THE SIGN OF THE DANCING MEN: NEGOTIATIONS OF MASCULINITY IN FILM MUSICALS

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ABSTRACT

The past couple of decades have seen an increasing prominence of the male dancer in mainstream film (a very recent instance is the performance by Richard Gere in *Chicago*). This phenomenon coincides with an increasing anxiety—amongst men in particular—regarding the centrality of traditional masculinity in a post-feminist, post-industrialist, post-capitalist and post-queer cultural context, and the role of males in society: the concern expressed about boys' performance in school is merely one instance of this more generalised anxiety.

This suggests that dance in film may be one site in which masculinity is being negotiated and re-negotiated for men in the culture—for instance, via the hypermasculinisation of the dancers. Yet dance is a risky space in which to accomplish such negotiations, since the male dancer has historically been regarded with suspicion.

Taking the figures of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly as constituting paradigms of the male dancer in Hollywood film, this paper examines the ways that more recent performances in film of dance by men both address those earlier models, and re-work them, via the 're-authentication' of the male body.

> "I have only the evidence of the dancing men,"
> said Holmes. (Conan Doyle 1930, p. 518)

The genre of the film musical is often thought of as encompassing the song-and-dance movies of the 1930s through to the late 1950s. Later musical films have not been produced in the same way as in the golden age of the Hollywood musical—for instance, the star-centred formulaic product of the RKO, Fox and MGM studios—and song and dance in these later films have sometimes functioned differently in the narratival structure of the movie. Accordingly, these later films are often considered paradigmatically different from the traditional Hollywood musical. The latter are viewed as innocent and naïve, at best, or, at worst, overdone and kitsch while the former are understood—or represent themselves—as innovative and clever.

The popular contemporary assumption that the Hollywood musical was simply an escapist genre that evolved over the course of two World Wars, a Great Depression and the post-World War II recession has in recent years been challenged. Instead, the genre has begun to take on different, contestatory meanings, as, for instance, the view that sees many such movies as always-already camp and/or queer and as therefore negotiating issues of gender and/or sexuality in covert ways. Newer approaches situating the films in their particular historico-cultural contexts have revitalised our understanding of the genre and its exemplars.

In recent decades we have witnessed a resurgence of the musical feature film, though with some important differences. Many of these feature, not stars who both sing and dance, but rather performers who dance to other artists' recorded music often already familiar to the audience.

Nonetheless, certain generic traits or motifs provide continuity between the older film musical and its more recent avatar. For example, the movie musical tradition that sought to acknowledge a distinction between stage and screen performance and yet, simultaneously, to *bridge* that difference is to be found in *Funny Girl*, first screened in 1968. Another example of continuity is the I've-found-us-a-barn-let's-put-on-a-show movie, exemplified by the series starring Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, and picked up again in such films as the British *The Full Monty* (1997) and the Australian tap-dance movie *Bootmen* (2000).

Integral to this renaissance of the musical film is the return of the figure of the dancing male, featured in movies ranging from the American *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) to *Chicago* (2002), and including the British film *The Full Monty* and Australia's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992) and *Bootmen*. These films often focus on a male character whose performance both encodes and articulates an anxiety around gender at a time that traditional notions of masculinity have started to come under pressure. That anxiety frequently expresses itself in these films through an accentuated or even exaggerated emphasis on the sexuality and pure physicality of the male character/performer. The representative movie of this genre is the John Travolta vehicle *Saturday Night Fever*. In *Saturday Night Fever* Travolta's body is eroticised both on and off the dance floor—even his ordinary walk is a sexual strut. This particular movie also articulates another common trait of such films, namely, a conflict between the central male character and an authority figure, often a father, over the issue of dance itself, and most commonly over whether it is a proper activity or occupation for a male. That conflict can be understood as a rite of passage that gives the central male character—the dancer—entry into the community of men as autonomous and fully masculine.

Of interest is the fact this re-emergence of the dancing man in the film musical coincides historically with an increasing anxiety around masculinity, especially in English-speaking cultures. We have seen articulated the fear that men are becoming emasculated or feminised, whether through the increasing presence of women in public life, the greater prominence of gay men and women, or changes in employment practices in late capitalism. We have also witnessed, in this country especially, a concern at the highest levels over the performance of boys in school, vis-à-vis that of girls. Recently we have observed also the debate in both the culture in general and in the Australian Parliament in particular over the issue of whether gay people should be allowed to marry one another. Increasingly vociferous invocations of 'the traditional family' and 'the sanctity of marriage' suggest that institutions that have traditionally undergirded men's station and power within a patriarchal structure are perceived to have come under threat, and through that threat masculinity itself is menaced.

Does the reappearance of the dancing man in so many mainstream feature films therefore signify an *acceptance* of a feminisation of males in the culture? Is it a *critique* of that feminisation? Or is it—however improbably—an attempt at *recuperation* of a traditional masculinity within a context—namely, song and dance—that has always proven rather risky in relation to notions of the 'truly' masculine? Given the constraints of such a paper as this, in what follows I propose to sketch answers to these questions; I will leave to the longer project of which this paper is a part the more detailed matters concerning the film musical as a genre.

Ramsay Burt observes about the male ballet dancer that by the nineteenth century this figure became 'an object of distaste in London, Paris and many other European cities' (Burt 1995, p. 24) because he was regarded as feminised, not least because he had become an object of spectacle (see Burt, chapter 3, for a discussion). Steven Cohan makes the same point with direct reference to the

Hollywood musical. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's work, Cohan suggests the singing and dancing male body in the Hollywood musical is an object of spectacle, and in this adopts the '*to-be-looked-at-ness*' (cited in Cohan 2002, p. 87; original emphasis) associated with the female body in film generally, but especially with the figure of the showgirl in the musical. Moreover, the male dancer, whether of ballet or modern dance, remains suspect as to his sexuality and therefore his very claim to masculinity, since the two are imbricated in our culture.

To understand the nature of the more recent phenomenon of the dancing man, we need to return to earlier Hollywood musicals and, specifically, to the two figures who created the tradition of the male dancer in film, namely, Fred Astaire (1899-1987) and Gene Kelly (1912-1996). There were, of course, other men who danced in movies; but these two remain pre-eminent, and are who most of us think of immediately when the figure of the male dancer is invoked. Astaire, the older of the two and the first to appear in film (in 1933), came from vaudeville. When he made his first film, Astaire was 34 years old. By contrast, Gene Kelly's background included training in modern dance and ballet (he ran his own dance school for a while at the beginning of his working life); and he was 30 years old when he made his first movie in 1942, almost a decade after Astaire's first film.

Fairly evident differences as well as similarities between the two men in terms of the ways they were represented, or represented themselves, in film have implications for the articulation and protection of the performers' masculinity in the eyes of the viewing public. The first of these is that Astaire's ascendancy in age over Kelly when the latter first began to appear in film is offset by Astaire's representation in most of his films as more debonair and a man of the world. Whereas we no doubt recall Kelly as often dancing in a shirt and slacks, Astaire typically is remembered for the urbanity of his appearance in tie and tails (at least in the RKO films in which he started off). That is, the appearance of upper-class identity and worldly experience provides a buffer to protect Astaire's masculinity, just as Kelly's is defended through his frequent representation as energetically working-class.

The style of dance is also an important means by which the masculinity of these two performers is maintained and protected. Astaire's strategy in dancing is to bring off what is clearly a difficult feat so that it looks effortless, elegant and—above all—easy enough for any man in the audience to imitate, though at the same time as an audience we are conscious that this is not the case. There is a kind of modesty, therefore, in Astaire's performance—what in the Renaissance was called *sprezzatura*, a disprizing or diminution of a feat or an accomplishment so as not to appear conceited. This modesty constructs Astaire as capable of great physical agility, speed and control, but as concealing these so as not to create excessive spectacle (except in instances of deliberate and obvious exhibitionist performance). This reserve is consonant with a traditional notion of masculinity as unassuming heroism.

What Astaire conceals, Kelly reveals. Kelly foregrounds the athleticism of his performance, and thereby draws our attention to the sheer physical effort, skill and judgment of his dancing. There is a brashness about Kelly's dance routines, an exuberance that suggests a more youthful masculinity, and one that is less inclined to hide its light under a bushel. This is a risky kind of self-representation, since it might easily be interpreted as convinced of its own authority and authenticity; and, within the economy of a patriarchal masculinity that encourages men to compete with one another, this is to invite another male to knock the Kelly persona back down to size. Therefore, lest the audience feel affronted by Kelly's lack of modesty (just as they would be charmed by Astaire's more self-effacing performance), Kelly manages to infuse a certain degree of self-consciousness and even also of self-irony into his

dance—brought out most clearly, perhaps, in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), a film that satirises the film industry itself. At the same time, however, as the documentary *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer* (2002) is at pains to point out, there was still a sense that what Kelly did in the way of dance could also be done by any red-blooded, active American man.

However, Astaire's sartorial elegance notwithstanding, both dancers are often represented in their films as of working-class origins, even if the narrative, as in *Easter Parade* (1948), constructs Astaire as a successful Broadway star and, in *Singin' in the Rain*, Kelly as a movie matinee idol. Working-class origins are much clearer in Kelly's films, and are often suggested through costume and set location. Yet the representation of the central character in a number of Astaire's films as having to find work as a dancer suggests at least shabby gentility, if not a working-class background. This imputation or clarification of class origins in the filmic narratives is critical: dance may then be seen, in Astaire's case, as a means to upward social mobility (which would have appealed to audiences after the Great Depression of 1929) or, in Kelly's case, as an exuberant expression of the genuine feelings attributed to the working class, as opposed to the muted 'polite' expressions and emotions of the upper class. Moreover, whereas a dancing member of the upper class would tend to look effete, a working-class man who dances is, by contrast, imbued with the hypermasculinity (and hypersexuality) commonly attributed, in our culture's social and gender mythology, to the working-class male. The audience's differing response to the two stars is neatly summed up in the disarming remark of one female interviewee in the documentary *Gene Kelly: Anatomy of a Dancer*: 'You gave your heart to Fred Astaire; but you saved your body for Gene Kelly.' However, in the popular mind, at least, Astaire continued to be associated with the upper class, as Kelly himself confirms in a 1975 interview included in the same documentary: 'Fred represents the aristocracy when he dances, and I represent the proletariat.'

Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, the model that has proven most influential on later male dancers in film musicals is that provided by Gene Kelly. The issues of class and the energy associated with the working class, in particular, are reflected in the working-class origins and the intensity of physical performance of Travolta, in *Saturday Night Fever*, for instance, or Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*. Here Richard Gere's rather subdued performance in *Chicago*—especially in comparison to the high-energy dancing of Renée Zellweger and Catherine Zeta-Jones—provides the exception that proves the rule.

The second similarity in representation between Astaire and Kelly—again reflected in the way the male dancers in the later movies are photographed—lies in the technique of cinematic representation itself. When they dance, both performers are generally filmed in mid- to long-shot, rather than in close-up. Even where there may be close-ups of legs and feet in motion in the dance sequences, these usually follow the more distant shots. The purpose here is to authenticate the male star himself as the performer of the dance numbers, something underscored by the credits for *Chicago*, which include a line specifically stating that the relevant dance numbers were performed by Zellweger, Zeta-Jones and Gere. After all, song can be lip-synched by a performer, even to the sound of her or his own voice; however, dance cannot be 'leg-synched,' except where the director and film editor intervene, to create the illusion, by cutting from the star to a dancing stand-in, that the male lead is able to dance.

The use of the medium and long camera shot of the male star dancing establishes not only the authenticity of the performance of the dance, but also the authenticity and irreducibility of the male body itself. This is implicit in the performances by Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, by Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*, by the boys in *Bootmen*, and most obviously by the out-of-work foundry-men-turned-male-

strippers in *The Full Monty*, where the finale of both the men's efforts and of the film itself is the revelation of the naked bodies of the men, in all their variety.

The male body is thus often represented in motion, self-absorbed (even, as in the case of Travolta and Swayze, when there is a female partner present), sexualised and eroticised through the very action of putting itself on display. Even though that male body may be an erotic object, and hence in danger of being rendered passive, the desire of the dancer not only for his partner's body but also for his own creates an excess that neutralises any threat of passivity. The male dancer is positioned in a risky space whose danger he surmounts by taking control of it, and occupying it actively.[i]

The bold occupation of that space also contributes to the heterosexualisation of the male dancer in the film narrative. Most film musicals move toward the union of the principal male dancer with his leading lady; and, especially in older musicals, we are alerted to the possibility that the dancer has met the right woman by the trope that she requires little or no teaching or rehearsal to partner him competently—she just *knows* the steps (a number of the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers movies use this device). Here, the complex relation of time and space in the musical becomes relevant. For example, where the film narrative pauses for a show-stopping number, the audience is clearly required to bracket the number as somehow not really interrupting the temporality of the story that the film tells. In the context of the heterosexualisation of the male dancer, we may understand that the initial dance of the male and female partners, especially in the earlier musicals, is both a prelude to and a metaphor for romance.

'If a dancer moves across a film frame and the camera constantly follows him, the eye has not really witnessed an event, for there is no beginning or end to it. However, if the dancer flashes onto the left of the screen and exits the other side or stops within the frame, something happens. Time has gone by; space has been consumed' (Gardner Compton, cited in Delamater 1981, p. 7). Compton's last statement is potentially reversible, for in the film musical, when space has been visually consumed, the audience likely understands that time—however notional or abstract—has gone by. The initial partnered dance number may thus additionally be understood as a metaphor forecasting sexual union in a bracketed *future* moment in the narrative. This is made explicit in *Dirty Dancing*, where Baby first asks Johnny to teach her to dance 'dirty,' and then later gives her virginal body to him. It can be implicit in the earlier form of film musical also, as Cohan's account of Cyd Charisse's performance in *Silk Stockings* suggests:

> before he is through dancing to 'All of You' . . . Astaire gets 'somewhere [sic] with Charisse because he does succeed in luring her into dancing with him, however stiffly, as the music swells to a lush string arrangement of the melody. Afterwards, as she reclines contentedly on a rug, he remarks with an irony that transcends this scene—indeed, the whole picture—'so, uh, dancing is a waste of time?' (Cohan 2002, p. 89)

It would seem, then, that the male dancer in the film musical has always occupied an area of risk, and that the generic conventions, as they have developed to the present, are so designed as to protect the masculinity of that dancer by essentialising his gender and assertively locating that masculinity in his body, the very object placed riskily on display as spectacle in the film. Movement, social class and sexuality—all become both inscriptions on and by the male dancer's body, in a sort of reflexive loop. This becomes significant when one considers that that body can also be figured as both (re-)gendering the nation and offering a sense of salvation to its men: Astaire and Kelly salvage American masculinity between the World Wars and after World War II, just as Robert Carlyle and his

mates in *The Full Monty* reconstruct British masculinity in a post-Thatcher United Kingdom, or the young dancers in *Bootmen* assert Australian working-class masculinity in an era of economic rationalism in our own country. We may have only the evidence of the dancing men, as Sherlock Holmes states in the epigraph to this paper; but it seems pretty strong evidence to refute the idea that the film musical is merely escapist.

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[i] One clear exception here is *Chicago*, whose *dramatis personae*, in terms of principal characters, is dominated by women, and whose structure and technique appear intended to test the traditional generic characteristics of the movie musical. For instance, the sequence titled (in the DVD version) 'Cell Block Tango' is in effect a *danse apache*, a highly formalised dance, often performed to a tango, that appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century and represented a violent argument between an *apache*, that is, a member of a Paris street gang or underworld figure, and his female partner, an argument that the *apache* wins. This was an exhibition dance in which the male often wore a beret or flat cap and a *pull marin*, a blue-and-white striped seaman's pullover, while the woman wore a short tight skirt with a slit running up one side. *Chicago* inverts the power relationships, each woman killing her partner. (I am indebted to my colleague Ann McGuire for pointing out the *apache* connection.)

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