

DRESSING BOTH SIDES:
AMERICAN MASCULINITY IN THE FILMS OF FRED ASTAIRE

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ABSTRACT

OREN VINOGRADOV: Dressing Both Sides: American Masculinity in the Films of
Fred Astaire
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This thesis considers the construction of a particularly American masculinity portrayed on film by Fred Astaire. I analyze two case studies, *Top Hat* (RKO, 1935) and *Silk Stockings* (MGM, 1957). By considering the interactions of musical and visual elements, I argue that the mythologies and nostalgia which have permeated scholarship on Astaire simplify his socio-economic identity in their interpretations of Astaire's gender performance. I reinterpret Astaire's song and dance numbers as overt references to a complex nexus of masculinity, American nationalism, and middle-class consumption, based on his relationships to surrounding depictions of foreign males. The persistence of this nexus contradicts Astaire's post-mortem image as ambiguously masculine. In light of each film's contexts, the determination of Astaire's roles as a repetitive character presents new avenues for critical research into sequential films from early Hollywood.

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Introduction

The prism through which Fred Astaire, one of Hollywood's great leading men, was perceived, was influenced by and, in turn, influenced the depiction of masculinity and of the American man. As one of the most divergently received actors in film history, Fred Astaire looms large in the United States of America, as alternately an icon of panache or an "unusual" form of leading man. Over the course of the twentieth century Astaire's personality as a multi-talented dancer on film has been co-opted to suit changing models of American identity. Unfortunately, interpretations which ignore the historical contexts of the films' creation and reception have the potential to overwrite historical viewpoints entirely. Based on the universal presumption that Astaire was quintessentially or unchangeably American, critics and scholars have provided overlapping and sometimes subtle interpretations of Astaire's staged persona, often with the aim of reifying or even defining the nature of American popular style for the period in which he was the country's favorite male dancer on film.

Unlike the broad consensus on Astaire's national significance, however, his masculinity has been subjected to contradictory interpretations. Since the 1930s, the reception of Astaire's musical performances and visual presentation has been complicated by America's evolving social politics. A more accurate image of Fred Astaire's staged masculinity emerges by recontextualizing his performances and their

critical reception as intersecting points of nationality, gender, and musico-dramatic style. My study interrogates Astaire's identity performances in order to clarify how his masculinity functioned on screen. I center my analysis on two representative case studies, *Top Hat* (1935) and *Silk Stockings* (1957), employed here as contrasting performances from early and late points in Astaire's Hollywood career. Proceeding from these examples, I demonstrate that the nostalgic mythology which has developed around Astaire depended explicitly on the portrayal of a specifically American masculinity.

Although recent scholarship on gender performance has paid significant attention to intersections of sexual and socio-economic identity, the literature on Astaire has proceeded largely from constructions of Astaire as a fixed character. Previous studies have sought to reconcile Astaire's brand of masculinity by proposing his film roles as located "outside" some vaguely-defined standard construct for performing American manhood. In comparison to later competitors such as Gene Kelly, Astaire has been analyzed as dubiously or reservedly masculine. According to Constance Valis Hill's comparison of the two,

Kelly capitalized on his masculine image in his films by wearing tight muscleman T-shirts and leotard-tight pants that drew attention to his rippling biceps, abdominals, groin, and thighs (so radically different a look from Astaire's baggy flannels and brightly colored matching scarf and socks in his Technicolor films for MGM).¹

While related to the differences in their body types and typical choreography, it is telling that the opposition between Astaire and Kelly are often couched in terms of their dress. What Kelly performs with his muscles, Astaire is left to display with only his clothing, imposing an uneven dynamic on subsequent analysis. Still, this comparison between

¹ Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 158. Hill's analysis of Astaire's RKO films is centered more on the intersection of his race and class.

Astaire and Kelly in the 1940s and '50s fails to take into account how Astaire's earlier career already defined a specific type of masculinity for his strikingly repetitive roles: a recurring character which continued to be utilized for his entire Hollywood career.

Indeed if one attempted to synthesize every critical reading of Astaire's repeated characterization, the result would be a distinctly American man who is at once an unassailably masculine romantic as well as an unusually effeminate hero. One list of the most stylish men in history published in *Gentleman's Quarterly* in 2010 declared,

Fred Astaire was so magnetic on-screen that it's easy to forget about the simple, gentlemanly elegance he displayed off. ... From his luxe suits to his smartly parted hair, to his pocket square and matching bow tie, to the ubiquitous flower in his lapel, everything was sharp, lithe, and timeless as the man himself.

On the other hand, one early (1934) review espoused the view that Astaire's dancing was entirely about "sex, but sex so bejeweled and be-glamoured and be-pixied that the weaker vessels who fall for it can pretend that it isn't sex at all but a sublimated Barriesque projection," proposing the idea that Astaire was an updated Peter Pan, originally a pants role. In 1978, critic Donald Spoto followed this reading with a more radical assertion: although he posited that Astaire was a supernaturally elegant man, he qualified that "there wasn't one-tenth the erotic energy passing between Astaire and Rogers that passed between [Clark] Gable and [Claudette] Colbert ... [Astaire] suggests a type of specifically American Peter Pan."² Whereas Hill's analysis is careful to maintain that Astaire remains a complicated case, much of the available literature reflects comparisons such as Spoto's uncritically back onto Astaire's earlier films, without taking into account the developing reception of Astaire's character across his performances, or against the

² Richard Hublar, "The Astute Astaire," *Gentleman's Quarterly* (USA), March 2010, <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/celebrities/195708/fred-astaire-gq-interview-style-fashion> (accessed March 22, 2013); James Agate, cited in Joseph Epstein, *Fred Astaire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 36; Donald Spoto, *Camerado: Hollywood and the American Man* (New York: Plume, 1978), 58.

background of changing definitions of masculinity. But the proposition and acceptance of Spoto's "nonerotic" or fundamentally asexual reading of Astaire's affected nonchalance attest to the lack of familiarity with the historical context among later audiences, and imply some uneasiness with allowing Astaire's commodified masculinity to function in the same manner as his more "traditional," working-class masculine competitors. Moreover, the existing literature on Astaire's early films is largely dedicated to describing the romantic relationship between the characters portrayed by Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Astaire's Hollywood dancing career stretched from 1933 to 1976, with most critics claiming as his most important work his series of collaborations with Ginger Rogers during the 1930s for RKO Radio Pictures, even though a number of notable films followed the end of World War II under Paramount Pictures and, more successfully, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (see Table 1). A lengthy list of scholarly publications, drawing on a range of analytical strategies, can be typified by Arlene Croce's *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book*, advancing the argument that Astaire's work with Rogers constituted a partial exchange of gender performance.³ While the underlying precepts of this argument are flawed, within the present study I am more concerned with disarming previous definitions of Astaire's identity based entirely on reading his mode of heterosexual conquest. Despite the repetitive plots of Astaire successfully charming Rogers, scholarly literature surrounding Fred Astaire has repeatedly, if often implicitly, inserted the question: is Fred Astaire's recurring character masculine, or not? Available historical evidence suggests, in fact, that this was not a question for his audiences. As sociologists Connell and Messerschmidt summarized, modern social scientists broadly

³ Arlene Croce, *The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book* (New York: Outerbridge, 1972), 8, 190.

Table 1: Dance Films with Fred Astaire in a Starring Role

<u>TITLE</u>	<u>YEAR</u>	<u>STUDIO</u>	<u>DANCE PARTNER</u>
<i>The Gay Divorcee</i>	1934	RKO Radio Pictures	Ginger Rogers
<i>Roberta</i>	1935	RKO Radio Pictures	Ginger Rogers
<i>Top Hat</i>	1935	RKO Radio Pictures	Ginger Rogers
<i>Follow the Fleet</i>	1936	RKO Radio Pictures	Ginger Rogers
<i>Swing Time</i>	1936	RKO Radio Pictures	Ginger Rogers
<i>Shall We Dance</i>	1937	RKO Radio Pictures	Ginger Rogers
<i>A Damsel in Distress</i>	1937	RKO Radio Pictures	Joan Fontaine
<i>Carefree</i>	1938	RKO Radio Pictures	Ginger Rogers
<i>The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle</i>	1939	RKO Radio Pictures	Ginger Rogers
<i>Broadway Melody of 1940</i>	1940	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Eleanor Powell
<i>Second Chorus</i>	1940	Paramount Pictures	Paulette Goddard
<i>You'll Never Get Rich</i>	1941	Columbia Pictures	Rita Hayworth
<i>Holiday Inn</i>	1942	Paramount Pictures	Marjorie Reynolds
<i>You Were Never Lovelier</i>	1942	Columbia Pictures	Rita Hayworth
<i>The Sky's the Limit</i>	1943	RKO Radio Pictures	Joan Leslie
<i>Yolanda and the Thief</i>	1945	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Lucille Bremer
<i>Ziegfeld Follies</i>	1946	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Lucille Bremer, Cyd Charisse, Judy Garland
<i>Blue Skies</i>	1946	Paramount Pictures	Joan Caulfield
<i>Easter Parade</i>	1948	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Judy Garland, Ann Miller
<i>The Barkleys of Broadway</i>	1949	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Ginger Rogers
<i>Three Little Words</i>	1950	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Vera-Ellen
<i>Royal Wedding</i>	1951	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Jane Powell
<i>The Belle of New York</i>	1952	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Vera-Ellen
<i>The Band Wagon</i>	1953	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Cyd Charisse
<i>Daddy Long Legs</i>	1955	20 th Century Fox	Leslie Caron
<i>Funny Face</i>	1957	Paramount Pictures	Audrey Hepburn
<i>Silk Stockings</i>	1957	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer	Cyd Charisse

agree that the construction of masculinity is segmented and pluralistic. It would therefore be more effective to interrogate *which* particular form of masculinity Astaire occupied.⁴

Similarly, previous attempts to separate Astaire's gender presentation from other leading men proceed from models of masculinity as a spectrum of performances ranging from idealized femininity to idealized masculinity. Steven Cohan has considered the critical "looked-at-ness" in film musicals to be a very specific form of feminized masculinity, wherein Astaire is his best example of a simultaneous subject and object of the masculine gaze. Now often cited in the secondary literature, Cohan's analysis illustrates that Astaire did not fit previous formulas for characterizing song-and-dance men, with their "reductive binarism of active male / passive female that the generic romantic plots frequently promoted."⁵ By Cohan's model, the performing male trades virility for charm, with the unassuming qualities of the latter modified by the egotistical nature of public performance. The implications for how femininity connects with egotism in this argument remain unclear. His results complicate our understanding of Astaire, but do not offer a concrete explanation of his performed identity. Cohan is similarly disinterested in the possibility that, of the myriad of possible masculinities, Astaire himself performed one which was received by contemporary audiences as a model of masculinity. Although early films connected spectacle with female roles, to suggest that audience simultaneously read Astaire as heterosexually charming, undeniably masculine

⁴ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender and Society* 19 (2005): 829–859, at 835.

⁵ Steven Cohan, "'Feminizing' the Song-and-Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the Spectacle of Masculinity in the Hollywood Musical," in *Hollywood Musicals: The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (New York: Routledge, 2002): 87–102, at 88, 95.

and yet implicitly feminized demands a simplistic if not singular view of masculinity itself.⁶

I propose that Astaire's early films in fact defined a specific masculinity which followed him throughout his career. Built on a small set of consistent signs, the protagonists played by Astaire across his 1930s sequence of films under RKO all appear to be essentially one and the same. The interlocking use of Astaire virtuosic tapping over dance-hall jazz, his tightly controlled wardrobe, and his mannerisms of quiet persistence were utilized to present a safe, refined image of the song-and-dance man. I suggest that the re-creation of this character within these contained, sequential films provided momentum for Astaire's subsequent performance practice on film: more specific than a type of character, he developed a stage persona with a built-in plot trajectory. I label this performed construction a *generalized character*. Based on my analysis of Astaire's films, I concur with previous scholarly attempts to distill Astaire's act into one character. At the same time I would like to qualify this distillation. A developing sense of nostalgia surrounding Astaire and his style led to different understandings of his generalized character while he continued to produce films, but the constancy of his characterization goes beyond fleeting intertextual reference. Indeed a number of his post-war films display extensive references to his RKO roles. Above all, his repetitive characterization should complicate how critics read each film with respect to his oeuvre at large.

The generalized character of Fred Astaire can be summarized as follows. As some sort of performer, Astaire's character is a charming showman with a tendency to self-

⁶ Sue Rickard, "Movies in Disguise: Negotiating Censorship and Patriarchy through the Dances of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers," in *Approaches to the American Musical*, ed. Robert Lawson-Peebles (Exeter, U.K.: University of Exeter Press, 1996), 72–88, at 80.

deprecate, though he believes himself physically attractive. When he is dressed for formal affairs, he wears a complete set of white tie accoutrements without variation; his casual attire is always presented with a full set of accessories, though he is not always the loudest dresser in the room. Almost all of his films contain some short discussion of fashion by Astaire or feature a song-and-dance routine highlighting his costume. No matter what straits he may find himself in, he is neatly groomed with well-oiled hair and a different outfit for every occasion. Meanwhile his character is – or at some point was – hard up for money; the situation resolves when he charms more wealthy men to support his shows or his material habits. Favors are showered on him by admirers of his tap dancing. He is stubborn, especially about romantic pursuits, but is not a womanizer. With rare exceptions he successfully woos the leading female – his failures are all old flames – but only after both singing to and dancing with her: it is usually during a dancing duet late in the second third of the action that his partner returns his affections.

Given the predictable plots of Astaire’s Hollywood output it would appear that their predefined musico-narrative structures implemented an equally predefined sense of masculinity. The RKO staff made clear efforts to streamline the production of their Astaire-Rogers films based on a prefabricated system for pacing musical numbers in each film; an early comedic duet, for example, is followed by a climactic, romantic duet between Astaire and his dance partner. Astaire was equally specific in his demands to the films’ composers, requesting at least one “sock dance,” or swinging solo number, for his character to show off his tapping.⁷ He also sang at least one other number, usually a

⁷ Larry Billman, “Featurette: *The Music of Shall We Dance*,” *Shall We Dance*, DVD, directed by Mark Sandrich (1937; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010); Hannah Hyam, *Fred and Ginger: The Astaire-Rogers Partnership 1934-1938* (Brighton, U.K.: Pen, 2007), 179-180; Todd Decker, *Music Makes Me* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 179.

contrasting romantic piece in the simpler style of contemporary ballads. This generalized character was not entirely inflexible, but was performed on the assumption that audiences had seen some previous incarnation(s) of Fred Astaire. Astaire hardly needed to restate overtly American or masculine characterization in each role. Visual and narrative indications of his masculinity were instead highlighted in opposition to foreign men and their representation. With ensemble casts loaded with character-actors of European stereotypes, the comedic stories in Fred Astaire's films form a set of arguments by contradiction for determining that his protagonist role in each film is that of a particularly American male. Astaire's sidemen are not all effeminate, but for many roles, their stereotypical depictions as foreigners decrease their perceived masculinity, and by contrast, increase Astaire's own. Through this process Astaire gradually developed a reflexive character that transcended his individual role in each film.

Since the majority of Astaire's time is spent in song-and-dance routines, there is little time to develop his character, and masculinity, through unrelated dialogue. Through Astaire's visual and musical signifiers, his masculinity is established on its own and in contrast to foreigners. His distinctive virtuosity is consistently linked to jazz, with the most virtuosic numbers often displaying innovative or flashy uses of props. Astaire's solos are noteworthy because of the attention his props draw to his relatively simple costuming, visually indicating a modified everyman. The implicit coding of masculinity in the use of jazz, paired with Astaire's bombastic pride in his talents, neatly contrast the reemergence of long-standing anxieties surrounding the sexuality of men in the theater. Between Astaire's star billing and his restricted sartorial repertoire, a simpler analysis might frame this contrast as a source of tension for Astaire's characterization. It is my

contention, however, that a deeper understanding of Astaire's sequential performance practice reveals a more complicated coding of a distinct American masculinity, one in which the middle-class American male is placed in direct opposition to foreign cultural elitism.

What precisely counted as foreign in the musical films of Fred Astaire was of course subject to change based on contemporary international politics and the studio contracts for each production. Critics at the time were vocal in their praise of the successful use of ensemble casts of comedians surrounding Astaire's musical numbers, even for those films where the plot was found lacking. Oftentimes the supporting male cast would feature at least one homosexual parody in the form of the "pansy" caricature. Lispering and rolling his eyes, the pansy may have good social standing, but he is always the comic relief even when an accidental partner to the drama. Much of the comedy is gleaned from such characters' use of feminine physical gestures or ineffectual posturing, marking them as "sissies." That pansy characteristics could instantly define a character, or even the tone of an entire production, underscores their difference to the protagonist. Eric Blore, Edward Everett Horton, and Erik Rhodes famously repeated roles for in the RKO films as pansified formulations of British and Italian caricatures.

Later MGM productions employed a stream of actors ready to play Latin American, French and Russian sidemen. As the United States redefined its relationships with other countries, so too did the selection of ethnic jokes evolve as part of the continual effort to update Astaire's generalized character to be always in the moment. British and Franco-Russian identities formed complicated webs of relationships for the respective pre- and post-war audiences in the United States. But in contrast to the enacted

British and European stereotypes, Fred Astaire was able to build his early characterization as a no-nonsense, direct speaker who wooed women with his persistence and charm. Critics quickly related this directness, as a signifier of Americans and of masculinity, with his tendency to steal women away from less concretely “heterosexualized” men.⁸

In contrast to scholarly analyses of Astaire completed in the 1970s and 1980s, the commercial use of Astaire’s image since his death has related his generalized character with an ascription of roguish masculinity, but only in his work with Ginger Rogers. This singular, conditional definition of masculinity does not hold up to a more nuanced reading of how Astaire performed throughout his career. Like the feminized Astaire, claims of his masculinity *in the face of* his role as a song-and-dance man also do not reflect the context of Astaire’s 1930s audience, which held similar esteem for competitors such as James Cagney and Dick Powell. Based partially on an assumption that World War II altered global expressions of masculinity, little attention has been paid to the relationship between Astaire’s pre- and post-war films.⁹ Popular support for interpretations of Astaire’s dancing as “undoubtedly masculine” focus merely on how the visual “unity” of his costumes and performance sets produce a “strong” (read: masculine), easily likeable character. These interpretations ignore the ways these musical performances reflect the complex relationship

⁸ Drew Todd, “Dandyism and Masculinity in Art Deco Hollywood,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 32 (2005): 168–181, at 177.

⁹ Recent research suggests that the alteration of post-war masculinity was far less ubiquitous than previously assumed; see Martin Francis, “The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity,” *The Historical Journal* 45 (2002): 637–652, at 645. For consideration of the changing dynamics of heterosexual relationships on musical stages, see also Jeffrey Magee, *Irving Berlin’s American Musical Theater* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 230–232.

of masculine and American elements of his generalized identity.¹⁰ It is telling, for instance, that the tensions between British and American fashion have persisted, if not evolved, in the modern reception of Astaire's generalized character. Classified in mid-century parlance as part of the "Mid-Atlantic" aesthetic, Astaire's style of mixing affected accessories with classical tailoring was popularly understood as an American gesture of aspiration towards the elegance of British nobility.

One recurring facet of Astaire's reception today is the persistent label that Astaire represents a "democratized" version of British sartorial achievements.¹¹ Clothing previously interpreted as effete on British bodies is redeemed as masculine on Astaire's due to readings of his performances as middle-class, if not class-less. Relegating Astaire to the alternate rhetorical spaces of schoolboy naivety and the breezy democratizer of formalwear further obfuscates the sexual and critical angles of his dances, but reinforces the claim that – in spite of potential readings of his costumes as pretentious – Astaire is undeniably all-American. The effects of Astaire's casual wardrobe on audiences and critics cannot be overstated, for it dominates the discourse in attributing masculinity to Astaire on screen and off. It is indeed his casual wardrobe for which Astaire is most commonly lauded in modern fashion writing. Modern fashion writer G. Bruce Boyer, for example, describes *Top Hat* as an initial contribution to "the style (Astaire) would make famous: soft-shouldered tweed sports jacket, button-down shirt, bold striped tie, easy-cut gray flannels, silk paisley pocket square, and suede shoes." Therefore, Astaire is held up as an unexpected source of American stylishness, for in spite of his popular use of "the prep school tick of twisting a scarf or necktie around

¹⁰ Rickard, *Movies in Disguise*, 80.

¹¹ Robert Sacheli, "Dancing Chic to Chic," <http://www.dandyism.net/?p=578> (accessed November 20, 2011).

the waist (in lieu of a belt) ... it was Astaire, dancing the stiff and contrived aristos off the stage, who became our model of *natural* elegance.”¹² This rhetoric of Astaire as an all-American boy targets his “natural” method of winning his partners by making them want to dance with him.

Astaire’s unchanging casual styles since entering Hollywood were essentially variations on what eventually became typical middle-class menswear in post-war America. During the war, the US draft left clothing production largely to women working in factories, rather than to specialized male tailors in local shops. The industrialized expansion of ready-to-wear clothing provided ready supply for young soldiers returning to work. Supported by the rapidly-expanding business of mass advertisements, post-war style reproduced the economical designs of wartime: hard-wearing, versatile clothing which could fit as many roles as possible. Subsequently, the medium-grey flannel lounge suit became a staple of middle-class American men. Advertisements from ready-to-wear manufacturer Brooks Brothers extolled the look as “anonymous but unanimous,” beneath color advertisements showing grey suits with blue shirts and minimal accessorizing.¹³ Production shifted to focus on the more casual single-breasted style of jacket during war-time rationing, since it required less fabric than double-breasted jackets. In order similarly to minimize the number of production patterns, drafts were only produced for a limited number of sizes, each developed

¹² G. Bruce Boyer, *Fred Astaire Style* (New York: Assouline Publishing, 2004), 10, 14 (emphasis mine); Riley, *The Astaires*, 92–93, 174: Already in the 1920s, Astaire’s friendly relationship with the Prince of Wales and youthful anglophilia had attached him to the Savile Row tailors Anderson & Shephard, who would continue to cut his suits through the end of his film career. There remains little evidence that Astaire’s particular style was taken up by any considerable portion of mid-century American men.

¹³ Rebecca J. Robinson, “American Sportswear: A Study of the Origins and Women Designers from the 1930’s to the 1960’s” (PhD diss., University of Cincinnati, 2003), 71–73; Anthony Equord Grudin, “Television Dreams: Andy Warhol and the History of Postwar Advertising” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008), 61.

to suit a wide variety of body types with only minimal alteration. But returning veterans reinforced a desire to avoid loud dressing, taking the loose cuts of ready-to-wear patterns and immediately wearing them; by avoiding close and potentially revealing tailoring, customers avoided drawing attention to themselves as individual bodies.¹⁴

Early attempts to capitalize on Astaire's Hollywood image included 1940s promotions for formal clothing in U.S. magazines. Even before his Hollywood career, his name and image were commercially used without contention for a variety of generic products. But it was only after entering Hollywood that Astaire's image was invoked for the fashion industry.¹⁵ Although *Top Hat* has been cited as one of Astaire's favorite works, it is curious to note his post-war relationship with the rhetoric of formal dress, no longer a uniform restricted to the upper class. When asked by a reporter in 1957 what his favorite costume was, he responded that "I don't like dress suits at all. Especially not white tie and tails."¹⁶ Yet variations on the theme of formalwear are prominent in his post-war films, employed nostalgically in *Blue Skies* and as self-referential humor in *Silk Stockings*. Regardless of his personal feelings, the legacy of *Top Hat* remained inextricable from his artistic work. Indeed, when Astaire accepted his American Film Institute Lifetime Achievement Award in 1981, the music that accompanied his walk up

¹⁴ Ava Baron, "Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian's Gaze," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 69: *Working-Class Subjectivities and Sexualities* (2006), 143–160, at 148.

¹⁵ Callison, "Dancing Masculinity for Hollywood," 73; Peter J. Levinson, *Puttin' on the Ritz: Fred Astaire and the Fine Art of Panache, A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 241–243; Kathleen Riley, *The Astaires: Fred & Adele* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 85.

¹⁶ Peter William Evans, *Top Hat* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 25; Richard Hublar, "The Astute Astaire," *Gentleman's Quarterly (USA)*, August 1957, <http://www.gq.com/entertainment/celebrities/195708/fred-astaire-gq-interview-style-fashion> (accessed February 20, 2013). In 1957, Astaire claimed that he owned only two dress suits, besides well over two dozen lounge suits, but expressed strong opinions about how one should accessorize formalwear.

to the stage was the theme from “Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails.”¹⁷ Astaire’s remark may not have been entirely casual. His statement may have been part of a move to differentiate himself from the character he developed for RKO, continually deployed by MGM and Paramount in his post-war films. In one well-known newspaper interview from 1957, Astaire stated that “In devising new dances, I try never to repeat myself,” but whatever his intent for the dance numbers, his generalized character was constantly repeated.¹⁸

I propose instead that Astaire’s musical numbers modify the relationship observed between Astaire’s panache and his repetitious plots to a more specific intersection of his own proven masculinity with differences of class and nationality. For each film, Astaire worked with its composer to build up a collection of pieces involving his multiple talents as a dancer. Ballet, ballroom, and tap techniques were all required for Astaire to show off his full capacity for spectacular performances. Each style necessitated different music, and combined with the narrative’s need for duets and group numbers, would have significant impact on which moments of the film got which music. It is entirely possible to construct a general taxonomy of music written for Astaire’s dance films as a particular form of musical pastiche. Of particular interest for the present study is the application of jazz as a mark of American popular modernism beyond its association with tap dancing.¹⁹ Given my scope, however, I have limited the discussion of jazz here to the interconnected

¹⁷ “Fred Astaire – Lifetime Achievement Award,” YouTube video, 6:22, posted by “fiberoptickarrie,” June 18, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=fvwp&NR=1&v=O9WT9fmVi4U>.

¹⁸ Cecil Smith, “Astaire Prefers ‘Good Old Days’ of the Present,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 1957, p. E1.

¹⁹ Todd Decker, *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 78. Decker dates this association in staged musicals incorporating multiple musical styles around the emergence of sound films, circa 1927.

topics of sartorial and nationalist display in Fred Astaire's song-and-dance routines from either end of his core Hollywood output.

In Chapter I, I illustrate how my concept of Astaire's generalized character provides a more holistic frame for analyzing Astaire's performance of masculinity in *Top Hat*. As his greatest success at RKO, I treat the title-song "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails" and its parodic choreography as the primary establishment of Astaire's relationship with formal dress. The development of Astaire's white tie and tails formed a *topos* for his song-and-dance routines throughout his oeuvre, numbering among his most famous successes on film, and themselves representing a reflexive network of intertextual references. The relationship between formality and the performance of American masculinity is made explicit through both of the "sock solos" in *Top Hat* and *Silk Stockings*, where clothing is utilized as a prop.

I subsequently reconsider all of *Top Hat* for its comedic interplay between an early form of Astaire's generalized character and the film's setting in Britain and Continental Europe. I avoid privileging the relationship between the generalized characters of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers throughout, in order to avoid collapsing Rogers' character into aspects of Astaire's broader characterization. To do so would reinforce limited readings of both characters as the consequences of their romantic achievements. Rather than critiquing Astaire in terms of his heterosexual prowess, I proceed by identifying and clarifying points which, from the perspective of a 1930s audience, draw attention to Astaire's displays of masculinity and their context.

As I discuss in Chapter II, the reception and rhetoric surrounding Fred Astaire's masculinity while partnered with Ginger Rogers was far from monolithic. By the 1940s,

interpretations diversified as critics grappled with comparing Astaire to the rugged masculinity of his competitors, most prominently that of Gene Kelly. Long after his final retirement, scholarly and popular reception would transform the critical language about Fred Astaire again, only to be consolidated with a nostalgic revival of 1930s discourse in the decade leading up to his death in 1987. It is during this retrospective period of the late 1970s and 1980 that Astaire reappeared in popular consciousness as an altered symbol for consumer marketing in the United States, a prime example of the “perfectly graceful man.”²⁰ The enduring connection between Fred Astaire and mass-market clothing is clarified not only by way of his musical numbers, but through public writing as well. Astaire’s personal fashion sense was scrutinized as publicly as were his filmed performances, and the connection between clothes and the performance of masculinity became deeply entrenched in the mythology of Astaire’s generalized character.²¹

²⁰ “Top Hat, White Tie and Tails,” *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1979, p. A18.

²¹ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 314. Dickstein has shown how at this time the intersection of “exceptional” style and masculinity was already well established as a talking point for American film critics.

Chapter I: Towards a Generalized Astaire: Competing Masculinities in *Top Hat*

The aura that surrounds Astaire's films as examples both of early film musicals and of their zenith attests to how quickly such sequential characterization became entrenched in the American studio system. Using generalized characters in a sequence of films allowed actors quickly to build cachet, and also to provide a set of readily available expectations for American audiences. Precisely how deliberate these individual efforts were remains difficult to determine, but statements by the RKO production staff indicate that they intended the Astaire-Rogers films to be received as a sequence, despite their wildly divergent settings.²² Critical myth-making surrounding Astaire's productions under RKO suggest that these elisions and their attendant shifts in musical materials were part of a larger, conscious project to change the role of music in the RKO pictures. This mythology permeates John Mueller's seminal studies on Astaire's choreographic style. But critical attempts to establish a sense of working organicism behind Astaire's routines have done more to aggrandize Astaire as a choreographer than to provide thorough analyses of his team's working methods.²³

²² Larry Billman, *Fred Astaire: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1997), 84–85.

²³ E.g. John Mueller, "Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical," *Cinema Journal* 24 (1984): 28–40, at 35–36; echoed throughout id., *Astaire Dancing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); see also Edward Gallafent, *Astaire and Rogers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 30–35; For a detailed critique of this work-concept, see Kevin John Bozelka, "The Musical Mode: Rock and Hollywood Cinema" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 116–119.

It is the very inseparability of Astaire's musical performance from the construction of his generalized identity that allows the formulaic plots of his films to function without having to call attention to the development of his character. That is to say, Astaire's individual performances are predicated on the fact that they constantly present his generalized identity. *Top Hat* is especially useful for analyzing this mechanism. It was a musical rewrite of the duo's first star billing together in *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), and both films are simple comedies of errors. Each achieved considerable success, though *Top Hat* garnered greater critical acclaim.²⁴ Here, the famous American dancer Jerry Travers (Astaire) has a chance encounter in London with the model Dale Tremont (Rogers; "No Strings"); he falls in love at first sight and repeatedly attempts to get her attention ("Isn't This a Lovely Day"). Miscommunication and some confusion between the identity of Travers and his affluent friend Horace (Edward Everett Horton) cause Tremont to reject him, despite her growing attraction. Tremont heads to Italy and marries her business partner, the rich Italian fop Alberto Beddini (Erik Rhodes). Travers follows Tremont to Venice after giving his show in London ("Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails"), still chasing after her ("Cheek to Cheek"). Travers eventually explains himself to Tremont and tries to comfort her over the marriage at a dance party ("The Piccolino"). Confronting Beddini, Horace's manservant Bates (Eric Blore) reveals that through a farce, he had already nullified Beddini's wedding to Tremont. Travers and Tremont happily celebrate their new relationship.

²⁴ The similarities between the films were instantly recognized in *Top Hat*'s reception: "The Screen: Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in Their New Song and Dance Show, 'Top Hat,' at the Music Hall," *New York Times*, August 30, 1935, p. 12; "Film Review: *Top Hat*," *Variety*, September 4, 1935, p. 14.

Initial reviews of *The Gay Divorcee* on stage (as *Gay Divorce*) in New York had little nice to say about the dramaturgy. One reviewer for the *Daily News* proclaimed that for Astaire, “Cut him off at the ankles and he is just another boy on the stage doing his earnest best.”²⁵ Yet only a year later in London, reviews echoed that “Mr. Astaire has, ingrained in him, a charm that makes most females in the audience want to mother him,” disregarding his already noticeable age of thirty-four.²⁶ The cultural division in Astaire’s reception would continue throughout his career on stage, and even into his early films with RKO. Such divisions across the Atlantic were fully impressed upon Astaire, who as a young man fashioned himself as something of an anglophile. As Kathleen Riley suggests in her recent landmark study of Fred and Adele Astaire, “The sense of ceremony that accompanied a[n English] night at the theatre, was, according to Fred’s sister Adele, another novelty for the Americans: ‘Nobody ever came to the theatre unless they were in dinner jacket. ... It was really a joy to work in England because people really made a fuss of you in those days.’”²⁷ Although *Top Hat* included explicit critiques of the London elite, reviews and sales were equally positive in England.

From the start of the film, Astaire’s character is introduced comically as a guest who makes a fuss in an English gentleman’s club, full of members dressed in long coats with top hats and white bowties. Notable is the musical elision of the eponymous “Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails” from the opening title-sequence over the image of a top hat,

²⁵ *Daily News*, December 4, 1932, cited in Riley, *The Astaires*, 160.

²⁶ *Tatler*, November 29, 1933, cited in Riley, *The Astaires*, 173.

²⁷ Riley, *The Astaires*, 81, echoed in Fred Astaire, *Steps in Time* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 114: “The nobility patronized the show, not with just a single visit, but quite often, and we met many of them. There was never a black tie in view those days either in stalls or boxes, for many months. That sea of white ties and stiff-bosomed shirts, along with the bejeweled ladies... was an imposing sight.” Adele may have meant that dinner jackets were the minimum level of dress, but it is equally possible that the ubiquity of his patrons and their formality is one of Fred’s autobiographical exaggerations.

the camera zooming out to reveal a circle of patrons in the London street about to enter the club. This is not the first time the music is heard: the title-sequence begins with a line of formally dressed dancing legs and their attendant walking canes, in front of which pirouettes a single male set of legs without a cane shown, much as per Fred Astaire's role in the actual number, followed by a female pair dressed all in white, analogous to Ginger Rogers. The pair spin together in ballroom fashion while the chorus remains still behind them (0:00:27). Most of this brief overture is a potpourri of main themes from the four other tunes by Irving Berlin featured in the film, settling on "The Piccolino," which more closely mirrors its scoring in the film's finale. "White Tie" returns, now drawing on the scoring from the actual number, but once the aforementioned zoom has been completed it is briefly intercut with a sparsely scored setting of the tune "London Bridge" (0:01:30). A final return to "White Tie" fades to silence as the gentleman who introduces the film proper enters the club, neatly dividing the external and internal space. We are therefore not given the opportunity yet to relate the tune with Astaire's face: only with his feet.

The comedy within the club revolves around the inability of Jerry Travers (Astaire) to follow the directives of a placard at the entrance, which reads: "SILENCE must be observed in all rooms." (0:03:04) It is especially significant that he is the only man in the room wearing a semiformal dinner jacket with a black bow tie, which puts him on more even social ground with the club's reception staff, even though he is either wealthy or connected enough to gain entrance to the club. When given the chance to leave quietly by his upper-class friend and producer Horace (Edward Everett Horton), he loudly taps out a rhythm resembling the start of a march with his feet (0:04:38), sonically prefiguring a visual element of the film's eponymous dance sequence even though the latter does not specifically include

a musical march. This both resolves and resets the comic tension surrounding Astaire, as the audience waits for his first choreographed number. The prominence given to Astaire's feet draws further audience attention to the characterization of Astaire through his dances; over the course of the film, the recognition of his character by others becomes almost more attached to the sound of his feet than to his visual presence.²⁸

Dancing of course represents the primary space for showing Astaire's talents within the Astaire-Rogers team. *Top Hat* is the first film in the RKO sequence to pay special attention to the balancing of personalities between Astaire and Rogers. When Jerry Travers (Astaire) and Dale Tremont (Rogers) dance together in tap – In “Isn't This a Lovely Day (To Get Caught in the Rain)” (0:24:51) – they dance in parallel to the same steps while the camera displays their full bodies, a distinct production characteristic which uniquely marked Astaire's RKO oeuvre. Their parallel steps silently display Tremont's realization that she loves Travers back, even though at this point in the story she is unable to confirm it verbally. Rogers' masculine riding outfit continues to assert her unwillingness to be overtly submissive, while showing off her well-publicized slim legs, a visual complement to the “wiry” Astaire. Across the sequence of Astaire–Rogers films, this complementary costuming was consistently upheld by all the core members of the production team as a deliberate goal. In turn, contemporary audiences readily accepted the relative equality between the two generalized characters.²⁹

What is unique to Astaire's films of this period is the particular class of masculinity he plays, one outfitted in the fanciful trappings of post-World War frivolity

²⁸ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 155.

²⁹ Adam Knee, “Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: Modernizing Class,” in *Glamour in a Golden Age: Movie Stars of the 1930s*, ed. Adrienne L. McLean (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011): 196–219, at 211; Hyam, *Fred and Ginger*, 37; Pamela R. Lach, “Dancing Dreams: Performing American Identities in Postwar Hollywood Musicals, 1944–1958” (PhD diss., UNC Chapel Hill, 2007), 21.

but without the pretensions of the persisting upper class in the Depression: his character was, from the start, predicated on nostalgia for prior economic abundance. However, these bounded class affiliations were presented as if they were distinctive aspects to Astaire's generalized character, leaving them indivisible from the production of American-ness and, most especially in *Top Hat*, from Astaire's own performance of masculinity. *Top Hat* is itself unique in foregrounding Astaire's ability to conform to his generalized character without conforming to the demands of his society; most of the dramatic conflict proceeds around, rather than through him. It is significant that the drama is played entirely for comedy, with Astaire constantly reacting to his surroundings rather than producing the entirety of the drama himself. But class alone does not fully account for the parodies in *Top Hat*. Rather a set of interlocking identity politics are the source of both Astaire's humor and his unusual charm, predicated on denials of "pansy" characteristics as well as conventional modes of courtship. *Top Hat* actively rejects notions of high and low art when dealing with issues of high and low society. However, to take the stance offered by Astaire's later biographers that his standard class dynamic is one of "classlessness" seems overly broad given the complexity of how his class figures into the common visual elements of his generalized character.³⁰

It is possible to read Astaire's generalized character, as proponents of the "classless" argument contend, as merely a lampoon of class dynamics. For instance, the film itself deems it almost unnecessary to mention that he is a dancer: it is mentioned only in an aside by Horace to a receptionist, confirming that the film rides on the audience's familiarity with the markers of Astaire's generalized character. Travers's

³⁰ Knee, "Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers," 197.

assumed abilities imply that the target audience of the film was expected to be more interested in Astaire's musical and choreographic virtuosity than in his ability to fully characterize a new role. Indeed, the cinema trailer highlighted little more than the principle actors before spending much of its time advertising that the music for the film had been composed by Irving Berlin, then listing the major song titles, rather than giving any details of the plot. Even though Astaire received top billing, the trailer did not significantly display him, and unusually, it failed to feature his singing voice; his main appearance is clipped from his big finale with Rogers in "The Piccolino" instead of the title-song routine.³¹

In the film itself, however, Astaire's complex socio-economic station is quickly brought into distinct focus even before he dances. The scene following the introduction revolves around the sartorial bickering of Horace and his manservant Bates (Eric Blore) concerning neckties, in which Jerry takes Bates's side but refuses to impose his opinion on Horace. A visual connection can be drawn between Jerry and Bates through their dress: both wear black bowties in contrast to Horace's white, an element the film does not allow the viewer to forget. Peter William Evans has read Astaire's manners here as the purposive construction of an ambiguously classed Astaire. On the one hand there is Bates, an exaggerated stereotype of British butlers, with his use of the royal first-person

³¹ "Theatrical Trailer," *Top Hat*, DVD, directed by Mark Sandrich (1935; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010); For a more in-depth discussion of the tunes' reception, see Charlotte Greenspan, "Irving Berlin in Hollywood: The Art of Plugging a Song in a Film," *American Music*, 22 (Spring 2004): 40–49; Decker, *Music Makes Me*, 261; Jeffrey Magee, *Irving Berlin's American Musical Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 168; Magee reads "The Piccolino" as an early Hollywood attempt to exploit Latin jazz, privileging its box office success over the parallel number "The Carioca" in the earlier, but still successful, *Flying Down to Rio*; as the current literature is most concerned with the films in which Astaire had star billing, this may be a systemic bias. However, the trailer for *Flying Down to Rio* prominently featured "The Carioca," with significant attention to displaying Astaire's singing. Astaire's voice is also present in the trailers for *The Gay Divorcee* and *Swing Time*: its absence in *Top Hat* does not equate to any difference in the amount of music Astaire sings in each of these films.

plural throughout and his stereotypically lisping pansy patter leaving it difficult for the audience to pin down his sexual identity (0:05:51). Horace distinctly fusses about performing his wealth through his appearance in a manner heavily coded at the time as an American exaggeration of “British” stereotypes. Almost instantly, this aligns Horace as part of a pansy comic duo, owing to contemporary American stereotypes of wealthy Englishmen as at least nominally sissified.³² In the context of 1935, when Astaire’s films were subject to censorship under Hollywood’s Motion Picture Production Code, these gestures are rife with suggestion.

Filled with vague and fantastical views of European culture throughout, Astaire’s RKO films defined a complex synthesis of Astaire’s masculinity by way of a negative argument. Excluding Astaire’s opinion in the argument over neckties, despite the implication that Astaire is in the right, provides weight to Astaire’s identity as anti-British. As a “good” English-speaking male, he could therefore be understood as American. At the same time it destabilized his socio-economic position, being above the station of a white male manservant, somewhere below Horace’s foreign wealth, yet altogether outside the scope of their argument over minute traditions. Throughout the film, Travers defers his costs and expenses to Horace, indicating that while Astaire is moving within upper-class circles, he does not share the same economic background. This, too, coded Astaire as American in a manner which makes it apparent that the qualification of “American” for Astaire’s production team included certain limitations on class. Likewise his opposition to Horace, whose pansy characterization is connected with foreign wealth, protects him from being

³² Evans, *Top Hat*, 7, 16; David Lugowski, “Queering the (New) Deal: Lesbian and Gay representation and the Depression-Era Cultural Politics of Hollywood’s Production Code,” *Cinema Journal* 38 (1999): 3–35, at 22; Eric J. Segal, “Norman Rockwell and the Fashioning of American Masculinity,” *The Art Bulletin* 78 (1996): 633–646, at 637.

related to a fop, British or otherwise. Just as the “sissy” character actor is definitively maligned, Astaire’s generalized protagonist is difficult to assail, because it is built into his act that his heterosexual romance will ultimately succeed. It is therefore difficult to take for granted any readings of Astaire which treat his character as a deformation of an otherwise stable ideal of heterosexual masculinity.³³

As an alternative to such readings, I suggest that Astaire’s generalized character replaced potentially emasculating situations with opportunities for parody. Astaire’s “No Strings” is a classic example of screwball comedy humor, in which the obvious romantic protagonist declares himself an eternal bachelor. Astaire’s variation on the genre draws its critical edge from the distance between his close, intimate singing style and the power of his tap dancing to disturb those around him. Travers’ refusal to marry is clarified in the second stanza as a rejection of romance for fine material pursuits: “I’m fancy free but free for anything fancy” (0:08:11). Following Steven Cohan’s argument for an effeminized Astaire, this performance would be about the establishment of Travers’s character as performing a public spectacle at all times, with the peripheral effect of spurring his interaction with Tremont. The constancy of his looked-at-ness, according to Cohan, constitutes a feminization of Travers. But instead, one might reframe the moment based on the relationship between Astaire’s dancing and the scope of the film. Even though he ends the second stanza with a tall hop in the air, it is only when Astaire taps, late into the second statement of the theme, that Tremont is shown as being awoken from her sleep in the room directly below his own (0:09:31). Travers’s prioritization of spectacular luxury is thus juxtaposed with the crude power of his tap dancing to disturb.

³³ E.g. Spoto, *Camerado*, especially 57–58.

In addition, it must be remembered that in this time, tap dancing was coded as aggressively masculine and urban.³⁴ “No Strings” therefore serves as a clarifying connection between the opening at the club and “Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails,” coupling the otherness of Astaire’s private masculinity with his economic status. However ambiguous his role as a dancer in Hollywood may have been, Astaire’s characters were charged with masculinity. As a result, Travers’s earlier involvement with Horace’s sartorial argument effectively turns this ambiguity onto upper-class society and its anxieties about public self-performance.

In his set-piece “Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails” Astaire displays all the accoutrements of white, upper-class masculinity but parodies each one in turn. Astaire’s generalized character, however, draws attention to subtle cues and even suggests these parodies are utilizing flimsy covers of comedy to inject deeper criticisms without appearing radical, a method of critical production which Sue Rickard has termed one of the “principles of deniability.”³⁵ Just before getting on stage, Travers receives a telegram that Tremont has left the country; he improvises, and humorously treats the note as if it were his invitation to a formal event – an impromptu prelude to set up the song:

I just got an invitation through the mails:
“Your presence requested this evening, it’s formal
A top hat, a white tie, and tails”
Nothing now could take the wind out of my sails
Because I’m invited to step out this evening
With top hat, white tie, and tails
I’m putting on my top hat, tyin’ up my white tie, brushing off my tails
...
I’m stepping out my dear to breathe an atmosphere that simply reeks with class
and I trust that you’ll excuse my dust when I step on the gas.
For I’ll be there: puttin’ down my top hat, mussin’ up my white tie, dancing in the

³⁴ Decker, *Music Makes Me*, 38, 46–47.

³⁵ Rickard, “Movies in Disguise,” 74.

tails!

After a brief interlude with his entourage of dancers, Astaire engages in an extended improvisation; this ends with the male dancers marching up in a row from the back of the stage, while Astaire mimes gunning them down with his cane, replacing gunshots with sounds from his tap shoes. As the curtain falls, Astaire steps out to the front of the stage to fire off a comical parting shot at the white tie-clad cadre of old men in attendance at the show (0:44:54). Astaire's performance in formal dress both demonstrates his rejection of upper-class mores and limits the possibility of reading him as stagnantly poor. But however fluid Astaire's presentation of class, he is certainly not *classless* in his prelude with the invitation. Astaire is different not only because he is the protagonist, but because he is alone in his construction of class throughout the film.

White tie was certainly a large part of the myth surrounding Astaire's character; in *Top Hat*, it is his most widely used costume. This rhetorical sense of default dressing is part of what has led to Astaire's misconstruction as a fop in recent criticism since his death. When Astaire sings about "mussin' up my white tie" in "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails" it can be read as simultaneously a coy allusion to getting hot under the collar and an affected opposition to masculine ideals of restrained orderliness, as represented by formal dress. Although readings of the number since Astaire's death have ignored his uniquely gendered performance of class, suggestions of class warfare point towards a complex relationship between his costume and the film's audience. But whatever complications are involved in the reception of Astaire's formalwear *topos* can be simplified through a consideration of Morris Dickstein's observations on the sequence. In particular, Dickstein identifies a "note of self-mockery in these lines, especially in a word

like ‘reeks,’ but Astaire doesn’t sing it that way.”³⁶ As Dickstein reads the scene, Astaire is inviting the audience to enjoy the excesses of upper-class luxuries, without overemphasizing the joke in the lyrics: that the judgmental exclusivity of upper-class culture is laughable. Astaire’s representation as the only middle-class male body in the film, as well as the only American male, subtly highlights his oppositional stance. He simultaneously gives a specific class to American masculinity while lionizing the said middle-class Americans as arbiters of taste. *Top Hat* is representative of its times, when popular media increasingly conditioned American men to believe that the arbitration of taste could be accomplished through the consumption of tasteful products, such as Astaire’s films, rather than meekly relying on pedigree to supply an unwarranted sense of cultural superiority.³⁷ His address to the film’s audience from the stage invites them to “step out” with him into a utopian space where luxurious experiences such as going to a show can be divorced from upper-class manipulation.

Dickstein has suggested that “not money and success, not even elegance and sophistication, were the real dream of the expressive culture of the 1930s, but this dream of mobility, with its thrust toward the future.”³⁸ What is put forth as desirable are the freedoms of the upper-class elite – the wind in their sails – but not their preferred expressions of wealth, much less taste. The visible audience within the film is entirely a part of the upper-class English elite, long since established within *Top Hat* as worthy of receiving the audience’s mockery. Travers’s attacks on the rich divorce the desirable accoutrements from

³⁶ Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 381.

³⁷ Darcey Callison, “Dancing Masculinity for Hollywood: The American Dream, Whiteness, and the Movement Vocabulary within Hollywood’s Choreography for Men” (PhD diss., York University, CA, 2008), 69.

³⁸ Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 361.

their distinctly static characters, a uniformed set of foreigners. All the same, his mocking treatment of formalwear in the lyric narration indicates that his interest lies more in the experience of formal events than the aesthetic enjoyment of their clothes.

A similar principle of deniability is imposed on the relationship between classical and narrative-function dancing. The impresario of the show within the film proposes Travers's performance as a "new mixture of ballet and jazz" in a manner that presumes that jazz (and tap) is a single, insular category, an aesthetic other to ballet. In fact there is no balletic choreography on the stage at all, the closest element being the narrative suggestions during Astaire's improvisation in the middle section of "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails." Astaire's use of a choreographed team and subdued gesticulation with his arms during the first musical theme does little to ameliorate the fundamental root of his choreography for "White Tie" in jazz. In the juxtaposed second theme however, Astaire is much more adventurous and performs his more complicated tap routines to what is a more heavily syncopated energetic theme. Crucially, it is the softer first theme, with less percussion and syncopation, which is played as Astaire guns down the white tie crowd on stage (0:43:39). A similar contrast is apparent in the refrain of the second theme, wherein Astaire pantomimes a strolling gentleman for the central section's narrative improvisation. Here, Astaire appears to be on his guard against invisible company while critiquing upper-class niceties. This mocking politeness is therefore part and parcel to the gunning taps. Softly articulated big-band swing led by the clarinet is employed for violence, while more heavily accented syncopation from the entire brass section is superimposed onto Astaire's affectation of class. Underneath the claim that the performance is a "proper" fusion with ballet, its mixture of racial and sexual cues hints to the audience that Travers's humor is an intentional cover for

his critique. Alongside the expectations built on his generalized identity, then, Astaire's use of jazz forwards a more nuanced relationship between the aspirations of his audience and the performance of class at large.

Where "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails" utilized formalwear to critique forcibly the elite, later it is used by Travers as a uniform to sneak into an upper-class party, drawing the sonic focus to his quiet but directed persistence. The romantic reconciliation duet and Irving Berlin's second best-selling single composed for the film, "Cheek to Cheek," forefronts Travers's musical attempts to win back Tremont, clothed this time in formalwear. Its ubiquity is eclipsed by the extravagance of Tremont's white feather dress; without his dancing props, Travers's formalwear is little more than a standard element of Astaire's generalized character. Astaire's natural charm may be effortless, but his attempts to court Roger's character in *Top Hat* are anything but, and if anything he sweeps her up into his rhythm rather than his arms. Indoors at a ballroom dance, Travers no longer has his hat or cane, and his white tie is notably unmussed. One striking moment highlights his otherwise whispering croon: the bridge between the main verse and the return of the chorus injects a brief shift of metric stress within the otherwise regular, slow common time, with Astaire switching to a bolder voicing over a more accented accompaniment (1:04:12). As he does, he stops dancing and assumes a more rigid pose, commanding her to "Dance with me, I want my arm about you; the charm about you, will carry me through," and though Travers does put his arm around Tremont's waist, she is motionless until he finishes returning to the chorus – to "heaven." Her energy returns as Travers resumes his more relaxed stance. From there, Travers whirls her out of the party and into a private pavilion, where the two engage in one of their most famous duets. The greater contrast between Travers's lack of success with

boldly sung commands and his success with a private dance highlights the power of Astaire's "natural," forthright dancing, even without his taps, much less a stage.

Historical distance has presented a very different reading for the division between Astaire's characters on a literal stage, as in "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails," and while not publicly performing within the film. In 2007, J. Peterman Company released an advertisement for watches which read: "Fred Astaire made it OK to be on the sophisticated side. He didn't have an English accent. He wasn't stuck up. He was like a regular person, except that he had talent and could sweep women off their feet."³⁹ For anyone to read Astaire as "on the sophisticated side" while acknowledging his non-English qualities recreates the dichotomy of the American middle class and European elitism, but at the expense of the more parodic elements I read here in his generalized identity. The inability of the copy to read past Astaire's self-presentation on the stage speaks to how the comedy surrounding his complicated performance of masculinity has been lost. It was of course in the interest of a company like Peterman to appeal to a middle-class consumer. But such simplified readings deleted the parodic aspects of Astaire's characters in favor of a more familiar, assertive masculinity. The commodification of Astaire's character came to a head in the aftermath of World War II, and it is with these losses of perspective that a rebranded Fred Astaire was reformulated into a nostalgic construction which persisted throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

³⁹ Epstein, *Fred Astaire*, 43.

Chapter II: Selling Nostalgia: The Legacy of *Silk Stockings*

If the beginning of Fred Astaire's film career created a set of variations on the theme of his generalized character, then his post-war career might be characterized as variations on the theme of nostalgia. More than once Astaire would attempt to retire, only to return to the screen with another take on his generalized role. *Silk Stockings* (1957), his final billing as a star in a dance film, offers a striking comparison with *Top Hat*. Each film offers similar situations for Astaire to inject his characteristic comedy and charm, though in different contexts: the Cold-War Paris and Moscow of MGM's *Silk Stockings* are a world away from the London and Venice of RKO's *Top Hat*. I suggest nonetheless that even with largely unrelated production teams, the films adhere to similar models for representing Astaire's generalized character. Moreover, the film contains some of Astaire's most aesthetically subdued costuming since the end of his tenure at RKO and the subsequent switch to color pictures, including a telling addition to the story in order to display his white tie and tails. His relatively muted accessorizing more firmly defines his character as all-American, in a role which demanded an unambiguously American reading of Astaire's character. *Silk Stockings* therefore represents a useful point of reference for the nostalgic image of Fred Astaire across the latter half of the twentieth century.

As a musical re-imagining of MGM's 1939 *Ninotchka*, the plot of *Silk Stockings* strings together the original story with a profusion of musical asides. Expectations had apparently shifted, for *Silk Stockings* features thirteen unique musical numbers, a stark contrast to the mere five in *Top Hat*. The main plot takes place in Paris, where American filmmaker Steve Canfield (Astaire) schemes to employ a Russian composer while keeping his three Soviet handlers (Joseph Buloff, Peter Lorre, Jules Munshin) from returning him to Moscow. Canfield shows the handlers the town, enticing them with the luxuries of Parisian life ("Too Bad"). When they fail to bring the composer back, Russia sends surly agent Ninotchka Yoschenko (Cyd Charisse) to retrieve them all; Canfield finds Yoschenko irresistible, and slowly woos her in a similar manner ("Paris Loves Lovers," "It's a Chemical Reaction," "All of You," "Without Love," "Fated to be Mated"). However miscommunication during Canfield's production alienates Yoschenko, who brings the others back to Russia. Both miss each other, but Soviet censorship obscures Canfield's letters to Yoschenko ("Red Blues"). Canfield engineers for the three Soviet officials to be sent back to Paris in order to lure Yoschenko back once they are tempted again. After surprising her with a show ("The Ritz Roll and Rock"), he proposes to her, and with the help of the three officials she agrees to emigrate to the United States with him.

As in *Top Hat*, Astaire's character in *Silk Stockings* is an American outsider to the European setting. While initially at odds with his American forwardness, the contrasting trio of bumbling Russian officials and even his love interest are charmed by his musical routines to go along with his ideas. Unlike in *Top Hat*, Astaire contends with a very different special relationship between America, France and the Soviet Union. It is now

America which is positioned as the default patriarch over France, with the Russian characters initially criticizing the capitalist excesses of both countries. Even from the show's start on Broadway, the theme of the exceptional American was essential to the script: in this reimagining of *Ninotchka*, Astaire's visiting American protagonist replaces a French nobleman. Consequently his methods for plying Yoschenko with the material culture of Paris take on an altogether different cast, culminating in their successfully eloping to America, their decision made in a nightclub. The script for the film version of *Silk Stockings* similarly revises *Ninotchka*'s even-handed humor directed at capitalism and communism, and instead uniformly treats the Soviets' critique of capitalism as decidedly backwards.

Most of the comedic stereotypes at play in *Silk Stockings* derive from a complex American view of post-war France (and, of course, of the Soviet Union). The American view of public arts in Paris during the latter half of the 1950s was colored by the profusion of communist pamphlets attached to artistic advertisements, many of which were explicitly sympathetic to an alliance with Soviet Russia. While France lobbied for its international influence as if its territories were the most important bulwarks of European culture against the influence of Soviet Russia, American interests centered around the desire to unify all of the Atlantic powers in the face of Soviet expansion. Due to the patronizing attitude of American foreign ambassadors, French politicians were wary of American interests and the initiatives of NATO even before the formation of the Fifth Republic in 1958. This only reinforced the American perception of France as a rather unstable bulwark against Soviet interests and, in effect, in need of external

guidance.⁴⁰ The political situation was convenient for MGM studios, utilizing simpler sets instead of replicating the graphical art deco aesthetic of Astaire's RKO films, even as the plot called for a glorified image of Paris. The hotel décor is plainer, the city less visually stylized, and the soundstage for Canfield's film is usually left strikingly empty.⁴¹ Only the all-white bar top in "The Ritz Roll and Rock" visually approaches art deco.

Conversely the film is filled with jazz tunes provided by Cole Porter where, unlike its irreverent use in Berlin's score for *Top Hat*, jazz subsumes other musical genres unto itself. Canfield's singing and dancing become impositions of American modernity in otherwise foreign spaces, sonically implying the utopian art deco feel which predominated in the earlier Astaire outings.⁴² Here, it is only available via Astaire. A hat is tipped towards the setting with pseudo-classical music, used for the drunken ersatz ballet between Yoschenko and Canfield when he brings her back to his hotel after a night on the Parisian boulevards. But it is only after Canfield's crooning "Fated to be Mated" that Yoschenko fully reciprocates with an equal partner dance (1:22:15); the final success likewise follows quickly from the similarly coded finale, "The Ritz Roll and Rock".

⁴⁰ Alessandro Brogi, *A Question of Self-Esteem: The United States and the Cold War Choices in France and Italy, 1944-1958* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 55–56; *ibid.*, *Confronting America: The Cold War Between the United States and the Communists in France and Italy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 167; William I. Hitchcock, *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944–1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 84–85, 116.

⁴¹ Decker, *Music Makes Me*, 190; A fuller explanation of this visual paradigm is beyond the scope of this study, but at the end of Astaire's life, the art deco aesthetic behind his RKO films was considered at least as important for advertising copy selling VHS reprints of the film as mentioning Astaire's partnered dances with Rogers, e.g. Hal Hinson, "Astaire on Tape," *The Washington Post*, June 25, 1987, p. B7.

⁴² Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 436; The imperialist construction of jazz as a music of American integration was increasingly employed by White fans after the war, but it remained a popular code for White artists as a style that was at once transgressive and intensely masculine, employing both with racial implications; see Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds: Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 65; For a popular example which applies these codes to Astaire, see Joel E. Siegel, "Puttin' on the Ritz: A Jazz Tribute to Fred Astaire," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 28, 1980, p. 46.

Consider the implications of one brief newspaper advertisement for the film: “Cyd Charisse and Fred Astaire star in musical about a Russian girl who becomes an American butterfly.”⁴³ Astaire’s successes through the use of his typical choreographic style are seemingly employed as a code for American mores and their presumed superiority as a means for self-expression. The plot lionizes a perspective of American exceptionalism.

Narratives of jazz as cosmopolitan progress are heavily promoted within the film as well. For example, Astaire’s final romantic duet with Cyd Charisse, “Fated to be Mated,” celebrates his climactic marriage proposal by showcasing their parallel dance over a progression through different musical and choreographic styles leading up to a finale over big-band accompaniment. Likewise, the scene choreographically shifts from understated steps to interpretive ballet, only to culminate in a series of showy prop stunts in line with Astaire’s typical style. After a brief song with one verse, Canfield swirls and swings Yoschenko across a bench over a variation on the verse theme, walking her over to his nearly empty soundstage of his film (1:22:27). The accompaniment transitions to a bossa-nova parody of the theme in the brass layered over a “classical” theme in the strings, replete with turns and mordents – much like the scoring for Yoschenko’s earlier solo ballet (1:08:58). Their parallel wooden poses at the end of each phase of the bass pattern emphasizes the interpretive, balletic steps employed to evoke the “Latin” setting of this variation. As they step into another section of the set, the music switches again, muted brass with piano and trap set slowing the theme down as the two dance over and around numerous props, kicking legs high in the air and stretching out their arms repeatedly while holding hands (1:23:56). Finally, the horns are doubled as the duo finish

⁴³ “Movie Previews,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 6, 1957, p. 16; echoed briefly by “‘Silk Stocking’: Amusing Colorful Musical Show,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1957, p. C10.

the piece with creative vaults over an iron barre, finally embracing (1:24:58). These gestures reemphasize Astaire's attire, his grey, single-breasted sack suit and wide charcoal trousers giving him the range of motion needed to pull off such stunts even without unbuttoning his jacket. Charisse employs a split skirt in order to mirror Astaire's steps to the end, her flowing skirt eventually revealed as a pair of billowing trousers (1:25:13), which only serves to reinforce Astaire's visible comfort. The casual treatment of his odd jacketed look – with a fiery red-gold handkerchief, carefully matched tie, white shoes and Brooks Brothers shirt in light blue – parallels Astaire's younger style when he danced with Rogers for "Isn't this a Lovely Day."⁴⁴ Now, however, the changed context of an American in Paris means his jazzy partner dance can be the reconciliation, not merely flirtation.

The grand musical finale appears dedicated to reinforcing the hegemony of Astaire's jazz in this imagined Paris. A late addition, "The Ritz Roll and Rock" is a jazz pastiche of early rock 'n' roll, juxtaposed as it is with a send-up of Astaire's sock dances in tails. The brassy slow introduction, with contrasting piano improvisation, recalls the scoring of the 1930s set pieces, only to be flipped around by the cut to saxophones over an electric guitar vamp. There is only a little rock 'n' roll about the musical materials, with Porter's use of twelve- and eight-bar blues salvaging only a slight relationship with Astaire's usual fare. Canfield's reference to the "smart set" appropriating rock 'n' roll similarly jabs gently at the French appropriation of jazz, in a period where only certain American civilians were appreciated among French organizers of cultural events, most

⁴⁴ The cut and detailing of this jacket are not visibly different from Astaire's tailoring during his RKO period; however, none of the jackets in the RKO pictures appears to fit both the details and relative shade of Astaire's piece here, so it cannot be concluded that the jacket survived from that period.

especially the wealthy.⁴⁵ In the United States press the choreography was not received particularly well, and it is now held up as evidence of Astaire's then-aging body.⁴⁶ But beyond the visual and lyrical similarities, the number is more noteworthy for its choreographic allusions to both "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails" (*Silk Stockings*, 1:50:05) and Astaire's "Puttin' on the Ritz" from his 1946 film, *Blue Skies* (1:51:10), a telling specificity among Astaire's many numbers in dress suits. Astaire's joke abstracts the metaphor underlining the earlier "Ritz," almost disregarding the context of the actual hotel in Paris. "The Ritz Roll and Rock" is not about Astaire's own clothes, but his derision for the style's appropriation by tailed "fops" recalls his critique of luxurious consumption in both of these self-referential allusions. Likewise, the costuming – and perhaps, even the odd choreography – combined with the overall dismissal of rock 'n' roll, pokes fun at the "hick hillbillies" and their lack of classical refinement. Astaire's final appearance in formal dress takes advantage of his generalized character to bolster his critique of elitists – read: Europeans – and merely trendy aesthetics – modern Hollywood – alike.

In the same vein of cabaret allusion, the Russian trio mirrors the roles of Astaire's previous comedic supports. The three are always shown together, a monolithic choir of communist masculinity – itself left somewhat suspect by the film's end. Their main dramatic number alone, the foxtrot "Siberia," features the trio ruining a break for improvisation with random gestures of flapping their arms around; they bump into each

⁴⁵ Frank Costigliola, *France and the United States: The Cold Alliance since World War II* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 84, 55: the United States' pointed interest in maintaining low tariffs on Hollywood films in France suggests that similar propaganda was intended for more than just American audiences, further complicating Canfield's quips throughout the film version of the story.

⁴⁶ Decker, *Music Makes Me*, 237; John Franceschina, *Hermes Pan: The Man Who Danced with Fred Astaire* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 201.

other as they attempt to spin around at the same time (1:33:53). Ineffectual attempts at creativity contrast the Russians with Astaire's numerous dance pieces throughout. As a constant packaged set, the three equally reflect the generalized characters of the typecast actors who portray them: Buloff, a favorite of the Yiddish theater, has a heavy "Russian" accent, while Lorre is nervous and impulsive. Their individual affectations disappear in the all-unison "Siberia." The stereotyped assertions that the trio care more for alcohol than women casts a collective shadow on their usual failures as they bicker endlessly; together, their pattering fills a similar role to the pansies of RKO, equal foils to Astaire's characterization.

Furthermore, the interaction of Fred Astaire's generalized character with the Soviet officials in *Silk Stocking* emphasizes their difference to the visual and sartorial landscape of daily life in the United States. Given the post-war American context of industrialized fashion, Astaire's outfits in *Silk Stockings* can be readily highlighted for their American affectations. For example, when Canfield first negotiates with the three Russians, he wears a double-breasted lounge suit cut from medium-grey flannel, paired with a pink button-down collar shirt from Brooks Brothers, matching pink socks and tie, a purple handkerchief, and brown suede shoes with purple laces. The effect draws significant attention to Canfield, set apart vividly from the Russians in their darker grey suits of worsted wool and white shirts with formal collars. His costume's palette is anything but subtle. All the same, Canfield's combination of casual shoes and shirt with a double-breasted flannel suit separates him from standard American business dress: the double-breasted jacket connotes either that Canfield has enough money to commission a jacket, or that the suit predates the war. The ambiguity of Canfield's tenuous wealth plays

to the standards of Astaire's generalized characterization, someone who obtains money from his patrons with a goal to immediately spend it. Nonetheless Astaire's casual incorporation of American ready-to-wear items sets him further from the Russians than from contemporary American trends. Audiences of the time likely read the outfit as classic Astaire, transposed to color film.⁴⁷

Canfield sets himself apart from the group musically in the ensuing song-and-dance routine, "Too Bad," as the three Russians and some female dancers celebrate their stay in Paris. The chorus of the song stereotypes the alcoholic Russians with Buloff's fumbled deliveries of "I drink to you!" while Astaire, no drink in hand, puts his feet on the dining table (0:09:57). Porter's swinging tune inserts a cha-cha into the second statement of the chorus through Astaire, who vocally replaces the previously shared "Ai ai ai!" with "Cha cha cha!" (0:11:08).⁴⁸ His vocal insertion and languid posing separate him from the inebriated Russians as they dance with the women: the performance once more engages Astaire's generalized character by way of contrast. Subsequent interactions between Canfield and the Russian trio all proceed from Canfield's demands. American presumptions of dominance over Franco-Russian affairs are played out here with much the same attitude as *Top Hat*'s parodies of British presumptions from the inter-war period.

Strangely, more recent nostalgic views of Fred Astaire have reconsidered his "Mid-Atlantic" presentation of fine British tailoring combined with American ready-to-

⁴⁷ John Chapman, "A Star Named Astaire!" *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1941, p. F2; Not long after departing RKO, Astaire was already being reassessed as old, if not temporarily considered old-fashioned. None of the extant literature has indicated that Astaire's style was either wholly unique or publicly interpreted as daringly individual: I have proceeded instead from the view that Astaire was the most publicly recognized representative of his early period's style.

⁴⁸ Decker, *Music Makes Me*, 261.

wear clothing as a *revolutionary* statement of panache. The relationship proposed by fashion writers, such as Boyer, between Astaire's Mid-Atlantic style of dress and the mores of the European elite, does not concern itself with the complications provided by Astaire's musical critiques. Moreover, these popular allusions to Astaire bled into advertisements and ready-to-wear collections directed at men, reinvigorating male interest in retro styles.

In his own time, Astaire had reservations about the use of his image in the fashion industry. He expressed his distaste for the use of his name in advertising copy for Brooks Brothers, a company he privately supported as a customer until their falling out in 1955. The company's public solution was to invoke his name in a 1959 official interview rather than featuring him in an official advertisement. However it remains difficult to gauge the effect of this falling out on Astaire's last films. To claim similarities in Astaire's pre-war costumes with his post-war daily wear assumes an untraceable influence. Costume credits in the individual films are often restricted merely to the providers of gowns for his female partners; similarly, my present research has been unable to ascertain fully who was in charge of dressing the other male characters or the dancing choruses for many of Astaire's films, unfortunately including *Top Hat* and *Silk Stockings*. Costume designer Edith Head was responsible for the overall wardrobes design for Astaire's post-war films with Paramount, including well-publicized credits for her gowns in *Blue Skies* and *Funny Face*, but the degree of her involvement with the male costumes in each film remains to be clarified. She most definitely clothed Astaire for at least one dance in *Funny Face*, but her methods for putting together outfits both from readily available items and from her

own custom designs leave her role in *providing* Astaire with costumes unclear.⁴⁹ The role of Helen Rose, designer on staff at MGM for *Silk Stockings*, is similarly difficult to place. At this time it is therefore impossible to fully determine the relationship between Astaire's publicized sense of style and the demands of his directors. Nevertheless, it remains a fact that a number of Astaire's costumes over the course of his Hollywood career utilized Brooks Brothers shirting, with their distinctive pattern of button-down collars.

Astaire's refusal to cooperate with the advertisements for Ralph Lauren's 1983 ready-to-wear series attests to his annoyance with such appropriations of his image. Similar to the Brooks Brothers affair, Lauren intended to use Astaire's name to brand a line of 1950s-inspired clothing, specifically a series of wide-cut trousers. He again refused to lend his image to any specific ready-to-wear clothing. But the rejection is also suggestive of Astaire's gender politics, as Lauren's intended "Astaire pants" were for his *women's* collection. It is possible that he felt some personal anxiety about this appropriation, given the new critical environment which questioned Astaire's performance of masculinity. Undeterred, Lauren repeated the tactics of Brooks Brothers and mentioned his "inspiration" to interviewers from *Vogue* magazine. Astaire's name was quickly developed into advertising copy for glossy photographs of Lauren's pantsuits, and for some time after, "Astaire" became fashionable shorthand for baggy pleated trousers for women. *Vogue* presented its readership with constructions of Astaire similar to then-current scholarship, emphasizing his "fancy free" presentation of Americana. "Now, 'fuller' pants means a controlled, well-cut look like the white linen Ralph Lauren

⁴⁹ Jay Jorgensen, *Edith Head: The Fifty Year Career of Hollywood's Greatest Costume Designer* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2010), 289–290; Edith Head and Paddy Calistro, *Edith Head's Hollywood* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983), 119.

pants (here with a Fred Astaire nonchalance and swagger).” “Fred Astaire nonchalance” was highlighted in a 1985 review titled “A Strong Sense of Ease.” The copy draws equally from *Vogue*’s archives, praising Astaire’s casual clothes, as the “perfect American ideal,” for they “fit, beautifully, and that he wears them with such incredible grace and loose-jointed style.”⁵⁰ However, *Vogue*’s advertisements for Lauren do not suggest that his style was itself feminine; rather, they appear to market a feminized reimagining of traditional American menswear. It is possible to read these advertisements as celebrations of Astaire’s masculinity, so securely positioned that it could be comfortably redeveloped into a historicized Americana without contention, even when co-opted for female presentations of androgyny. High-fashion pricing and the references to Astaire’s casual elegance thus reinforce Astaire as an icon of American nostalgia.

I contend that this moment near Astaire’s death accounts at least partially for the similarly reinvigorated interest in analyzing his films. Only now, the cultural milieu was modified by the influence of retrospective magazine articles and convenient interpretations of Astaire, aided by an accelerating industry of lifestyle advertisements aimed at men.⁵¹ It bears mention that these retrospectives were largely developed from, and supported by, images of Astaire in color. That is to say, such analyses developed a nostalgic view, cast on Astaire’s post-war career, when he himself promoted nostalgic interpretations of his generalized character. Without critical reconsideration of this

⁵⁰ “Vogue’s Last Word on Fashion in This Issue,” *Vogue* 173 (November 1983), 484–485; “A Strong Sense of Ease,” *Vogue* 175 (December 1985), 350; “Fashion: The New Allure in Paris,” *Vogue* 139 (March 1949), 123: This earlier review also highlights Astaire’s shirt, and the included photograph contains Astaire wearing a shirt in the Brooks Brothers pattern.

⁵¹ Peter Jackson, “The Cultural Politics of Masculinity: Towards a Social Geography,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 16 (1991): 199–213, at 206.

compound nostalgia, scholarship on Astaire at the time of his death did not produce a complete analysis of his gender performance and its context.

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My analysis provides a method for restoring a richer interpretation of Fred Astaire's works and their changing contexts. Based on my understanding of generalized characterization, I have proposed that a complex and intertextual definition of identity is central to disentangling the reception and analysis of character actors in Astaire's sequential films. Far larger projects are implicated in this method of approach. My thesis illustrates only a handful of potential answers for advancing discussions of masculinity in early Hollywood in an attempt to rescue Astaire from decades of misuse as rhetorical ammunition. An expanded project on Astaire would need to reconsider not only his relationships with other men on screen, but also a more detailed exploration of the historiographical divide between Astaire's partnership with Ginger Rogers versus his later collaborators and their dance styles, whether a classically trained ballerina such as Leslie Caron, or a singer-dancer like Judy Garland. Similarly, there is a pressing need for literature concerning Astaire's characterization and choreography with respect to his age, but this goes well beyond the arguments in this study. In the search for more accurate scholarship on the history of song-and-dance men, this project represents merely a first step, comparing a selection of opposing interpretations for one man's masculinity. All the same, it is my contention that a more thorough understanding of Astaire's masculinity and reception provides an important window into recent constructions of American masculinity at large.

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