

SINGIN' IN THE RAIN

Directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen

Produced by Arthur Freed

Distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Released in 1952

Don Lockwood, speaking on the occasion of his movie's premiere, declares that his motto is "dignity, always dignity." By way of a witty flashback we see that the official record of Don Lockwood's life doesn't conform with reality. But dignity is what Don Lockwood wants from his life, and he finds it by the time of *Singin' In The Rain*—not the movie we watch, but the one we can only imagine, the movie he shares with his great love, Kathy Selden. The change she engenders makes possible a life equal to his rhetoric.

This absolutely astonishing, effervescent, delightful film is one of history's most highly regarded. It is one that everybody who sees enjoys. To most it's just some great musical numbers strung together by an amusing tale of Hollywood's transition to sound. But the songs, the dances, the editing, the set design, the acting, the lighting, and a dozen more components of the film are merely technical. The story is what counts, and each facet of the production serves an excellent story. A movie with a good story will endure even if its technique has fallen from favor, while great technique can never rescue a dumb story. A great story always has a fighting chance to endure. With *Singin' In The Rain* we have a straightforward and compelling story told with dazzling technique. Moreover, because the story is simple it can be told in a complex way, which makes for even more fun.

A star of the Roaring Twenties, Don Lockwood is being swallowed up by his on-screen alter ego. His every move is dictated by his studio, his work is nothing but "dumb show," and the public thinks he's soon to marry his loathsome leading lady. Don's not very honest and his pride is getting out of control. But he's still loyal to his childhood friend, Cosmo Brown. He's embarrassed by their humble origins, thinking that a polished lie, a tapestry of music academies and apprenticeships, makes for a 'dignified' background more fitting for a star. In his red carpet reminiscences, Don is actually revealing his truest desire—if he can't find dignity, he'll fake it like a pro. But the trappings of stardom can't compensate for a character deficiency. They just complicate it. And even though he fools the public, he can't fool himself.

As in many great stories, one day the old routine is broken, and the protagonist is forced to take stock of his life. Aspiring dramatist Kathy Selden becomes the first woman to refuse the attentions of Don since Lina Lamont (of all people). Kathy, like Don, wants legitimacy. She is just as much a hack as Don Lockwood (jumping out of cakes is hardly an exalted calling); she's just not as well known. And Kathy, like Don, portrays herself as something she's not—she says she's a legitimate actress on the stage. So it's no wonder he's crazy about her—she's pretty, talented, delusional, and gives him the thrill of the chase. Later we learn a lot more about Kathy—she is selfless, happy to dub Lina in order to save *The Dueling Cavalier* and, by extension, Don's career. Thus, Lina Lamont, who seemed but a dumb rival for Don's affections,

is revealed to be a shrewd and ruthless opponent of studio head R.F. Simpson: If Kathy Selden doesn't continue to dub for her, she'll sue for the whole studio. So, at last, a villain(ess) emerges, and our film's fractured love triangle is reconstituted as a staging ground for power plays. The climax— R.F. (appropriately taking the lead), Don, and Cosmo pulling up the curtain to expose the source of Lina's new voice, and by so doing, reconciling the business machinations story line with the Don, Lina, and Kathy love triangle—is eminently satisfying.

The climax underscores a strength of the story—economy of character. No player is extraneous. Take R.F. for example. Through the picture he is just a facilitator for jokes (tugging Lina's microphone chord so she topples over, dismissing talking pictures at his party and then later claiming he warned everybody they were a threat). But once Lina puts up a fight, threatening to take the studio away from him, R.F. turns a corner. Confronted with the blockbuster results of *The Dancing Cavalier's* premiere, he struggles. He wants to do the right thing by Kathy Selden, but the easier way is to collaborate with Lina and make a fortune. So the cipher now has weight. Indeed, no major character except for Cosmo Brown is exclusively comic. But he is so funny that any concerns for dramatic weight evaporate. Cosmo stands apart, commenting on the absurdity of the movie like an impertinent court jester. He, like every character, has a specific purpose in the screenplay. There are no wasted lines or scenes.

Singin' In The Rain is brilliantly constructed. Consider its structure and patterns of repetition:

It begins with an abstract pre-title sequence presaging the celebrated hyper-reality of *The Broadway Melody*. After the titles we arrive at the premiere of *The Royal Rascal*, while our film ends at a premiere (with a sneak preview sitting right in the middle). The film opens with the slicker-strut, and ends with, first, the film's climax (where "Singin' In The Rain" is performed before the movie crowd), then the billboard announcing 'Singin' In The Rain' as the title for a new Monumental Picture. (And just as the love story angle and movie business angle were synthesized in the climax, Don and Kathy's personal partnership now doubles as a business partnership.) Of course, Gene Kelly's iconic performance of "Singin' In The Rain" concludes our film's second act.

Consider the sequencing of the songs amongst the leads. "Make 'Em Laugh" is just Cosmo; "You Were Meant For Me" is Don (with Kathy watching); "Moses Supposes" is Cosmo and Don; "Good Morning" is Cosmo, Don, and Kathy; then after "Singin' In The Rain" comes "I Would, Would You" by Kathy (with Don taking a turn watching). Additionally, we have the progression from Cosmo and Don's formative years montage (all realistic) to the montage compressing Hollywood's conversion to sound (realistic and abstract, leading to a concrete "Beautiful Girl" number) to *The Broadway Melody* (all abstract, to be made concrete in *The Dancing Cavalier*). That's some kind of symmetry.

The Broadway Melody is a far more interesting spin on an idea conceived for the ballet fantasy of *An American In Paris* (1951). Here, instead of Gene Kelly dancing with his female lead, he dances with a woman his character will not win over—that enigmatic provocateur, Cyd Charisse. Since this sequence is presented as what will be seen in *The Dancing Cavalier*, our imaginations are not unduly taxed as they were by *An American In Paris*. (We don't have to struggle with a justification for how this could happen.) Nor does the story grind to a halt like

it did in that film—after all, conceiving and shooting *The Dueling Cavalier* is the crux of our movie's second half. But just like in *An American In Paris*, this extended dance sequence is a visual expression of the protagonist's longings. The 'hooper' goes from wide-eyed fish-out-of-water to the-talk-of-the-town. And as he finds respectability he loses his joy. But then a new talent reprises the mantra The Hooper hasn't heard in a long time—'Gotta Dance.' Interestingly, the concept for this sequence (in the context of the movie) came from Cosmo. And Don acts it out. Like Cosmo, he lived it. Cosmo never became 'dignified' after arriving in Hollywood, but Don lost the joy and exuberance that are Cosmo's trademarks. The flashback at the film's beginning implies that Don used to have the magic touch, but lost his passion to entertain, fame beguiling his sensibilities.

The Broadway Melody is a jaw-dropping excursion of and through cinematic imaginings, like a pioneering style of alternate reality. And it's the greatest thing in the movie. *Singin' In The Rain* is confirmed to be Don Lockwood's story by The Broadway Melody. It gives an account of the movie in miniature. It is what makes *Singin' In The Rain* a masterpiece. Here's why it is special:

First, it's a huge joke, because there's no way something like this could have been seen in a primitive talkie circa 1927. (And—imagine—if *The Dancing Cavalier's* costume sequences are the dream of a modern-day hooper then, since *The Dancing Cavalier* ends with a costume sequence, the hooper never wakes up!)

Second, talking pictures decimated Broadway. Staging a tribute to Broadway in a 1927 talkie is like awarding someone a medal before stabbing him with a knife.

Third, this is accessible abstract moviemaking. Too often we handcuff movies—linear storytelling, concrete settings (either studio or location), clear narrative direction. In The Broadway Melody, we don't know where we are—we know the sequence was filmed on a stage, but we don't know what reality it's supposed to represent. (Remember, we're not necessarily seeing a verbatim excerpt from *The Dancing Cavalier*.) The details of The Broadway Melody's story are subject to interpretation, and time has virtually no meaning, so making sense of it all is an engrossing challenge. Let's break it down bit by bit.

We start with an introduction sung by Gene Kelly alone. Then The Hooper arrives in town. All he's got is a pocket full of dreams. Girls don't pay him any attention. But an agent decides to take a bet, freshens up his style, and gives him his first gig. The crowd at that smoky dive is a lot like him. Immediately he is embraced. He dances, giving a hint of his full talent with a dash of The Windmill. But then he meets an extraordinary woman—a gangster's moll. The Hooper wants a girl, but she might prove more than he can handle. They flirt and tease each other, but before they can kiss, the gangster woos her back with diamonds. The Hooper's bewilderment is broken by the agent, who sends him to work. Now, in a brief montage, the hooper's rise is shown. He climbs the ranks of Vaudeville, an ascension culminating in the famed Follies of Ziegfeld. Note that each gig is a little more polished than the previous, and correspondingly less exuberant. By the time he reaches the Follies, The Hooper is barely moving, let alone dancing. But he is a star.

Entering a posh club, everybody cheers him. He has his pick of the ladies, and all is well. But then he sees his dream girl again. Even before he goes over to speak with The Moll, he imagines what they could be together. Now we, the audience, are three levels deep into

Singin' In The Rain. Even in this fantasy within a fantasy, the exquisite structure of our film is evident. Three times—beginning, middle, and end—Cyd Charisse's mile-long scarf is set free after becoming tangled up with Gene Kelly. She is no longer The Moll but what The Hooper wishes she could be—delicate instead of coarse, docile instead of threatening, but still graceful, and loyal only to him. Where the first level has dialogue and singing, and the second level has only singing, here, three levels deep, there is no dialogue and no singing. This is as abstract as the movie gets. Where, before, their interplay was coy and challenging, here they are united in visual harmony. It is she who walks over, validating his hopes that she cares for him. She allows herself to be lifted and cradled (where before he could only grab at her). And finally they kiss. But their longing for each other, expressed beautifully through movement, proves illusory; the dance ends with the couple once more far apart. Returning to the second level, we see The Hooper approach her, full of hope. But The Moll won't give him a chance. Even now, even with all that money, he can't have her.

Depressed, The Hooper leaves the Casino, calling to our memory an earlier scene when Don Lockwood stood contemplating the just-departed Kathy Selden (after she caked Lina Lamont at R.F.'s party). This time, any hint of curiosity on his face, any vestige of hope, is gone. Alas, The Hooper is alone.

Just then a young upstart catches his attention, dressed like he was, long ago. He sounds the same exuberant call—the one The Hooper had forgotten, *Gotta Dance*. Remembering the joy of entertaining, and reveling in the rediscovery of his proficient steps, The Hooper throws off the cares of the world and gets back to doing what he does best. And now he's no longer alone—he dances with others who, like him, celebrate the joy of living. Here, for the only time in the picture, Kelly lets loose with his trademark windmill move. This is Gene Kelly at his best.

Even with the realization of a long-hoped-for success, happiness is not guaranteed to follow. And, certainly, success is no guarantee of love—women are easy, but love is hard. All one has is the craft. Until The Upstart arrives, this is the story of Don Lockwood before Kathy Selden—he struggled, found success, became respectable, but found that none of it amounted to much and certainly didn't make him happy. The Upstart represents Kathy Selden. He/She inspires a change in The Hooper/Don Lockwood. And it is this change which finally makes our protagonist happy.

When he finally decides to risk being himself and not DON LOCKWOOD, when he realizes he'd rather be "flesh and blood" than a "shadow," when he decides to love somebody besides himself, he finds the victory. To our film's catalyst, Don says it best: "From now on there's only one fan I'm worried about." Kathy Selden has changed his life, helping him become the man he always aspired to be. In the end he found love and fame. But without Kathy it wouldn't have been long before he had neither. She recognized his potential, both professionally and personally. What she saw missing in him, what he hoped others would see in him, he can finally see for himself, in himself—dignity. And he'll never have to worry about losing it again.