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# The ABCs of *Top Hat* (1935)

*Allison Witcofski*

Speaking about the kind of filmmaking now known as classic Hollywood, the most popular and influential cinema ever invented, Vincente Minnelli gave away its secret: “I feel that a picture that stays with you is made up of a hundred or more hidden things. They’re things that the audience is not conscious of, but that accumulate” (qtd. in Schickel 257). The ABC method provides a way for finding those “hidden things” Minelli spoke about. Starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, *Top Hat* (1935) is a musical masterpiece from the classic Hollywood period that portrays the struggles of love in a lively, creative fashion. Focusing on a plot of mistaken identities and erotic landscapes, this fairytale musical sweeps viewers off their feet with energetic dances, catchy show tunes, and romantic comedy. Arguably one of the very best of the nine movies Astaire and Rogers made together, *Top Hat* utilizes the dancing, singing, and acting of this talented pair to emerge as a classic musical. *Top Hat* is a richly layered film that can be appreciated on many different levels. This paper seeks to uncover the many elements to be discovered in *Top Hat*, revealing it to be a complex, artistic masterpiece. Each of the twenty-six entries explores specific details of the movie with the aim of giving this richly appointed film the credit it truly deserves.

## **ASTAIRE**

Fred Astaire is the most important figure in the history of the Hollywood musical. As David Thomson observes, Fred Astaire “is preeminently the saint of 1930s sophistication... whose enchanting light voice kids the sentimentality of this songs” (Thomson 36). The male protagonist in *Top Hat*, Fred Astaire portrays his character, Jerry Travers, as a mirror image of

his own “real life persona.” Both incredible dancers and performers, Astaire portrays Jerry as he would himself: a happy-go-lucky, talented young man.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1899, Frederic Austerlitz Jr. grew up as a city boy in a western state (Hamilton). However, unlike many other children in the early twentieth century, Fred, and his sister Adele, were discovered as talented Hollywood potentials at an early age, and, thus, their simple lives were short lived. Thrown into the limelight at the early age of five, “[Fred] was successful both in vaudeville and on Broadway” (Hamilton). Being a duo act with his sister for almost thirty years, Fred Astaire decided to give film a shot, as a solo actor, after Adele retired in 1932 (Thomson 37).

Thanks to his talent and hard work, Astaire, at the ripe age of thirty-four, debuted in his first Hollywood film, *Dancing Lady*, in 1933, paired with Joan Crawford (Thompson 37). Thus, as the cliché saying goes, “a star was born.” Or, should it be said, playing with his name, “Fred a Star” came into being. After all, “Astaire” has been noted to be “the most refined human expression of the musical, which is in turn the extreme manifestation of pure cinema” (Thomson 36). Thus, because of his overwhelming stage presence, it is only logical that his minor appearance in *Dancing Lady* would lead to even greater Hollywood roles.

Upon catching the interest of major Hollywood studios, Astaire was signed to RKO shortly after his debut (Hamilton, Thomson 37). His career, most notably, took off in 1933 thanks to his newly formed partnership with Ginger Rogers. In fact, the two were so successful with one another that they starred in at least nine pictures together and were at the top of the charts in the RKO musical realm. Furthermore, the duo was so astounding even the famous Katharine Hepburn stopped to admire their work, applauding that “Fred gave Ginger class, and Ginger gave Fred sex” (“Fred Astaire Biography.com”).

Once his partnership with Ginger began to settle down in 1939, so too did his career (“Fred Astaire Biography.com”). In fact, Astaire ended up taking “a temporary retirement from 1945-7, during which he opened...Dance Studios” (Hamilton). Upon reentering the limelight, Astaire continued his career in the film and television industries. Although his appearances were not as well received as his earlier days with Ginger Rogers, Astaire still amounted a few well-known successes: such as starring in “two of his finest films: *Funny Face*...and *Silk Stockings*” (Thomson 37). Although neither could reach the epitome of his accomplishments achieved in the 1930s and early 1940s, Fred Astaire still managed to live up to his name and make a living out of his multitude of talents well up until the time of his death, where he died of pneumonia, in 1987 (Fred Astaire Biography.com).

As Jerry in *Top Hat*, Fred Astaire’s love for performing truly carries over into the persona of his character. From tap dancing a lullaby on a pile of sand to singing and dancing the foxtrot in “Cheek to Cheek,” Astaire’s persona dazzled audiences through his on-screen character. In fact, one could argue that Jerry and Astaire are basically the same person in that their liveliness and love for entertainment shines through both in the film and behind the scenes.

Lastly, much like his real life, Astaire in *Top Hat* plays a famous theatrical star who is constantly applauded by both fans and friends alike. Going from America to England, at the beginning of the film, Jerry is still widely



recognized by minor characters, as can be seen when the desk clerk at the club room asks Horace if Jerry is the famous star from America. Much like his real-life actor, Jerry is acknowledged as both a huge success and a major performer wherever he goes. Thus, the fame and glory of Astaire in his real life is ultimately personified through Jerry in his *Top Hat* portrayal.

## **BOWTIES**

A comical scene that introduces Horace's assistant, Bates, into the film, the squabble that Horace describes concerning bowties comes off as being quietly amusing. Bates, as Horace complains, believes that square ties are the only possible ties one can wear with evening clothes. However, Horace disagrees and relays that the butterfly bow is the ideal accessory. This squabble, having caused a tiff between the master and his serving man, leaves Jerry dumbfounded within the first few minutes of the film. A memorable comedy bit before the plot of the film is undertaken, Bates, to end the bowtie dispute, slyly congratulates Jerry on his choice of wearing a square tie with his attire when they first meet. With a cheerful conclusion, Jerry announces that "They [meaning Bates] likes me, [Jerry]!" (*Top Hat*).

Seeing as today's men do not wear bowties as adamantly as those gentlemen from the 1930s, these accessory pieces stand as a perfect representation for the emphasis of "B" in this paper. In accordance to the fashion of the elitists in this film, bowties are continuously worn with black suits. This fashion statement, as portrayed throughout the entirety of the film, is a throwback to the era of Pierre Lorillard ("Bow Tie History"). Lorillard "designed a new style of formal wear...[known as] the tuxedo and black bow tie look." ("Bow Tie History"). The tuxedo appointed with a black bow tie as the center point eventually led to the phrase "Black Tie Attire." A fashion statement concocted in 1886, Black Tie Attire was the epitome of aristocratic men during the 1930s ("Bow Tie History").

Contributing to “the iconic stud looks of Fred Astaire,” (“Bow Tie History”) bowties, within the span of *Top Hat*, not only allude to Pierre Lorillard, but they also showcase a man’s style in terms of his upper-class status.

### **CIGARETTE CASE**

As portrayed on and off throughout *Top Hat*, “the 1930s were a period when many Americans began smoking and the most significant health effects had not yet developed” (Markel). Therefore, thanks to their emergence as a unique, new activity, cigarettes were highly emphasized during this time period, and, thus appropriately, made a few cameos throughout the musical.

“In contrast to the symbol of death and disease it is today...the cigarette [during the 1930s] was a cultural icon of sophistication, glamour and sexual allure – a highly prized commodity” (Markel). Since Fred Astaire was seen as one of the dominant actors of the Classic Hollywood period, it was only fitting he should portray America’s conception of a classy aristocrat. After all, Hollywood is based on showcasing the appeals of its viewers, so, therefore, by using cigarettes within the film, Hollywood attempted to make Astaire seem more attractive to his audience. Moreover, since smoking cigarettes was seen as the fun, new thing to do, Hollywood inevitably portrayed Jerry’s character as being more familiar to the audience in that he was partaking in activities many of them would have been doing during the time period.

Due to the fact that smoking was so popular during the 1930s, one obviously needed to keep them safe when not in use. Consequently, like a trophy in a showcase, cigarettes were kept in cigarette cases. Similar to billfolds, these cases usually contained clasps that locked the holder when not being used. On the inside, cigarettes were lined up in the case and secured with an elastic-like string to hold them in place. Many, especially for the aristocrats, sported fancy

designs on the outside covers to make them look more appealing. After all, cigarette smoking was already deemed “cool,” so why not make such an activity that much more appealing?

## **DANCING**

The master of speaking with his feet, Fred Astaire demonstrates his dominance in this art form by not only wooing Dale with his quick taps, but by also beating a lullaby with his rhythmic feet in the European hotel at the beginning of the movie. Like a specialized ventriloquist, Astaire provides another form of communication for his audiences by speaking through his feet.

Like the integrated musical that *Top Hat* is, Fred Astaire’s dancing sequences help move the plot forward through their “theme[s]...spirit...[and] tone” (Altman 129-77). “[Contributing] to some general effect [of the movie],” in this case, the winning over of Dale’s affections, Fred Astaire, playing Jerry Travers, uses his dancing to convey his love towards her (Astaire 129-77). Using dancing like a mating call, Jerry is able to win over Dale, at least for a little bit, in the dance sequence of “Isn’t This a Lovely Day (To Be Caught in the Rain).”

Looking into this scene, the audience notes Dale’s reluctance to give into Jerry’s affections. Stuck under the gazebo with him during a thundering rain storm, Dale continuously moves away from Jerry, not wanting to be his “fluffy little cloud” (*Top Hat*). In fact, until the tap dancing sequence, Dale refuses to meet Jerry’s gaze at all. Only when he begins alluringly tapping and whistling next to her does Dale decide to answer his “mating call” and communicate with him through her own taps. At first, the two merely copy each other’s moves, as if to test the waters. Soon after, however, both end up paralleling one another in a duet dance. By doing so, the characters not only show their interest in one another, but they also foreshadow for the audience a potential couple paring. At the end of the dance, Jerry and Dale finish their

communication by touching one another in a fast paced, couple duet. Thus, much to Jerry's happiness, his tap dancing wins over his love interest. Although this acceptance is short-lived, seeing as Dale soon mistakes Jerry for Madge's Husband, Horace, "Isn't This a Lovely Day (To Be Caught in the Rain)," portrays how Jerry's dancing capabilities can be utilized as a form of communication that uses taps when his words are unable to win over Dale.

Another example of Jerry's dancing, as a form of visual enjoyment and specialized speech, can be witnessed when Jerry, as mentioned previously in this section, uses his taps as a lullaby. Having irritated Dale with his hard knocks, seeing as he was tap dancing above her room when she was trying to sleep, Jerry quickly forms an apology through a softer dance sequence. Sprinkling sand over the floor to dull his steps, Jerry moves to a slower, quieter rhythm, asserting himself as Dale's "official sandman" (*Top Hat*).

As a result of Jerry's quiet taps, Dale soon finds herself drifting off to sleep with a smile on her face. Thus, Jerry's plan, having worked, is portrayed as a sentimental dance that pleads for forgiveness. By speaking through his feet, Jerry is able to win over Dale's affections, at least for the few moments it takes to lull her into sleep.

### **EDWARD EVERETT HORTON JR.**

A common figure in the Astaire and Rogers musicals, Edward Everett Horton is well known for his supporting roles in several Classic Hollywood films. In fact, "It seemed like Edward Everett Horton appeared in just about every Hollywood comedy made in the 1930s. He [depicted] the perfect counterpart to the great gentlemen and protagonists of the films" (Boehm). Put in another way, Horton took on the lesser roles of Hollywood films and, through them, gave the movies the comedic breaks their audiences deserved.



Born in Brooklyn, New York in 1886, Horton, from the get-go, was exposed to the glamorous world of show business thanks to the focus on theatrical performances that painted the appeal of “The Big Apple.” Arriving on the theatrical stage in the early 1900s, Horton quickly discovered his knack for acting due to his college debut at Columbia University. Around “1907 he joined the Dempsey Light Opera Company,” shortly followed “In 1908” by his involvement with “Louis Mann’s acting troupe” (Aliperti).

Thanks to his background in theatrical performances, Edward Horton made the jump from stage performances to cinematic roles when he arrived on the film scene in 1922. Due to his “distinctive voice,” Horton easily bridged his own transition from silent films to “talkies” (Aliperti).

Since he had such a gifted sound on the big screens, Horton’s movie acting career took off, which resulted in over one hundred different film appearances throughout his career (Aliperti, Boehm). According to Horton, he was so successful in the film business because “[he had his] own little kingdom” in the Hollywood realm. “[He did] the scavenger parts no one else [wanted], and [he got] well paid for it” (Aliperti). Eventually, however, Horton’s career came to an end when he died in 1970 from cancer (Boehm).

Alluding to his “kingdom” in the Hollywood realm, Horton usually portrayed lesser characters in films. Thanks to his commonly comedic castings, he “made an institution of the

Nervous Nellie character” (“Edward Everett Horton Is Dead”). In other words, Horton’s roles usually portrayed him as an “instantly recognizable [character who was] jittery” and “made [everything] sound like the end of the world” (“Edward Everett Horton Is Dead”). Having been said, Horton’s portrayals may not have been the most grand or dramatic, but they were definitely enjoyable and easily distinguishable.

Although most of his castings were small parts, not all of his roles were. In fact, one of his biggest castings can be aptly witnessed in RKO’s *Top Hat*. While he did not play the main character, Horton definitely stepped up his acting in that he portrayed the main secondary male character: Horace Hardwick. A man known for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Horace’s misfortunes can be seen in his many confrontations with his suspicious wife, Madge, and his run-ins with the overly protective Alberto Beddini. Known as being the main character’s comical “right hand man,” Horton’s Horace helped portray *Top Hat* as a family fun film. “Horton was the quintessential sidekick, reliant as a friend...whose happiness came from worrying about and organizing the lives of his friends” (Slide).

Thanks to the comedic relief he constantly bestows within the movie, Horton’s Horace allows the audience to laugh at his misfortunes and cheer on his willingness to help Jerry win over Dale’s heart. As a whole, “Edward Everett Horton...knew that his demeanor evoked comedy. [Thus, he] actively worked to create a comic effect” (Slide).

## **FENCING SWORDS**

One of the most bizarre features in *Top Hat* is the collection of fencing swords that Alberto Beddini keeps at his disposal. Odd items to be kept in a ritzy, Italian hotel, the fencing swords strike the audience as comical items to behold.

In accordance to their reference in the movie, these items are brought to the forefront of the film when Alberto catches wind that Jerry, who is being mistaken for Madge's husband, is pestering his newly wedded wife. Taking on his role as the man of the relationship, seeing as gender roles during the 1930s called for males to portray the more masculine traits of their affiliations, Beddini assures Dale that he will protect her as he runs upstairs to stop Jerry's tap dancing. Although he never gets the chance to use his fencing skills against Jerry, he ends up threatening Horace with his foreboding jabs towards the man.

During the 1930s, historically known as a time "of physical culture," sports like fencing portrayed "the robustness of French manhood" (Tumblety 17). Through his use of grabbing a fencing sword to threaten Jerry, Alberto is exercising the stereotypical characteristics of males during this time period. Seeing his wife upset, Alberto reacts through physical means, as most men during the 1930s would have done. Going along with his French roots, Alberto's use of "fencing [is] portrayed as a natural continuation of the tradition of French skill..., a "national glory" that nourished courage and resilience" (Nye 164). Thus, by possessing fencing swords, Alberto not only asserts himself as a Frenchman, but he also allows the audience to see him as a physical male who is not afraid of brawls and confrontation.

Through their presence in the film, Alberto's fencing swords portray him, more thoroughly, as a masculine Frenchman. Taking on French ideals and masculine gender roles, Beddini, thanks to these sporting items, is further described as a whole. Besides portraying him as a manly individual, the swords also help in painting Alberto as an exotic character to American audiences in that he personifies "the French...ideal of duty" (Nye 99). In other words, Alberto, to audiences, is seen as a foreign character depicted in an appealing, fairytale-like light.

Thus, thanks to his readiness to brawl with a fencing sword, Beddini is shown as a more intricate character within the scope of *Top Hat*.

## **GLOVES**

During the 1930s, gloves symbolized sophistication, taste, and class. In an era hit by economic downfalls, people chose to invest in accessories more so than outfits. Being both cheaper and more readily attainable, items like gloves, hats, and jewelry gave wearers the ritzy feeling they wanted to attain in a time when budgets were tight and fashion was still all the rage (“1930s Accessories”).

Throughout *Top Hat*, the two main characters, Jerry and Dale, are both seen wearing gloves. Used to accentuate their high-class outfits, these two wore gloves more as a commodity than a fashion statement. Both characters’ high social status showcase the luxuries of the upper class that the lower class could not so readily attain. In other words, because of the money readily available to them, as opposed to people of lower classes, Dale and Jerry are able to flaunt their gloves as commonplace accessories rather than rare possessions.

Despite the glitz and glam portrayed by the main characters in the film, “The 1930s commenced in economic depression and ended in global war. A somber mood, an uncertain future plagued the nation” (Bennington). America relied on fashion in the 1930s to lift morale (Bennington). In other words, “fashion,” such as those portrayed in magazines and clothing articles, helped people “momentarily escape the harsh realities of the decade, and thus dream about a bright future” (Bennington). In terms of gloves during this decade, the middle and lower classes would have had one or two pairs for special occasions as opposed to the aristocracy which would have possessed multiple sets. Otherwise, in terms of the lower working classes,

work gloves were the only pairs these people would have possessed. Unlike the lower classes, the aristocracy, such as Jerry, would have owned gloves to complement their Black Tie Attire.

## **HAIRSTYLE**

When someone mentions the 1930s, what usually comes to mind? The Great Depression and World War II most likely, right? Well, what about the hairstyles that women sported during that time? Think about it, the curly, bobbed hair was basically all the rage back then. Coming out of the 1920s were shorter, more pixie-like cuts. These cuts can be seen in movies pertaining to that period such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. The 1930s acted as a sort of maturing stage for hairstyles in that women began growing out their shorter locks in favor of sporting bobbed cuts and shoulder length styles.

Since the 1920s represented a start for women's rights activists, the hairstyles of the decade were cut short to symbolize women as being equal to men. With both genders sporting similar cuts, women's hair stood as an outcry for equality rather than "fragile" femininity. "It's a paradox that in a decade that was laying the groundwork for the equality of women, fashion dictated that women and men [had] to look more and more alike" (Nash).

When the 1930s came around, women decided to revert back to their softer ways by opting to focus, once again, on the traits that made them feminine. Thus, waistlines and busts were emphasized to portray "the natural beauty of the [female] body" (Nash). With this change in pace from boyish features to womanly assets, hairstyles also took on a new emphasis for a more sophisticated, regal appearance.

This change included "a softer look than the sleek bob and tight ringlets of the 1920s" ("1930s Hairstyles"). Thus, "women began wearing their hair in more feminine styles with parts sweeping to the side or down the middle" ("1930s Hairstyles"). This emphasis for a more

elegant, delicate look can definitely be witnessed throughout *Top Hat*. Dale's hairstyle is a prime example as her longer locks make her look more peppy and sweet in nature.

Going along with the idea of more womanly appearances depicted through hairstyles, one could argue that said styles may have helped contribute to the depiction of characters within *Top Hat*. For instance, Madge, throughout the film, is seen as having shorter hair than her friend Dale. This subtle difference in appearance could be alluding to the fact that Madge seems to be manlier, in terms of characterization, than Dale. Whereas Dale comes off as being airy and fun, looking for love in a world of misconceptions, Madge appears to be more skeptical and crude. Perhaps, due to the fact that Madge's hair is closer to a male's cut than Dale's is, her characterization is affected by it. Maybe Madge was one of those early feminist activists who chose to sport a more boyish cut well into the 1930s. Like a personification of characterization, hairstyles for women in *Top Hat* are definitely an asset of the film that must be noted.

## **ITALY**

According to Altman, musicals fall into three distinct subgenres: show musicals, fairytale musicals, and folk musicals. In terms of *Top Hat*, this film is definitely a fairytale musical. Putting emphasis on sex as well as exoticism, fairytale musicals take viewers to interesting lands and show them how sex can be used in different ways: for battle, for adventure, and for relationships (Altman 141). In terms of the Astaire and Rogers film this paper focuses on, exoticism takes the audience to Italy while sex leads the couple on a journey of self-discovery through the use of mistaken identities (Altman 141).

Seeing the fairytale musical played out through *Top Hat*, the audience is sent on a wild goose chase throughout Italy. When Jerry finds out the love of his life, Dale, is in Italy visiting Horace's wife, Madge, the love-struck man talks his friend into flying to Italy. Using sex as an

adventure to win over Dale, Jerry's "uncontrolled drives" cause him to make rash decisions in order to quell Dale's "apparent fear of sexuality" (Altman 141). Arriving in Italy a few hours after Dale, Jerry lets his love be his guide as he travels around the Italian resort in search of Dale. While on the hunt for his paralleled partner, the audience not only feels the urgency of Jerry's actions, but the viewers, too, catch glimpses of exoticism along the way.

In terms of exoticism being noted, especially when talking about the Italian resort portrayed throughout most of the film, one must understand the use of such exquisite landscapes. Instead of the audience being familiar with the territory, fairytale musicals use exoticism to ensnare the viewer's mind. This use of foreign places creates an illusion of unfamiliar territories that stimulate the audience's fanciful musings. Instead of allowing the audience to be comfortable in the land they are used to, the directors and producers of *Top Hat* place most of the film inside Italy so as to treat the audience to new spectacles outside of their United States safe havens. Thus, Italy is seen as a beacon on the horizon that can only be reached in the portrayal of *Top Hat*. After all, most people watching the film have probably never been to Italy. Therefore, having been stated, viewers are allowed to explore the unfamiliar territory through the actions of Jerry and his sexualized adventure.

Again, seeing as viewers of this movie have most likely never been to Italy, the exoticism in the film stands out as a foreign country full of wonder and awe. From gondolas on the Riviera to beautiful Italian accents showcased by hotel staff and policemen, the world of Italy comes to life in a magical portrayal. As if to take a break from reality, audiences who watch this movie are transported to another world and escape the monotony of everyday life. In other words, seeing as this musical is a Classical Hollywood film, most of its viewers were, and probably still are, from the United States. Therefore, instead of focusing on a film in America, which many of the 1930s

musicals of the time period did, *Swing Time* being a prime example, *Top Hat* chose to break from the norm and explore the wonders of Italy through the sex driven adventure between Jerry and Dale. Thus, the potential for cultural displacement definitely brought an air of intriguing interest to this film (Altman 129-77).

## **JUVENESCENCE**

Definitely one of the best ways to describe the main male in this film, juvenescence refers to the childishness of Jerry Travers (“juvenescent”). “Being [both] youthful” in character and “young in appearance,” Jerry makes the musical enjoyable to watch for audiences of all ages (“juvenescent”). Instead of acting like a crotchety old man with doubts about his future, such as how Astaire portrays his character in the later film *The Band Wagon*, Jerry acts as the polar opposite. Full of life and optimism, Jerry leaves his fate to chance as he scurries along, blinded by love, throughout the film. Letting admiration be his guide and allowing his charming personality to take over, Jerry acts juvenile in his pursuit of Dale. Instead of cordially courting her like a prestigious gentleman, he uses his talents and money to not only dance and sing around his female counterpart, but to also shower her with excessive amounts of flowers and complements. Thus, instead of a relationship like Madge and Horace, based on a business-like partnership and elitism, as can be seen in the fact that they hardly spend time with one another while on vacation in Italy, Jerry molds an almost childlike pact with Dale in that he wins her over with faithful companionship and playful songs about being “caught in the rain.”

## **KERAUNOPHOBIA**

A very complex name for a rather easy-to-understand anxiety, keraunophobia is the “fear of thunder [and] lightning” (“Keraunophobia”). In terms of *Top Hat*, Dale, when trapped under a gazebo at the horse riding club, jumps at the sound of a thunderbolt. Having recently told Jerry

that she is not afraid of the storm, Dale, having been called out by the thunder for her mild case of keraunophobia, is forced to put up with Jerry's comforting song about the weather. Although she refuses to accept Jerry's advances at first, she is eventually won over by his confidence and charm when dealing with the thunderstorm. Therefore, thanks to her phobia, Dale is able to seek refuge in Jerry's song and dance, thus carrying on the plot of the film.

During the comforting number, entitled "Isn't This a Lovely Day (To Be Caught in the Rain)," the two leads use voice and rhythm to work out Dale's fear and turn it into a fun activity. By focusing on the steps rather than the storm, Dale becomes enchanted by Jerry's "magic." Consequently, by the end of the song, Dale is able to accept the storm as nothing more than a minor scare. Therefore, the audience is able to take joy in the fact that the two main characters have finally come eye-to-eye, if only for a little bit, and have accepted their destinies as a future romantic pair.

## **LOOPHOLE**

Despite the fact that *Top Hat* is a family friendly film, this movie still delves into the world of explicit love. However, smartly orchestrated by the film's directors and producers, *Top Hat* makes "a detour around the obstacle of censorship" in order to delve into the depths of the affections showcased between Dale and Jerry (Altman 171). In other words, love is explored through a scandalizing sheen, even though all matters of explicit love are merely just misconceptions blown out of proportion.

"Typical in its unwillingness to reveal semi-clad bodies or stress sexual desire, *Top Hat* nevertheless engages the spectator in a journey into the forbidden" by painting sex as an adventure (Altman 171). Whereas Dale believes Jerry is already a married man, she chooses to stray from his love because she believes such affections are forbidden (Altman 171). An

unknowing mistake, Dale's misconceptions and fears for falling in love with Jerry give *Top Hat* an "innocent way to displace forbidden desire" (Altman 173). Thus, the movie can "get around the Code" in a way that "[substitutes] for actual infidelity [of] a character's belief" by making Dale think she "is involved with an unfaithful husband" (Altman 173). After all, Dale believes Jerry is Madge's husband, so it is only fair the audience feels sympathy towards her when she chooses her friend's marriage over her own happiness.

Thanks to this dramatic irony, the audience is forced to admit a longing "[for] Ginger's [desire of] the forbidden" (Altman 176). Although the audience knows about the misconceptions being thrown around in the film, viewers still give into the cravings of "encouraging adulterous activity [by] openly celebrating the emotional consummation of" the so called "affair" going on between Dale and Jerry (Altman 176). This is especially true when the audience craves for the couple to come together, despite the fact that Dale has just married her clothing designer, Alberto. Only when the plot is revealed that Dale and Alberto were not legally married does the audience rest easily knowing that their partaking in adulterous desires is actually just another misconception of the film (Altman 176). Thus, illicit love or passion is explored through a censoring loophole not only to explore sexual desires in a more appropriate way, but to also showcase affections in a more family friendly, enjoyable manner.

## **MONOCLE**

A very brief piece shown within the musical, the monocle appears at the beginning of the film in the club room scene. When a waiter walks into the room and sets down two glasses, making a slight noise doing so, one aristocrat takes off his monocle to give said waiter a disapproving look. Like a dramatic emphasis, the monocle, which normally covers one's eye, is removed by its user in order to show that the nobleman means business.

A common accessory among older gentlemen, as well as elitists, the monocle is a prescriptive piece of eyewear that acts just as glasses do. In other words, monocles are used for “correcting [the] defective vision of one eye, held in position by the facial muscles” (“monocle”). Although most, during the 1930s, were made for the usage of correcting one’s vision momentarily, some of these eye pieces were merely worn to enhance one’s appearance as an intellectual. A common item among the rich, monocles, much like the aforementioned “gloves” section in this paper, were used to enhance one’s overall fashion appearance. As a result, it was not uncommon for both men, and women, to wear these eyepieces in order to “give themselves an edge” in the trend-setting realm. Like a sign for one’s ego, monocles usually meant the wearer was both wealthy and an important figure worth being recognized.

## **NUPTIAL**

Seen as the climax of *Top Hat*, Dale’s marriage to Alberto acts as the epitome of the film. From the start of the musical until their engagement announcement, Dale has been constantly struggling to understand her misconceptions about Jerry and Horace. Only when Madge points out that a husband would keep the boys at bay does Dale come to terms with her need to be married.

Marrying out of protection more so than love, seeing as Alberto has always had feelings for her whereas she cannot really reciprocate said emotions, Dale uses this nuptial to solve her problem concerning Jerry and Horace. Dramatic irony for the audience, Dale’s use of marriage as a shield ends up leaving the rest of the cast to figure out the true plot of the film: misidentification. Thus, thanks to Alberto swooping in and stealing away Dale, Jerry is able to slide in and explain the misunderstanding to his counterpart. Therefore, through doing so, the two are finally able to love one another with no other “strings attached.”

In hindsight, without the nuptial between Alberto and Dale, the film would have probably turned out very differently. Dale would have most likely ran off, back to London, and Jerry would have probably spent the rest of his life trying to track her down. Thus, the musical would have left the audience dazed and confused as to whether the couple would ever reunite. Much like the plot in *It's Always Fair Weather*, a 1955 musical starring Gene Kelly, the viewer would have watched the characters part ways at the end of the film without really feeling a sense of finality. In other words, like in *It's Always Fair Weather*, where the three army comrades meet up for a reunion only to part ways by the end of the film in a rather awkward, civilized manner, so, too, would Dale and Jerry have probably left one another. Similar to the aforementioned Gene Kelly film, *Top Hat*, if left without the nuptial scene between Dale and Alberto, would have left the audience uncertain about whether the main characters would ever reunite.

Therefore, having all been said, the nuptial allows Jerry to come to terms with Dale's mistake, and, thus, moves him to trap her in a gondola in order to reconcile her misunderstandings. Consequently, the plot, thanks to the inclusion of the marriage, is able to end with the audience knowing that the couple has definitely reached their destination of a "happily ever after" finale.

### **OSTRICH FEATHER DRESS**

"In the depression of the 1930s, many cinemagoers wanted to escape from the daily grind" (Lavery). Thus, by going to the movies, "they could spend a dreamy hour or two...believing in" the glamorous lifestyles of Classic Hollywood (Lavery). Therefore, having been stated, *Top Hat* is a perfect example of an exotic journey that allows the viewer to escape reality in order to divulge into the imaginary. Not only does *Top Hat* woo its audience with

fanciful worlds such as Italy and England, it also engages the viewer with dazzling displays of dance and fashion.

In terms of *Top Hat*, a moment that draws on all three above mentioned points in this musical occurs when Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire hit the balcony ballroom in the elaborate “Cheek to Cheek” dance.

With twirls and dips galore, this song incorporates the beautiful dancing talents of Astaire and Rogers while also drawing on the imagery of Venice. Finding love in a foreign world, “Cheek to



Cheek” not only ensnares the mind with its fluidity and romance, but it also captures the audience’s attention with Roger’s beautiful ostrich feathered dress.

The dress displayed in “Cheek to Cheek” showcases “the feathers (which had been extended at a cost of \$1,500) [floating] stunningly” throughout the dance sequence while “Rogers glides across the equally beautiful...realistic ‘Venetian Canal’ Big White Set” (Lavery). Seemingly perfect on the big screen, just the opposite occurred when the cameras were not rolling. The irony of this scene, unbeknownst to most people who watch this movie, is that Astaire actually hated Rogers’ feathered dress. In fact, he wanted Rogers to wear a different dress she had previously worn in one of her former films, *The Gay Divorcee* (Lavery). For Astaire, all seemed to be “his way or the highway” in this matter. However, he was quickly forced to have a change of heart. Thanks to “a threat by Rogers and her...mother...to walk out

[of]...the film unless they got their way,” Astaire was “won over...and the dress was [put] back in the film” (Lavery). Thus, as a result of the fighting spirit portrayed by both Rogers and her mother, one of the most iconic scenes in film history is able to live on for thousands of viewers even to this day.

## **PEARLS**

Worn by both of the main female characters in *Top Hat*, pearls not only accentuated an outfit, but they also granted the wearer a sense of elevated status. With “Budgets...being stretched very thin...the same economical reductions were made on” jewelry in the 1930s (“1930s Jewelry Styles and Trends”). “Because of the glamorous Hollywood effect, more women were wearing more jewelry...[which] shifted from simple to extravagant (“1930s Jewelry Styles and Trends”). Thanks to costume jewelry and things such as “fake” pearls being produced, accessories were made cheaper in order for people to achieve a look of sophistication and class without having to pay excessive amounts of money in order to do so. In other words, “Rich looking 1930s women’s jewelry,” such as pearl necklaces and earrings, “was necessary to [make] a poor dress look like a million dollars” (“1930s Jewelry Styles and Trends”). After all, with the Great Depression hitting the 1930s so tremendously, every dollar counted. However, one must bear in mind that, unlike the average women in the 1930s, Dale’s and Madge’s jewelry were most likely not costume imitations because, seeing as they belong to the aristocracy, they could easily afford the “real deal” pearly items.

In terms of the overall effect of pearls being portrayed throughout the musical, one must note why such an accessory was chosen to be worn by the rich women throughout this film. In terms of the aristocracy at this period in American history, pearls classified the wearer as a rich, well-to-do individual (Julie). “Pearls [were] a perfect complement to the pale colours and fussy

fashions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century” (Julie). They also alluded to exotic lands and famous females such as Queen Elizabeth I, who frequently wore strings of pearls, and the famous goddess Venus, whose “oysters and pearls [symbolized] love” (Julie). In other words, pearls not only noted the wearer as being a powerful, classy woman, but they also represented the user as a lady worthy of affection. In other words, “the pearl...suggests tradition, aristocracy and a sign of wealth” (Julie). Thus, having all been stated, people like Dale and Madge probably chose to wear their pearls in order to distinguish themselves as upper-class, noble women worthy of admiration.

#### **QUIET: “Silence must be observed in the club rooms”**

The London Thackeray Club, a hotspot for sophisticated gentlemen, is the first scene in *Top Hat*. Opening up with aristocrats decked out in top hats and bowties, this first scene emphasizes the realm of the musical. Centered around a theatrical superstar, Jerry Travers, the club room within *Top Hat* helps highlight the childish nature of the main character. Despite the fact that he is an elitist held in the utmost regard of the upper class, the audience is able to distinguish him as an outsider because he does not take societal rules too seriously. Where the men in the clubs puff their cigars and read their newspapers in silence, Jerry chooses to have some fun by experimenting with noise. Crinkling his paper and clearing his throat, to see just how much he can get away with in the club, the audience sees Jerry’s comical side from the get-go. Even when Horace and Jerry depart from the gentlemen’s room, Jerry chooses to have the last laugh by tap dancing loudly, thus disrupting the peaceful nature of the club room and its essential rule, “Silence must be observed in the club rooms.” Like a rebel, Jerry breaks the one rule in the club, observing silence, and characterizes himself as a happy-go-lucky individual.

The characterization of Astaire as a playful, childish character, as seen in his portrayal of Jerry Travers, directly contrasts one of his later films: *The Band Wagon*. Whereas in *Top Hat*

Astaire is loved and adored by almost everyone he meets, thanks to his cheerful demeanor and positivity, *The Band Wagon* shows Astaire as a washed up theatrical star who has a more pessimistic outlook on life. Made eighteen years after *Top Hat*, *The Band Wagon* stands as a direct contrast to the clubroom's enthusiastic youth. Said movie portrays Astaire as a star going out of business. Instead of adoring fans, he has a few friends who actually care about his career and dancing abilities. Only when he is forced into the limelight, with the help of his female counterpart, Cyd Charisse, does Astaire gain fame similar to that in which he possessed in his *Top Hat* youth. Thus, reverting back to the first scene of *Top Hat*, the club room helps characterize Astaire as being at the top of his game. Instead of a pessimistic star, Astaire, in his portrayal of Jerry, is seen as a man worth noting, full of playfulness and hope.

## ROBES

One of the most reoccurring articles of clothing within the span of this musical, robes, or dressing gowns as they were more commonly called in the 1930s, stand out as unique fashion features worn by several characters throughout *Top Hat*. From the elaborate, silky wrap worn by



Ginger Rogers when she first meets Jerry to the bulky cloak adorned by Bates when he is first introduced to the audience, these items of clothing are not only functional throughout the movie, but they are also fashionable.

Utilized more commonly in the past than in the present, robes in the 1930s were more trendy and practical than their counterparts of today. Whereas, in today's society, robes are mostly just fluffy fabrics worn to get in and out of the shower, dressing gowns of the past were common go-to leisure items used for everyday usage around the house. Aptly going along with their usage, according to the time era, these "dressing gowns were referred to as lounging robes" (Schneider). Much like how people commonly snuggle into oversized hoodies in today's day and age, robes were used in virtually the same way during the period in which *Top Hat* was filmed.

Differing from the present, robes in the past were more elaborate in their designs. For men, "dressing gowns featured large notched lapels with cord trimmings on the edges, the pockets, and on the cuffs" (Schneider). Likewise, women's robes were just as fancy. Most were made from silk or a lighter fabric than today's puffy covers, and portrayed elaborate designs or fanciful frills that helped flatter the woman's figure. Thus, when looking at the past, even such leisurely items like lounging robes were more elaborate, yet still functional, than most of today's counterparts.

## **SAND**

Deeming himself as Dale's personal "Mr. Sandman," Jerry, having kept up, and upset, the sleepy female with his chipper tap dancing, within the first few minutes of the musical, decides to apologize through his feet. When words fail to mend the irritation Dale displays towards Jerry, he uses his talent to soothe her annoyance. Having gotten the sand from a cigarette receptacle outside of Horace's hotel room, seeing as smoking was "all the rage" back in the 1930s, Jerry puts his apology to good use through upcycling the sand as a sort of muting device for his loud taps.

Not only does the sand in the cigarette container portray an innovated mind for the male protagonist, but it also acts as a turning point in the relationship between Dale and Jerry. Instead of letting her storm off, Jerry's apology, through tap dancing over sand, relays unto the audience this pair is yet to be finished in terms of associating with one another. In other words, by using the sand to dull his tap dancing into a melodic lullaby, Jerry sets up the plot for the rest of the musical: winning over the girl of his dreams. Although the sand leads to momentary happiness between the two characters, the musical quickly turns to other plot devices such as gazebo scenes and Venetian gondolas to bring the storyline to its epitome: a happily ever after. The sand thus acts as a transitioning piece that not only brings about the main plot of the musical, but also acts as a foundation the other scenes build upon.

## **TELEPHONES**

In today's culture, where cellphones run rampant and wall phones are basically a thing of the past, rotary and operator conducting telephones strike the audience, especially the younger generations, as odd contraptions to behold. In terms of rotary phones, having to wind up a dial for each number when calling up a friend worked great in the past, but have obviously lost their touch in today's evolutionary playing field. Likewise, operator controlled phones, in which the user requested to be connected to a certain number, have also become virtually non-existent in today's society. Seeing as both phones pose rather painstaking processes, at least for today's texting generation, these phones, although archaic and odd, serve a unique purpose on the set of *Top Hat*.

Adequate in terms of electronics during the 1930s, rotary and operator conductive telephones portrayed in *Top Hat* are used as a means of communication between characters. Acting as catalysts to get the characters to interact with one another, these devices, throughout

the film, force the plot to deepen throughout the movie. Put in another way, characters are still able to communicate with one another in a more informal way, even when they are not in the same room. Thus, telephones influence the plot by giving the



characters an opportunity to further digress with one another throughout the story.

An example of plot furthering in action can be seen when Dale calls up Jerry to try and trick him into admitting he is cheating on Madge. Still believing Jerry is Madge's flirtatious husband, Dale uses an operator conductive phone to confront Jerry in an informal way. Although they meet shortly after the phone call to discuss their "relationship" with one another, where Dale pretends that she has met Jerry before, the telephone, at the beginning of this mischievous scene, helps in furthering the plot of the movie while also allowing Dale a safe distance of separation from Jerry in order to work up her exposing scheme. Thus, like the aforementioned term of catalyst, operator managing and rotary using telephones exert an influence on *Top Hat* in a casual way that suits a few of the characters' informal conversing needs.

## **UNITED STATES**

Never actually portrayed within *Top Hat*, the United States acts as an off-screen starting point upon which Jerry's musical journey takes off. Being a huge stage star from America, having traveled to London to meet up with Horace, a big time theatrical producer, Jerry acts as the personification of the "American Dream." Seeing as many people already know of his reputation, alluding to the desk clerk who asks Horace about Jerry's whereabouts in the club

room scene, the male protagonist's rise to fame in America paints the United States as an inspiring land that even the exotic people of Europe can appreciate. Acting as a confidence booster for the United States, Jerry carries out his American ideals throughout the film in order to portray himself as a standup guy worth noting.

Another piece that the United States alludes to is that it acts as a safe bet within the realm of exoticism. No matter what happens throughout the film, Jerry knows he can always return back to his American roots. Whether he finds love with Dale or not, Jerry can rest assured knowing his career and fans will always welcome him back to America with open arms. Thus, seeing as Italy and Great Britain are portrayed as chances that Jerry chooses to take, the United States is portrayed as the safe haven after the foreign escapades recede.

## **VIOLET**

Violet, also known as Horace's former "side girl," acts as the representation of the letter "V." Although the audience never meets this character, she inevitably plays a key role throughout one of the underlying plots in *Top Hat*. Having met her at a zoo in London, Horace relays to Jerry that Violet was the one girl he cheated on Madge with. Although it was only for a very short time, Horace is plagued with guilt about the whole ordeal. Wanting to be nothing but a pleasing husband to his wife, Horace, throughout most of the musical, is afraid that Madge knows about his little secret.

Being confronted by Beddini about chasing after Dale, since Dale has confusingly mistaken Horace's true identity, Horace fears the rest of the main characters in the play are ganging up on him. Only when Jerry clears the air about mistaken identities is Horace able to breath freely knowing Jerry is the only other character who is aware of Violet. Thus, acting as a comical side plot within the play, Violet helps represent the case of mistaken identities.

Therefore, Violet not only contributes to the comedy of the film, but she also personifies herself as being a source of anxiety for Horace. Thus, Violet inevitably helps characterize Horace in that her mentioning helps portray him as a jittery person. Being plagued by thoughts of their cheating ways throughout the musical, Horace ends up portraying himself to the audience as an overly nervous, jumpy individual. In all, Violet helps further create the characteristics of Horace's character in terms of *Top Hat*.

### **WHITE AND BLACK**

One of the most telling attributes of *Top Hat*'s classical antiquity is its use of black and white cinematography. During an age where film was quickly transitioning from black and white to color, *Top Hat* can be seen as one of the last classical grayscale movies. In terms of *Top Hat*'s color scheme, "Black and white" hues paint this movie as being an advocate "of glamour cinematography" ("Movies and Film"). In other words, alluding to its partaking in Classical Hollywood, *Top Hat*'s coloring portrays this musical as a trailblazer in the antiquity of authentic, monochromatic films. After all, some of the most famous names, such as "Garbo, Bogart...[and] Dietrich...[were] photographed in black and white." Thus, why should such names as Astaire and Rogers be excluded from this list? Therefore, as RKO cleverly saw, the use of monochrome shooting, instead of adapting the newer colored filming craze, left *Top Hat* in the category of authentic films in Classical Hollywood. Thanks to its famous faces and color scheme, *Top Hat* can easily be recognized as a perfect example of "glamor cinematography" ("Movies and Film"). Aptly summed up, "[Viewers of *Top Hat*] do not experience a lack of color in [this] black and white [film]...If anything, it is the introduction of colors" that would have left this film in a state of awkward uneasiness ("Vertigo: Philosophers on Film" 182-3).

**“X” (Criss-Cross)**

“I’m warning you, never let your path criss-cross mine again.”

As uttered by Alberto Beddini, this iconic scene in *Top Hat* portrays a confrontation between the two secondary men in the musical. Alberto, believing that Horace has been flirting with Dale, threatens



him. Believing Dale’s confusion of Horace, Alberto, who happens to know the real Horace personally, relays unto the man that he should be faithful to Madge and not stray from his married ways. The irony of this scene is noted by the audience, who is all too aware that Horace believes Alberto is talking about his former affair with Violet.

Thanks to the overlapping theme of mistaken identities throughout this musical, the irony of “criss-crossing” paths comes to light. Dale thinks Jerry is Horace. Alberto believes Horace is having affairs behind Madge’s back. Horace claims both Alberto and Madge know about his affair with Violet. Madge thinks Horace might be cheating on her. No wonder this film is so intriguing!

Like a mystery musical, the audience is forever hoping that the characters will uncover the truth about one another and, thus, come to a peaceful, happy conclusion by the end of the film.

**YEARNING**

As mentioned previously throughout this paper, the main plot of *Top Hat* is for Dale and Jerry to overstep misconceptions in order to become a couple. After all, this fairytale musical is

nothing without its romantic pair! If these two characters do not fall in love, there really is no musical. This is especially true in terms of *Top Hat*'s "sex as adventure" theme (Altman 129-77).

As mentioned previously, sex helps drive this musical forward in that the exoticism portrayed throughout the film allows the main characters to pursue their desires in new realms. From Jerry admitting his love for Dale in Great Britain to Dale figuring out her identity crisis mistake in Italy, sex is explored as a means of adventurous expeditions that ultimately end in desire. Seeing as Dale wants to be with Jerry throughout *Top Hat*, but chooses to stay away because she believes he is Madge's husband, the idea of yearning is present throughout the entirety of the movie. Only when identities are revealed is true love allowed to finally ensue, permitting Jerry and Dale to dance their way into a form of "happily ever after." Having been stated, thanks to this fairytale musical's exotic pursuit of sex, in terms of an adventurous type of way, yearning is finally able to rule by the end of the musical (Altman 129-77). Thus, the plot is ultimately resolved thanks to one man's inability to give up on love, and one woman's reawakening of desire after being thrown through a whirlwind of misconceptions.

### **ZZZ (Sleep)**

The last letter to be discussed in this ABC paper, "Z" stands for the gentle sleep that washes over Horace, Jerry, and Dale after the sand dance tapping scene. Seen as a feel-good passage that leaves the viewer smiling, this adorable part of *Top Hat* focuses on the innocent love Jerry holds for Dale. Realizing he needs to make amends with the newfound girl of his dreams, Jerry uses his dancing skills to woo her over. Not only does his dancing leave her in a peaceful slumber, but it also engulfs her in a sense of security and affection.

Thus, this lullaby scene plays upon the movie as a feel-good spot where the audience recognizes the wholesomeness of Jerry's affections. Instead of trying to win over a wife for more

sexual arousing means, such as musicals like *All That Jazz* represent, where the main character is quite the womanizer, *Top Hat* portrays Jerry as a loving gentleman who wants nothing more than to make his lady happy. Instead of pursuing her as a prize, Jerry chases after Dale in a purely romantic sense. All he wants is to live a happy life with her. In no way does this lullaby scene suggest sexual innuendos of any kind. Thanks to the rhythmic taps that put all characters into a happy slumber, this scene assures the audience of the wholesome, gentle loving plot that will inevitably pursue throughout the course of *Top Hat*.

*Pictures courtesy of the Del Valle archive.*

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