

AN AMERICAN IN PARIS (1951)

Cast: Gene Kelly . Leslie Caron . Oscar Levant . Nina Foch .
Georges Guetary

Screenplay: Alan Jay Lerner

Music & Lyrics: George and Ira Gershwin

Choreography: Gene Kelly

Director: Vincente Minnelli

Producer: Arthur Freed for M.G.M.

How right Al Jolson was when he broke screen silence in the first musical talking picture by declaring "You aint heard nothing yet!" That was in 1927 in "The Jazz Singer" made by Warner Bros. who thanks mainly to former Broadway dance director Busby Berkeley turned out the best of the early screen musicals until 1933 when R.K.O. had Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers "Flying Down To Rio" and singing and dancing their way through a succession of hits for the rest of the decade.

It was during the 1940's that M.G.M. gradually emerged as top musical dog and it all started when Arthur Freed, a successful song-writer on their pay-roll was made a producer in 1939. Shortly afterwards, Freed brought Vincente Minnelli to Hollywood and yet another historic partnership was formed.

Minnelli first directed for Freed a film version of his all-black Broadway musical "Cabin In The Sky". They then went on to make a series of highly original musicals including "Meet Me In St. Louis" (with Judy Garland), "The Pirate" (with Gene Kelly), "On The Town" (directed by Kelly and Stanley Donen) and culminating in that perfect blend of talents "An American In Paris".

Universally acclaimed as M.G.M.'s great artistic triumph of 1951, "An American In Paris" brought the musical movie to an imaginative peak, especially in the 18 minute ballet danced by Kelly and Leslie Caron. Just about everybody involved won an Oscar but none more deservedly than Kelly. He received a special award for his choreography but he could equally well have been given a further two for discovering Leslie Caron in the Ballets des Champs Elysees and for his singing, dancing, acting and charm - pure and simple. Kelly never puts a foot wrong and it is he, above all, who holds the film together.

The following year Kelly and Freed made another classic M.G.M. musical "Singing In The Rain". Some may say that this was their greatest success. Maybe they are right but maybe it's just because "Singing In The Rain" has always been a superb period pastiche whereas "An American In Paris" was very much of its time and things have undoubtedly changed. Unfortunately Paris is not what it was - no longer does it seem as romantic and exciting - and the affection we felt towards our allies - the Yanks - after the 1939-45 war has also waned.

Whatever our critical criteria, they are both marvellous musicals. Highlights from them were included in a tribute in 1974 to M.G.M.'s first 50 years in the movie business. That tribute was entitled "That's Entertainment" and that's exactly what you should get tonight!

TONY ROZELAAR

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