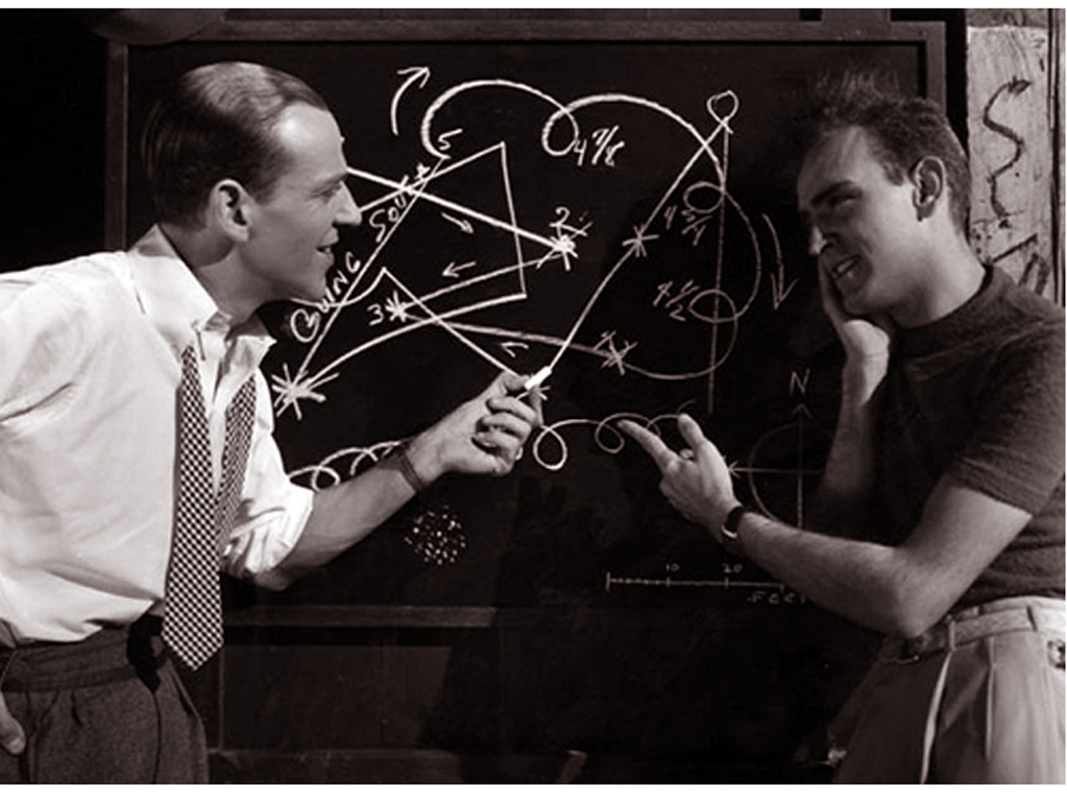


DANCING WITH ASTAIRE AND ROGERS

Their Smooth Steps Take
Many Torturous Weeks to Perfect



Hollywood. The woodpeckers were driving everybody on the RKO lot crazy again.

From early morning until late night, for six weeks, the rhythmic punches of leather on wood had saturated the studio and all its alleys with constant, infuriating dinning. Carpenters stuffed pine shavings in their ears. Painters missed a stroke and swore cuttingly. Actors prayed for respite from the incessant drumming of six rubbery feet. Scenarists bit their nails and howled, on stricken occasion, like wolves.

The splintering sound came from a building 300 feet long, 60 feet high, a vast barn as plain as a field boot. In it, tired, awry, a little defiant and looking faintly like weary scarecrows, stood the biggest money-making stars in the RKO studio.

Rehearsal—No white tie glistened starchily on Fred Astaire's lean neck, no tail-coat flared out as he danced. No swirl of chiffon billowed around Ginger Rogers. She wore creased slacks with a hole torn in one knee, her silk waist sagged. Her hair fell over her face as if some one had draped a floor-mop over her skull. They stood on small wooden platforms. Before them, on the floor, grinning acidly, sat Hermes Pan, their dance director. A black slouch hat shaded mocking eyes, his necktie was slung around his waist as a belt.

"What are they calling this next picture?" Astaire demanded, truculently.

"'Stepping Toes,'" Pan replied.

"Hah!" exploded Miss Rogers. It was an explosion made up of dynamite that was half nerves, a quarter weariness and a quarter rehearsal temperament.

"But there isn't going to be any picture . . ." Pan began. Astaire and Rogers crucified him with a look. "Not unless you get to work and learn some routines."

He had paid little attention to Astaire, the star. As one dancer to another, he assumed Astaire knew his business and needed no coaching. Astaire paid even less attention to Pan. No one ever pays much attention to assistant directors except those under them.

The major number in the picture was the *Carioca*. It required a background of dancing Negroes. Pan, who learned to dance in Tennessee, largely Negro fashion, knew exactly what to do and was doing it. Astaire strolled in. Presently a rest break came. Astaire walked over to Pan.

"Where did you learn that technique?" he asked.

"Tennessee," Pan replied. "Negro folk stuff."

"Could I do it?"

"Sure," said Pan. "You do everything else."

Astaire liked the youngster's blunt answers. He realized the need of a critic

two are whisked to a music-room and they hear the score. Pan watches both of them.

"He thinks we've been knitting a sweater for six weeks," Miss Rogers said icily.

"No, but you haven't got anything yet," Pan replied. "Let's get going."

Blisters—For another hour they drummed. Off in a corner a tinny piano gave them the rhythm. On the floor, Pan sat. In the middle of a rhythm, Rogers stopped, stepped down, put her left foot up on a chair, took off her shoe and glared at the director. Her foot was bleeding. Pan, no fool, said nothing.

From the platform, Astaire grinned.

"I'll be with you in a second," he said. "My blisters will burst any minute, now."

Pan called off rehearsal for the day.

The stars vanished to their dressing-rooms, the director sat, drumming on the chair-arm with his fingers. A routine began to come through the spaced snicking of the finger-nails. He nodded a couple of times, tried it again, got up. He tried it with his feet. It made sense. Dance sense. He buttoned up the collar of his black shirt, hitched his hat-brim down, nodded to the pianist, went home.

Ten days later the rhythm etched out was perfected by Rogers and Astaire. Twelve days later, Allan Scott, scenarist, finished the script of "Stepping Toes." A week later it was in production.

The youngster who takes Rogers and Astaire in hand for six to eight weeks before each picture left Nashville, Tennessee, when he was fourteen, a gangling, only slightly bewildered young Greek who wanted to dance—for people and for money. His father was Greek Consul in Nashville. The family name was Pan—plus eleven more letters ending in "opolis." When he arrived in New York, the boy dropped all but the first three letters of his name and began looking for work. He got it. In a chorus of a musical comedy.

Before he was twenty he was assistant dance director for several musical productions on Broadway; when he was twenty-two he was summoned to Hollywood. A year later, during the filming of Astaire's first picture, "Flying Down to Rio," he was assistant dance director. That meant he had to drill and cajole forty chorus girls, thirty-nine of whom would gladly have slit his throat after the first ten days.

When the first playing of the score is finished, the stars go home. Next day Astaire and Pan meet on the bare stage and fool around all afternoon, getting nowhere. They don't even try to get anywhere.

"We just fool around, just fool around for hours," said Pan.

Steps—Out of the fooling around a few steps begin to assert themselves. On the basis of these, Pan and Astaire work together for a week, without routine, without definite aim. They hope for luck and trial and error to bring them something new. Usually it does. By the second week, Miss Rogers is called. She watches them for a week.

"I play Rogers for those first two weeks," Pan explains. "I know how she dances and what she expects from Astaire. I'm her reverse side. Sometimes I play Astaire."

He danced in Astaire's place for a week during invention of the *Bojangles* routine in "Swing Time."

Astaire sat there, watched, sometimes tried. But Rogers and Pan did the preliminary work.

At the end of the second week, the stars

Dancing with Astaire & Rogers

have the basic routines worked out. Then follow two weeks of polishing. Three, if necessary.

Nerves begin to get taut in the third week, temperaments bubble up and boil. Pan tightens his necktie belt and says nothing. The temperaments boil away.

After this preliminary work come six weeks of hard, unrelenting practise, day two are whisked to a music-room and they hear the score. Pan watches both of them.

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After this preliminary work come six weeks of hard, unrelenting practise, day and night, until feet bleed, tempers flare. Sometimes there are tears.

Broadway—A musical comedy starts from scratch and opens five weeks later on Broadway. Featured dancers in such shows can perfect routines long after the show has opened. They can change them, reroutine them, tighten them at every public performance eight times a week. In pictures, it has to be done first. If Astaire thought he worked hard rehearsing for Broadway productions, he probably has changed his opinion. He tucks eight weeks of harder rehearsing into every picture.

After eight weeks the picture begins. Even then mistakes are made, the scene is stopped and started all over again. There have been seemingly smooth, effortless dancing scenes in Rogers-Astaire pictures which were shot forty times before the perfect one came. That means doing the same thing over and over to the same music in the same setting to the same sleepy electricians and wearied director from 9 o'clock in the morning until nearly midnight.

The record was set in "Stepping Toes," scheduled for release two weeks hence. The last number in the picture was shot forty-seven times before it was done right. The forty-seventh shot was done with the feet of both dancers bleeding, their nerves snapping. Rogers had destroyed three gowns, the skirt of the fourth and last was torn. Happily, the tear didn't show. Astaire had wrecked six boiled evening shirts, reduced nine white ties to limp rags. When the picture is released, no audience will detect the torn feet, lacerated nerves, shattered poise and ravaged dress. Rogers will be smiling, gay. Astaire will be nimble, gallant. No audience at all will see Pan, but he was standing about five feet away during all that shooting, just outside range of the camera. The day's toll to him was one black felt hat, ten nibbled finger-nails. The nibbling went right down to where it hurts.

Chorus—When the two stars aren't engaging Pan's attention he has the duty of choosing chorus-girls. A smaller chorus was wanted for "Stepping Toes." Exactly twenty-four girls. A call was sent for 1,000 "pretty, trained, limber girls, each to be beautiful enough to pass a close-up test." One thousand and ninety-three appeared for the call, of whom some could not have passed the close-up test. But all could dance, were in practise, therefore limber.

"Some of the girls were the best dancers in Hollywood," Pan reported. "But they didn't have beauty. We had, reluctantly, to let them go."

Enough were obviously unsuitable to cut the selection list to exactly 1,000. These were divided into groups of 200 and each

group was taken for a day. By the end of each day, 190 went home depressed, defeated, possibly hungry. Ten were told to report back. At the end of five days, fifty girls were chosen.

On the sixth day Pan and his assistants lined the fifty up, began the unpleasant work of telling twenty-six they were not wanted. By sundown that night twenty-four exceptionally lovely and talented girls had been chosen—to be merely chorus-girls, backgrounds to two stars.

Sight and Sound—More often than not, Rogers and Astaire do all the photographically acceptable dancing twice. Studio floors, waxed, polished, made to look like gleaming marble, are not safe for their type of dancing. If one slipped, strained a tendon—the result would be delay, cost to the studio of from \$10,000 to \$100,000.

They dance, for the camera, in plain-soled shoes without metal taps. Days later, when the negative has been printed, they go into a sound-proof room with a small screen and sound equipment. They look at the print projected on the screen, time themselves to it and begin to tap in synchronization. The sound equipment picks up the rhythm of the taps, harnesses it to the picture.

On occasion, after talking it over with Pan, Astaire has elected to do it all at once, sound and photography together. But not with Rogers. She likewise has soloed sight and sound together. But not with Astaire.

Their pictures, the result of long, painful rehearsal, are the most profitable coming from that studio, and as an economic wand of plenty, reach farther.



Side-Lines—Dance schools, Coast to Coast, are deluged with youngsters wanting to learn tap-dancing. The depression for dance teachers ended when the public took a fancy to the Rogers-Astaire combination. A manufacturer of the little metal taps that go on the soles of dancing-shoes reported a 400 per cent rise in his business in 1935, 280 per cent in 1934. In Brooklyn, New York, a shoe factory specializing in dancing-shoes for soft shoe and tap work found itself swamped with orders from ambitious amateurs. Smallest town into which an order was sent was Grundy Center, Iowa.

Astaire, more than any other star, is credited with popularizing white tie and tail-coat for men's evening wear, after years of dinner coats and black ties.

Two weeks ago a dress manufacturer and a hat-maker arrived in Hollywood on the same plane from New York. They were grimly ready to put down earnest money for the rights to put Ginger Rogers's name on dresses, hats.

Neither has authorized use of the name on as many objects as Mickey Mouse. But they have a point up on him. Mickey Mouse can't tap-dance.

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With them as a cause for the national craze for tap-dancing is Eleanor Powell, long-legged Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer tapping star, and, at Warner Brothers studio, Ruby Keeler.

There is a trade secret common to each of these: each has limitations as a dancer. None ever gets away from his or her defined abilities. They never seem to be dancing within a certain, restricted number of routines, but they are. New music, new costumes, new plots and new settings give each the semblance of a new and heretofore unseen mastery of new, intricate steps. Not so. They are the same rhythms in new dress.

The man who knows more than all of them put together is the dancing star of the 20th Century-Fox studio, a Negro, a man old enough to have worn out before they started. But he didn't. He is Bill Robinson, wide-grinned, gleaming sixty-odd-year-old black, who to-day is willing to bet money he can run backward faster than any man can run forward, eats two quarts of vanilla ice-cream a day, has a gold-plated revolver given to him by the Police Department of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

He goes to all their pictures.

"Ah learn things," he says simply.