

## Musicals: An Overview

Musicals / Dance Films are cinematic forms that emphasize and showcase full-scale song and dance routines in a significant way (usually with a musical or dance performance as part of the film narrative, or as an unrealistic "eruption" within the film). They are also films that are centered on combinations of music, dance, song or choreography. In traditional musicals, cast members are ones who sing. Musicals highlight various musical artists or dancing stars, with lyrics that support the story line, often with an alternative, escapist vision of reality - a search for love, success, wealth, and popularity. This genre has been considered the *most* escapist of all major film genres. Tremendous film choreography and orchestration often enhances musical numbers.

### Introduction

With the coming of talking motion pictures, the musical film genre emerged from its roots: stage musicals and operettas, revues, cabaret, musical comedy, music halls and vaudeville. They were the *last* of the major film genres, because they were dependent on sound captured on film. (How could a movie be "all-singing, all-dancing" without sound?) Musicals are often described as Broadway on film, although many other forms of musicals have been made (e.g., rock 'n' roll movies and disco/dance films). Recently, animated films (with musical soundtracks, such as **Beauty and the Beast (1991)**, **Aladdin (1992)**, **The Lion King (1994)**, and **Tarzan (1999)**) have emerged as one of the major musical forms, and many of them have won Best Original Song Oscars.

### The Earliest Examples of Sound/Dance Films

One of the earliest films with a famous dance sequence was **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921)**, noted for Latin lover Rudolph Valentino's sensuous tango performed in a smoky cantina while dressed in an Argentine gaucho costume. In 1926, Warner Bros. had produced **Don Juan (1926)**, the *first* full-length silent film released with a complete musical score synchronized on a 78 rpm *Vitaphone* soundtrack (with sound effects and an original score). The groundbreaking film cleverly synchronized canned sound effects and dubbed music to the action.

### The Jazz Singer (1927): A Landmark Film

With the coming of the talkies, the film musical genre naturally emerged with the *first* full-length, revolutionary 'talkie' (with speech and song) that premiered in New York City at the Warner Theatre on October 6, 1927. It was a "musical" of sorts - Warner Bros.' **The Jazz Singer (1927)**. Contrary to popular belief, it was *not* the first sound feature film, since it was mostly silent, and it was *not* the first Hollywood musical (**The Broadway Melody (1929)** holds that honor). It was also *not* the first instance of sound-on-film.

In reality, the landmark part-talkie *singing* film was an old-fashioned melodrama about Jewish-bred 'jazz singer' Jackie Rabinowitz/Jake Robin (charismatic Broadway mega-star Al Jolson). It featured seven songs (including "Blue Skies," "Toot-Toot-Tootsie," and "Mammy" - famous for the image of Jolson on one knee holding out his arms to embrace the audience), and a few lines of screen dialogue (including one long emotional homecoming speech to Jolson's mother, played by Eugenie Besserer). After Jolson had sung his first song, "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face", he delivered a portentous, spellbinding line that was ad-libbed and left in the film, before singing his next song. His naturally-spoken words were the *first* ever heard in a full-length movie:

“Wait a minute! Wait a minute! You ain't heard nothin' yet. Wait a minute, I tell ya, you ain't heard nothin'! Do you wanna hear 'Toot, Toot, Tootsie!'? All right, hold on, hold on. (To the band leader) Lou, Listen. Play 'Toot, Toot, Tootsie!' Three choruses, you understand. In the third chorus I whistle. Now give it to 'em hard and heavy. Go right ahead!”

### **Upheaval in the Industry**

The other major film studios (Paramount, Loew's, First National and UA) realized the expensive and challenging ramifications of the sound revolution that was dawning, and that talkie films would be the wave of the future. Most of the studios started to convert from silent to sound film production - a tremendous capital investment. Thousands of existing theaters had to be rewired for sound. In 1927, only 400 US theatres were wired for sound, but by the end of the decade, over 40% of the country's movie theatres had sound systems installed. Many Hollywood actors/actresses lacked good voices and stage experience, and their marketability decreased. By 1930, the silent movie had practically disappeared, and by the mid-1930s, film industry studios had become sound-film factories. The industry standard was becoming *sound-on-film* - a more practical alternative than sound-on-disk.

Most early musicals were crudely made, due to technical limitations, and often just adaptations or photographed versions of recent stage hits. Broadway stars were called in to become musical film stars. Broadway legend and popular Ziegfeld Follies star Fannie (or Fanny) Brice (in her sound film debut) performed some of her inimitable sketches and songs ("I'd Rather Be Blue Over You" and the title song) in director Archie Mayo's and Warners' musical **My Man (1928)** - one-third of which was silent. The studio thought she would be the female equivalent of Al Jolson, but the film was not financially successful, and Brice (with her Yiddish persona and atypical star look) was not an overnight success on film, until her "Baby Snooks" character in the top-rated radio comedy series became popular.

On stage, the Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein II *Show Boat* debuted in 1927 - it was the first Broadway musical *play*, differing from previous musical revues (a series of musical numbers strung together). In two years, Universal released the part-talkie film version **Show Boat (1929)** - the *first* of many versions (James Whale's 1936 version with Paul Robeson - usually considered the best, and George Sidney's 1951 version with Howard Keel) of the popular adaptation from Edna Ferber's book.

### **The First Genuine Musical: The Broadway Melody (1929)**

The first *genuine* musical, fully integrating singing and dancing into a 'backstage musical' plot was also MGM's *first* full-length musical, **The Broadway Melody (1929)**. It premiered in Hollywood in early February of 1929 at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, and was the *first* widely-distributed sound feature. It was proudly advertised as "All Talking - All Singing - All Dancing", and the popular film brought in a profit of over \$1.6 million. It was the *first* musical film - and the *first* sound film as well - to win an Academy Award for Best Picture. The film inspired three more **Broadway Melody** films in the following decade - in 1935 (the best of the series), 1937, and 1940. In 1929, it also inspired an abundance of copycat imitators with similar 'backstage' or show-business-related plots.

The landmark musical, with songs composed by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown, starred Anita Page (as Queenie) and Oscar-nominated Bessie Love (as older sibling Hank) as two sisters seeking fame in the New York theatre - known as the Great White Way - while both were attracted to song-and-dance man Charles King (as Eddie). The musical is outdated today and exhibits its clumsy vaudevillian, stage-bound roots (with Jack Benny as master of ceremonies). However, it featured the innovative use of two-colors in "The Wedding of the Painted Doll" sequence, a mobile camera, and slangy dialogue. The film was also revolutionary for two sound engineering firsts:

- it used a pre-recorded soundtrack (for "The Wedding of the Painted Doll" sequence)
- it had post-production sound effects and editing

The pioneering sound film was produced by young production head Irving Thalberg, and its original score was written by the team of Nacio Herb Brown and Arthur Freed - the film's hit song was "You Were Meant For Me." [Freed remained with MGM and eventually was responsible for some of the studio's most successful and sophisticated musicals, beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1950s. Brown's and Freed's songs were later recycled into **Singin' in the Rain (1952)**.] Other songs included "Give My Regards to Broadway" (George M. Cohan), "The Wedding Day of the Painted Doll", "Love Boat," "Broadway Melody," "Boy Friend," and "Truthful Deacon Brown" (Willard Robison).

## The Boom in Musicals

The 1930s were considered the beginning of the "Golden Age of the Musical" with a greater variety of musical vehicles and stars. Musical arrangers, song-writers, conductors, and dance instructors hurried to the West Coast to be part of the onslaught of 'talking' musicals. In particular, backstage musicals became the rage during the Great Depression, encouraging the production of other imitators with similar characters: a struggling stage producer, wise-cracking chorus girls practicing and on the lookout for rich husband prospects, and the opening night opportunity for stardom for an inexperienced chorus girl filling in for the leading lady. Paramount's Astoria, Long Island studios were the earliest to master the musical genre. Some of the leading songwriters and lyricists, such as Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and George Gershwin began to write original screen musicals or provide words and music. The studio associated with all-star extravaganzas and revue-type productions was MGM.

MGM's follow-up film to its successful Best Picture entry in 1929 was **Chasing Rainbows** (originally titled **The Road Show**) (1929), again bringing together stars Bessie Love (as Carlie) and Charles King (as song-and-dance man Terry), with the memorable tune "Happy Days Are Here Again" - the future Presidential campaign song for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1932.

Musicals experienced a significant boom during the late 1920s and early 1930s, many of them with Broadway stars lured westward to Hollywood. Eddie Cantor was attracted to Hollywood from Broadway, where he made his first sound film **Whoopee!** (1930), based on Flo Ziegfeld's 1928-1929 Broadway production (with the same cast) and filmed almost intact.

Silent film stars Corinne Griffith, Colleen Moore, and others found themselves in sound films with dialogue. Pretty red-headed Paramount star Nancy Carroll appeared in the part-talkie comedy **Abie's Irish Rose** (1928) - making her the *first* Hollywood actress to sing and dance on a sound stage, and also in the early sound musicals **Sweetie** (1929) and **Honey** (1930), among others. Portraying the 'girl-next-door', Carroll was notable as the *first* musical star to emerge within Hollywood.

Janet Gaynor's *first* all-talking film was Fox's popular early musical **Sunny Side Up** (1929), one of the first musicals created directly for the screen (with a score by DeSylva-Brown-Henderson) - and featuring the film debut of young 7 year-old Jackie Cooper. In the familiar Cinderella tale, Gaynor took the role of working-girl heroine Molly and sang "I'm a Dreamer (Aren't We All?)", "If I Had a Talking Picture of You", and the title song. Also, Gaynor was again teamed with her silent film romantic partner Charles Farrell (they were known as "America's Favorite Lovebirds") for the first time in a talkie. The finale's bizarre, erotic and uninhibited production number "Turn on the Heat," partly tinted in Multi-color, has been considered the 'first purely cinematic' number of its kind - 36 chorines led by flapper Jane Worth (Sharon Lynne), who were dressed as Eskimos, flung off their fur parkas when their ice-bound set became a 'hot', palm-tree-dotted tropical island - and when it became too hot and the island went up in flames, they jumped into the water in their skimpy summer suits.

## All-Star Revue Musicals

Every studio in the late 20s produced lavish, star-studded musicals of the "all-talking, all singing, and all dancing" variety that contained smorgasbord lineups of specialty or vaudeville acts, comedy sketches, musical numbers, short dramas, and other production numbers (some of which had color sequences). In many cases, actors with no musical talent whatsoever were recruited into these musical revue films that were essentially all-star spectacles.

One of the first "variety" shows was MGM's elaborate, Best Picture-nominated **The Hollywood Revue of 1929 (1929)** noted for two highlight songs: "While Strolling Through the Park One Day" and "Singin' in the Rain". Its star-studded cast included Joan Crawford (singing and Charleston-dancing to "Gotta Feelin' For You"), Marion Davies (performing "Tommy Atkins on Parade" and also tap dancing), Bessie Love (performing "I Never Knew I Could Do a Thing Like That"), comedy sketches from Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton (performing "Dance of the Sea" dressed as Neptune's daughter) and Marie Dressler (singing "For I'm the Queen"), and other star performers. It was hosted by Jack Benny and Conrad Nagel and was most notable for an early version of "Singin' in the Rain", performed by Cliff Edwards (known as "Ukelele Ike") during a rainstorm in the two-color finale.

## Early Musical Directors: King Vidor

One of the early landmark musical films was King Vidor's and MGM's melodramatic musical **Hallelujah! (1929)**. It was King Vidor's *first* talkie and only musical. And it was the *first* all-black feature film in the sound era with a soundtrack composed of various spirituals and traditional songs, such as "Swing Low, Swing Chariot" and "Swanee River." It was a risky film to make, given its questionable box-office potential, and the fact that it was shot mostly on location in Memphis. [Vidor was already known for his great silent films, including **The Big Parade (1925)** and ★**The Crowd (1928)**.] It was also the *first* film with a dubbed, asynchronous soundtrack added *later* in the studio in Hollywood - a technological, post-production advancement. Although the film contained some racial stereotypes, overdone acting, and primitive techniques, it remained a powerful tale of murder and redemption in the Deep South, regarding black man Zeke (Daniel Haynes) who was led to commit manslaughter and murder within a love triangle involving seductive temptress Chick (Nina Mae McKinney) and her lover from the past Hot Shot (William E. Fountaine).

## Resurgence of Musicals

Warner Bros. was the studio that produced the *first* talking picture in 1927, the *first* movie operetta (**The Desert Song (1929)**), and the *first* color musicals. The *first* all-color (actually two-strip Technicolor) sound musical was Warners' and director Alan Crosland's backstage musical **On With the Show! (1929)** - advertised as "the first 100%, Natural Color, All-Singing Production" - with a plot similar to the later release, **42nd Street (1932/33)**. Director Edmund Goulding's big-budget musical **Reaching for the Moon (1930)**, starring Douglas Fairbanks (in one of his few sound pictures) and Bebe Daniels, was to be the *first* musical to feature an all-Irving Berlin song score, but the studio eliminated all of them except "When the Folks High-Up Do the Mean Low-Down", performed by a young Bing Crosby, June MacCloy and Bebe Daniels. The studios began to fear that audiences were becoming exhausted by the number of songs in films.

The *second* full-length color sound feature film ever made was Warners' ambitious and successful Technicolor musical **The Gold Diggers of Broadway (1929)** by director Roy Del Ruth. It featured a number of popular variety stage stars, including talented dancers, singers, and comedians. It was famous for "Tip-Toe Through the Tulips With Me" and "Painting the Clouds with Sunshine" by Nick Lucas, who also starred in the film. It was a remake of the silent, non-musical comedy film about chorus girls, **The**

**Gold Diggers (1923)** - and it was followed by Mervyn LeRoy's musical remake **The Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933)**. [In all, Warner Bros. made five **Gold Diggers** pictures, four of which were made in the 1930s. See more below.]

By 1932, however, Hollywood studios had glutted the public's tired appetite and their overexposed song-and-dance epics (often sacrificing plot and character development) went into a commercial decline, coinciding with the height of the Great Depression. There were approximately 60 musicals in 1929, and over 80 in 1930, but by 1931, there were only 11. Audiences bypassed many of the musical films that were being cranked out, and preferred to watch other genre creations, such as the early *gangster films*: **Public Enemy (1931)** and **Little Caesar (1930)**, the *comedy film* **Min and Bill (1930)**, or the Best Picture-winning *western film* **Cimarron (1931)**. The novelty of sound had worn off and the popularity of musicals suffered. For example, MGM's star-studded, over-produced **Hollywood Party (1934)** with a host of writers and directors, originally titled *Hollywood Revue of 1933*, was basically a disaster. It had a mish-mashed plot, and starred such diverse actors as Laurel and Hardy, Jimmy Durante, Lupe Velez, Polly Moran, Frances Williams, and The Three Stooges.

### **The Landmark Film: 42nd Street**

The musical genre was really sparked, fortunately, when the Warners studio stole director and dance choreographer Busby Berkeley away from United Artists. (Earlier in the decade, Berkeley was hired by Sam Goldwyn as dance director on four Eddie Cantor films (one each year), where he began to display his talents. In **Whoopie! (1930)**, his debut film, Berkeley's first number was "Cowboys," partly crooned by 16 year-old Betty Grable, and the film also contained the first evidence of Berkeley's trademark "top shot" in "Song of the Setting Sun". In his next film **Palmy Days (1931)**, Berkeley continued to demonstrate his visual ingenuity by having the Goldwyn Girls use placards to form a train at the end of the hit tune "My Honey Said Yes, Yes." And in **The Kid From Spain (1932)**, Berkeley brought on criticism for his 'peeping tom' views of chorines' silhouettes behind a translucent screen. Finally, in **Roman Scandals (1933)**, he exhibited further excesses, with his "No More Love" sequence in which long blonde-haired slave girls were chained nude to a wall.)

The Warners film that breathed new life into the musical form was Darryl Zanuck's executive production of director Lloyd Bacon's **42nd Street (1932/33)**, another lively backstage drama that chronicled the hard work of a manic Broadway director (Warner Baxter) behind the making of a musical comedy - where life (whether as a director or chorus girl) depended upon the success of the opening show. The Warner Bros.' 'putting on a show' film (with two Oscar nominations for Best Picture and Best Sound, with no wins) also featured two fresh new juvenile stars, Ruby Keeler (as a chorus girl) and tenor Dick Powell, and it starred Ginger Rogers as veteran showgirl Anytime Annie.

Berkeley made screen history in this milestone-grandfather of spectacular musicals, with scores of chorus girls, large extravagant musical 'production numbers' and sumptuous art deco sets, surrealistic imagery, optical effects, zoom lenses, escapist musical numbers, fast-paced timing and rhythmic editing, and wise-cracking dialogue. Berkeley was aided by the penned tunes of Harry Warren (and co-writer Al Dubin), who contributed "Shuffle Off to Buffalo", "Young and Healthy", and the climactic title song "42nd Street". [Songwriter/composer Warren also worked on Berkeley's other 1933 films, and wrote some of the best-remembered musical songs ever created.]

### **Busby Berkeley - Master Musical and Dance Choreographer**

It was the first real look at the imaginative choreography of former Broadway dance director Busby Berkeley, a transplant from Broadway musical-directing. He was the first to truly realize that a filmed musical was totally different from a staged musical, with the camera becoming an integral participant

with the choreography. He was becoming known for his trademark sensual, kaleidoscopic patterns of carefully-positioned, often scantily-clad chorus girls with props photographed from above (his "top shot"), from swooping cranes, from the trench below the stage, or from cameras placed on specially-designed tracks to capture audacious camera movements. Abstract, shifting geometric patterns, screen compositions, and props in his highly-stylized 'moving pictures' included giant flowers, neon violins, and waterfalls.

In most of these unique films, emphasis was on large extravagant (sometimes outlandish) musical numbers and sets. He used his chorus girls not as individuals but as parts of large, attractive geometric patterns moving with precise choreography. The images could be animated tiles in vast, ever-shifting mosaics, fanciful geometric patterns or cascading designs. Often, he would use his legendary cinematic "top view" shot to capture the kaleidoscopic views. He dressed the girls up in preposterous costumes, sometimes as coins or musical instruments, or the chorus girls would wear next to nothing but wisps of gauze. He also introduced the 'chorine close-up' shot.

Berkeley produced many more distinctive musicals during the Depression-afflicted 1930s for Warner Bros. In fact, Berkeley alone choreographed three films for WB in 1933 (\*). [Note: These three films all featured performers Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler, Guy Kibbee, Lorena Layson, Renee Whitney and Pat Wing. They also featured songs written by Al Dubin and Harry Warren, and conducted by Leo F. Forbstein.] Each movie attempted to outdo the previous extravaganza in exotic, erotic flamboyance (in chronological order): **42nd Street (1933)**, **Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933)**, **Footlight Parade (1933)**, **Roman Scandals (1933)**, **Fashions of 1934 (1934)**, **Dames (1934)**, **Gold Diggers of 1935 (1935)**, **Gold Diggers of 1937 (1936)** .

He introduced spectacular musical numbers (often non-integrated into the narrative) with stylized action, astonishing sets, and huge lavish dance numbers for the *Gold Digger* series. Mervyn LeRoy's blockbuster **Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933)** (a remake of the **Gold Diggers of Broadway (1929)** which itself was a remake of the silent film **Gold Diggers (1923)** about chorus girls), was one of Berkeley's purest fantasies for the Depression Era. It featured a young, coin-clad Ginger Rogers in the opening production number leading a chorus line of showgirls garbed in more gold-coin costumes singing "We're in the Money" (with one verse in Pig Latin). In another scene, Berkeley undressed his pretty chorus girls entirely behind screens, backlighting them so that the audience could see all they had to offer in silhouette. In another romantic scene "The Shadow Waltz", neon-lighted violins formed geometric designs on the screen with girls dressed all in white. The film ended with the social commentary of the finale's downbeat number: "Remember My Forgotten Man" accompanied by the singing of Joan Blondell.

One of Berkeley's greatest extravaganzas in the same year was another Lloyd Bacon collaboration: **Footlight Parade (1933)**, in which Ruby Keeler and Joan Blondell co-starred with a lively yet crazed Broadway musical producer (James Cagney). The film has many classic numbers including "Shanghai Lil" and the underwater/fountain sequences in "Honeymoon Hotel". The most incredible and showy of all sequences of musical fantasy in Berkeley's films was the 15 minute production number "By a Waterfall". It included a revolving wedding cake fountain and an elaborate aquacade of 100 bathing-suited girls, performing kaleidoscopic patterns in the water and reflecting their images in a pool, climaxing in a huge human fountain.

**Dames (1934)** included Berkeley's inventive, staged choreography in a title production number (Harry Warren's and Al Dubin's love song "I Only Have Eyes For You") in which gigantic, precision-fit jigsaw puzzle pieces on the backs of dancing chorus girls came together to form a large picture of the face of Ruby Keeler. The 'backstage musical' film also featured showgirl Mabel Anderson (Joan Blondell) solo-singing "The Girl at the Ironing Board".

The visually-stunning **Gold Diggers of 1935 (1935)**, not only production-designed but directed by Berkeley, featured one of the finest examples of Berkeley's inventiveness. He traced the experiences of a chorus girl through a day and night, culminating with her death fall from a Manhattan balcony. In another sequence titled "The Words Are In My Heart", pretty chorus girls playing long rows of two-dozen separate white pianos were merged together into one huge piano. He accomplished this spectacular feat by having his stagehands invisibly dressed in black while they wheeled the pianos around on stage. The film climaxed with Berkeley's large-scale dancing number "Lullaby of Broadway". The inventive, show-stopping, tap-dancing climactic finale - a film within a film - of a day in the life of the Great White Way of New York, started with an opening shot (in a dark frame) of a lit, approaching, disembodied, singing, and upturned face (singer Wini Shaw's face) followed by a famous dissolve (into an aerial shot of Manhattan) - and then told a mordant and cautionary tale of life (and death by falling from a skyscraper balcony) in the hedonistic night-time city.

The era of extravagant *Gold Diggers*/Berkeley numbers began its decline shortly after the mid-30s, due to production cuts and enforcement of the Production code that forbade some of Berkeley's sublimated sexual images. The famed director/choreographer was restricted to only two production numbers in Lloyd Bacon's **Gold Diggers of 1937 (1936)**, featuring the ten-minute final musical number "All's Fair in Love and War", nominated for Best Dance Direction. It featured Joan Blondell leading a chorus of 104 women dressed in white military uniforms (against a shiny black floor) as they tapped their way through a series of military formations and flag-wavings with Berkeley's trademarked geometric patterns. By the time the last *Gold Diggers* film was released, **Gold Diggers in Paris (1938)**, Rudy Vallee had replaced Dick Powell (who had starred in the previous three *Gold Digger* films), and the budgets for Berkeley's numbers were drastically cut and scaled down.

### **Shirley Temple at 20th Century Fox**

Besides MGM, other studios had their own musical attractions, and merchandising 'cash cows.' One of the biggest money-making, musical super-stars of the mid-1930s was Twentieth Century Fox's talented, naturally-acting, charming child attraction Shirley Temple. The diminutive, curly-topped sensation earned a special Oscar in 1934 "in grateful recognition to her outstanding contribution to screen entertainment." Although her films went into decline by the late 30s, as she got older, she achieved legendary film status in such films as: **Baby Take A Bow (1934)** - her first starring vehicle, **Bright Eyes (1934)** - one of Shirley's best, with her classic rendition of "On the Good Ship Lollipop," **Little Miss Marker (1934)**, **Curly Top (1935)** - with Shirley as a resident of an orphanage, and noted for her phrase: "Oh, my goo'ness!" - [this phrase was referenced in the latter film **Annie (1980)**], **The Little Colonel (1935)** with her famous staircase dance sequence with 56 year-old vaudevillian and musical stage star Bill "Bojangles" Robinson; has a short Technicolor finale, **The Littlest Rebel (1935)** - a Civil War era film, the finale includes a 'challenge dance' against Bill Robinson, **Captain January (1936)** including the delightful song/dance number "At The Codfish Ball" with Buddy Ebsen, **Dimples (1936)** - famous for Shirley's convincing re-enactment of Little Eva's death scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, **Poor Little Rich Girl (1936)** - a remake of Mary Pickford's 1917 film, co-starring Alice Faye, **Stowaway (1936)** - as a character named Ching-Ching, orphaned and stranded in Shanghai, China who stowaways on a ship bound for San Francisco; known for Shirley's frequent spouting of wise 'Charlie Chan' sayings, and her wonderful rendition of "You've got to S-M-I-L-E, To be H-A-Double-P-Y," **Heidi (1937)** - includes a dream sequence set in Holland with the singing of "In My Little Wooden Shoes," **Wee Willie Winkie (1937)** - directed by John Ford and set in India, **Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1938)** with 10 year-old Shirley performing a medley of many of her earlier hit songs, "On the Good Ship Lollipop," "When I'm With You," and more, **Little Miss Broadway (1938)**, and **The Little Princess (1939)** - her first Technicolor feature film.

## **Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: The Greatest Dance Duo**

The resurgence of musicals for RKO in the 1930s featured the cinematic artistry of the seemingly effortless and carefree, graceful, energetic and inspired dance team of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers - the most enduring, best-loved and complementary stars of the era. Katharine Hepburn was quoted as saying about them, "He gave her class, she gave him sex." In a unique musical courtship, the earthy Rogers matched Astaire's nimble dancing vitality with her own brand of wise-cracking humor and talent. In many of the films, they engaged in a 'challenge duet' of dancing skills and abilities (i.e., "Isn't It a Lovely Day (To Be Caught in the Rain)" in **Top Hat (1935)** or "They All Laughed" in **Shall We Dance (1937)**). Their screwball comedy musical/dance films often seamlessly integrated the musical numbers into the storyline - often one of chance meetings, mistaken identities, breakup or misunderstanding, and reconciliation.

Astaire, arguably the greatest dancer in film history and an import from Broadway, was the creative and revolutionary force behind the choreography and cinematography. He didn't fit the profile of a studly, good-looking actor, but he changed forever the way in which the camera moved in musicals. Musical numbers would now be filmed in long takes with minimal camera movements and cuts, and Astaire also insisted that his full-figure had to be captured in the camera frame. The fact that long dance sequences would be filmed in only one or two takes meant that the dance routines had to be performed flawlessly - or repeated. Film technicians designed a so-called "Astaire dolly" that could move on wheels and capture his whole body from a low-angle.

### **The RKO Films of Astaire and Rogers**

The dance couple made nine films together at RKO over a six-year period from 1933 to 1939 - only two of them were nominated for Best Picture. Beginning at RKO, in the first of their nine films there, they co-starred (billed fourth and fifth in secondary roles) in **Flying Down to Rio (1933)** in only one dance number. The film was known for its memorable airplane wing-dancing chorus girls scene and their debut dance number - the sensual 18-minute, show-stopping "Carioca." (Their first film together was also the first time Astaire/Rogers had been teamed with choreographer Hermes Pan.) Then, after being recognized as possible stars (as a dancing playboy and sweet but spunky dancing partner), they were top billed in the next year's excellent **The Gay Divorcee (1934)**, playing their traditionally-remembered elegant and sophisticated dancing roles, exhibited in two classic Cole Porter numbers: the dance-song number "The Continental" (it won an Oscar for Best Song) and "Night and Day." In 1935, they were second-billed in their fourth film - the light-hearted **Roberta (1935)** (directed by William Seiter) with a nominated Best Song contender "Lovely to Look At" by Jerome Kern.

### **The Three Best Films of Astaire/Rogers**

The famous dance team's three best films in the series are considered to be:

- the quintessential and very successful **Top Hat (1935)**, a tale of mistaken identities and romantic misunderstandings set in London and on the Italian Riviera, featuring Irving Berlin's superb songs (i.e., "It's It a Lovely Day (to Be Caught in the Rain)" and "No Strings"), their memorable dreamy duet "Cheek to Cheek" number with Rogers in an ostrich-feathered dress (that shed during the routine), the dance "The Piccolino", and Astaire's signature solo number "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails"
- the magical **Swing Time (1936)** featuring their poignant duet "Never Gonna Dance," Astaire's blackface solo dance "Bojangles of Harlem," the romantic "Waltz in Swing Time", and the light courtship dance "Pick Yourself Up"
- **Shall We Dance (1937)** their seventh film together in four years, featuring Gershwin music and their classic tap duet "They All Laughed"; also with a delightful roller-skating routine



They also teamed up to dance together in **Follow the Fleet (1936)** with an Irving Berlin score (the highlight was their dramatic duet "Let's Face the Music and Dance"), and in the screwball musical comedy **Carefree (1938)** with three Irving Berlin duets - and featuring Astaire's and Rogers's *first* and only on-screen kiss. Their last RKO picture together was the musical biopic **The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle (1939)**, culminating with Astaire's death in its conclusion. After a ten year absence from the screen, the legendary pair of Astaire and Rogers was reunited for their tenth and final film in MGM's inferior reunion film - **The Barkleys of Broadway (1949)**, their only Technicolored film, with the memorable number "You'd Be Hard to Replace", a reprise of "They Can't Take That Away From Me," and Astaire's dance solo "Shoes With Wings On." Amazingly, Astaire and Rogers were never nominated for an Academy Award for any of their musical performances/roles, although Rogers presented Astaire with an Honorary Oscar in 1950.

### Astaire's Other Dance Films

Astaire continued to star in musicals for other studios and with other dance/film partners. After Fred Astaire left RKO for MGM to make **The Broadway Melody of 1940 (1940)**, the only film in which he tap-danced with Eleanor Powell (to Cole Porter's "Begin the Beguine"), he later made two wonderful musicals with Bing Crosby for Paramount:

- **Holiday Inn (1942)** in which Crosby relaxingly croons "White Christmas" for the first time and Astaire dances with Marjorie Reynolds - the film was later remade as **White Christmas (1954)**
- **Blue Skies (1946)** featuring Irving Berlin music and Astaire's classic "Puttin' On the Ritz"

Both of Astaire's marvelous romantic musicals for Columbia with a ravishingly-beautiful Rita Hayworth in the early 1940s have been under-rated - Hayworth was probably Astaire's best dance partner after Ginger Rogers. They were first paired together in **You'll Never Get Rich (1941)** featuring Cole Porter songs, and then in **You Were Never Lovelier (1942)**. Their dancing was as good as the best Astaire-Rogers romantic duets. Astaire also starred in Vincente Minnelli's **Yolanda and the Thief (1945)** and the Irving Berlin musical **Easter Parade (1948)** with Judy Garland.

In **Royal Wedding (1951)**, Astaire performed two memorable numbers: his hat and coat stand-rack routine, and his famous "wall and ceiling walk" dance number in his hotel room during "You're All the World To Me". He also performed many song and dance numbers with Jane Powell, including the dance duet "Open Your Eyes" and "How Could You Believe Me When I Said I Love You (When You Know I've Been a Liar All My Life)?" [Keenan Wynn's famous number in the film was "What a Lovely Day For a Wedding".] Much later, Astaire danced with Audrey Hepburn in one of the best musicals of the 1950s, the gorgeously visual **Funny Face (1957)** - a film also directed by Stanley Donen.

### Musicals in the Late 30s and 40s Post-War Period

Musicals really came into full flower in the late 1930s and into the 1940s, with an increased demand for escapist entertainment during World War II and bigger budgets for the musical genre. The 1940s inaugurated the heyday of elaborate MGM musicals in technicolor. Color was also being introduced into the major productions. MGM's most popular fantasy musical was the artistic, classic Technicolor masterpiece **The Wizard of Oz (1939)**, starring an appealing and young emerging star Judy Garland as Dorothy in a magical land and dreaming "Over the Rainbow." [Garland was recognized earlier for her singing of "Dear Mr. Gable/You Made Me Love You" in **The Broadway Melody of 1938 (1937)**.] Even Disney's **Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)**, the first full-length animated feature, was also the first animated *musical* - with the title character occasionally singing within the film. Its songs included the tuneful "Heigh-Ho" and "Some Day My Prince Will Come." Although not technically a musical, the visually-brilliant masterpiece **Fantasia (1940)** blended together animation and classical music.

As in other film genres (such as the *western* and *gangster* films), darker undertones emerged in some musicals in the post-war period, such as in director Michael Curtiz' Technicolor musical comedy **My Dream is Yours (1949)**, a Warner Bros' film starring Doris Day (in her second film). In its story about a tormented romance (similar to *A Star is Born*), the film demonstrated how personal relationships between performers were sacrificed for their careers (single war-widowed mother Martha Gibson (Doris Day) was told: "Two careers in one family is one too many. We'll concentrate on mine, huh?" by egotistical and conceited popular radio crooner Gary Mitchell (Lee Bowman)).

### **Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland: Teen Stars in the 40s**

One of MGM's top musical teams in the 1940s was composed of all-American kids Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, successfully paired together in a total of *ten* feature films during their careers in a series of musicals, most of which were specifically-designed Mickey-Judy vehicles known as "backyard musicals" (a group of teenagers would put on their own musical show against insurmountable odds) often directed and/or choreographed by Busby Berkeley (Garland and Rooney were paired in *seven* films (# - the seven musical films were in 1937, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1943 (2), and 1948)).

Garland's best role and fresh singing (of Hugh Martin-Ralph Blane hits including "The Boy Next Door," and "The Trolley Song") were showcased in MGM's nostalgic period musical **Meet Me in St. Louis (1944)** for war-time movie-goers, where she was directed by her future husband Vincente Minnelli. The story, about a middle-class family in a turn-of-the-century, Mid-western World's Fair city, was based on *New Yorker* stories by Sally Benson. Songs and dances in the film were performed in natural circumstances by many of the characters as a way to further the plot, and to reveal the characters and their emotions, such as Garland's "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"). Garland's swan song film at MGM was **Summer Stock (1950)** in which she again co-starred with Gene Kelly and sang "Get Happy" - in drag.

### **Esther Williams' Swimming Musicals**

One of the biggest MGM stars of the 1940s was swimmer Esther Williams who found ingenious ways to appear in musicals in a bathing suit. She was featured with other perfectly-choreographed chorus girls in many imaginative and absurd situations centering around water. She starred in synchronized swimming routines or ballets in various swimming musicals.

### **Flag-Waving Musicals and Americana**

Composer Irving Berlin was the master of the patriotic song, including his 1938 hit tune "God Bless America", and the "Song of Freedom" in **Holiday Inn (1942)**.

### **Gene Kelly: MGM's New Musical Dance Star**

- Freed was responsible for bringing a new musical star from Broadway to Hollywood in the early 40s - the dynamic, ballet-oriented, Irish-American Gene Kelly. As a dancer, Kelly brought an imaginative freshness and athletic-style, muscular vitality to a number of films, projecting a very different down-to-earth persona from the sophisticated, suave and stylish tap dancing of Fred Astaire who often wore top hats and tails. His first major role, in a stage production of **Pal Joey**, brought him a Hollywood contract.
- In Kelly's film debut, he was teamed with director Busby Berkeley, playing a song-and-dance man opposite co-star Judy Garland in MGM's **For Me and My Gal (1942)**. He was successful in Columbia's Techni-colored **Cover Girl (1944)** opposite Rita Hayworth, particularly when he danced with his own reflection in "Alter Ego." And then in MGM's Best Picture-nominated

**Anchors Aweigh (1945)** in the post-war years, Kelly (with his *sole* Best Actor nomination in his career) performed a dance with a scene-stealing Jerry, the cartoon mouse from "Tom and Jerry" - and the film co-starred a young and thin Frank Sinatra who crooned Styne-Cahn tunes. As mentioned earlier, Kelly also performed a song-and-dance duet with Fred Astaire (their sole dance together) in **The Ziegfeld Follies (1946)**. **The Pirate (1948)** featured Kelly's singing and acrobatic, graceful dancing opposite Judy Garland, accompanied with a Cole Porter score - its most famous dance sequence was "Be a Clown."

- Teamed with co-director Stanley Donen for the first time (they directed three MGM post-war musicals), Kelly made his directorial debut with **On The Town (1949)**, an energetic dance/musical that took the musical out of the wall-bound studio and on location into New York City. The adapted Leonard Bernstein stage show was a story about three on-leave sailors (Kelly, Sinatra, and Munshin) looking for romance during a 24-hour shore leave. Some of the film's production numbers included the opening "New York, New York", "The Miss Turnstiles Ballet", and "Prehistoric Joe." Stanley Donen also directed MGM's **Royal Wedding (1951)**, a story inspired by star actor Astaire's real-life story, and featuring Astaire's two famous solos: a 'tap-dance on the ceiling' routine, and a hat-rack duet.
- There were two musicals that won the Academy Award for Best Picture in the 1950s, and both were the works of Freed's and MGM's remarkable musical production unit, and directed by Vincente Minnelli. Kelly expressed his amazing appeal and choreography in MGM's trademark film, **An American in Paris (1951)**, a classic, Award-winning Best Picture film about the romance between an American painter (Gene Kelly) and a French girl (Leslie Caron). It featured George and Ira Gershwin music and a climactic, 17-minute, half-million-dollar 'dream ballet' - one of Freed's pioneering inventions. The musical won five other Oscars (Best Screenplay, Best Score, Best Cinematography, Best Art Direction and Best Costume Design), and Kelly was awarded an honorary Oscar for "his brilliant achievements in the art of choreography on film."
- Freed's other Best Picture award winner was another Minnelli-directed film, MGM's adaptation of Colette's story of **Gigi (1958)**. The story within this original film musical was about a shy Paris courtesan (Leslie Caron) who was courted as a wife by a wealthy Parisian playboy/patron named Gaston (Louis Jourdan).

### **The Greatest Musical Ever**

By most accounts, the greatest musical ever produced (co-directed by Kelly and Donen and produced by Freed), a comic, satirical spoof of the dawn of the Hollywood sound era, was MGM's **★Singin' In The Rain (1952)**. It included Kelly's now-classic solo dance of the title song in the rain, Donald O'Connor's energetic, acrobatic, slapstick dance/song "Make 'Em Laugh," the Kelly/O'Connor duet of "Moses Supposes," and a remarkable "Broadway Melody" ballet sequence in the finale (with Kelly dancing with Cyd Charisse). It is one of Hollywood's best-loved films, with Kelly as silent film star Don Lockwood, and Jean Hagen as dumb, squeaky-voiced actress Lina Lamont, but it was ignored by the Academy Awards (with only two Oscar nominations for Best Supporting Actress for Jean Hagen, and Best Scoring of a Musical Picture). The film's setting was during the disruptive transitional period between silent films and the coming of the talkies. It captured the confusion caused by the introduction of talking-film technology in Hollywood, and its often disastrous effects upon silent era performers.

### **The Demise of the Cinematic Musical**

In the 1950s and early 60s, when the studio system started its demise and the public again grew tired of a long succession of musicals, the expensive-to-produce, risky screen musicals were among the first genre to be discarded. Television was making inroads and grabbing the film-attending public. And many of the biggest musical stars were approaching their swan-song years, such as Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and Frank Sinatra. Some Hollywood musicals had to be made cheaply, such as **Top Banana (1953)** starring

Phil Silvers in the film version of his Broadway hit, and shot on location at NYC's Winter Garden Theatre. Other musicals such as MGM's and Minnelli's **Brigadoon (1954)**, WB's **Damn Yankees (1958)** with Gwen Verdon, and Paramount's **Li'l Abner (1959)** (both lesser renditions of their 1956 Broadway hits), were examples of the decline of the musical feature film during the 1950s.

### Disney's Animated Musicals

Not to be overlooked, Disney Studios produced many classic animated musicals in the 50s with hand-drawn animation and great scores, including **Cinderella (1950)**, **Alice in Wonderland (1951)**, **Peter Pan (1953)**, **The Lady and the Tramp (1955)**, and **Sleeping Beauty (1959)**.

### The Rise of Big-Budget Screen Adaptations of Broadway Hits

During the age of television (and song-and-dance variety shows), the Hollywood studios played it safe. Most musicals were lifted directly from established Broadway smash-hits on the "Great White Way" - and adapted into film versions for the big screen. Classic Broadway hits that opened on the silver screen in the 50s included **Annie Get Your Gun (1950)** with Betty Hutton and Howard Keel in the lead roles, the colorful **Show Boat (1951)**, MGM's **Kiss Me Kate (1953)** - a musical version of *The Taming of the Shrew* with Howard Keel and Kathryn Grayson [and the only musical ever filmed in 3-D], and the breathlessly entertaining barn-raising dancing of MGM's and Stanley Donen's **Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (1954)** (sensationally choreographed by Michael Kidd, especially in the "Challenge Dance" sequence). This Best Picture nominee, with completely original songs, later became a Broadway musical in the 70s.

In addition, there were other great hits in the 50s and 60s:

- Frank Loesser's **Guys and Dolls (1955)**, that substituted Frank Sinatra and Marlon Brando for the original musical talent
- Fox's and collaborators Rodgers and Hammerstein's **Oklahoma! (1955)**, derived from the smash 1943 Broadway musical of the same name
- **Carousel (1956)**, adapted from the 1945 Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical of the same name
- **The King and I (1956)** with Yul Brynner in an Oscar-winning, Best Actor role as the King of Siam and Oscar-nominated Deborah Kerr (with singing dubbed by ghost vocalist Marni Nixon)
- **Gypsy (1962)**, with Natalie Wood miscast in the title role of stripper Gypsy Rose Lee
- director Joshua Logan's and Fox's **South Pacific (1958)**, based on another popular Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical
- the superior **The Music Man (1962)** from Warners, with Robert Preston reprising his greatest Broadway role as charlatan Professor Harold Hill; future TV child star (*The Andy Griffith Show* and *Happy Days*) and Oscar-winning director Ron Howard appeared as the insecure, stuttering boy Winthrop
- MGM's **The Unsinkable Molly Brown (1964)**, with Debbie Reynolds

### Best Picture-Winning Musicals in the 60s

From 1958 to 1968, there were *five* musical Best Picture winners out of eight nominees. Four musicals in the decade of the 1960s adapted for the screen won the Academy Award for Best Picture. All four were based on Broadway hits, but with a distinct difference - each one involved a major cast change:

- UA's **West Side Story (1961)**, from Best Director-winning co-directors Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, with ten Academy Awards from eleven nominations, was the *Romeo-and-Juliet* inspired 1957 hit Broadway musical with spectacular choreography (especially in the film's opening), hit songs including the exhilarating "America" (performed on a rooftop), and "Maria"

with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Its romantic tale featured star-crossed young lovers: Puerto Rican Maria (Natalie Wood replacing Carol Lawrence, with singing dubbed by Marni Nixon) and American Tony (Richard Beymer replacing Larry Kert, with singing dubbed by Jim Bryant) associated with competing juvenile gangs in Manhattan's Upper West Side

- Warners' and Lerner's and Loew's musical play **My Fair Lady (1964)**, with twelve nominations and eight Oscars, was directed by the legendary George Cukor and based upon George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* and the 1956 stage production. It was about a Cockney street urchin named Eliza Doolittle (Audrey Hepburn replacing Broadway star Julie Andrews, with singing again dubbed by Marni Nixon) who was transformed by linguist Henry Higgins (Rex Harrison) into a proper lady; Cukor won his *sole* Best Director Oscar with his fifth nomination, and all three British cast members (Stanley Holloway, Gladys Cooper, and Rex Harrison) were nominated in acting categories, with Harrison the winner as Best Actor; Audrey Hepburn was conspicuously absent from the nominees; **My Fair Lady (1964)** defeated another Best Picture-nominated musical, **Mary Poppins (1964)** - see below
- Rodgers and Hammerstein's and producer/director Robert Wise's most successful work - 20th Century Fox's romantic musical/drama **The Sound of Music (1965)** based on Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse's 1959 Broadway hit about a romance between a nun-turned-governess (Julie Andrews) and a widower (Christopher Plummer) with seven children, with ten nominations and five Oscars, featured an unforgettable Julie Andrews (replacing Broadway star Mary Martin) in the lead role, singing melodic Rodgers and Hammerstein songs (including the lively "Do-Re-Mi" and lyrical "Edelweiss"). The sweet, somewhat sentimental film was set in 1938 Salzburg, Austria and shot with beautiful views of the Alps and the city.

[**The Sound of Music (1965)** surpassed **Gone With the Wind (1939)** to become the biggest money-making box-office hit to date (and the biggest, most profitable box-office musical of all time.) It saved 20th Century Fox from going into bankruptcy after their lavish spending on the disastrous **Cleopatra (1963)**. The film won five Oscars - Best Picture, Best Director (Robert Wise), Best Sound, Best Musical Score, and Best Film Editing. (Julie Andrews starred a year earlier, with her film debut and a Best Actress-winning role, in the marvelous childrens' film **Mary Poppins (1964)**, with 13 Academy Awards nominations and five wins, that blended animation and live action and was filled with delightful Disney songs, including Oscar winner "Chim, Chim Chiree".) And Andrews would go on to star in the 1920s musical spoof **Thoroughly Modern Millie (1967)**, and reteamed with director Wise in the box-office failure **Star! (1968)**, a biography of stage musical comedy star Gertrude Lawrence.]

### A Revival of Dance Pictures

Dance pictures were revived in the late 1970s by director John Badham's classic urban drama/dance film **Saturday Night Fever (1977)** that starred John Travolta (with the film's sole nomination for Best Actor) as a vulgar, blue-collar Brooklyn paint-store clerk - transformed into a pulsating, white-suited disco king Tony Manero who struts across a dance floor of rainbow-colored squares. The famous disco film featured a popular Bee Gees soundtrack (un-nominated by AMPAS!). Dance champion Denny Terrio and choreographer Lester Wilson trained Travolta, who was a teen idol and starring on TV's *Welcome Back, Kotter* (as Vinnie Barbarino), to swivel his hips on the dance floor. The film, costing about \$3.5 million, made almost \$300 million for Paramount Studios. [The film's lesser sequel was Sylvester Stallone's **Staying Alive (1983)**.]

The next year, Travolta co-starred with Australian singer Olivia Newton-John in Randal Kleiser's popular, spirited, nostalgic 50s film **Grease (1978)** with smutty dialogue - it was a former 1972 hit Broadway musical that brought two big hit songs: "Summer Nights" and "You're The One That I Want", to the charts. (The film's only nomination was Best Song for "Hopelessly Devoted to You.") It was about two

lovers, Australian transfer student Sandy (Newton-John) and American greaser Danny Zuko (Travolta), who enjoyed a summertime romance but had to adapt to new roles back in their high school cliques, the T-Birds and the Pink Ladies. Its popularity made it one of the highest grossing movie musicals ever. Patricia Birch's lesser sequel, **Grease 2 (1982)**, her debut film as director (she had choreographed the original film) maintained the same locale, Rydell High School, but brought a new cast including Michelle Pfeiffer and Maxwell Caulfield. Olivia Newton-John's follow-up film to *Grease* was a disaster -- the musical roller disco fantasy **Xanadu (1980)**, in which she starred as a Greek muse in Los Angeles alongside co-star Gene Kelly (in an attempted comeback).

In response to *Grease*, independent film producer Roger Corman provided the low-budget **Rock 'n' Roll High School (1979)** with a soundtrack by The Ramones. A Western-style *Saturday Night Fever* film, James Bridges' **Urban Cowboy (1980)**, with popular young stars John Travolta and Debra Winger, featured Houston honky-tonks, mechanical bull-riding in bars, blue-collar cowboys, and country music dancing (including the Cotton-Eyed Joe). Alan Parker succeeded with the dance musical **Fame (1980)**, a story of eight struggling young dancers in New York High School for the Performing Arts - so popular that it helped launch a television show - and it received six Academy Award nominations and two wins (Best Score and Best Song).

Adrian Lyne's slick **Flashdance (1983)** was the immensely popular, highly kinetic, music-video style film - with an Oscar-winning title song by Irene Cara. It featured 19 year-old Jennifer Beals in her first starring role as Alex - a day welder in Pittsburgh and night dancer in a men's club who aspired to successfully audition for ballet school. Herbert Ross' energetic rock/dance film **Footloose (1984)** was also a culturally-significant film with a pounding, hit soundtrack (that featured Kenny Loggins' Oscar-nominated hit single of the title song, and a second nominated Best Song "Let's Hear It For the Boy"). It starred John Lithgow as a strict minister and Kevin Bacon as the illegal and defiant dancer in town. Singer Prince (in his first starring film) played "The Kid" in the feature-length music video **Purple Rain (1984)**, and succeeded in having the #1 movie, album, and single simultaneously. The sleeper hit, feel-good teen-oriented dance/romance film **Dirty Dancing (1987)** with Jennifer Grey and Patrick Swayze provided nostalgia, great dance routines, sexy young stars, and a coming-of-age story set in the Catskills in 1963. The film sparked a short-lived revival of the sexy Latin dance - the lambada - with such exploitative films as Joel Silberg's **Lambada (1989)**, and **The Forbidden Dance (1990)**, starring Laura Elena (Martinez) Herring (the first Latina to win Miss USA - in 1985).

### **Animated Musicals from Disney Revived**

Animated musical blockbusters from Disney's studios also succeeded with high-quality feature films that kept musical scores alive. They proved to be more popular than live-action efforts (such as **Bedknobs and Broomsticks (1971)**, **Pete's Dragon (1977)**, and others). Alan Menken was instrumental in leading the songwriting and storytelling for a number of Disney animations in the 1990s, as were pop stars (such as Elton John, Phil Collins, and Sting):

- **The Little Mermaid (1989)**, based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale with the popular songs "Part of Your World," "Kiss the Girl," the Oscar for Best Original Score (Alan Menken) and Best Song-winning "Under the Sea"
- **Beauty and the Beast (1991)**, the classic French romantic fable (from Jean Cocteau's 1948 *La Belle et La Bete*) that was the *first* Best Picture-nominated animated musical feature film, with the Oscar for Best Original Score (Alan Menken), a Best Song-winning title tune, and two other Best Song nominees including "Belle" and "Be Our Guest"; its success was recreated when it was adapted into a Broadway show
- **Aladdin (1992)**, with the Oscar for Best Original Score (Alan Menken), the Best Song-winning "A Whole New World", and Robin Williams as the voice of the Genie

- **The Lion King (1994)**, with a pop music score by Elton John and Tim Rice, including the Oscar for Best Original Score (Hans Zimmer), the Best Song-winning "Can You Feel the Love Tonight," also "Circle of Life" and "Hakuna Matata"; later in 1997 became a Broadway hit musical
- **Pocahontas (1995)**, with Academy Awards for Best Original Score (Alan Menken, Stephen Schwartz) and Best Song-winning "Colors of the Wind"
- **The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996)**, inspired by Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, with songs composed by Alan Menken (Oscar nominated for Best Original Score) and Stephen Schwartz
- **Hercules (1997)**, a Disneyfication of the myth of Hercules, with the Academy Award-nominated Best Original Song "Go the Distance"
- **Mulan (1998)**, nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Music Score
- **Tarzan (1999)**, with songs by Phil Collins, including the Best Song-winning "You'll Be In My Heart"
- **The Emperor's New Groove (2000)**, Academy Award-nominated for Best Song "My Funny Friend and Me" (performed by Sting)

Dreamworks' attempted to compete with the Disney animated musicals with **Prince of Egypt (1998)**, and won the Academy Award for Best Song (Stephen Schwartz) for "When You Believe." Another unbelievably tasteless animated musical was director Trey Parker's independent **South Park: Bigger, Longer and Uncut (1999)**, a spin-off based upon a cable-TV series with foul-mouthed characters - it had an obscene title song ("Blame Canada") that was nominated for Best Original Song.

### The New Millennium

It would take the new millennium to bring more well-received musicals, but the first few struggled to find audiences: Kenneth Branagh's Shakespeare-inspired musical comedy **Love's Labour's Lost (2000)**, Lars von Trier's dramatic musical **Dancer in the Dark (2000)** with Bjork, and John Cameron Mitchell's rock musical **Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001)**. Baz Luhrmann's eye-catching and dazzling, Best Picture-nominated **Moulin Rouge (2001)** (the *first* live-action musical to be nominated for Best Picture since **All That Jazz (1979)**), and choreographer Rob Marshall's debut feature film and razzle-dazzle film **Chicago (2002)** (at \$171 million) proved that adaptations of modern stage musicals (a rock-opera bio in this case) or inventive fantasy musicals were still possible. Marshall's film was a musical drama and a screen adaptation of the 1975 Broadway hit musical *Chicago* from John Kander and Fred Ebb, originally directed and choreographed by Bob Fosse, and revived on Broadway in 1996. It garnered six Oscars from its thirteen nominations, including Best Picture. It was the *first* musical since **Oliver! (1968)** to win the top award.

However, the trend could be short-lived, due to the total box office failures of stage-to-screen adaptations of such acclaimed and popular Tony-winning musicals as Joel Schumacher's **The Phantom of the Opera (2004)** (at \$51.2 million), **Rent (2005)** (at \$29.1 million) and the get-rich-quick scheming of theatrical con-men in **The Producers (2005)** (at \$19.4 million), as well as other notable musical flops, such as **From Justin to Kelly (2003)** (starring *American Idol* singers Justin Guarini and Kelly Clarkson), **Beyond the Sea (2003)**, **Camp (2003)** and the Cole Porter biopic **De-Lovely (2004)**.

Director Bill Condon's **Dreamgirls (2006)** (at \$103.1 million) was a lavish and vibrant screen adaptation of Michael Bennett's popular 1981 Broadway musical about a trio of Motown-style soul singers *The Dreams*, in a thinly veiled *roman a clef* of the real Motown singing group The Supremes. It acquired eight nominations but came away with only two wins: Best Supporting Actress (Jennifer Hudson), and Best Sound Mixing, even though it won at the Golden Globes awards as the Best Musical or Comedy. **Hairspray (2007)** (at \$119 million) - the song-and-dance adaptation of the Broadway smash hit, with

stars Nikki Blonsky and John Travolta in early 1960s Baltimore, became one of the few movie musicals that grossed over \$100 million, joining **Chicago (2002)**, **Dreamgirls (2006)**, and **Grease (1978)**. However, it received no Oscar nominations, although it did have three Golden Globe nominations. Also, Tim Burton's **Sweeney Todd (2007)** (at \$52 million), with Johnny Depp as a Victorian-era vengeful barber, was recognized with three Oscar nominations (and only one win). In some respects, the entire musical genre wasn't being blamed for the decline in big-screen movie musicals, only individual films.

### **The Musical Film Today**

In the 2000s, the musical film began to rise in popularity once more, with new works such as *Rent*, *Across the Universe*, *Enchanted*, *Burlesque*, and *Mamma Mia!*

**The above is adapted from AMC Filmsite's "Musicals/Dance" webpage**

(<https://www.filmsite.org/musicalfilms.html>)

**AFI's 100 YEARS OF MUSICALS**

<http://www.afi.com/100Years/musicals.aspx>

**Fred Astaire's "Say it with Firecrackers" in *Holiday Inn***

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LxlaCBhekU>)

**"El Tango de Roxanne" in *Moulin Rouge***

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rn0xXo1gwGY>)