42nd Street*, and forget about all the clichés of Let's-put-on-a-show and you've-got-to-come-back-a-star and the delirious overhead Busby Berkeley camera angles. *42nd Street* was a rallying cry for the New Deal and an authentic American miracle, offering up equal portions of hope and frivolity. Ruby Keeler's homeless nobody who becomes a star stood in for every spectator wanting to make it out of the Depression, and Warner Baxter's desperate and ailing director was a constant reminder that even the lightest fluff comes at a price. With this much awareness and skill, song and dance could seem germane. It did so as well in the 1940s, when extravaganzas bearing titles such as *Star-Spangled Rhythm* took the national mind off fear. There was no art, nor even that insinuatingly artless way in which musicals can illuminate deep feelings and hidden cravings. It was a very particular type of escapism being offered, one that acknowledged what was going on in the world, refracting it through the Hollywood lens, and having it come out in terms of swing music, Technicolor, and Betty Grable.

After the war, a disconnect became steadily more apparent. Even as a film like *Singin' in the Rain* embodied the musical at its absolute apogee, there were too many changes for musicals to bridge the gap. By the time of *Gigi* in 1958, it was clear that while musicals could occasionally rise wonderfully out of the old routine, they had somehow become less essential—equivalent to canvases that are sublime but must necessarily be placed in the isolation of a museum setting. There then followed, as a sort of rebirth, the huge grosses and Oscar stockpiles of *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music* and the others. Even as the self-congratulation continued, something false was going

on. These movies owed their allegiance to footlights, not cameras, reflecting the film musical's past far less than the enormous popularity of Broadway musicals in those years. On the screen they were liked and attended—even, in the case of *Sound of Music*, inspiring faith-based devotion bordering on fanaticism. But there was nothing else going on in movies or in American life or in the world—notably, Southeast Asia—that would give these movies genuine consequence. Besotted with their own prestige, these big-gun singing epics tried to pretend that musicals were not essentially an unpretentious art, a thing of honest craft and sweat and barely articulated finer feelings. For some, the refinement of a *My Fair Lady* came off, in an age of Beatles and antiwar protests and freedom marches, as a lack of simpatico. Then came a bunch of lavishly petty blockbusters to finish off the job. *Camelot* and *Paint Your Wagon* pretended to be relevant, but their mien was zillions of light years away from the genuine cool of, say, Astaire and Rogers dancing to "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" in *Roberta*. The times and the musicals had changed, and no one had bothered to coordinate one with the other.

Cabaret, in 1972, was not the last successful American movie musical before *Chicago*, nor the last good one. There were, in the intervening thirty years, some worthy tries as well as some things that could truly be counted unspeakable. But, to many, it felt like the end of the line. Over about four years (1970–74) the musical film died, in effect, completely, and MGM's survey of its former glories, *That's Entertainment!*, was the eulogy. The initial effect of *That's Entertainment!* was the regretful nostalgia of "They don't make 'em like that anymore"; yet in a larger sense it showed not only why musicals were extinct (cynicism, economy, rock music, faddishness) but why the best of them were transcendent. It could be said, while warily skirting a pun, that they had legs. They weren't only wistfully brassy reminders of lost innocence or the stuff of campy excess. Many of them were unmatched reminders of the effect made when talent and showmanship and well-spent money find the right point of collusion.

When *That's Entertainment!* was released in 1974, it had been a generation since the last golden time for original film musicals. *Gigi*, the final great one of that era, had come out in 1958, so there had been enough time for them to have, in effect, gone out of fashion and back in again. The impact was startling—almost nothing in that documentary drew laughs, even though derision was encouraged at the sight of Joan Crawford's maladroit dance stylings and those pomp icons Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy. Even, or espe-

cially, Esther Williams's world of undersea rococo drew gasps. People began to think about what earlier had been taken for granted. The growing appreciation was abetted by television and retrospective screenings, a few books, and, in time, the home video market. The secrets were out: Fred Astaire was a god, Gene Kelly was sexy, and Judy Garland could be loved by straight people too. Adding to it all were the occasional modern-day forays into musical filmmaking. If *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* didn't make one appreciate even a mediocre Betty Grable vehicle, what would? Seeing Gene Kelly trundle geriatrically through the dire *Xanadu* served less to elicit pity than, fortunately, to remind everyone of his former greatness. As each new abomination came out, more millions realized the quality, even the relevance, of the old ones.

So . . . musicals are wonderful, musicals are trash. Both are accurate, and this holds true not just because *Singin' in the Rain* is a masterpiece and *Paint Your Wagon* belongs in a litter box. They can be art and garbage, and they deserve the arguments. What cannot be disputed is their achievement and their importance. *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933* are not only major parts of the musical canon but of American sociology. *The Broadway Melody*, the first real movie musical, is a historically vital originator of a new kind of American pop art. So, in its way, is *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. As for *The Wizard of Oz,* a shelf of books could be written about its impact on the movie and television industries and on gay and straight culture. That musicals were popular and liked can be proved by sheer numbers. But there's more to a movie than its being a hit, let alone winning an Oscar. Whenever a movie comes out, it is part of a vast channel of history and culture and aesthetics. Sometimes it has a reverberant impact and sometimes very little. Either way, it will be swept along by trends and currents established by everything that's come before, yet ultimately it will end up in a unique destination. What those currents are, why they can be both good and otherwise, is the main topic of consideration here.

Dreams are by definition the most evanescent of things. Gone with the morning, never to be touched, seldom recurring, not even so tangible as to be remembered. Small wonder that movie musicals are often held to be an accurate actualization of dreams and fantasies. And, as with dreams, close inspection can help make their presence more comprehensible. They do not evaporate when examined—on the contrary, they welcome an examination that seeks to understand why they've danced in so many brains for all these scores of years. Not all the magic can be totally captured; no one, not even Arlene Croce, has completely explained the full enchantment of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. However,

scrutiny and understanding are still possible, even desirable. Enough remains, for example, to help explain why Busby Berkeley's "Lullaby of Broadway" sequence is a truly masterful piece of cinema. Enough may remain, too, to account for a great singer like Bing Crosby making so many dull and flimsy movies yet retaining immense popularity. Or to account for the numerous occasions when the musical lost its magic even as it kept making money. Or why some of the best musicals are those not featuring live performers. Or why African American artists were able, back in the day, to get just a little more of an even break in musicals than elsewhere in films. It might even be possible to fathom why the musical-film terrain of the 1960s began to resemble the elephants' graveyard. The answers are usually present, and they do not come through a web of preconceptions. These films don't necessarily conform to normal standards of greatness, and far too many of them are prone to shoving wonderful moments in between sections of stolid compost. Like dreams, like human beings, like life, there's a great deal of inconsistency here. Fortunately, for those whose hearts go that way, there is also an inordinate amount of bliss, plus rewards that are without parallel. And, as a connoisseur knows while sampling an especially fine champagne, a closer look at the bubbles does not lessen the sparkle.

Chapter 1

Everything's Been Done Before

Musicals have, in a way, been eternally accidental. While they are usually vastly dependent on precision and calculation, it should also be remembered that it is not always in their nature to make perfect sense. Thus, they emerged far from their creators' initial intent and, ever since, have been medleys of happenstance and collision, nestling celestial details within an overall devilish kind of chaos. If they come out, the best of them, like wondrously polished and superbly well-oiled machines, a great deal of blind uncertainty is always hovering just offscreen. First and last, there is their ever-present history, which is rich and often ambiguous. It swirls about, bears down, and forms an overlapping cluster of inescapable truths. Consciously or not, musical films will always operate within them:

1. There is no such thing as a sure thing.
2. The musical is a vibrant, incestuous cannibal, relentlessly feeding off itself, repeating itself, forgetting and then remembering what it does. Every good or great musical is built on a foundation of the good qualities established through previous musicals. On rare occasions when something new or innovative happens, it is added to the mix.
3. Any part of a musical will find causes and equivalents in other musicals, before or since. Janet Gaynor is the direct ancestor of Johnny Depp, triumphing in spite of a lack of song-and-dance experience. *The Desert Song*

or *Les Misérables*, Morton Downey in *Mother's Boy* (1929) or Kelly Clarkson in *From Justin to Kelly* (2003)—it's all, almost, the same.

4. Musicals enjoy a mutually admiring kinship with their audiences. The bond is special and precise, unintelligible to outsiders, and quite fragile. When either side violates it, crisis occurs.
5. Because of the musical's once-and-future nature, its past remains a live and immediate thing. Al Jolson, believe it or not, like it or not, is still singing.

As binding as these precepts are, musical film has always picked its way through an existential minefield. These movies try to be new at the same time they regress and reconstruct. They are uncannily self-referential, yet they sneer at their past while celebrating it. They are fragmented and oddly cohesive, predictable and variable, nostalgic and current. Their history, too, is both straightforward and serpentine, a progression that constantly digresses. The capsule account of their lifespan recounted here, then, will follow history's lead and at times dart back and forth through the years to connect the dots, just as the films do themselves. The echoes of their earliest years are still being felt today, the viewers matter as much as the films, and one way or another the same damn things keep on happening. There's also that brilliant, confounding trump card: just when it appears that musicals don't count, they prove their worth.

"It's always best to start at the beginning," Glinda the Good Witch observed, and that beginning is not Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*. Because of the florid power of his iconography—the big voice and ego and black-painted face—it can be easy to zero in on Jolson rather than search out the more mundane truth. (That, unfortunately, is how history sometimes works. Also movies and politics. That's entertainment.) This is where *Singin' in the Rain* does something of a disservice. Let it be beside the point for a moment that possibly the greatest of all musical films is about how musical films began—could the circle be closed more ecstatically?—and embraces its history with sublime zest. With all its glory and smarts and affection, *Singin' in the Rain* does propagate that old Warner Bros. myth about Jolson blurting out "You ain't heard nothin' yet" and changing movies forever and causing song and dance to spring up overnight. At best, this is a gross oversimplification, dramatically efficient yet about as similar to what really happened as Kathy Seldon's voice is to Lina Lamont's. The less magnetic truth is that the initial push to bring sound to movies was not about musicals or talking pictures, and that Jolson was less a cause of the revolution than an unintended by-product.