

# "Let the Dance Floor Feel Your Leather": Set Design, Dance, and the Articulation of Audiences in RKO Radio's Astaire-Rogers Series

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## **‘Let the dancefloor feel your leather’: set design, dance and the articulation of audiences in RKO Radio’s Astaire-Rogers series.<sup>1</sup>**

*Abstract: This study revisits a classic film series from the high-point of Modernism’s influence on Hollywood art direction: RKO Radio’s Astaire-Rogers society film musicals from 1933-1938. The study makes use of primary evidence, contemporary reviews and critical writings from the 1930s to illustrate the corporate, social and production contexts of a film series that made effective use of the networks of social relations extending from studio personnel to theater patrons. The study adopts the principle of articulation, drawn from Laclau and Mouffe, in order to explain how discourses surrounding the films were employed by necessity to ensure success for each film and offer the possibility of continued financial return. In the Astaire-Rogers series, various elements of the film text, such as dance routines and modernist furnishings, were articulated to audiences through extra textual material, and the visual landscape of aspirational modernism connected with real domestic and social spaces. The study proposes that the series offered more than an escapist fantasy for the passive audience, but engaged audiences physically and discursively in order to develop an intimate connection between screen aesthetics and financial success.*

Keywords: Astaire, Rogers, RKO, design, Modernism, dance, articulation, Laclau, Mouffe

*Introduction: Looking back at the Astaire-Rogers series*

In studies of the studio system in Hollywood in the 1930s, the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers series for RKO Radio Pictures represents one of the most replete histories of a popular film series. The series provides industry historians with a readymade and incontestable illustration of the product of a smooth running studio mechanism, and there can be few better examples of the aspirational Depression romance. In turn, the series has led to landmark studies of the studio and the films themselves that have served to cement the latter's place in academic criticism and popular culture, these include Arlene Croce's *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book* (1972) and a special issue of *The Velvet Light Trap* devoted to RKO Radio Pictures (1973). What these studies emphasise is the economic viability, in addition to aesthetic pleasure, offered by escapist fantasy set in contemporary times. Astaire and Rogers started as a team in support roles in their first film together, *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), and their last pairing for RKO Radio was for the biopic *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939). However it is undoubtedly the society comedies which had the capacity to beat the Depression – both for the audiences and for the studio. The pair made seven such films after *Rio*: *The Gay Divorcée* (1934), *Roberta* and *Top Hat* (1935), *Follow the Fleet* and *Swing Time* (1936), *Shall We Dance* (1937) and *Carefree* (1938).<sup>2</sup> Each film in the Astaire-Rogers tells the story of ordinary Americans inhabiting lush spaces of European high design, which they map or enact through popular dance. From these twin perspectives of design and dance, the incorporation of the Astaire-Rogers series into histories of Hollywood is most often made by establishing their unique and lasting position in the development of a consistent studio “look” or visual style, coupled with a conception of audience fantasy through dance, that reflects the marrying of a particular American Modernism with

European production personnel and techniques. For Donald Albrecht, RKO's productions for Astaire and Rogers represent an "amalgam" of modern American architecture and streamlined, Europe-influenced Art Deco that few other studios could consistently match (84).

Apparently effortless in their urbanity, the films' settings combine some of the harsher elements of European modernism (tight angles, deep chiaroscuro lighting) with the streamlined motifs of American modernity, at the same time illustrating the mechanics of corporate film production in combining individual craftsmanship and virtuoso performance with big business. This depiction rests on the notion of a passive audience engaging with the films merely as escapist fantasy, being fed such a fantasy by a Hollywood production system interested only in stretching a capital return for as long as the series lasts. This was critiqued in 1980 by J.P. Telotte, for whom the narrative of escape through performance that the films provide (that of surviving and transcending the Depression) is reinforced by a reliance upon the tension created by the down-at-heel circumstances of some of the characters (19). Nevertheless, whilst in the 2010s we might contest the notion of the passive audience in today's cinema, largely due to our awareness of merchandising, fandom and cross-platform textuality, the concept of an *engaged* audience in the 1930s can still seem remote. This is despite established studies of the ways in which film in the 1930s and 1940s employed adaptation, merchandising, and local campaigns to actively enroll audiences (Harper).

For this reason, a more nuanced understanding of the Astaire-Rogers series is attempted here by a closer examination of contemporary material, such as campaign books, contemporary criticism and trade press, that was essential to the creation of a vibrant discourse or "buzz" around each film, and which was instrumental in strengthening the extension and continuity of audience engagement as the series of

films developed, peaked and ultimately waned. The Astaire-Rogers series more than most was able to exploit the youth enthusiasm for the dance floor, with its big numbers on lavish, modern sets especially arranged to catch on amongst picturegoers. A study of the ephemera of moviegoing provides a fascinating glimpse into ways in which modernity was articulated through the wider experience of cinema, how audiences engaged with the films, and how this engagement was stimulated and maintained by the studio.

### *Modernity's Networked Spaces*

A hint to what might be revealed in fresh research is provided in an observation on cinemagoing made in the landmark study of American social life in the 1930s: Robert and Helen Merrell Lynd's *Middletown in Transition*. As a follow-up study to their 1929 work *Middletown*, the Lynds returned to their subject – actually Muncie, Indiana – to observe the effect of the 1929 financial crash and ensuing Depression on what they had earlier described as the “characteristic but not typical” American town (*Middletown* 9).<sup>3</sup> Visiting in 1935, ten years after their original observational study, the Lynds found that the population turned to bromidic pursuits in the face of economic hardship. Magazine readership had increased, especially for new, sophisticated titles such as *Esquire*, which were seen as “‘painkiller’ reading in desperately hard times.” (*Middletown in Transition* 258) Similarly, radio had experienced a huge boom in sales and listeners, and dancing was a prominent feature of the lives of anyone under thirty years of age. Even at the height of the Depression, dance was a core youth activity, encouraged by public events staged by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). The cinema had not diminished in popularity but instead had experienced an unusual effect of the shortages; patrons

were inclined to head straight for high quality films. As the Lynds recorded in an interview with a theater owner, “the ‘fairylane’ type of picture has been more popular than ever - the type of picture that lifts people into a happy world of gaiety of evening clothes.” (qtd. in *Middletown in Transition* 261). In 1935 audiences would have seen Astaire and Rogers in *Roberta*, with Irene Dunne and Randolph Scott, and leading the cast in *Top Hat*, the series’ highpoint.<sup>4</sup> The value of the Lynds’ observation lies not in the obvious relation between the Depression and escapism, in which the screen performs as a transcendent gateway, but in the practical centrality of cinema to the other activities that the Lynds observed. This was a relationship which involved more than watching for entertainment, but which also involved dance and imitation, social interaction with other patrons, and even, to a certain extent, a relationship with the spaces of production and the stars and personnel at the studio. The screen, in this case, is not a membrane that picturegoers cross in order to be released from the real world. The screen is a surface that *articulates* the relationship between social and material spaces on both sides, connecting them in physical and practical relationships, which exist to ensure the success of the film.

Sustaining and engaging audiences was essential to the ongoing financial success of the industry that had developed around Hollywood’s major studios, in which, as Tino Balio has described, the physical infrastructure of corporations rested like an inverted pyramid on the intangible product of the movie (5). This seems all too fragile until we admit that the “product” in this regard is more than the physical object of the movie, as produced by the studio and then distributed for exhibition, but something more akin to what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe describe as the “impossible object” (112). Laclau and Mouffe’s discussion of hegemony and potential responses to it can be instrumental in understanding how large institutions and

corporations both engage in, and close down, discourse in order to exercise power. In dealing with social organization as inherently unstable and shifting, any hegemonic structure (such as a film studio, conglomerate or industrial affinity) engages in public discourse since it is discourse that represents society's continual attempt to determine and construct centers or nodal points of knowledge. We might recognize such centers of knowledge in Hollywood in the role played by the studios and their campaign teams, of course, but also in the role played by established movie critics and columnists upon whom we rely on for intellectual opinion, as well as *authorized* nodal points such as official tie-ins, adapted texts and even, more recently, fan fiction and participatory media. During the 1930s, campaign books, for instance, were distributed along with films, as they were to RKO Radio theaters, and film rental customers, which include explanations of character and plot, features on music, setting and script, as well as the actors. Other nodal points would have been the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, and in particular its operation as censor of the Hays Production Code, as well as preview audiences whose responses were vital to the completion of a film's final cut. It is this kind of articulation that serves to give any film its particular identity in the immediate context of exhibition and, ultimately, over time. The "impossible object" is more than the film as an object or screening, and includes the continually shifting network of discursive practices which in turn give the whole an identity based on the articulation of this network. Hegemonic structures articulate these nodal points by necessity – for financial or economic gain or political dominance – even though ultimate fixity of meaning is impossible (112).

The sociologist Bruno Latour has taken this principle as a guide to understanding networks of social interaction from the perspective of articulated, or localized practices (194). For instance, if we understand that social networks

surrounded the theaters in towns and cities across the US in the 1930s, we can trace these networks through the means of communication – trade papers, fan magazines, reviews – and through the activities which brought people together through exhibition. We might normally frame this network using the principle of escapism: the Astaire-Rogers musicals were anodyne “painkiller” entertainment which took patrons away from their lives for 90 minutes and took them to the sophisticated space of metropolitan New York or fashionable Europe. The screen thus translated the fantastic ideas of the production team – sensational costumes and furnishings, energetic and sophisticated dances, and frivolous, carefree plots – into images which enable the illusion of fantasy.

However, as we begin to look at the material which surrounded the series we see a much more practical engagement with the films by the audiences, an engagement encouraged by the studio corporation to maximize attendance by making generic enjoyment of the film specific to the local audience. Latour’s argument is that articulation articulates the individual with the generic experience, and for Latour it is the generic that makes up “a large part of you.” (195) For instance, the Lynds noticed that, for adolescents in particular, part of the appeal of society films with huge stars was their availability as role models: “Joan Crawford has her amateur counterparts in the high-school girls who stroll with brittle confidence in and out of ‘Barney’s’ soft drink parlor.” (*Middletown in Transition* 262) Noted later in studies of audience interaction from the 1930s and 1940s (Kuhn and Stacey), this kind of repetition and imitation of star turns is an important part of youth culture, and is carried out in spaces which mirror, albeit on a more mundane level, the nightclubs and lounges of the films.



### *Fred and Ginger at RKO Radio*

As a team, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were part of a hit formula that was first realized in 1933 in *Flying Down to Rio*. The success of *Rio*, alongside *King Kong* which was released the same year, is highlighted by Tim Onosko and John Davis as giving RKO Radio important “revenue and repute” after a period of considerable difficulty, with the studio slowly recovering from a record net loss in 1932 of \$10,600,000 (Onosko 3; Davis 6-7).<sup>5</sup> Like the series made by other comedy or musical teams such as the Marx Brothers, the films are often rolled into one in moviegoer folklore, and routines and gags often become interchangeable (this is apparent in academic criticism). This merging of one discrete text into another in the audiences’ minds is perhaps characteristic of the film series during and after its run, and does much to help us to understand in the first instance how articulation might be central to a series’ success. Discussions of who-danced-what-on-which-set, for instance, help maintain the status of the series in the public mind, something upon which the studio as producer and distributor relied. The expected exhibition period for a movie in the 1930s was one week, with films shown in the studio’s own vast estate of movie theaters across the country and rented to those of other studios and independents. The success of a movie could thus be measured by the number of rentals to other theaters as well as the precious *holdover* – the extended run of a movie into a second or even third week at the theaters. Since the Astaire-Rogers series produced eight musicals in five years, into an already crowded exhibition schedule, a casual moviegoer would surely have had difficulty in remembering which film had the beachfront set for “Night and Day” (*The Gay Divorcée*, 1934) and which had the casino set for “Let’s Face the Music and Dance” (*Follow the Fleet*, 1936). RKO Radio responded to this in the campaign book for *Shall We Dance* (1937), with a

ready-made theater contest for “slick showmen” to “cash in on the vast amount of publicity the famous pair have been accruing during the past three years.” (“Dance Remembrance Contest for Fans!” n.p.) Patrons were asked to guess each famous dance number from a publicity photograph provided, with photographs available from all of the previous films. The series of films had been on a short hiatus since *Swing Time* (1936), and the campaign idea illustrates how closely memory and audience continuity figured in the development of a film series.

In essence, the Astaire-Rogers RKO films are romantic comedies played in the style of what was then described as the “Continental farce,” an otherwise relatively unpopular, scandal-based story type which was considered somewhat “taboo” by screenwriters, and directors such as Mark Sandrich, who helmed five of the films. (“Einstein of the Studios” n.p.) For this reason it comes as no surprise that the stories too seem interchangeable or to overlap. Most have stories of mistaken identity, with Ginger mistaking Fred for a licentious paramour rather than a genuine suitor, and most of the films involve incredible near-misses in which Fred’s character’s real identity could be revealed but is not. Contemporary reviewers understood them for what they were: plots constructed to extract the maximum number of easy-to-anticipate gags, set in the most refined locations and punctuated by exquisitely crafted performances from dancers who stretch the limits of the audience’s belief in the spontaneity of their meeting. Inasmuch as the films deal in fantastic European or New York locations, the audience is constantly made aware of the humble origins of Fred and Ginger’s characters. In *Swing Time* Fred arrives in New York from the country virtually penniless (though he is wearing an obviously expensive morning suit), whilst in *Shall We Dance* his bluff exterior as Russian ballet dancer Petrov is revealed to be a cover for mild-mannered “Peter P. Peters from Philadelphia, PA.” A similar Eastern

European ruse had already been used by Ginger in *Roberta* (1935), whilst in *Top Hat* (1935) she is employed as a socialite to model clothes in Europe, though prepared on principle to go back to the US to “live on the dole.” The starkest of such characterizations in the series has to be Fred as a wisecracking, gum-chewing sailor in *Follow the Fleet*, alongside Ginger as a singer in a taxi-dancing club. Both working class roles are put into sharp relief by the film’s showstopper “Let’s Face the Music and Dance’, in which they act out a fantasy of casino highrollers.

The films are therefore generally about ordinary and even homely characters transcending their backgrounds and establishing themselves in their new surroundings: nightclubs, first-class lounges, fashion emporia (Telotte 23). This transcendence is mirrored in the exhibition the films had, starting with highly glamorous premieres and extending out to the small town theaters. Like all RKO Radio’s major films, the Astaire-Rogers “filmicals”, as they were known, premiered at the Radio City Music Hall, the company’s New York headquarters, often on major holiday weekends. Both *Top Hat* and *Swing Time* broke company records on their opening day, with *Top Hat* selling 13,000 tickets for the Music Hall alone by 4.00pm on its first day. (By comparison, the Lynds reported the largest theater in “Middletown” has having a *weekly* average attendance of 14,000.) The success of *Top Hat*, for example, is perhaps best illustrated by the speed with which it overtook even its own studio’s other products in terms of rental contracts in theaters across the country. *The Radio Flash*, RKO Radio’s in-house exhibitor newspaper, reported seven weeks after it opened that *Top Hat* had garnered 9,700 contracts nationwide. This is compared to 8,432 rentals for the films *The Gay Divorcée*, *The Little Minister*, *Roberta*, *Alice Adams*, *Last Days of Pompeii*, *The Three Musketeers* put together in the whole of the previous production season. (*The Radio Flash* 19 October 1935, 9)

The insights such as these from *The Radio Flash* remind us how the trade journal can be a significant artifact in putting together a picture of a corporation and its patrons. As an in-house journal, *The Radio Flash* provided a crucial link between exhibitor and studio based on the exchange of information, with sales receipts going into the head office in New York in return for tidbits and promotion ideas about future box office smashes coming out of the studio in West Hollywood. As with campaign books, *The Radio Flash* also gave hints to exhibitors on staging publicity events (such as sky writing and barnstorming aerial events for *Flying Down to Rio*) and reported on particularly successful events from around the country. Exhibitors and local RKO Radio agents also attended an annual national convention, accompanied by department heads from the studio, which stressed the need for cautious management in hard economic times. For the 1933 exhibitor convention issue, associate producer Shirley Burden and RKO art department head Polglase provide peppy feature/reports that emphasize their careful scrutiny of the balance sheet for even the most fundamental aesthetic decisions, perhaps in an attempt to offset in the minds of hard-pressed theater managers the apparent extravagance of particular movies:

“Furthermore, it is my intention to economize on mistaken ‘production value’ in the pictures entrusted to my care. [...] pictures have been produced in the past with lavish settings that evoked criticism rather than praise. This was due to the fact that the settings were not in keeping with the pocketbooks of the characters in the story, thus losing the semblance of reality. These elaborate and costly settings had no place in the story. They were used for mere ‘production value’.” (Burden 5)

In this way *The Radio Flash* provided coherence for a film studio that always seemed to be in jeopardy, with seven presidents in seven years. Like the National Screen Service or campaign books, the journal was a communication process whose value depended not just on the quality and type of information, but on the speed of communication and the networks of connection it created and along which the information could be passed. For example, a dusty archive copy of *The Radio Flash* held at the American Film Institute Library in Hollywood still has a sticker attached warning the exhibitor not to let it get into the hands of patrons. There could hardly be better evidence of the fact that, not only were patrons hungry for information on upcoming releases, but also that the success of film series *depended* on the kinds of social interaction between studio, office, theater, and patron that sneaked copies of *The Radio Flash* could assist.

#### *Between stage and screen*

The series represents the triumph of economy and creativity in art direction, as well as a critical moment in cinema design's gathering independence from the theatrical stage. This development depended crucially on the coherence established in art direction at a time when art departments might be working on several types of film simultaneously. It also depended upon a growing confidence that the cinema screen could create a new type of image, but one rooted in the articulation of real social spaces. The stages in *Top Hat* and *Follow the Fleet* are meant to look strangely artificial, with the onscreen audiences underlining the place of the audience in the theater auditorium, vis-à-vis the stage, as poor in comparison to the view given to them by the camera. The camera, especially in the Astaire-Rogers films, could go where no theater audience is allowed, and there is a seeming delight taken in *Top Hat*

as the film cuts from the view over the audience to Fred and Ginger's feet on the dance floor.

In spite of the production of some lavish sets, principle economies in the studio were achieved at this time through the growing ingenuity of construction and the establishment of a pyramidal management system for the development of productions. Hollywood studios combined produced 433 films in 1935-36 season, with the larger studios producing 50-60 each and RKO Radio producing 40 on its own (Ramírez 42) This entailed a staggering productivity from its personnel, whose responsibility devolved to Polglase as supervising art director for the studio. Under him were appointed unit art directors such as Carroll Clark for the Astaire-Rogers series. Even then, the responsibility for the “design” of sets was most often further resolved down to artists like Allan Abbott, whose drawings provide many of the sets with their final, onscreen appearance. Occasionally, specialist designers might be brought in, as was the case with the employment of former Ziegfeld collaborator John Harkrider for the “Silver Sandal” set in *Swing Time*. In such cases, as with the success of Polglase's first big set for *Flying Down to Rio* in 1933, the set itself attracted almost as much interest as the stars, in the same way that computer generated imagery now garners interest from the press in the reporting of new blockbusters.

In his role as supervising art director, Polglase comes in for both praise and criticism, particularly because of the level of bureaucracy his role inevitably required. Charles and Mirella Affron, in their seminal work on Hollywood set design, paint a picture of Polglase as studio executive with neither the time nor the inclination to be involved in the direct design of stage sets for RKO, based as their analysis is on testimonies from Maurice Zuberano and Orson Welles, amongst others (19). Affron and Affron make a persuasive case against Polglase since it is more broadly known

that the supervising art director took principle credit for the work whether they had been directly involved or not. This serves to confirm for them their conclusion that Polglase failed to imitate his principle rival, Cedric Gibbons, in creating house style for RKO, as Gibbons had done at MGM. But for Ramírez, criticism for Polglase is unfounded if it fails to take into account the nature of collective labor of the design or architecture office, which served as the model for the Hollywood process. In this regard, the delegation of authority and responsibility from the “named” senior designer, who might be invisible for much of the apparent creative process, should not be confused with a lack of creative input or control (38). For example, a recent study of the Fosters global architectural partnership, headed by Sir Norman Foster, suggests that this model still obtains amongst elite architects, though at odds with our Romantic notion of the individual designer and their authorship, which clearly influenced Affron and Affron (McNeill 509). We have already seen that Polglase’s executive role was useful in engaging with theater managers through *The Radio Flash* in-house journal to reassure them of a consistent visual product. What is clear from both historical points of view is that an attempt was indeed made to develop a definite house style at RKO, at least in the contemporary, upscale settings of the Astaire-Rogers films, and it is this which was most likely to appeal to audiences hit by the Depression. For Juan Antonio Ramírez and Ellen Spiegel, echoing Albrecht, there is consistency which is developed in the Astaire-Rogers sets, unfettered as Clark, Abbott and Polglase were by the constraints of presenting period settings or exotic lands. For Ramírez, “the stylistic unity at RKO is unquestionable,” whilst Spiegel confidently notes Polglase’s liking for particular visual motifs (such as thin horizontal lines) which appear in all the films under his guidance (Ramírez 53; Spiegel 19). The hotel set for *Flying Down to Rio* established the gold standard for the studio and the art

department continued to raise this standard almost throughout the series to the country club in *Carefree*. Often the sets were remarked upon in reviews, themselves prompted by campaign books and the captions for production stills. The Astaire-Rogers series is perhaps known best in design studies as the series that perfected the “Big-White-Set,” or “B-W-S,” (Spiegel 19) from the ways in which this rapid development took into account changes in film stock (which could render white more effectively), the creative use of interior spaces (which rarely seem architecturally plausible) and the sheer spectacle afforded to them by the studio. For almost every film in the series the production team was able to put the studio’s two largest sound stages together: such as for the hotel in *Flying Down to Rio*, the Lido in *Top Hat*, and the nightclubs in *Swing Time*. The size and scale of the sets, and the room for maneuver that specialists like Harkrider were given, led in cases such as *Swing Time* to a staging which was subtly effective in expressing the “film’s spatial and emotional narrative,” as James Sanders has noted (262). The Rogers and Astaire walk down a twin staircase which separates and then brings them back together. Despite taking up large amounts of studio space, these could stage many different scenes seamlessly and contribute crucially to the plot, for instance in separating the lovers to develop the mistaken identity storyline. At other times, especially when the plots revolve around characters in the public eye, the sets are used to create interior, private boudoirs in the middle of public spaces – as in the roller-skating rink in *Shall We Dance* or the bandstand and verandah in *Top Hat*.

This reflects the tension created by an emerging film art that was still to fully escape its reliance upon theatrical stage, but one which was enabled by a self-consciousness appeal to design in the home, as much as the development of screen artworks. For Andrew Buchanan, writing in 1934, the subjects of films drawn from



the stage naturally prevented the development of true movement in film, which he saw as the inevitable future of filmmaking. In this analysis the musical extravaganza is the result of the filmmaker as showman who “loses sight of the medium he is supplying.” (57-58) Morton Eustis, writing about MGM supervising art director Cedric Gibbons in 1937, also compares the role of the art director in film to that in theater. In his comparison, the theater designer is seen as being focused on the one, big set, as if photographed from a single vantage point. According to Gibbons, “[h]e had concentrated on one very fine picture forgetting entirely that a moving picture is ... a *moving* picture.” (791)

Caption: Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dance “They All Laughed” on a nightclub set for *Shall We Dance* in 1937. The onscreen audience safeguards verisimilitude but in all other respects Fred and Ginger dance directly for the movie theater audiences.

The Astaire-Rogers series continually exhibits this tension between the “stage” of the films, some of which were themselves based on stage plays, and the emerging vocabulary of cutting and camera movement that the action required. On the one hand was the desire for filmmakers to establish a coherent and separated filmworld on a two dimensional screen, from plots that constantly stressed the role of the proscenium stage or modern dance floor. On the other hand was the desire of the studio for the films to articulate with audiences in a manner which would boost attendances. Perhaps the most startling example of the former is “Night and Day” from *The Gay Divorcée*, in which David Abel’s mobile camera gives the impression of a totally enclosed space, even at one point by filming through Venetian blinds. However,

where this approach was less successful was for numbers where the spectacle of dancing is occasionally overwhelmed by the “B-W-S”. The Lido’s spectacular piazza set in *Top Hat* is described by one British reviewer as having “a twentieth-century Christmas-cake appearance, which is a little depressing,” (*Daily Telegraph*) although it is the bandstand for “Isn’t it a Lovely Day” which really stretches the imagination in keeping a coherent sense of space (because it seems to stretch to fit the dance and the camera). Perhaps the most finely drawn example of the tension between stage and screen in the series comes in *The Gay Divorcée*, for which a huge set was constructed to represent a seaside hotel.<sup>6</sup> Featured in a byline in *The Radio Flash*, the hotel set was described as “revolutionary” in its depiction of three dimensions (*The Radio Flash* 18 August 1934, 4-5), yet even this depiction of depth in cinema was in dispute: Alberto Cavalcanti, writing even as the film was in production, argued that “the preoccupation with depth has obscured the fact that the projected image is inevitably a flat image. The emphasis is no longer on the volume, but on the line.”(78)

By contrast, fan mail regarding the settings of current films came in good supply, and reflected a much broader range of interest that emphasized the effect of the sets on a “real world” understanding of designed space. For example, copies still exist of replies made from the office of Gibbons at MGM to would be art directors – who are almost routinely told to go away and study architecture.<sup>7</sup> The mail to RKO Radio that Polglase received appears to be no different:

That we have an audience [interested in the sets] has been proved by the hundreds of “fan” letters we have received. These letters are from decorators, architects, builders, and prospective home owners, amongst others. Usually, they request detailed information about certain

settings. They also ask for photographs, sometimes blue prints. (*The Radio Flash* 15 July 1933, 4-5)

Polglase, like Gibbons, was able to capitalize on this relationship through the press, who were given tidbits of information on the furnishings. For instance a caption in the MPAA Herrick Library for a publicity photograph from *Top Hat*, sadly now lost but presumably illustrating the set for the London hotel, remarks on the film's "NEW NOTE in modern architecture [including] curtains of woven cellophane, fireplace and hearth lined with chromiumed metal, rug of woven ribbed pattern and two varied width strips of chromiumed metal along the soffit of the ceiling which reflect light on the ceiling." (Publicity still P-824-P-28, Herrick Library) In a similar fashion, the studio was able to use *The Radio Flash* to develop the potential of *Top Hat* as a style icon through product endorsement. A byline in August 1935 reads:

**The Furniture World** - In a current issue of the Furniture World, Frances Yost, noted authority in the industry, writes of "the last word in modern furniture as used in "Top Hat"." She urges furniture dealers to co-operate with theatres in various types of promotion. Photographs of modern furniture interiors, available for tie-up purposes, are reproduced in the magazine. (*The Radio Flash* 3 August 1935, 2. Emphasis in original.)

As Ramírez observes, this circular network of interaction was, of course, completed by the influence that the huge nightclub sets from *The Gay Divorcée*, *Swing Time* and *Shall We Dance* had on real nightclub architecture in the 1930s (24). These spaces

used the same new materials seen in the sets, often after consultation with the studio itself, and often to similar spectacular effect. This occurred on a more general level because of the reach that cinema gave to the art department head as a designer, and because of the role a supervising art director such as Gibbons or Polglase had in developing a studio “look.” Like Gibbons, Polglase was a trained architect and still undertook private jobs (his department designed the interiors of Ginger Rogers’ Coldwater Canyon home in 1937). But as an art director Polglase had a freer hand in experimentation than an architect or designer might ordinarily have had, as Carina Carroll recognized writing in a design journal in 1935. This gave him the power to popularize a style on a vast scale “by insistence and repetition” across a number of films of a particular motif or effect (391). The effect was compounded by the growing vocabulary of realism in cinema, which presented via film sets a world which purported to reflect real social spaces. It is important to remind ourselves occasionally of the obvious fact that, whereas cinema spaces today are usually meant to reflect realistically already existing design trends, the spaces represented in society films of the 1930s were consciously ahead of fashion. But as A. B. Laing noted in 1933, because these sets were still understood as imitative rather than innovative, their “realism” had considerable worldwide agency as “an unconscious trade propagandist, stimulating interest in many American products.” (64) The nightclubs and lounges of the Astaire-Rogers, bedecked in sensational materials such as cellophane and chromium, gave the films a chic elegance which could be imitated by homeowners and businesses. They might do so as uncritically as a teenager might imitate a Joan Crawford wisecrack. The cinema screen, although conceived by Cavalcanti and others as a medium of the line, in two-dimensions, actually articulated a network based on material aspiration that already existed in the publicity materials and trade press. All

that was now required was the social practices that would inhabit these glistening spaces, and which would enroll audiences into a social network truly shared with Fred and Ginger.

### *Dancing with Fred and Ginger*

For audiences who queued to see the premiere of each musical at the Radio City Music Hall, the experience began with being seated in Donald Deskey's elegant sunburst auditorium, whose stage would echo the stages of fashionable nightclubs like New York's Silver Slipper, the inspiration for *Swing Time*'s "Silver Sandal". It would have seemed uncannily like Astaire and Rogers were performing on the real stage, especially during numbers in which they were effectively performing directly to the camera, such as "They All Laughed" from *Shall We Dance* or "Bojangles of Harlem" from *Swing Time*. The dancehall element of so many of the films, often as an extension of a nightclub stage and used to both start and end affairs, proved an essential element of audience involvement after the film had finished. Each film has a notable big number, of which "The Carioca" and "The Continental" are perhaps the most famous, and certainly in the earlier films this is a large ensemble affair. It was this number that most clearly articulated the relationship between the film's producers and its audiences, as fans could learn complex steps in spaces which seemed to connect physically with those represented on screen. Whilst the success of "The Carioca," the big number from *Flying Down to Rio*, was something of a surprise, "The Continental" in *The Gay Divorcée*, and later ensemble numbers, represent a clearer attempt to appeal to amateur and recreational dancers. The lyrics, though ostensibly relating to the dance's emotional appeal, nevertheless manage to include tacit instructions: "You kiss while you're dancing the Continental." This was the pattern

for later films, especially “The Piccolino” in *Top Hat*, which involves a large chorus line of dancing couples connected to each other by a sash around the girl’s waist. The sash appears to draw on the screen the dance’s particular moves, unwinding when each girl is pirouetted or turned away, and so on. The effect is that the dancing couples imitate the mechanism of a machine. The motif of dance lesson is itself parodied in “Pick Yourself Up”, for *Swing Time*, when Astaire visits Rogers’ dancing school in order to learn steps he already knows (he is, of course, there to woo Rogers), and in the same year the craze for dance competitions was reflected in “Let Yourself Go”, from *Follow the Fleet*. Ginger’s song includes the instruction “Come! Get together / Let the dancefloor feel your leather / Step as lightly as a feather / Let yourself go.”

Caption: “Come! Get together / Let the dancefloor feel your leather”: several numbers from the Astaire-Rogers series include specific invitations to dance, such as “Let Yourself Go”, from *Follow the Fleet* (1936), the steps for which are illustrated for fans in this publicity material.

The dance numbers suitable for dancing at home were often given pictorial notes in the campaign books, even for startlingly inventive and athletic moves such as those in “Let Yourself Go”, and the local dance competition was a key tie-in for exhibitors. When “The Yam” appeared for *Carefree*, publicity stills gave advance notice that the dance was a particular feature again (it involves Astaire lifting Rogers to step over the furniture of a country club). By then the series had started to wane, though the value of the ensemble number had clearly been appreciated. The songs borrowed motifs and themes from popular music of the time, perhaps ensuring that the dance steps could be kept up through a whole evening on a town’s dance floors.

There was even a concern for Irving Berlin and director Mark Sandrich that “The Piccolino”, from *Top Hat*, was too close to Harry Warren and Al Dubin’s popular song “She’s a Latin from Manhattan.” These ensemble numbers were dances that could be learned and practiced by amateurs all over the country, who would feel as if they too were dancing in rooftop nightclubs or in exotic European locations. Most importantly, if they did not have access to the publicity material and its step guides (and even perhaps if they did) they would need to return to the theater to watch Astaire and Rogers once more, promising exhibitors precious holdover contracts. Instrumental in this also must have been what the Lynds described in 1929 as the “added factor of sharing this experience with a ‘date’,” which contributed to a general awareness of the relaxing of social taboos and “the ‘early sophistication’ of the young.” (*Middletown* 267) The sensational materials and décor of the society film must have given the idea of the date movie an extra thrill. Given the popularity of dancing amongst the young, combined with widespread interest in romantic narratives, accelerated by tie-in dance competitions and given an added frisson by the burgeoning of youth sexuality, the temptation to “kiss while you’re dancing” must have been all too difficult to resist. This is why the centrality of the tractable, three dimensional set in the Astaire-Rogers series is so important. Together Fred and Ginger physically explore and describe for the camera the space in which they dance, especially in the private spaces they find in public. They enact these public spaces and make them private – skating rink, bandstand or verandah. No better example is provided by the number “Cheek to Cheek” from *Top Hat* which became the series’ most famous song. The implausibility of the number’s premise was not lost on a British reviewer at the time: “[i]t happens that nobody else wants to dance at this moment, and that Mr. Astaire knows all the words, so he sings it to his partner, and

again they go into a dance of complications which no ordinary girl would like to have sprung on her in an empty ballroom.” (*Sunday Express* 15 October 1935) Yet this ability to create a private, intimate space from the public dancefloor is exactly what those tacit instructions are for, and is of course what young couples seek in public places to this day. In the same way that set piece numbers bring to life the darkened nightclub for “Waltz in Swing Time” in *Swing Time* or the shuttered beach house for “Night and Day” in *The Gay Divorcée*, the prestige spaces of the society film could be enacted by any young small-town couple in a suburban dance hall or at a FERA dance in the local park

### *Conclusion*

As the story of Fred and Ginger has been told and retold over the years the “simple” facts of production become more distinct and the subtleties of distribution and reception are rendered obscure. It requires a different principle of investigation – one of articulation rather than transcendence or translation – to lead a study to reveal once again the rich network of social interactions that help create the myth. This allows us to reach a more sophisticated understanding of the Astaire-Rogers series than is presented by the Depression-escapist fantasy, and further suggests how important it is to consider the networks of social interaction in film production more generally. It is the relative stability and productive uniformity of the studio system, especially in the production of a series of films, which allows us to quickly identify the networks, and especially its centers or nodes, that were essential to the series’ success. Perhaps even more useful is the chance to properly integrate analysis of the executive, corporate and social aspects of cinema consumption into the analysis of a film’s aesthetic form, and its articulation of modernity to a country seeking aspiration



to wealth and success even when the means were not available. In the case of the Astaire-Rogers series, we can say that the relationship between set, camera and dancer was not merely one of industrial efficiency but really was a unique and effective catalyst for imitation and enactment that connects the represented spaces of high modernity with the real social spaces of the American town. Articulation is an effective principle in this regard because of the ways in which the film, as the apparent material component of an “impossible object” hides the network (trade press, contemporary criticism, the dance-hall tie-in, feature articles etc.) that was crucial to the series’ success, but which can be revealed by a close analysis of the ways in which any one element reorients, as a process of localization, the network around the audience. This kind of elision means that the historian of popular culture, in looking at film and television as aesthetic *and* commercial production, must always ask of any film what it is that the film articulates, and what networks exists to ensure that a film gets made, anticipated, seen, enacted, and remembered.

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<sup>2</sup> The couple were reunited at MGM in *The Barkleys of Broadway* in 1949.

<sup>3</sup> The Lynds' analysis of the average town is famously satirised in RKO Radio's 1947 William Wellman/James Stewart vehicle, *Magic Town*, in which the town is understood to be able to predict in microcosm the result of every national poll.

<sup>4</sup> Coincidentally, in *Roberta*, Astaire plays the leader of a band called "the Wabash Indianians."

<sup>5</sup> To put this figure into context, RKO filed for bankruptcy in 1934, with half the company being sold to an investment trust for \$5,000,000.

<sup>6</sup> In the film Edward Everett Horton, as Egbert Fitzgerald, refers to their destination as a seaside town in England, "Brightbourne", presumably an amalgamation of Brighton and Eastbourne, although in the campaign book for the film the setting is stated as being Brighton.

<sup>7</sup> Cedric Gibbons special collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The material had not at that time been accessioned, and I am grateful to Barbara Hall, Curator of Special Collections, for access to this and other material.