

SHALL WE DANCE?: GENDER AND CLASS CONFLICT IN ASTAIRE-ROGERS DANCE MUSICALS

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The nine films Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers made for RKO Studios between 1934 and 1939 were among the most popular films of the 1930s, and the two stars were regularly judged to be among the most popular performers of the decade in polls of audiences and exhibitors alike.¹ Even the most hard-boiled critics enthused about the glories of these films, and reviews from across the nation included descriptions of audiences bursting into applause at the dances and “howling” at the comic performances. Box office receipts confirmed the duo’s appeal; all but one of their films made a substantial profit and RKO netted over eighteen million dollars from the films’ initial releases.²

But audiences didn’t simply want to watch Astaire and Rogers, they wanted to emulate them as well. One wag predicted in 1934, “Undoubtedly the main result of *The Gay Divorcee* will be an epidemic of broken legs throughout the country from drunks trying to dance over tables and chairs like Fred Astaire” (Carroll 3).

¹The nine films are: *Flying Down to Rio*. Dir. Thornton Freeland. RKO, 1933.; *The Gay Divorcee*. Dir. Mark Sandrich. RKO, 1934.; *Roberta*. Dir. William A. Seiter. RKO, 1935.; *Top Hat*. Dir. Mark Sandrich. RKO, 1935.; *Follow the Fleet*. Dir. Mark Sandrich. RKO, 1936.; *Swing Time*. Dir. George Stevens. RKO, 1936.; *Shall We Dance*. Dir. Mark Sandrich. RKO, 1937.; *Carefree*. Dir. Mark Sandrich. RKO, 1938.; *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*. Dir. H.C. Potter. RKO, 1939. Much later, and not part of this series, was their reunion film, *The Barkleys of Broadway*. Dir. Charles Walters. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1949.

²For example, about *The Gay Divorcee*, Rob Wagner reported with amazement, “The preview audiences cheered!” (10). Andre Sennwald observed that *Roberta* was “unveiled with appropriate cheering at the Radio City Music Hall yesterday” (15). Reviewers also regularly alluded to long lines of eager moviegoers in their reports. About *Swing Time*, Frank Nugent joked, “That was no riot outside the Music Hall yesterday; it was merely the populace storming the Rockefeller’s cinema citadel for a glimpse of the screen’s nimblest song and dance team” (14). In the mid-1930s, profits from these films were widely credited with helping to save RKO from bankruptcy. See Lasky.

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More seriously, *Literary Digest* marveled in 1936, “Dance schools coast to coast are deluged with youngsters wanting to learn tap-dancing. The depression for dance teachers ended when the public took a fancy to the Astaire Rogers combination” (“Dancing with Astaire” 20–21).³ Fan magazines also suggested intense audience identifications with the stars. Articles with gushing titles like, “I’d just love to dance with Fred Astaire!” abounded in the mid-1930s (Baskett 30).

How can we explain this passionate national audience attraction to these apparently light, formulaic musical comedies? Contemporary critics were quite clear about the delights of Astaire-Rogers pictures: wonderful dancing, splendid music artfully sung, and witty comedy effectively played, both by the principals and by a talented supporting cast. The sparkling appeal of Rogers and Astaire as personalities was also regularly celebrated, as were the elaborate, elegant Art Deco sets. All these elements, which were generally credited with making the films extremely “entertaining,” are historically specific. Why *these* songs, dances, jokes, and performers? What about them was so attractive that people would return to see the same film again and again, and long to emulate the stars with such fervor?

In what follows, I read Astaire-Rogers musicals as I believe many 1930s viewers did, as highly contradictory and conflicted figurations or representations of their historical moment.⁴ Consumers schooled in the broad comic conventions and stereotypes of minstrelsy, vaudeville, popular theater, and silent film did not expect psychological complexity in their characters or “classical” Hollywood narrative logic in their plots. They understood comic characters not as real people, but as representatives of social positions, and relations between those characters in formulaic plots as representations of the historical contradictions and social conflicts of the decade. I argue that audiences were drawn to these comedies by a wish to see the disturbing social conflicts of the Depression years represented metaphorically or symbolically, and resolved in particular, politicized ways that helped to

³Dorothy Emerson, a dancing school teacher in Portland, Maine, made much the same argument in 1935: “The splendid routines danced by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in their pictures have done more to stimulate interest in the dance than anything that has happened in the dance world for years.” Quoted in Parson, 26.

⁴My thinking on this question has been influenced in various ways by Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, and by Lott, Lipsitz, Rabinowitz and Levine.

manage real world contradictions that could not be resolved (Jameson, "Reification").⁵

Comedies and musicals have very long histories as genres in which the formation of an appropriate heterosexual couple is understood to represent the restoration of social order. So it was logical for the creators of comic narratives like the Astaire-Rogers films to turn to these forms to explain and make sense out of the social conflicts and social disorder associated with the Depression. To "get" the jokes of these films and understand their appeal to audiences, we have to decipher a complex system of interlocking metaphors, conventions, and formulas invented (or reinvented) in response to the Depression, tropes which constituted a kind of popular common sense of both the producers and the viewing audience. What all these formulas have in common is that they use gender difference and gender relations as a central way of representing different social groups and social conflicts. Historian Joan Scott has argued that "representations of gender are a primary way of signifying relationships of power" and that "sexual difference is a primary way of signifying differentiation" (42). In 1930s musical comedy, representations of gender are a central way that the social, political and economic crises of the decade are figured, and relations (and conflicts) between the sexes are consistently used to represent power relations (and conflicts) between a variety of social groups.

Musicals and Form

In his analysis of the American film musical genre, Rick Altman argues that what most importantly defines a musical is its having a "dual-focus narrative." In such narratives, a central heterosexual couple must struggle against various obstacles to unite, overcoming their differences and reaching a compromise. This first focus is matched by a second, parallel one, in which the differences between the couple are simultaneously figured as differences between two competing value systems; in Altman's view, this second focus of the narrative represents the conflict between valuing hard work and the desire for entertainment or pleasure, a divide

⁵See also Jameson's *Political Unconscious* for a more developed version of this argument.

he sees as central to American culture. The resolution of the romantic conflict then also represents the healing of this larger cultural conflict that we cannot actually ever resolve (16–58).

Because his focus is the question of how to define a genre and reconstruct its historical development, Altman does not attempt to situate particular musicals in more precise historical contexts. In his analysis of the Astaire-Rogers series, which he defines as “fairy tale musicals,” Altman reads the screwball romantic conflicts between Astaire and Rogers as a battle over the appropriateness of sexual expression, seeing Astaire as exemplifying fun, freedom, and love and as overcoming Rogers’ repressed, socially conventional resistance; in this reading, when she finally succumbs to his persuasive wooing, we are encouraged to embrace both her liberation and the values of pleasure and entertainment that Astaire has represented (158–77).

If we reconstruct the discourses surrounding these films in the mid-1930s, however, another dual focus comes into view. Astaire-Rogers musicals are indeed constructed around two central and intertwined conflicts. First, they represent and explore the very real gender crisis and conflict that developed in tandem with the economic crisis of the Great Depression. The collapse of the sexual division of labor, and the crisis of masculine identity that followed widespread male unemployment, exacerbated profound changes in gender roles and relations which had been underway for some time. Astaire-Rogers films represent gender conflicts and offer companionate marriage, a restored white male dominance, and a masculinity based on heterosexual prowess as solutions to gender troubles, and by extension, to the Depression itself. At the same time, however, they present us with the figure of a strong and assertive working woman who refuses to accept disrespectful or domineering behavior from a man, and who demands and gets egalitarian treatment from him as the price of her affection and partnership.

Second, these musicals are, in their dual focus, simultaneously stories of class relations in a time of political and economic upheaval. They figure the Depression and the political conflict between capital and labor as a gender conflict between a male and a female character, each of whom has strong class associations. Through a convoluted process of negotiation and compromise—acted out in a series of breathtaking dances—the couple is united, symbolically

solving the class conflict, and by extension, the economic trouble of the real world. We might read this formula as surprisingly homologous to the professed (if unrealized) compromise logic of the New Deal and thus as a pro-New Deal allegory. Yet we also see represented a variety of challenges to this resolution, most notably in the insistence that the working character's perspectives and values be respected and affirmed as central to the outcome, and the wealthy character's behavior and attitudes reformed correspondingly.

Indeed, it is possible to read these narratives as arguing for something entirely new. Altman writes that the dual focus narratives resolve with one partner finally embracing the values of the other and letting go of an investment in his/her initial values. But Astaire-Rogers films suggest a more subtle third way. In these films, the two don't necessarily move to one side of the values spectrum or another; the dances and the arrangements of the music signal a different kind of resolution, in which the couple escapes the boundaries of song structure and/or the dance floor and represents the creation of a wholly new world. We might see this as representing the social democratic culture that was being created out of the CIO and other labor organizations that were so much on the upward move during precisely the years of Astaire and Rogers' greatest popularity. In this view, these films aren't shoring up an older status quo; they're helping to bring into being and sustain a new and modern one, organized centrally around companionate marriage and social democracy. And it is in the musical numbers that so captivated audiences that this new world is most compellingly figured.

Night and Day

Astaire and Rogers' first pairing, in *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), was largely accidental. A newcomer to film, Astaire had been cast as the comic sidekick to the male lead, Gene Raymond; Raymond played a lecherous bandleader and Astaire his assistant. The more experienced Rogers was cast as the band's singer. During the film's big production number, "The Carioca," Rogers and Astaire danced together and their on-screen chemistry was such that RKO quickly began looking for a vehicle in which they could co-star. Astaire's most recent stage hit, Cole Porter's "The Gay

Divorce,” was quickly revamped for the screen and Astaire and Rogers cast as the romantic leads (Croce 21–29).

The *Gay Divorcee* has the sort of conventional, illogical comic plot that is standard in musical comedies in this period, and its general outlines were repeated in most of the subsequent films in the series. Astaire plays Guy Holden, an American dancer on holiday in England with his friend, the incompetent lawyer Egbert Fitzgerald (Edward Everett Horton). He meets Mimi Glossop (Rogers) at customs, where he attempts to help her free her skirt from the trunk in which it has been inadvertently caught. Though she has asked him only to find her aunt, who can unlock the trunk and free her dress, he decides to take matters into his own hands, and ends up tearing a large hole in her skirt. She is furious and wants nothing further to do with him, but he, of course, is smitten with her and devotes himself to finding her again.

Rogers has come to England to obtain a divorce. Unbeknownst to Astaire, Horton is acting as her lawyer, and arranges to have her spend the night at a beach resort with a hired Italian gigolo, Rodolfo Tonetti (Erik Rhodes), who will serve as a co-respondent in the divorce. In despair at his inability to find Rogers, Astaire accepts his friend’s invitation to accompany him to the resort, where he sees Rogers across the room and pursues her to a large empty ballroom. There, he sings Cole Porter’s hit song “Night and Day” to her.

As he sings this powerful anthem of intense longing in a reedy, pleading voice, Astaire leans into the frame toward Rogers, and repeatedly brings his hand to his heart to emphasize his sincerity. She mimes her ambivalence, smiling at his ardor but then turning or walking away from him as he sings. He follows, and when he finishes, she tries to walk away several times. Each time, he speeds to head her off and draw her into dancing with him. She finally allows him to take her by the wrist and gently pull her into the dance. Gradually, he begins to win her over, though she keeps walking away from him and at one point even pushes him away, sending him spinning across the floor. Undaunted, he persists, keeping his attention focused intensely on her face and even wooing her with an eager little tap solo.

The arrangement of the song emphasizes the struggle between them. As Astaire initially pleads with Rogers to dance

with him, the melodic line of the verse of the song is played by a trumpet, with heavy drums, instrumentations coded as male. But as she agrees to dance with him as the chorus begins, the sharp brass drops out and the melody is played softly by strings, coded as gentler and more feminine, in alternation with muted trumpets. As Astaire begins to lead more assertively, the loud brass surges up into the mix briefly, then subsides again, as they dance in ever more perfect harmony. As the music reaches the third and final chorus, both the brass and the strings (and the beat of the tom-tom) swell up on the soundtrack, the music now louder, faster, more insistent, as the dancers spin rapidly, right on the edge of control and balance. Then, suddenly, the music slows and softens again, and a harp rises prominently into the mix as he lowers her gently onto a bench and offers her a cigarette. She gazes up at him, dazed, and shakes her head no. Arlene Croce has described this as “an incomparable dance of seduction” (29), which it surely is. But it is important to analyze the specific details of how the relationship is constructed, given that the dance also establishes another element of the formula: that the songs and the dances will be central to characterizing the stars and to telling the unfolding story of their relationship to each other; it is in the dance that they negotiate their relationship.

How might this narrative of gender relations have resonated with viewers in the early 1930s, and sent them flocking to dancing school? One important context for answering this question is the fact that the economic crisis helped to cause a related crisis in gender roles and relations. The massive male unemployment of the early Depression years (estimated to have reached 25% in 1933) made the normative sexual division of labor, in which men were the primary breadwinners and women primarily homemakers, difficult to sustain. Since male identity and men’s status as heads of households derived largely from their roles as providers, the Depression caused a crisis of masculinity for many men. One indication of the extent of the national anxiety about masculine status and identity is the outpouring of sociological studies on unemployed men and their families that began in the early 1930s and continued throughout the decade (Scharf 102–07; Ware 14–24; McElvaine 172–86; Kessler-Harris 250–71).⁶

⁶For contemporary accounts, see also Komarovskiy and Bakke.

The economic collapse and the gender crisis were further linked by the fact that working women were often blamed for the Depression. Commentators argued that if all women left the work force, there would be jobs for all the male providers who needed them. This was, of course, not true, as the sex segregation of the labor market meant that women had jobs as nurses, waitresses, or hairdressers that unemployed steelworkers were unlikely to take. Nevertheless, this classic scapegoating of women had serious consequences, as married women were quickly excluded from many jobs by law or company policies (McElvaine 182; Milkman 27–48). At best, the question of whether women should work outside the home once again seemed like a pressing cultural issue.

This instability in the gender order developed in the context of longer-term changes in gender roles and relations that had been in process for some time. The successful women's suffrage movement, women's increasing labor force participation and college attendance, and the cultural changes associated with the rise of new attitudes toward sexuality, all concerned men interested in preserving their dominance in the family and fearful that increasingly independent "New Women" would choose not to marry at all. One important response to these changes among the white middle classes was the new ideal of "companionate marriage," espoused most famously by Judge Ben Lindsey in a 1927 book. Lindsey argued that marriage had to be reformed to take account not only of women's increasing desires for independence and autonomy, but also of the growing sense that marriage should not be primarily an economic arrangement, but rather a partnership based on love and sexual attraction. Companionate marriages, in this formulation, were more egalitarian than the so-called "Victorian" marriages against which they were defined, but men were still imagined to be dominant in these couples (Lindsey and Evans; Simmons, "Companionate" 54–59; Simmons, "Modern Sexuality" 157–77; D'Emilio and Freedman 234–68).

In this context, the "Night and Day" number can be seen as a representation of companionate marriage; it's a drama of the restoration of male power, not through simple conquest or dominance, but through negotiation to a new, more equal relationship. Astaire still leads, but both the dance and the music represent him as having to persuade her, to dance to "her music" or on her musical ground, in order to reach a new equilibrium in

which both their instruments play together; they're in love, based in part on his symbolic sexual prowess, and to win her, he must meet her needs, make her the center of attention of his world. On the other hand, at the end of the dance, Rogers has literally been swept off her feet. It would be easy to read this as a straightforward representation of restored male dominance and sexual control of women, an analysis that would affirm many women's historians' views that the thirties were a time of relative gender conservatism and quiescent feminism.⁷

But I think such a reading would not tell the whole story, because it would both ignore the extent to which Rogers' character has agency, and the fact that this apparent resolution is abruptly ruptured in the next scene. In the kind of comic misunderstanding that typically keeps movie couples apart, Rogers comes to believe that Astaire is the gigolo hired by her lawyer, and all her warm feelings towards him dissolve. She coldly informs him that she will await him in her room at midnight and stalks off. Since he doesn't know that she is mistaken about his identity, Astaire is startled by this apparent female sexual assertion, and he falls back on the very same bench she had just been sitting on, wearing an equally dazed expression. So while the dance may have figured masculine assertion and control, the plot elements conspire to disrupt that resolution and the notion that women can't be assertive: now he's the one stunned by her apparent sexual forthrightness.

Isn't it a Lovely Day to be Caught in the Rain?

Rick Altman has argued about Astaire-Rogers musicals that they have much in common with the "screwball" romantic comedies that were so popular at the same time. Altman characterizes these films as being structured by the trope of "sex as battle," seeing the constant quarreling between the male and female leads as symbolic or coded sex, during the era in which the production code limited producers' ability to represent sexual attraction and romance.

But we might also read this screwball structure as repeatedly staging the gender crisis of the 1930s; male dominance is in

⁷For example, see Melosh for a fascinating argument about the gender conservatism represented in public art in these years.

question and cannot be taken for granted, and so it is what the narrative must repeatedly and insistently argue for. At the same time, female self-assertion and demands for respectful and equal treatment are also represented and affirmed; these two elements are presented as in conflict, and the narrative must try to resolve them.

One way the films repeatedly stage this battle for power and control is in the “challenge dances” that were part of all the Astaire-Rogers films. In these tap duets, the two dancers competed to copy and then top each other with increasingly difficult or unusual steps. These dances are another crucial part of defining their relationship (Altman 163; Croce 60–62).

Top Hat (1935) has a similar plot structure to *The Gay Divorcee*; once again, Astaire’s character has met and immediately annoyed Rogers’. He is smitten with her and pursues her ardently, while she tries to avoid him. When she goes horseback riding and is caught in a rainstorm, he appears at the bandstand on which she has taken refuge with an umbrella and offers to rescue her. She replies haughtily, “No thank you, I prefer to be in distress!” He persists in the face of her refusal, and when he begins to sing “Isn’t This a Lovely Day,” her ambivalence is obvious. As she often does, she walks away from him as he sings, and he follows. As she listens, she smiles slightly and keeps time subtly with her riding crop, almost against her will; she doesn’t want to be rescued by him. She won’t look at him, but at certain lines, she moves her eyes to the right, as if to see him peripherally, so we know she’s listening carefully, despite her pretence of indifference.

When he begins to whistle and dances a few steps past her to provoke her, she cannot resist the challenge, and responds by whistling and following him exactly. He is surprised and pleased when he turns around and finds her mirroring his every move. Soon they are competing; he taps and she follows, but soon they are dancing together, side by side, not touching, like a same-gender dance team. Their equality is emphasized by the fact that she is in riding clothes, and thus dressed quite like him, and she imitates even his masculine gestures of dancing with his hands in his pockets. The end of this segment of the dance is marked when they stop face to face, with their arms folded across their chests. But then the music is off again and so are they, ballroom dancing face to face

without actually touching, until a second blast of thunder signals yet another a change and a speed-up of the music. Soon she has moved into his arms and they whirl across the bandstand. He taps while she spins, then she taps while he spins; then he lifts her and she lifts him, in a remarkably equal series of moves. They dance off the bandstand, then leap back on out of the rain and shake hands to symbolize their new friendship. This is the dance of partnership, where we see them falling in love, as equals. Visually, it isn't a dance of male dominance; they have danced their way to a new kind of relationship.

This dance is another example of the way the film cannot take male dominance for granted and must try to argue for it. But it doesn't argue very well, as it makes equality—with some male leading—seem incredibly fun. This isn't a dance of seduction, it's a dance of negotiation. And the fact that she's in such a masculine costume—she often wears pants in these films—has to be seen in the context of the huge amount of anxiety there was in Hollywood and the culture about women wearing “the” pants. This number shows us that women's equality is nothing to be afraid of; indeed, it's rather thrilling.

Let's Face the Music and Dance

Many critics who have looked both at these musicals and at their screwball comedy counterparts have suggested that the Depression is absent from these films and that viewers went to the movies to escape from any reminder of the economic and social difficulties that were so present in their lives (Delamater 70; Gallafent; Mueller). It is certainly true that the Astaire-Rogers films take place largely in luxurious hotels, ballrooms, and other ruling class enclaves, which Astaire and Rogers move through in elegant evening clothes. And yet if we look below this surface, we see that hints of male economic trouble, the contradiction that these texts must repress, are everywhere in these films. At least once in every film, Astaire's character is made to suffer some humiliation that has to do with his lack of money or with unemployment; perhaps the most vivid example of this is in the opening scenes of *Swing Time* (1936), in which, on his wedding day, Astaire's co-workers literally take his pants from him and win all his money from him in a poker game. They do this to keep him from marrying and

leaving the group, and after he fails to arrive at his own wedding, his fiancée's father sends him to New York to make his fortune before he will let the marriage take place. This late in the series, we can take real pleasure in the spectacle of the elegant Astaire, still dressed in the striped pants, cutaway coat, and top hat he was to have worn to his wedding, so broke that he has to hop a freight train to get to New York (Kendall 100–06). These scenes allow different identifications; they both evoke real world troubles that many could identify with and also offer the opportunity to identify against Astaire in his highbrow incarnation and enjoy the sight of a wealthy man experiencing hard luck.

These films really *are* about the Depression. The linkage that these scenes make between the inability to establish a heterosexual couple and the male inability to provide relies upon the fact that the economic crisis and the gender crisis were so closely linked in many Americans' minds that they had come to seem like the same thing. Thus gender trouble could be used to figure economic trouble, and the romantic resolution of the gender conflict between the stars could come metaphorically to stand for the resolution of the economic problems of the nation.

Follow the Fleet (1936) ends with a remarkable dance that is staged as a performance at a fundraiser. This number, "Let's Face the Music and Dance," overtly stages the intertwined gender and economic crises of the 1930s. The curtain opens on a scene of a roulette table in a chic casino. Astaire, dressed in tails, is playing a high-stakes gambler, whose fat wallet has attracted a bevy of beautiful women, who hang on him and encourage his reckless excess. But when he lays a fat wad of bills on a number that doesn't win, and good-naturedly opens his wallet to show he is broke, all the women immediately fade away. He backs from the table, and his place is soon taken by another man, who is draped in the same women who just abandoned Astaire. The curtain closes, and reopens on a scene on the roof of the casino, overlooking the lights of the city. Astaire is profoundly alone, as his former friends refuse to acknowledge his existence as they walk past and around him.

The music turns ominous, as he takes a small revolver from his pocket, and aims it at his temple. Before firing, he looks over his shoulder and sees Rogers, who has also come to the rooftop to commit suicide. He races to the parapet from which she is about

to jump, and pulls her back to safety. She is obviously distraught and he is angry at her for giving in to despair, until he sees the gun in his own hand and shows it to her with embarrassment and sympathy. She lunges for it and he pulls it away and throws it off the roof. Then he sheepishly shows her his empty wallet to explain his despair, and throws it off the roof as well with a resigned shrug; the music too signals her resignation and despair as she walks away from him and leans her head despondently on a wall.

She has not been responsive to his attempts to reach her, so he sings Irving Berlin's song to her. The lyrics evoke the economic crisis with phrases like, "there may be trouble ahead" and "before they ask us to pay the bill," and offers "moonlight and music and love and romance" as more important and valuable than money. An evocation of courage and the power of love in the face of hardship, the song encourages listeners not to give up, no matter how bleak things may look. This message is powerfully reinforced by the music, which gradually moves from a minor key (signifying sadness or pain) to a more upbeat major key.

As Astaire begins each of the first three verses, Rogers walks away from him and he has to follow; she subtly mimes her despair, face agonized, breath rapid, hands wringing ever so slightly. By the fourth verse, he finally has her attention, and as he sings the final line—let's face the music and dance—she begins to dance with him.

As in most of their numbers, the intensity builds in stages. They dance in a restrained way through one AABA chorus. Then the dance speeds up; it is as if they're dancing themselves out of their lethargy and despair. And it ends with wonderfully defiant visual moment, in which, arm in arm, they kick their knees high and throw their heads back and then step offstage; they have been saved from trouble and transformed by the dance and the power of love and romance.

It is not difficult, in the context of the gender and economic crises described above, to see why this might appeal to 1930s audiences. While Astaire is a winning gambler, he's surrounded by beautiful women, but once he has lost his money, no women are interested in him, and women and men alike shun him. He's nobody, and a poignant evocation of the fears of men who can't provide. The lyrics of the song and the scenario of the dance get

our attention by staging the intertwined crises of the economy and masculinity and directly address not only male anxieties about being unable to provide, but also the related fears that women would no longer desire them or respect them or their authority in the family. Indeed, since it is both men and women who shun Astaire, the number also evokes the fear of social rejection and loss of position that could accompany large economic losses for even the most prominent people.

The number also engages the difficulties women faced; though we don't know what has driven Rogers to similar desperation, this too is readable as Depression-related. Popular culture abounded with anxious narratives of the plight of women without providers. And indeed, the fact that we don't know what has brought her to this point is significant; this story makes male economic "trouble" the central problem that the dance must resolve.

The dance offers companionate marriage as a symbolic resolution of these Depression crises; love and romance are represented as more important than money, and the male inability to provide is rendered unimportant, because these are relationships based on sexual attraction, friendship, and romance, not on economics. Though he's broke, Astaire's masterful leading of Rogers figures his heterosexual prowess, and offers such sexual skill as an alternative form of masculinity open to men without resources. Yet her active participation is essential; they are a team, in this together. Coming at the end of the film, "Let's Face the Music" thus stages the restoration of male leadership within a more egalitarian heterosexual couple, at the same time that it represents the restoration of gender order as a solution to economic crisis. It acknowledges the contradictions between gender prescriptions and economic realities and it offers a way of imagining reconstructed gender relations.

To put this number in the larger context of the film, it is performed as part of a fundraiser to help Rogers' sister and her sailor fiancée pay for the refurbishing of their father's cargo ship, with which the couple plan to make a living, sailing the world together. Their performance is so stunning that Astaire and Rogers, cast as an out of work vaudeville team, are immediately hired by a Broadway producer for his new show. So the solution of the gender and economic crises within this number simultaneously solves the larger plot problems of inadequate investment capital and unemployment that structure the film's narrative.

They All Laughed

At the same time that Astaire-Rogers films use the formation of the couple to figure the restoration of gender and economic order, they also use the relationship between the stars to represent the unification of the classes in a common cause, as ideally imagined by the New Deal and the Popular Front (in slightly different ways). Astaire and Rogers usually represent opposing classes; Astaire is most often cast as the callow, ruling-class character, who pursues the feisty, working-class-accented characters played by Rogers. So as the couple renegotiates their relationship to achieve a new partnership, each must sacrifice, and each must give up some of their mistaken ideas about the other, in order to reach a happy compromise. This is not unlike the model rhetorically presented by Franklin D. Roosevelt as the way to get the economy going again; it is just like an NRA code negotiation in structure. Astaire and Rogers, symbolically standing for capital and labor, must come to some new agreement that puts the economy (or their show) back “in production.”⁸

This symbolic staging of class conflict is quite clear in the 1937 film *Shall We Dance*. Astaire and Rogers are cast as a ballet dancer and a musical comedy star, respectively. Although he is really Peter P. Peters from Philadelphia, on stage he is Petrov, the great Russian ballet dancer. She is Linda Keene, who has decided to retire from performing as a popular singer and dancer. Rogers’ producer will go bankrupt if she quits, so he throws a retirement party and contrives to get her to dance with Petrov (who is avidly pursuing her despite her pointed dislike for him) in hopes of keeping her working. At the party, Rogers sings “They All Laughed,” and then the bandleader announces that she will dance with Petrov. They are embarrassed into compliance.

The orchestra breaks into a generically modernist flourish that evokes Debussy’s “Afternoon of a Faun.” Astaire leaps out onto the stage and performs a series of elaborate ballet leaps in waltz time, while Rogers stands woodenly and watches him with a look of disgust. After he has flitted around her several times to his arty music, she mutters to him, “What am I supposed to do?” and he replies, “Twist!” sending her twirling. But then they’re back where they

⁸On the NRA and the new political equilibrium Franklin D. Roosevelt was seeking to establish, see Leuchtenberg, 63–94.

started. She decides to take matters into her own hands and responds to his leaps with a clever set of tap steps, danced to the orchestra playing "They All Laughed" (her song) in swing time, a solo which she concludes by snapping her fingers in disdain. He responds again, with more ballet steps, as her face registers frustration and annoyance. Then suddenly, Astaire grins slyly, the orchestra swings into her song, and he suddenly breaks into tap response to her steps. (The phrase "who's got the last laugh now" plays as he does this.) She looks amazed as he smirks, then the music switches back to her song in swing time and they begin to dance together.

As is typical in these arrangements, the music gradually grows in intensity, as they dance ever more comfortably and confidently together. During the first chorus they dance side by side, doing the same steps. As the song begins to repeat, their steps become more complex and they begin to dance arm in arm; he leads her through a remarkable series of whirling turns that circle the entire dance floor and signal their growing unity and togetherness. As the song swings into the final chorus, the intensity of the song increases dramatically. Its call-and-response organization is now fully in the sound ideal of jazz and any trace of the art music is gone. He whirls her through a head-spinning series of incredibly fast turns, then swings her up onto a grand piano and leaps up next to her; they grin gleefully at each other.

The number is staged as a symbolic class conflict, which pits the highbrow, European art of ballet against the middle- and working-class appeal of tap and jazz. Astaire's self-indulgent, self-involved prancing figures the excesses and effeminacy of the rich and leaves no room for her to dance with him. Similarly, she makes no effort to blend her tap solos with his movements, regarding his capering with disdain and being obviously unwilling to follow his lead. They have neither music nor steps in common, so it is only when he renounces his art music and ballet dancing and joins her in tap that they can actually dance perfectly together; neither dancing alone appeals much, but when they work together, their dance is an enormous, joyful success.

The resolution of this class conflict is very specific. Astaire must reform, give up his effete highbrow dancing and embrace a real, manly, popular American art form. In this way, like many screwball comedies, these films are stories of class unity that is based on the moral re-education and reform of the rich, who

must renounce their greedy and selfish ways and embrace the communal values and communitarian aspirations of the middle and working classes. In this formula, wealthy people can be good or bad, and the good rich are those who are willing to change and make common cause with other classes for the benefit of the whole nation. This is consistent with the ideology articulated by FDR in his many fireside chats and speeches, and which had a broad appeal, particularly to middle-class liberals.⁹ And it was also consistent with the more radical ideologies of class promoted by the CIO and other Popular Front organizations. Many people in the thirties embraced some version of this new class consciousness, and were more than willing to blame the wealthy for what they had done to the nation, and for the malfeasance that had caused the Depression.¹⁰ So ideologically, the wealthy had to be forced to renounce their old ways and embrace the new American way, which is NOT highbrow and European-oriented, but down-to-earth, modern, and American. And the ambiguities of this symbolism were such that a wide cross section of the American political spectrum could see their views represented in this resolution.

“They All Laughed,” like many of the Astaire-Rogers musical numbers, thus stages the resolution of a gender conflict—a couple divided from one another—as the resolution of a class conflict, and in this case, it is the working-class position that is affirmed. Once accepted by both members of the couple, this results in joyful harmony and happiness. These dances make this class resolution seem desirable and appealing, and they encourage the viewer to identify with Rogers, in her disdain and disgust for the foolishness and stupidity of highbrow folk. Since we know Astaire isn’t really one of

⁹McElvaine argues that the Depression crisis had a profound effect on many Americans’ value systems, leading middle and working-class citizens to see their economic and political interests as profoundly interdependent. This change led many to abandon the more characteristic American ideology of individualism and embrace a more cooperative, communitarian ethos (196–223).

¹⁰My notion of the Popular Front here relies on Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front*. Denning argues that Cold War historiography has systematically erased the popularity and explanatory power of Left ideas in the 1930s, and that millions of Americans participated in what he calls “the laboring of American culture.” That is, the values, ideals, and perspectives of working people—a new, class-conscious moral economics—took on a new centrality in American culture in this era. Though Denning’s primary focus is not mass culture, his argument helps to illuminate the class metaphors, and thus the broad appeal, of the Astaire-Rogers films.

them—he’s a “regular guy”—his move to tap is obvious and unproblematic. To dance like Astaire and Rogers, then, might well have been to affirm that transformation of values and the “laboring of American culture” that their dances performed.

You say ee-ther and I say eye-ther

The class conflict between the couple was more explicit in *Shall We Dance* than in previous entries in the series, but the class contours of their personas as stars had been with them from the time of their initial pairing, and had been shaped and reshaped both by the films and by the voluminous publicity about each of them. To understand the power and the ideological effects of these films, it is important to understand what viewers were being encouraged to know and think about Astaire and Rogers and how those expectations could shape audiences’ perceptions of the films and the stars. The gender and class associations that attached to the duo’s images were important in shaping audiences’ expectations about and interpretations of the films. Richard Dyer has argued that “stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society,” and that they “represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, and historically constructed. Much of the ideological investment is in the stars seen as individuals, their qualities seen as natural” (8). At the same time, Dyer asserts, stars are also “embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives” (17–18).¹¹ In light of this, what

¹¹Dyer also reminds us that stars are media constructions, largely created by Hollywood publicity machines. A star’s image is created through a combination of elements, including her films, publicity materials, pinups and other photos, personal appearances, interviews, biographies, advertisements, and other kinds of press coverage. These star images are complex and often internally contradictory. Indeed, Dyer argues that particular figures become stars because their images or personae are able to sustain contradictory values or ideals, in ways that mirror the contradictions in the culture about those ideals. But a star’s image is part of how a film is sold; audiences who know the star’s image have a certain expectation of what the film will be like and what the characters she plays will be like. It is, of course, difficult to know exactly what any individual viewer thought of a particular star. Dyer notes that while audiences cannot make star images mean anything they want to, they can select from among the complex and contradictory elements of the persona those meanings, feelings, inflections and contradictions that work for them.

were the team of Astaire and Rogers suggesting about how to be in the world of the mid-1930s?

When RKO first hired Astaire, he had already had a long career as the dance partner of his sister Adele, with whom he had achieved stardom on the Broadway and London stages. Because he was always paired with his sister, he had never played a romantic lead. Instead, he had been typecast as a typical “juvenile,” playing insouciant youths from the upper classes. Publicity about him confirmed his typecasting, emphasizing his love of expensive clothes and cars and his passion for elite hobbies like golf and horse racing. When Adele retired in 1932, he decided to explore the possibility of a solo career in films, but Hollywood talent scouts were skeptical. One oft-quoted apocryphal story describes a Paramount executive’s assessment of an early Astaire screen test: “Can’t act. Can’t sing. Balding. Can dance a little”(Croce 23). More importantly, Astaire’s upper-class image concerned producers. One profile noted, “New York debutantes liked him, but there were grave doubts concerning his ability to charm shopgirls and stenographers” (Barnett 72–74, 76–85). RKO decided to give him a chance, and when he arrived in Hollywood, he brought with him a persona well-known as upper class. After his first films, this concern disappeared. One reviewer enthused, “Patently, Astaire’s manner, style, personality, and terpsichorean brilliance, which impressed him so favorably on Broadway and West End audiences, are likewise a cinch for picture patrons” (Abel 14).

By contrast, Rogers had considerably more experience with Hollywood, having made nineteen films before her first film with Astaire. Like him, she had moved from vaudeville success to rave reviews in hit Broadway musicals, and from there to small parts in films, where she specialized in playing wise-cracking flappers and gold-digging chorus girls. Right before *Flying Down to Rio*, their first film together, she had played small but prominent parts in two hit Warner Brothers musicals, *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*. These roles came to define her screen persona as a smart, sassy, assertive, and likable working woman. In addition to her films with Astaire, Rogers did several films in the mid-1930s that further emphasized this part of her persona, including *Stage Door* and *Bachelor Mother*. By 1940, this persona was so well-established that *Time* magazine could describe her as “the flesh-and-blood symbol of the all-American working girl” (qtd. in Morley 59).

So when they arrived on the set of their first picture together, Astaire and Rogers already possessed one of the elements that was essential to their on-screen chemistry: the class associations of their respective personae. And the conflict between them, which would structure all their films, is then always, at least implicitly, a class conflict. As they made more films together, the composers writing their music began to make these conventions of their conflict even more explicit in the songs commissioned for their pictures. For example, in "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," Ira Gershwin framed the conflict between the couple as one of pronunciation, a difference clearly related to class: "You say ee-ther and I say eye-ther." Each sings a refrain, comparing their pronunciation of everything from potatoes and tomatoes to pajamas and oysters, and this incompatibility makes their relationship seem impossible. Rogers even performs the elite pronunciations in an exaggeratedly haughty way, using her sunglasses like a lorgnette in imitation of society women. But each singer also acknowledges that "If we call the whole thing off then we must part, and if we ever part, then that would break my heart." As the singers reach compromise on pronunciations, the song is followed by a remarkable tap dance on roller skates, which stages the difficult balancing act any such cross-class union entails and affirms the possibility of achieving it for the good of both sides.

The writers, performers and studios were also very concerned to control and shape the perception of the gender characteristics of Astaire and Rogers' personae. Defining Astaire's masculinity was a prime concern, as his slight build, high tenor voice, and casting as a dancer or musician might lead to his being mistaken—by stereotype—for homosexual. His association with things highbrow and European also risked making him seem effete or foppish, so Astaire's characters were carefully constructed and surrounded by foils who helped to define him by contrast. This explains the presence in most of these films of numerous stereotypical "sissy" characters, invariably European or British, who were played by a group of skilled comic actors, including Edward Everett Horton, Eric Blore, and Erik Rhodes. Astaire's normative, all-American masculinity is clearly distinguished from their fluttery incompetence.

In a culture where economic power was ideologically equated with dominance and masculinity, Astaire's characters

figure the social contradiction caused by widespread male unemployment: how can one be both broke and masculine? He is regularly characterized as temporarily unemployed or without funds, but this never emasculates him. By evoking, however briefly or humorously, the economic crisis, the films get the audience's attention by alluding to one of their central concerns: the unemployed, if not forgotten man.

The films help manage the gender contradictions of Astaire's role in several ways. First, in every film, Astaire is given solo dances, in which he can perform his mastery of his unique dance style, a blend of tap, ballroom, and modern dance techniques. Also, he sings many of the important songs in their films, making his perspective central. Rogers only gets to sing a few numbers, and has no dance solos. Since in the world of the musical the subjectivity of characters is expressed in the music, this is a compelling assertion of his power.

Second, Astaire's partnering of Rogers figures his heterosexual prowess and dominance; his leading literally sweeps her off her feet. These dances figure not only his masculine ability to overcome obstacles and difficulties, but also the reassertion of male control over strong, assertive women. In the context of the collapse of the sexual division of labor and the prevailing anxiety about whether women would come to dominate in families with no male provider, these dances stage and seem to resolve a key anxiety of both men and women.

Astaire's control and masculinity were carefully shored up by the RKO publicity machine. Media reporting on Astaire obsessed on two themes: how hard he worked to choreograph and perfect their dances and how intent on and successful he was at controlling every aspect of his career. Lest anyone think dancing an effete avocation, the press reported avidly and extensively on preparations for each new Astaire film. While Rogers was typically involved in the numerous other films she made between their musicals, Astaire and his assistant Hermes Pan spent an average of eight weeks before filming ever started, choreographing and perfecting the dances, which Pan would then teach to Rogers at night. These stories are full of images of the dancers exhausted, disheveled, with bleeding feet after hours and hours of grueling rehearsals, all designed to emphasize that the "seemingly smooth, effortless dancing scenes" are "the result of long, painful

rehearsal.” Typical is this description of filming the “Never Gonna Dance” number in *Swing Time*, which required forty-seven takes to get right:

The forty-seventh shot was done with the feet of both dancers bleeding, their nerves snapping. Rogers had destroyed three gowns, the skirt of the fourth and last was torn. Happily the tear didn't show. Astaire had wrecked six boiled evening shirts, reduced nine white ties to limp rags. When the picture is released, no audience will detect the torn feet, lacerated nerves, shattered poise and ravaged dress. Rogers will be smiling, gay. Astaire will be nimble, gallant. (“Dancing with Astaire” 20–21)

It was always noted that Astaire contractually had the power to control every aspect of the dances, including how they were filmed and edited. Publicity materials also affirmed that many of their most memorable routines required numerous takes because Astaire required that the dances be done perfectly from start to finish, not made to appear perfect by editing together different takes. Rogers gets points for continuing to dance while her feet bled through her shoes, but it is Astaire whose perfectionism required this dedication. These stories not only affirmed a work ethic hard to defend in a time of a massive lack of work, but also constructed Astaire as a man both in charge of his success and earning his money appropriately.

Rogers' characters must also manage a key 1930s contradiction: how could a woman be strong, self-reliant, independent, even employed, without emasculating her male partner or refusing to marry him entirely? Rogers' characters negotiate this contradiction brilliantly, managing to remain strong and appealing women who demand to be treated with respect and taken seriously as equals, while also exposing a vulnerability and willingness to unite with a man who proves himself worthy of her love. Usually cast as a woman who has to earn her own living (as a model, a performer, a dance instructor), Rogers' characters have a directness and a common sense that mark them, stereotypically, as not elite. In each narrative, when she first meets him, she wants nothing to do with him, until he gives up his fatuous, condescending pose and demonstrates a seriousness—through his song and dance—that makes him worth bothering with. No Depression victim or ditzy air-head desperate for a man, Rogers' characters are self-respecting women who refuse to accept sexist treatment. When she does

finally unite with Astaire, it is as a partner, a near equal, a companion who required him to change. And this character type and relationship formula was anything but unusual in this period; the most popular romantic comedies of this period abounded with assertive female figures played by actors like Claudette Colbert, Jean Arthur, Carole Lombard, Irene Dunne, and Katharine Hepburn (Kendall).¹²

Publicity materials about Rogers portrayed her as an all-American girl-next-door, and she comes across as quite androgynous. As with Astaire, her extraordinary work ethic is mentioned approvingly, giving her a masculinized aura. Noting her frequent 18-hour days at the studio, *The New York Times* described her as “One of the hardest workers in Hollywood.” The author mused, “Nobody knows why she drives herself the way she does. She isn’t trying to get elected to something; she has already been elected the nation’s favorite ballroom dancer” (Crisler B4).¹³ Many articles told the harrowing story of how she became a breadwinner in vaudeville at the tender age of fourteen, and how she had to work hard to support many people from a very young age (French 37, 72–74). But all this hard work is presented as having paid off. *Life* described her as “a living affirmation of the holiest American legend: the success story” (“Ginger Rogers” 61–69). Rogers herself is also regularly quoted saying how much she loves to work hard, and how she had deliberately put her career above all other things. “You know I’ve worked hard to get somewhere in this business. [. . .] Work. work. work. I thought of nothing else then. The breaks have not been easy for me, you know” (Bow 12, 84–85).

¹²Kendall insightfully explores these characters and the actors who played them. The anxieties these characters were designed to manage also come through very clearly in publicity stories about them. For example, articles about Carole Lombard explained her view that the success of women in Hollywood demonstrated that women who are self-supporting will choose to marry only for love, and that they seek “a sympathetic friend—a comrade of the spirit,” not simply a provider. She attributes problems in gender relations to the “conflict between the old ideas men had toward women and the changed status of women,” and asserts, “I think it will be the men who have to change their attitudes toward wives.” Lest we think this wasn’t controversial, a bold-faced caption at the bottom of the page warns, “A hundred years ago, says this author, Carole Lombard would have been burned as a witch for her radical beliefs!” (Madden 46–47).

¹³This article also makes much of the fact that Rogers had been appointed an honorary admiral in the Texas Navy “by the admiring governor of her home state.”

To a lesser extent than Astaire, she's also presented as in control of her career; she went on strike in 1936 until RKO agreed to pay her more money and cut the number of films she was required to do each year. She was particularly incensed that not only was Astaire making more money than she was, but that Edward Everett Horton and Victor Moore, supporting players, were making twice what she was. Rogers later wrote about this:

It wasn't considered "ladylike" to talk about money, but when you're a lady earning her living, the subject becomes exceedingly significant and well worth discussing. [. . .] I didn't begrudge Eddie and Victor their fees . . . however, I put in many more hours on our films and my name above the title brought in the customers. [. . .] In my case, there's no question that the discrepancy in treatment and remuneration was due to my gender. When Fred Astaire made his demands to the front office, his requests were honored, while mine were attributed to "greed" or "ego." (Rogers 192-93)

When Rogers was criticized by some in the press for her demands, fans wrote in to defend her. One argued, "It is not considered strange that the 'small' man, who rises to the top in the business world, should do things and demand things which were once beyond him. This is the deserved reward of his success, and he would be thought extremely foolish if he did not take advantage of it. The case of Ginger Rogers does not seem very different" (Sutcliffe 12). Letters like this suggest the extent to which Rogers was perceived by audiences as a hard-working, self-made woman who deserved to be treated equally with her male co-stars.

Rogers' androgyny was also celebrated in descriptions of her athleticism and competitiveness, qualities that helped define her screen image as well. "Salient trait in Ginger Rogers' behavior is competitiveness. [. . .] Her competitiveness enabled her to make herself almost as good a dancer as her teacher Astaire. In her private life, this competitiveness is harmlessly projected into all forms of sport. Ginger Rogers bowls, swim, dives, and plays tennis as if she were trying to make an Olympic team" (*Dancing Girl*" 50-51). A profile of Astaire that calls the duo "Hollywood's greatest team" described Rogers as "industrious and energetic" and notes, "Her assiduity and competitiveness were as keen as [Astaire's] own" (Barnett 80). They are presented as appropriate and evenly matched teammates.

Another aspect of Rogers' image was the complex of terms that are captured by the phrases "all-American" and "girl-next-door," which are often used to describe her. *Life* argued:

Ginger has become an American favorite—as American as apple pie—because Americans can identify themselves with her. She could easily be the girl who lives across the street. She is not uncomfortably beautiful. She is just beautiful enough. She is not an affront to other women. She gives them hope that they can be like her. She can wisecrack from the side of her mouth, but she is clearly an idealist. Her green eyes shine with self-reliance. She believes in God and love and a hard day's work. ("Ginger Rogers" 61)¹⁴

At the same time, however, Rogers also regularly appeared modeling in fashion spreads and advertisements, and offered "makeup secrets" and advice about popularity and romance in the sort of contrived publicity articles that appeared about many female stars (Walters 47; "Ginger Rogers Tells" 101–02; Reeves 52–53).¹⁵ Stories about her short-lived marriage to actor Lew Ayres presented Rogers as committed to keeping on with her career, while still taking responsibility for all domestic management and for the emotional work of sustaining the relationship; these things are not made to seem incompatible or mutually exclusive, and Rogers' situation is explicitly equated with that of all other working wives (Bow, 84–85; Hunt 40–41).

All these elements of her star persona explored and helped to manage the gender crisis of the 1930s. Her characters, who are clearly to be understood as appealing, very typical women, mark out the boundaries of acceptable female ambition, and make it possible to imagine a self-possessed life and a companionate union with an appropriately egalitarian man. Her persona contains and appears to resolve a key contradiction: it's good for women to work and to have ambition but it's also important for women to stand by and support men. In the context of the national anxiety about male unemployment and women's proper

¹⁴Similarly, *Time* said, "Her outstanding quality as a movie star is a frank and home-grown air which both U.S. and foreign audiences recognize as essentially American . . . she represents the American Girl, 1939 model—alert, friendly, energetic, elusive [. . .] she has a careles self-sufficiency" ("Dancing Girl" 49).

¹⁵Rogers was also regularly featured in advertisements for beauty products like Lux Toilet Soap in fan magazines.

roles (including their right to work), Rogers' characters stage the conflict so many people felt, and offer audiences different (but limited) ways to identify with her and to interpret the message of the films.

Shall We Dance?

In the final number of *Shall We Dance*, ballet dancer Astaire, who has been rejected by Rogers yet again, vows that he will dance with women wearing "Ginger" masks, if she won't dance with him. In an elaborate production number that includes both ballerinas and chorus dancers, Astaire stages the class unification—the merger of tap and ballet—which the audience has been made to want by the drive of the narrative. He dances with both the ballet dancers and with the chorus line. In the course of the number, he changes from his ballet costume into his more traditional tails, and the mood of the music shifts back and forth, from a somber slow arrangement to an upbeat brassy one. These alternations musically and visually restage the conflict between the two forms and their associated values.

Then the stage clears and Astaire sings the final number, which asks, "Shall we dance, or keep on moping?" yet another brave reiteration of the power of love and romance to defeat Depression despair. Rogers' answer is to dance with him, and as their number concludes, they move to the front of the stage as the ballerinas and chorines dance together behind them. The camera zooms in on them as they sing the last lines of *her* song: "They all said we'd never get together/ They laughed at us and how/ But oh ho ho, who's got the last laugh now?"

It is ultimately her song, her perspective, which defines the class and gender unity that the number represents so compellingly. Singing these words together, they embody what Astaire's character has explicitly desired, which is to create a new musical and dance form, the union of ballet and tap. But with the exception of the visual presence of the corps de ballet in the background of the final scene, the signifiers of ballet have disappeared and been replaced with those of the new, modern world of tap and jazz. In this finale, then, as in the large production numbers that conclude many of their other films, a vision of community is represented, and in this case, what is made to seem natural, normal,

and appealing is this new sensibility that ultimately rejects the values of the wealthy and the past, and affirms the new cooperative egalitarianism taking shape in American culture.

In a 1939 article on their last RKO film together, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*, *Time* magazine's reviewer opined, "Astaire and Rogers symbolize their era quite as completely as the Castles symbolized theirs" ("Dancing Girl" 49). Arguably, to symbolize an era is to represent its most important values, ideas, ideologies, and ways of being in the world, and to embody, as Richard Dyer reminds us, the social categories through which people make sense of their lives. Astaire-Rogers films were so popular in the 1930s because they represented, and then symbolically managed, the social contradictions of the Great Depression, constructing a vision of the world in which gender and class conflict were resolved, and in which that resolution was achieved by celebrating the new, the American, the democratic, the egalitarian, and the modern, while rejecting the elitist, the European, the hierarchical, the old. To identify with these two stars, and to want to perform their dances, was to embrace both new forms of gender relations and the class-conscious ideologies and new moral economics of the New Deal/Popular Front civic culture that brought Americans from diverse backgrounds and political philosophies together into a new American community. Astaire-Rogers films helped to normalize and promote this new status quo in American culture, and to secure many Americans' consent to it.

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