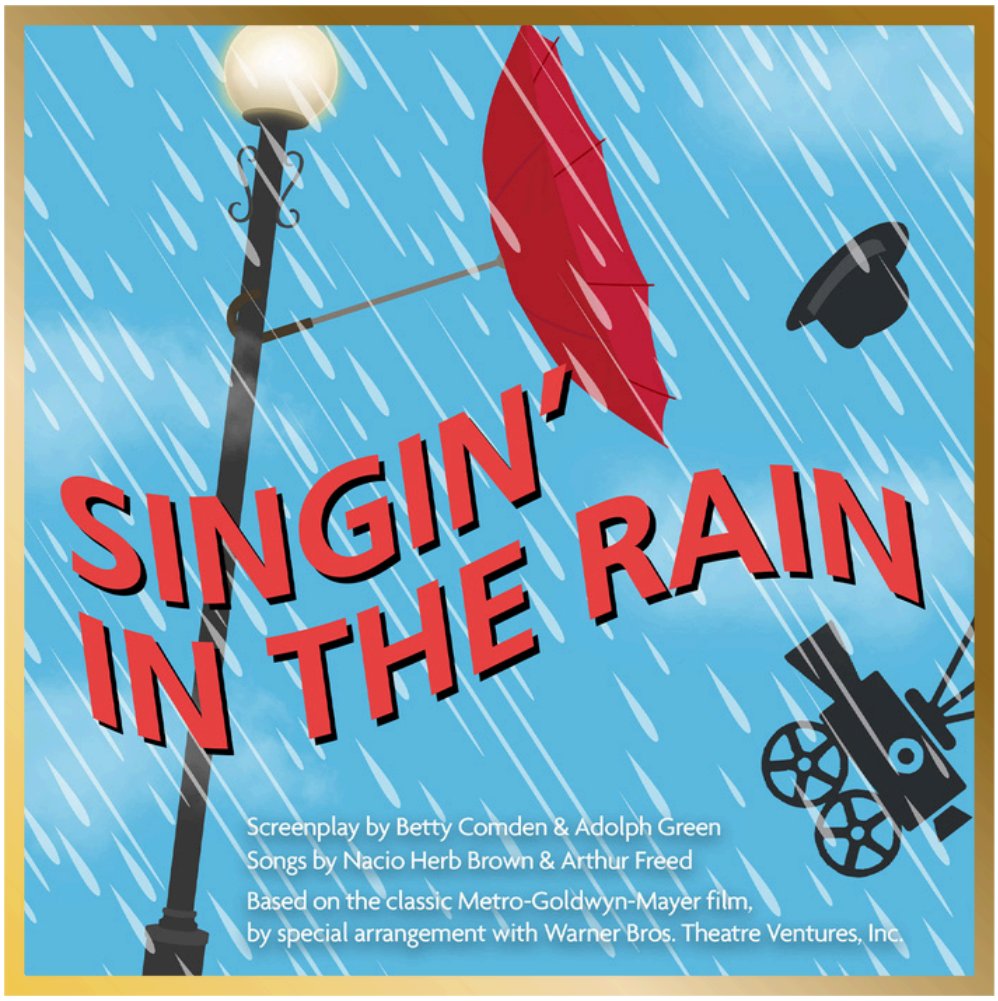


A Dramaturgical Casebook

Director: Evan Hoffmann

Dramaturg: Liv Fassanella

PLAYHOUSE ON PARK

Singin' in the Rain at 70: Hollywood's show-stopping musical remains a winner

by Guy Lodge

It might have opened to muted applause, but the Gene Kelly-Stanley Donen dream team turned a 1952 also-ran into a classic

Singin' In The Rain was not exactly conceived as a masterpiece. Arthur Freed, head of the musicals unit at MGM, had a back catalogue of songs – not all of them classics – that he'd co-written for various films at the studio between 1929 and 1939, and had the idea of stringing them together as a song score for a single new musical. Screenwriters Betty Comden and Adolph Green were hired to cobble a story around the disparate tunes; Howard Keel, a stolid bass-baritone in the MGM stable who had acquitted himself respectably in Annie Get Your Gun, was pencilled in as the lead.

As a producer, Freed tended to alternate artistically ambitious prestige musicals – just one week before Singin' in the Rain premiered, he picked up a best picture Oscar for Vincente Minnelli's ravishing, Gershwin-scored pop ballet An American in Paris – with cheerful, brightly disposable filler. (Remember Pagan Love Song? The Belle of New York? No?) At the outset, one might have expected the sketchily contrived Singin' in the Rain to fall firmly on the B-list.

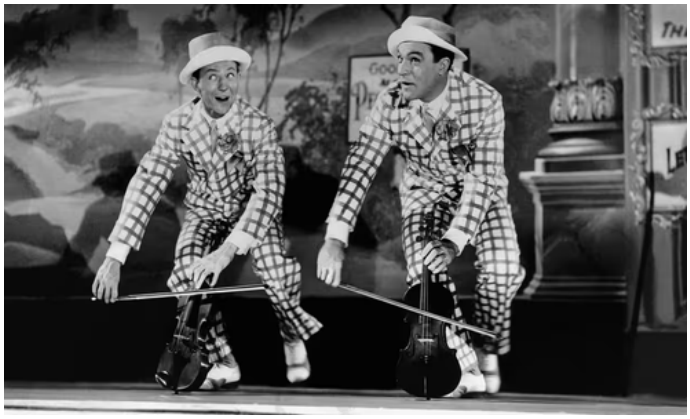
But that would have been reckoning without Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, at that point something of a dream team for Freed and MGM. Their first film as a director-choreographer duo, the sailors-on-leave romp On the Town, had elevated its featherweight material with visual wit and restless movement; separately, Donen had brought fleet-footed flash to his direction of the Fred Astaire vehicle Royal Wedding, while Kelly's stardom had reached a peak with An American in Paris. When production on the latter wrapped, making Kelly available, the script for Singin' in the Rain was passed on to him. Changes were made. The rest, as they say, is history.

History, of course, takes time to take shape. Back in 1952, Freed would probably have been surprised to learn that Singin' in the Rain, rather than An American in Paris, would eventually become the most canonised of all Hollywood musicals – the one routinely cited even by non-acolytes of the genre as one of the greatest films ever made. (In the last four editions of Sight & Sound's decennial critics' poll, it has consistently been the highest-scoring musical, twice placing in the all-time top 10.) Upon its release, however, it wasn't treated as any kind of milestone.

Reviews and box office were good if not phenomenal; the Academy, having lavished six Oscars on An American in Paris the year before, gave Singin' in the Rain a scant two nominations. (Even the Globes handed their best musical award to the drab Susan Hayward vehicle With a Song in My Heart instead.)

Watching it 70 years later, you can see why an industry then preoccupied with prestige and television-beating spectacle took time to give the film due respect. Nothing about Singin' in the Rain announces itself as Art, or even as a grand event: it's a film so light on its feet as to make its genre-melding entertainment look deceptively easy. The script shuffles warm romantic comedy, breezy Hollywood satire and fanciful Broadway reverie with casual speed, never straining for punchlines or pathos; there's occasionally a jukebox carelessness to the song placements that fits with the film's general insouciance. Squint slightly at the screen, and you can see the sweet, amusing, throwaway B-musical this might have been, given duller casting and a little less directorial care.

But then, just as you're settling into the film's sunny, effortless groove – wondering, amid your pleasure, if it's maybe a notch less masterful than you remembered or had been told – Donen and Kelly hit you with a shot of pure lightning-in-a-bottle magic. It's surprisingly slow to start as a musical: the film's first full-scale musical number comes nearly half an hour in, with Donald O'Connor's silly-putty physicality making a stunning gymnastics act of the frothy Make 'Em Laugh – one of only two new songs composed for the film, and a shameless knockoff of Cole Porter's Be a Clown at that. You don't need musical freshness with that dynamism in the delivery.



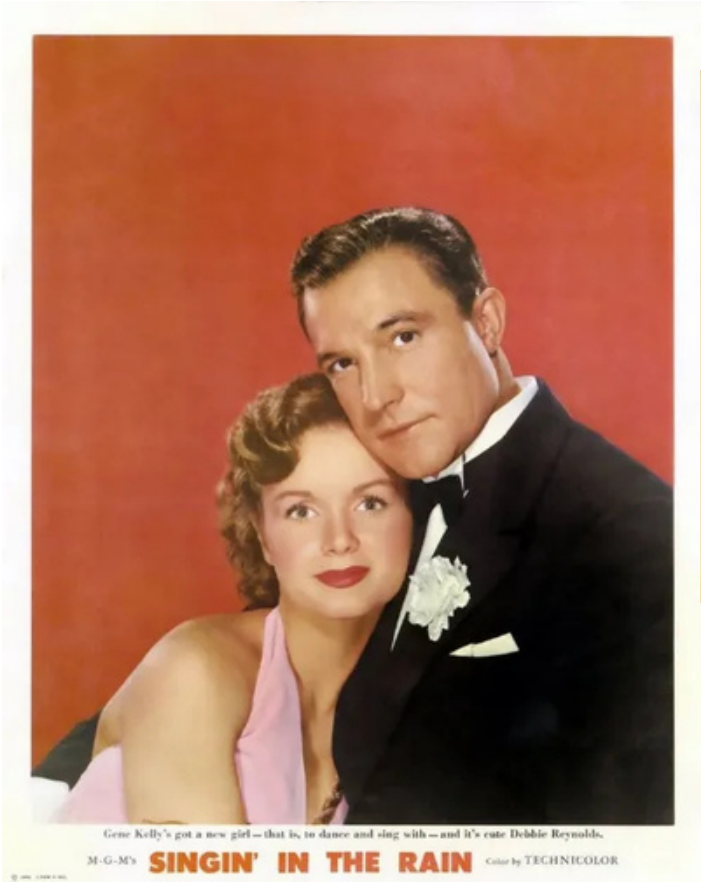
It's only getting warmed up. The romantic overture You Were Meant for Me is given a staging of heart-stopping romanticism, wedged between all the film's daffy farce. An empty soundstage, bathed in artificial cotton-candy twilight, furnished with only a ladder – a sparse playground for the swoony effects of Kelly's choreography. And yet this too is overshadowed by the film's genuinely iconic centerpiece, the single number without which, for all its other marshmallowy delights, Singin' in the Rain wouldn't be nearly so enduringly remembered. (What would it even be titled, for starters?) A studio streetscape, drenched in artificial rain; a lamppost turned dance partner; Kelly more limber than any man has ever been in a sodden tweed suit.

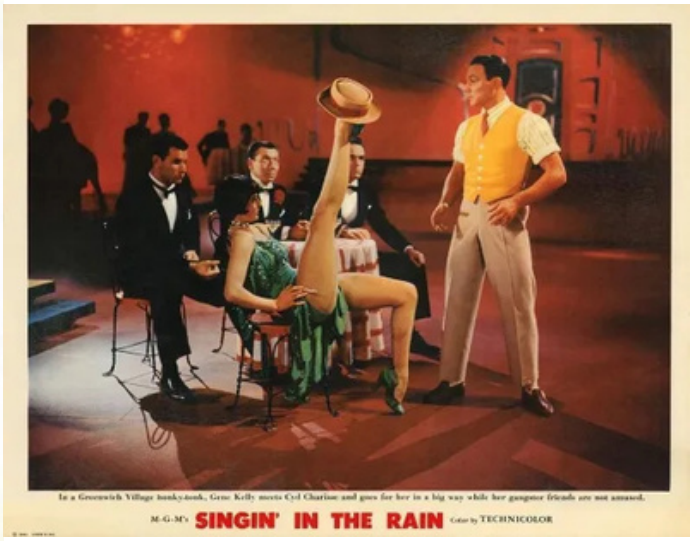
It's hardly the film's most effortful set piece: far more manpower, hoofing and production design went into the film's extended Broadway Melody pitch sequence, with its shifting sets, twirling banners of fabric and steamy, leggy Cyd Charisse cameo. Yet that lengthy number isn't the first, second or even tenth thing you remember about Singin' in the Rain; its arbitrary purpose and placement in proceedings functioned as a clever meta-commentary on the ramshackle storytelling of the standard Hollywood musical, making its lavish conception somewhat deliberately self-defeating.

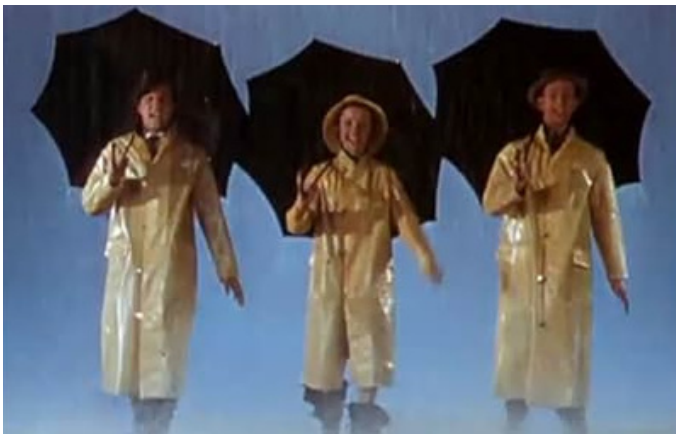
It's certainly no match for a single dancer humming a tune and splashing boyishly in a puddle, and perhaps that was the point. Set in the late 1920s, the film depicts a Hollywood in a state of transition, throwing everything at the screen to survive as silents gave way to talkies. Meanwhile, its

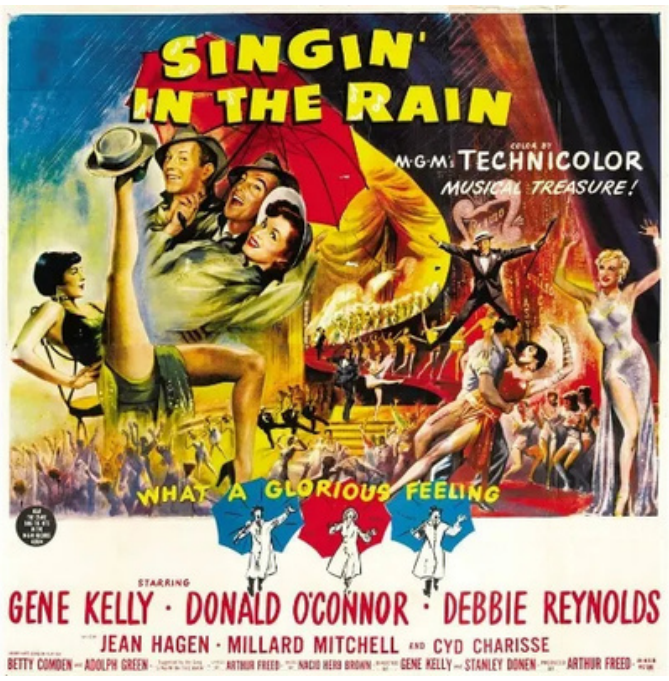
sendup of panic-driven production excess was timely in 1952. The studios' fixation with supersized widescreen epics, aimed at combating the threat of the small screen, began to bleed into the humble musical, changing the shape of the genre to what would eventually become the gargantuan form of 1960s blockbusters like My Fair Lady and The Sound of Music. (Freed, tellingly, would win one more best picture Oscar in the 1950s, for the hyper-decorated frou-frou excess of Gigi.)

In its shuffling, unfused way, however, Singin' in the Rain called on Hollywood to cool their jets, take a breath and appreciate simpler showmanship: a little dance, a little laugh, a little romance, a little rough weather. It might not have seemed a very big deal at the time. But it's reached 70 with nary a wrinkle.









Look Back at the Original Production of Singin' in the Rain on Broadway

From Playbill.com

The production opened July 2, 1985, at the Gershwin Theatre.

Singin' in the Rain, the musical based on the 1952 MGM film, opened at the Gershwin Theatre on Broadway July 2, 1985. The production, directed and choreographed by Twyla Tharpe, played 38 previews and 367 performances before closing May 18, 1986, earning two Tony Award nominations.

Singin' in the Rain tells the story of a 1920s silent-screen romantic duo preparing for the arrival of motion-picture sound and the events that occur when the leading man falls for the girl called in to dub over the screechy voice of his onscreen partner. Betty Comden and Adolph Green adapted their screenplay for the stage with music by Nacio Herb Brown and Arthur Freed.

The musical starred Don Correia, Mary D'Arcy, Ricahrd Fancy, Faye Grant, Peter Slutsker, Ray Benson, Austin Colyer, Jacque Dean, Diane Duncan, Craig Frawley, Melinda Gilb, Mary Ann Kellogg, Alison Mann, Barbara Moroz, Robert Radford, Hansford Rowe, Gene Sager, John Spalla, Cynthia Thole, Martin Van Treuren, John Carrafa, Richard Colton, Yvonne Dutton, Katie Glasner, Barbara Hoon, David-Michael Johnson, Raymond Kurshals, Kevin O'Day, Tom Rawe, Amy Spencer, Shellehy Washington, and Laurie Williamson.

Singin' in the Rain featured original choreography by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, scenic design by Santo Loquasto, costume design by Ann Roth, Lighting design by Jennifer Tipton,

and sound design by Sound Associates, Inc. with stage management by Steven Zweigbaum, Arturo E. Porazzi, and Amy Pell. Visit the Playbill Vault for the complete cast and creative team.

15 Facts About Singin' in the Rain

By Eric D Snider

Singin' in the Rain isn't just an upbeat musical from 1952. It's also a history lesson about Hollywood in the late 1920s, when silent pictures were giving way to talkies. And, of course, it's also a valuable tutorial on how to be an awesome dancer (i.e. be Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor). It is many things! Here are some facts about Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen's classic musical to enhance your next viewing.

1. It wasn't adapted from a Broadway musical.

Many movie musicals of the 1930s, '40s and '50s were based on stage shows, but this wasn't one of them. Rather, it was a new script, written just for the movie, featuring old songs written for previous movies. Some 30 years later, after the film had become a beloved classic, it was reverse-engineered into a stage musical, premiering in London's West End in 1983 and subsequently appearing (with revisions and more songs) on Broadway.

2. It was conceived by producer Arthur Freed as a means of showcasing songs he had written, but it wasn't (just) an ego trip.

Freed was a successful lyricist in the 1920s and '30s, collaborating with composer Nacio Herb Brown on dozens of songs for MGM musicals. In 1939, after essentially serving as an uncredited producer on The Wizard of Oz, Freed was given his own unit at MGM, where he oversaw the production of about 45 big-screen musicals (some originals, some Broadway adaptations) over the next 23 years, making MGM synonymous with the genre. The term "jukebox musical" didn't exist yet, but there were a few films in that era that fit the description, using old sets of songs with nothing in common but their authors as the framework for new stories. Warner Bros.'s Yankee Doodle Dandy (1942) and MGM's own Till the Clouds Roll By (1946) had done it with the songs of George M. Cohan and Jerome Kern, respectively.

In 1951, as Freed was shepherding the George and Ira Gershwin-based An American in Paris into existence, he thought of doing the same thing for the songs he'd written with Brown. Many of those ditties were big hits, and Freed had certainly earned the clout at MGM to advance what might have otherwise been seen as a vanity project. The studio head in the movie, R.F. Simpson, is based on him.

3. The one "original" song written specifically for the movie is actually a rip-off.

As the film was about to commence shooting, directors Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly realized Donald O'Connor didn't have a solo number. Nothing in the Freed/Brown collection seemed to fit, so they asked the pair to whip up something new, something along the lines of "Be a Clown," from Cole Porter's 1947 MGM musical The Pirate. Freed and Brown did exactly that, delivering "Make 'em Laugh," a song that Donen later called "100 percent plagiarism" of "Be a Clown."

The similarities were overwhelming and undeniable.But Freed, you'll recall, was the producer of Singin' in the Rain. One doesn't really tell one's boss, "Uh, sir, I think you might have stolen this," so the song stayed. The story goes that Cole Porter didn't mind (or didn't sue, anyway) because he was grateful to Freed for all the career support he'd given him. "Moses Supposes" was newly written for the film too, with music by Roger Edens and lyrics by the screenwriters. But it's not a complete song, lyrically speaking, so usually isn't counted.

4. Debbie Reynolds had no dance experience before she made the movie.

She pointed this out when she was asked to be in Singin' in the Rain, but Kelly said he could teach her, just as he'd done with Frank Sinatra for Anchors Aweigh. Reynolds had been a gymnast, so she wasn't completely unfamiliar with physical movement requiring grace and stamina. Ever the trouper, she buckled down and rehearsed day and night until she could share a dance floor with Kelly and O'Connor without embarrassing herself. She was quite young, too, turning 19 during the shoot. (Kelly, her love interest, was 39.) She later said, "The two hardest things I ever did in my life are childbirth and Singin' in the Rain."

5. Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor had never worked together before.

O'Connor, born into a vaudeville family in 1925, had been onstage since infancy and in movies since he was 12. He had 36 film credits, mostly musicals and Francis the Talking Mule pictures, under his belt when he got the Singin' in the Rain gig. Kelly was 13 years older and came to Hollywood a bit later than O'Connor, yet still racked up 18 films between 1942 and 1951, when at last their paths crossed. And they almost didn't: Freed, the producer, wanted Kelly's An American in Paris co-star Oscar Levant for the Cosmo role, but everyone else—screenwriters Betty Comden and Adolph Green, directors Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen—wanted someone who could dance.

6. Gene Kelly choreographed his dance scenes with Cyd Charisse in a way that hid the fact that she was taller than him.

Or she was when she wore heels, anyway, as she does in the film. To keep the height difference from being obvious, Kelly arranged the routine so that they were never both standing upright when they were next to each other, always bending toward (or away from) one another instead.

7. Yes, Kelly had a fever when he filmed the "Singin' in the Rain" number.

Contrary to legend, it wasn't shot all in one take—or even all in one day. It lasted a couple of days, and on at least one of them, Kelly was sick with a fever of anywhere from 101 to 103 degrees, depending on who's telling the story.

8. Costume designer Walter Plunkett said this was the most work he had ever done for a film—and he had worked on Gone With the Wind!

Both films were period pieces, but Singin' in the Rain required a greater number of elaborate, ornately detailed costumes than Gone With the Wind did. They had to be more accurate, too, since 1952 audiences remembered Hollywood of the late '20s more clearly than 1939 audiences remembered the Civil War. All told, Plunkett designed about 500 costumes for the film.

9. The last shot of the "Good Morning" number took 40 takes.

It's the part where the three of them somersault over one couch and then tip another one over backwards before collapsing on it and laughing. Kelly was a demanding choreographer and director, and you'll notice that most of the dancing in the film is presented without a lot of editing. The camera moves around, but it doesn't cut to other angles very often, and the dancers's bodies are usually wholly visible. So when there are, say, three dancers who are supposed to be in unison, and one part of one person's body does the wrong thing, you've got to do it again. The whole shoot was difficult for that reason, and this number was particularly challenging. Reynolds said that at the end of a 14-hour day shooting the scene, her feet were bleeding.

10. The 10-minute "Broadway Melody" dance number near the end of the film was a late addition.

Freed was encouraged by how well a similar sequence in An American in Paris had turned out, so he suggested that Kelly and Donen conceive one for Singin' in the Rain, too—after most of the rest of the film had been shot. That's why Donald O'Connor isn't in this part: he was under contract with Universal and had to go make another Francis the Talking Mule movie.

11. Cyd Charisse owed her role in the film to Debbie Reynolds's lack of experience.

Charisse is only onscreen for a few minutes, in the aforementioned "Broadway Melody" dream ballet sequence. The role would logically have gone to Reynolds, but she simply didn't have the dancing chops to pull it off. Leslie Caron, who'd danced with Kelly in An American in Paris, wasn't available. So the job went to Cyd Charisse, an acclaimed dancer whom Kelly had admired since seeing her work with Fred Astaire in Ziegfield Follies. (Charisse was actually supposed to have had Caron's role in An American in Paris, but had to drop out when she got pregnant. She'd given birth only a few months earlier when she took the Singin' in the Rain job.)

12. There may have been some censorship in the ballet number.

Watch as Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse are dancing at the 1:22:03 mark in the film, and you'll see a jump cut. The camera doesn't move, but something's clearly been snipped. The unconfirmed but probably true explanation is that censors deemed a portion of the dance too suggestive. (They'd warned Kelly beforehand not to choreograph Charisse wrapping her legs around his waist, even though real ballet dancers do that all the time.) The footage was removed, and the music was re-scored to match the new cut. Whatever was taken out is presumably lost forever, as the entire Singin' in the Rain negative was destroyed in a fire.

13. Donald O'Connor really should have died filming "Make 'em Laugh."

And not just because you could legitimately break your neck doing those run-up-the-wall flips (although that, too). The physical exertion required for the scene would have been demanding for anyone ... and O'Connor, by his own admission, was smoking four packs of cigarettes a day. And after the entire sequence had been shot? He had to do it all over again, because a technical error made the footage unusable.

14. The first time we see Cyd Charisse, she's smoking a cigarette. It's the only cigarette she ever smoked in her life.

Kelly and Donen thought the character, the seductive girlfriend of a gangster, ought to be smoking. Charisse, who had never smoked before (making her a rare bird in 1951 Hollywood), told them she didn't know how—so they stopped shooting long enough to teach her. Evidently failing to see the pleasure in it, she never smoked again.

15. The film was a bit of a letdown after An American in Paris.

An American in Paris—also starring Gene Kelly; also built around a particular songwriter's work; also featuring a large-scale dream ballet sequence—was released in November of 1951. It was a hit, eventually winning six Oscars, including Best Picture. Three weeks after the Oscar ceremony, Singin' in the Rain came out. It did well enough with audiences and critics, but it got very little awards attention, and it wasn't perceived as being nearly as successful as its predecessor. Over time, public sentiment changed. An American in Paris is still highly regarded today, but it's Singin' in the Rain that shows up on the "best" and "favorite" lists.

Gene Kelly from the movie "Singin' in the Rain."

Hollywood in the 1920s: stars, scandals and the end of silent films

by Lauren Good

The bright lights of 1920s Hollywood may have blinded many of those flocking to Los Angeles, but cast a shadow over a dark underbelly. As new film Babylon explores the tumult of the 1920s, Lauren Good takes us from the scandals that rocked the movie world to the 'talkies' that changed show business forever…

The glamour and aspiration of the movie industry's so-called golden age, typically dated from the 1910s to the mid-20th century, still captures imaginations today. However, for all the big stars, box-office smashes, and glitzy premieres and parties, the reality of what was happening behind the scenes in Hollywood was far more complex.

In particular, Tinsel Town in the 1920s was driven by excess – a stark contrast to a wider society governed by Prohibition – and where there was excess, scandal was sure to follow…

When were the first silent films produced?

On 24 August 1891, American inventor Thomas Edison, who had already seen success with the telegraph and light bulb, stretched science that little bit further when he successfully manufactured the Kinetograph (a motion picture camera) and the Kinetoscope (a peep-hole motion picture viewer). The financial potential of Edison's inventions, which built on innovations such as the Lumière Brothers' Cinématographe, was quickly realised. And so the silent era began, and flourished through the turn of the century, a world war, and into the 1920s.

"You've got various kinds of technological innovations that make the mass transportation of cinema possible," says cultural and literature historian Sarah Churchwell on an episode of the HistoryExtra podcast. "That exploded in the early 1920s."

People flocked to watch these silent films. It is important to note that this definition of 'silent' can be misinterpreted: in the earliest days, screenings were accompanied by a phonograph recording of music; then as movie theatres became more established, pianists and organists were hired to play during the film. In some of the larger cities, a full orchestra would provide the score.

Edison dominated the industry, owning most of the patents to motion pictures and receiving fees from those who wished to screen films in the United States. This influence only increased further when he founded the Motion Picture Patents Company. Often referred to as the Edison Trust, it had strict rules: those screening a film could only use patented equipment, run for no more than 20 minutes, and were unable to show film credits.

Soon, there was pushback to Edison's tactics. Smaller companies, such as Majestic Films and Famous Players, successfully fought him on his strict laws, and his company was sold in 1918. What's more, until this point many movies had been made around New York and Chicago, but from around 1908 filmmakers began relocating to southern California, drawn to the cheaper land and a climate that allowed for filming to carry on all year around. This prompted a monumental change as the world's film capital moved from Fort Lee, in New Jersey, to the west coast of the US and a spot that would become Hollywood.

What was the reaction to the move to California?

Until the film companies showed up and replaced a landscape of rolling fields and orchards with sprawling studio lots and sets, Hollywood was a farming town.

Film historian Mark Glancy discussed this transformation on the HistoryExtra podcast, saying it was "far flung from the rest of the United States at the turn of the century. Los Angeles was a small city then and it was several days travelling time from the east coast."

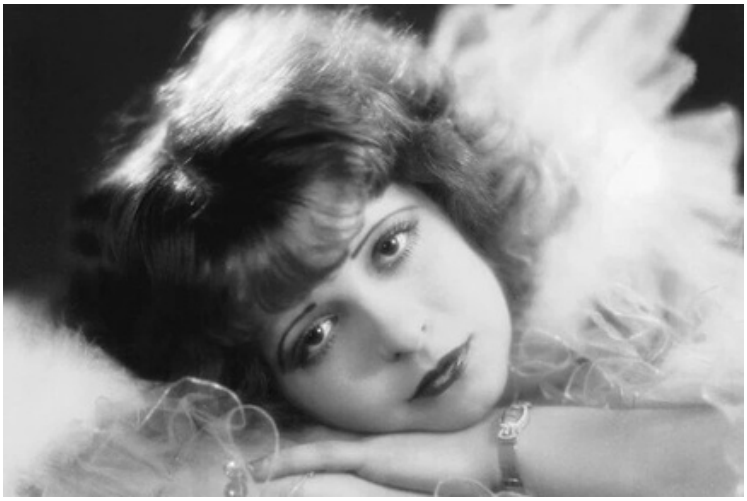
Not every local was excited to be so near to the magic of the movies, either. Resentment simmered as the area of Los Angeles changed, and there was a lot of anger towards the most visible faces of the industry – the stars. Some shops and cafes began displaying signs declaring, 'No Dogs or Actors Allowed'.

That did not dissuade swathes of people from making the move. Hollywood was quickly becoming the place to be if you wanted to be make it in film. American actors such as Gloria Swanson (b1899), Mary Pickford (b1892), and Clara Bow (see below) would make their names in the silent films of the 1920s, joined by the likes of Gary Cooper (b1901) John Gilbert (see below) and the British actor Charlie Chaplin (b1889).

Before this move, Glancy said the film industry was "much more disparate and spread-out", but at Hollywood it became "much more centralised around several companies". These included Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount Pictures, 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros.

What were the characteristics of silent films?

Since the pictures playing out on screen did not have sound, other elements had to be utilised in order to keep audiences entertained. Films produced in this era often featured intertitles – a card with words on it that punctuated the action – to narrate plot points or provide occasional piece of dialogue.



Clara Bow

The acting was far more emphatic too, as expressions were vital in understanding what feelings the actors were portraying. Compared to the subtleties and nuances of screen acting today, there were far fewer differences between acting in a film than on a stage in the theatre, where there was a need to emote to the back of the room. In the 1950 hit Sunset Boulevard, the embittered and deluded silent-film star Norma Desmond (played by Gloria Swanson) captures this when she declares: "We didn't need dialogue. We had faces!"

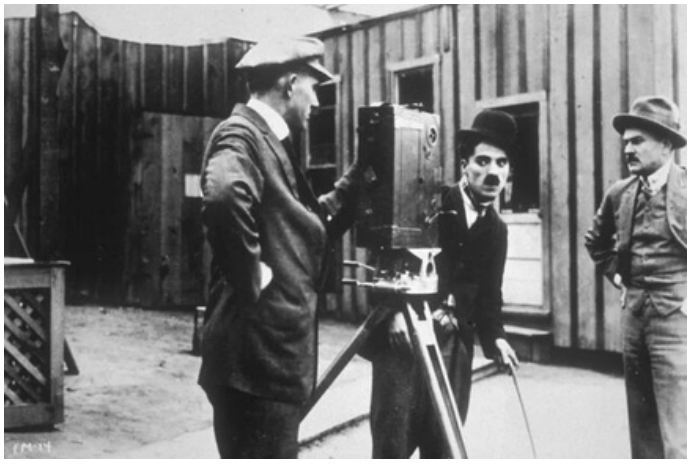
The scandals that rocked 1920s Hollywood

Among the most infamous of the sensational news stories that came out of Hollywood was the murder, in 1922, of William Desmond Taylor. The director of dozens of silent films was found dead in his Los Angeles bungalow, with bullet wounds in his back. What's more, a group of actors, actresses and studio executives were present at the scene, rummaging through Taylor's belongings. The murder, which remains unsolved to this day, became a nationwide cause célèbre.

The previous year, another death had rattled the industry: model and actress Virginia Rappe had fallen ill at a party held by Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle – the highest-paid film star in the country, with a $3 million contract with Paramount – and died four days later. The cause was a ruptured bladder and secondary peritonitis, which Rappe's close friend Bambina Maude Delmont testified was the result of a violent sexual assault by Arbuckle.

The story spread around Hollywood, and Delmont toured the country sharing stories of great evils in the film industry. Statements such as these enlightened the public to the sordid details of some on the silver screen, so much so that by the mid-1920s, Hollywood's scandals were regularly making daily features in newspapers.

Even Charlie Chaplin, perhaps the most famous face from the silent film era, was caught up in the maelstrom. Although beloved for his moustachioed and dishevelled character, The Tramp, he had a highly controversial personal life. Two of his four wives were under 18 years old when he married them; the divorce document compiled for his second, Lita Gray, provided damning accounts of his abusive behaviour and seduction of her whilst she was underage.



Charlie Chaplin

Beyond individual accounts, the wider lifestyle in the 1920s industry shaped the Hollywood lifestyle as we might imagine it today. While outwardly supportive of Prohibition, many successful actors spent their high wages on drugs and alcohol behind closed doors. Soon, newspapers were brandishing stories of actors being admitted to sanatoriums and some, including Wallace Reid and Barbara La Marr, died from addiction.

Scandals did not do Hollywood's reputation any favours, and soon actors had 'moral turpitude clauses' included in their contracts. According to Forbes, the movie studio Universal outlined this as "anything tending to degrade you in society or bring you into public hatred, contempt, scorn or ridicule, or tending to shock, insult or offend the community or outrage public morals or decency".

What happened when the pressure became too much?

Away from the scandals and headlines, the pressures of living a Hollywood life were tricky for anyone to contend with, let alone the performers who entered the film industry at a young age or those who never got their big break.

In 1932, the 24-year-old actress Peg Entwistle ended her life by jumping from the 'H' of the Hollywood sign. She had been struggling to get roles and RKO Pictures had not renewed her contract. A hiker discovered her body and found a note in her purse that read: "I am afraid I am a coward. I am sorry for everything. If I had done this a long time ago, it would have saved a lot of pain."

Jean Harlow, feted as the original 'blonde bombshell', similarly died at a young age. Her mother had been a failed actor, so pushed Jean to become one in her place. Her original name was Harlean Carpenter, but took her mother's name in her career. She went to the Hollywood School for Girls, but left at 16 when she eloped with 23-year-old Charles McGrew. They divorced just two years later, just as her career was taking off.

Over the next decade, Harlow starred in 43 films. Meanwhile, tragedies and issues plagued her private life: her second husband, MGM executive Paul Bern, was presumed to have taken his own life; and she divorced her third, Harold Rosson, within a year. It was when she was about to get married for the fourth time that she became dangerously ill. Her drinking, and already weakened state caused by meningitis and scarlet fever during childhood, led to Harlow being diagnosed with uremic poisoning. She died at the age of 26.

Did the rise of the 'talkies' kill the careers of silent stars?

There is a belief that many film stars, like John Gilbert, watched on helplessly as their time in the spotlight was snatched away as the 'talkies' took over.

Certainly, it was a different artform to contend with: for one, directors could no longer talk as the cameras rolled, so there was less guidance than during filming in the silent era.

However, Mark Glancy told HistoryExtra that the belief we have about this transition is largely a myth perpetuated by blockbuster films like Singing in the Rain (1952). "This idea that Lina Lamont [a silent film star played by Jean Hagen], with her screeching voice, was typical of silent stars who couldn't survive the transition to talkies."

It did "ruin a few careers", he adds, "but it wasn't the kind of overwhelming change that it's sometimes portrayed to be."

What other challenges did Hollywood in this era face?

Beyond the strains within the Hollywood machinery itself, the film industry was not immune to factors outside of the California hills. The most damaging was the stock market crash on in October 1929, which brought about the Great Depression and ruined millions of people in the US. Film investors were among them.

Abram F Myers, chairman of the Allied States Association of Motion Picture Exhibitors, said in a 1932 edition of Film Daily: "The motion picture business is neither depression-proof nor fool-proof."

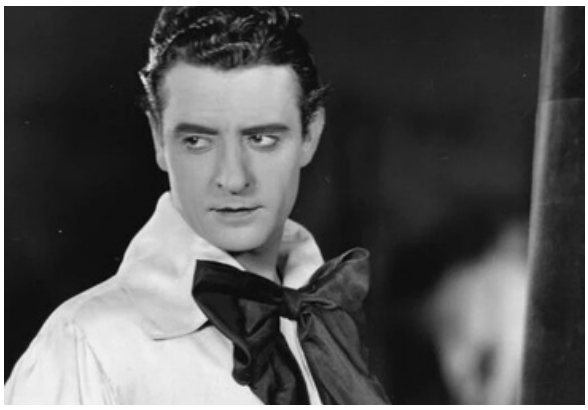
The situation only became worse. In March 1933, President Franklin D Roosevelt issued Proclamation 2039 – the order to stop all banking transactions immediately. This was the case for a week, and, in response, film studios cut the salaries of most of their production workers by 50 percent. When the banks reopened, the cuts remained, leading many film industry employees to feel that they had been taken advantage of. Trade unions formed in response: the Screen Writers Guild in April 1933, followed by the Screen Actors Guild.

In 1954, the Screen Writers Guild approved to form a national union for a broader cohort of writers across not only film, but television and radio too. They then formed two separate bodies, becoming the Writers Guild of America, West and Writers Guild of America, East. These unions still exist today.

What is the legacy of this period in Hollywood's history?

Within a decade, Hollywood transformed from a small farming town to the centre of tabloid speculation and scandal.

A place where dreams were made, and crushed, Hollywood had a pull like no other. It is no wonder this golden age continues to hold such fascination nearly a century on – after all, people still flock to the bright lights today. Some will make it while others fall short; a sad history that has repeated itself and will continue to do so, as long as actors grace the silver screen.



John Gilbert

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Talking Pictures — Hollywood's First Great Self-Examination

By Neah Lekan

At first it was excitement, the sheer thrill and wonderment felt on viewing a moving picture. Later, it was entertainment, the transporting performances and evocative storytelling of a grand production. But then came examination. The camera turned on itself, teaching us not only of its glamours and glories, but of those sacrificed in their realisation.

To the twenty-first century viewer, self-examining (or otherwise "meta-Hollywood") films are familiar, even unremarkable. In the past decade alone, we have seen works such as The Artist (2011), La La Land (2016), Hail Caesar (2016), Once Upon a Time in Hollywood (2019), and Mank (2020) take direct looks at Hollywood filmmaking, not to mention films such as Licorice Pizza (2021), which interrogate the impact of the industry whilst not being strictly tied to Hollywood itself.

Film has a unique ability amongst artistic mediums to portray its own creation and consumption. Even so, the sub-genre of self-evaluative films, or "cinema about cinema," was not an inevitability. Indeed, without the difficult transition between silent films and "talking pictures" beginning in 1927, this ever-popular sort of film may not have looked the same today. From as early as the late 1930s, writers and directors seized on the stories of stars falling from grace, old actors finding new niches, and the industry remaking itself as ideal for both entertainment and commentary.

Though oft forgotten now, these films are the foundation for the past decade's litany of self-referential Hollywood filmmaking, and more than that, poignant works of art in their own right.

I. The Silent Cowboy

The first major film to directly treat with Hollywood or Los Angeles is, as far as we know, 1923's *Souls for Sale*, a silent drama that already had many of the key features common to early self-referential cinema. Rivalries for the love of a young actress, a rise to stardom, and unfortunate ends are all incorporated, making the film appear quite innovative in retrospect. Perhaps the earliest major talking picture to focus on these themes was George Cukor's *What Price Hollywood*? (1932), a similar story of a waitress turned actress balancing the love of two men, one of whom meets a tragic fate.

What these early entries lack, however, is the true essence of self-examination. They are meant, at least apparently, as stories and nothing more. Now, they are captivating and dramatic stories to be sure, but there is no direct criticism of the industry beyond a general sense of its corruption. That all changed with a single film in 1937, the story of a western star fallen from grace, not because of moral corruption or love, but because of the industry and its operations. That film was It Happened in Hollywood.

It Happened in Hollywood (hereafter IHH) is an obscure film today, and at the time was equally out-of-step with ordinary conventions, running only sixty-seven minutes. Taking both that and the film's palpable '30s camp with a pinch of salt, we find a heartwarming tale of a man set on redeeming himself after being cast out of his profession. Helped along by its inclusion of a child character to spur our hero's journey and inspire his transformation, the film is regarded by some as overly sentimental, but is widely seen as the progenitor of the "films-about-films" sub-genre.

It is best seen in the context of its 1937 contemporary A Star is Born. Both films centre on men cast out whilst the women in their lives attain new levels of fame and notoriety, demonstrating just how popular that form of story was at the time IHH was produced. By focusing on film, however, IHH has metacinematic qualities that A Star is Born does not, and has spawned just as many indirect descendants as the latter has direct remakes. Importantly, whilst all ends happily in IHH, there is nonetheless criticism of the industry's treatment of our immensely-likeable hero, mainly centring on how quickly he is turned away and forgotten.

That acknowledged, IHH is certainly not as biting or direct as its descendants, and ultimately we are left with the sense that, as the Bard says, all's well that ends well. Nevertheless, the film deserves credit for being the first to grapple with the silent-to-sound transition and its ramifications, and it is the foundation of many of the more enduring works that followed.

II. The Wilder Touch

The more I write cinema articles and essays, the more you will read the name Billy Wilder. I say this to qualify my personal bias toward his work, but also to illustrate how central I feel he is to satirical, politically-aware, and socially-conscious cinema in Hollywood and beyond. His entry into the "films-about-films" sub-genre, Sunset Boulevard (1950) is widely regarded as one of the greatest films of all time, and certainly the greatest work of self-referential Hollywood satire.

My affection for Sunset Boulevard could fill pages, but objective and even sceptical observers have acknowledged its groundbreaking qualities. The film follows out-of-work screenwriter Joe Gillis (William Holden) as he falls into the employ of faded silent film star Norma Desmond (played to great effect by real silent film star Gloria Swanson). Watching Norma's madness up close as she inhabits her Wilshire mansion, a place "out of beat with the world," engenders true pity for those cast aside by the advent of the talkies. Norma, for all her wealth, is desperate, lonely, and lost, cast aside at a young age by an industry interested only in her potential to earn them box-office dollars.

The beauty of Sunset Boulevard, like so many truly great films, lies in the way its real-life creators mirrored those they portray. Gloria Swanson really was a silent film star kicked to the kerb after the switch to sound. The film features Buster Keaton and Mary Pickford, who met similar, though distinct fates, and Cecil B. DeMille, a director who was able to continue his rise to Hollywood immortality despite the transition away from silent pictures. Wilder portrays the industry's cruel lack of regard for its female stars especially well, and we even see Norma continuing costly and destructive beauty treatments in hopes of her comeback, or sorry Ms Desmond, I meant "return."

The writer Joe's story is equally damning to the industry. From his unfeeling agent who counsels him that "the best things in the world were written on an empty stomach" as he struggles to make ends meet to the studio executive concerned with profit far more than artistic or even plot integrity, we see an industry that has traded its commitment to cinema for simple, sanitised films guaranteed to pay off. Stop me if any of that sounds familiar. In the end, Joe is a victim of Norma's madness, yes, but ultimately of the industry that wounded her and him alike.

The film's most idealistic character, the young script reader Betty, is advised by Joe to leave Hollywood before it consumes her. Some see this act as one of self-sacrifice, with Joe sending away a woman he loves in order to preserve her soul. Read in the context of self-criticism, though, it becomes a warning to the audience themselves. Do not follow the "call to be on that screen" of La La Land's opening number. Put another way, "abandon hope all ye who enter."

III. The Mirror Inverse

Compared to *Sunset Boulevard*, the other continually celebrated 1950s film to treat with the silent-to-sound transition is considerably lighter in tone. *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) is an easy-viewing musical where *Sunset Boulevard* is a hard-hitting noir, yet there are more common threads than meet the eye between the two thematically-linked films. Being set in 1927 rather than 1950, *Singin' in the Rain* is able to portray just how difficult the transition to the talkies was for performers and artists, as well as how embarrassing failing to make that transition could be. When our leading characters Don and Lina are humiliated after their first talkie premieres, we feel deeply the sense of confusion and displacement that is merely implied in *Sunset Boulevard*.

When Kathy Selden, a young singer and dancer on the make (and also love interest to Gene Kelly's Don), is drafted to cover for Lina's…particular…accent and lack of vocal talent, we also see how exploitative the industry can be. With Lina's cunning threat of legal action hanging over them, the studio uses Selden for her voice without promoting her, a wrong only righted by Lina's lack of foresight. So yes, Singin' in the Rain is a feel-good romantic musical, but it is also willing to critique the industry along the way.

In both Singin' in the Rain and Sunset Boulevard, filmmaking is reduced from an art form or an exalted and glamorous vocation to strictly business, a capital-driven enterprise like any other. Both peel back the glistening façade of Hollywood, yet both also offer stories of the humanity that shines even in a morally flawed industry. In Sunset Boulevard, it's Betty's idealism, Joe's caution and sacrifice, and Max's (erstwhile husband and butler to Norma) loyalty. In Singin' in the Rain, it's the true love between Kathy and Don, the loyalty of Don's best friend Cosmo, and the ultimate if ethically messy, triumph of justice that lend hope and a touch of the human.

In this way, Singin' in the Rain acts as the inverse of the mirror Wilder holds up to the industry in Sunset Boulevard. One works through comedy and levity whilst the other works through dark, tragic themes. The visual difference between the two is striking, with one colourful and bright, and the other Wilder's trademark mordant to morose black-and-white composition. Yet, for all these differences, both reflect the industry's core intentions and their human consequences, consequences to which audiences viscerally connect.

Though the particular focus on the silent-to-sound transition of the late 1920s largely lessened after these two films, their legacy remains palpable. Most especially in Chazelle's La La Land, we see the same convergence of a striking and relatable human story with the zero-sum game of corporate filmmaking. In the case of The Artist, a film which does tackle the rise of the talkies, the old story of a male silent star fallen from the heights of fame while his younger love interest rises takes on new life. Whichever approach one prefers, the light or the dark, the bright or the greyscale, the substrate from which each film draws remains constant.

Conclusion

Few moments in the history of cinema have attracted as much examination as the transition from the Silent Era to sound. As we have seen, that examination started early, but matured through the endlessly influential Sunset Boulevard and Singin' in the Rain, before continuing to inspire into the twenty-first century. As with any subject, different writers and directors took distinct approaches in rendering the period in their projects, yet a remarkably similar series of themes emerge across them. We can look forward to yet another entry to evaluate with the release of Damien Chazelle's next project, Babylon (2022) later this year.

Above all, these films demonstrate both the extent of the industry's flaws, and those of corporate media more broadly, as well as the human potential for good that endures despite these flaws. Amongst all the victims of the talkies, we find just as many stories of renewal in and beyond the industry as we do melancholic and tragic falls from the heights of fame.

Most of all, however, we observe a theme common to almost all industries, people striving in the face of a complex and capital-oriented system to achieve their dreams. And if that isn't characteristic of Hollywood, or of Los Angeles, then I don't know what is.

Origins of Vaudeville

From comedyville.ca

Comedy has seen a steady evolution over time with modern comedy owing its origins to many different things. One of the primary influences that led to modern stand up comedy that you see in our Montreal comedy clubs was Vaudeville. Let's take a look at the origins of Vaudeville in this article.

What Was Vaudeville?

You've likely heard the term Vaudeville before. However, if you aren't a huge fan of theatre or comedy, you may be a bit unsure of what exactly it refers to. Vaudeville was a type of theatre that developed in France in the late 1800s that is very similar to a variety show. It was very popular throughout Canada and the United States until the 1930s.

A typical Vaudeville show would consist of several distinct, unrelated acts. Show attendees would see things like acrobats, jugglers, animal tricks, feats of strength, songs, one-act plays, and comedians. Comedy during Vaudeville often took the form of slapstick and physical humor. However, it gradually grew to approximate a situation similar to modern standup in some acts.

Origins of Vaudeville

The origins of Vaudeville are complex and actually quite hotly debated. The term itself is believed to be derived from val-de-Vire, a river in Normandy. French poet Oliver Basselin wrote popular humorous drinking songs called chansons du vau-de-Vire. Nearly two centuries later, these songs were revived with new lyrics and performed at agricultural fairs as short sketches called vaudevilles.

Some people may highlight Paris' Theatre du Vaudeville as part of the evolution of Vaudeville. While it did play a part, the majority of its life was a traditional theatre company that produced multiple act plays. However, in the late 1800s, it did begin to experiment with programs that provided a variety of short plays and poetry readings together. However, this still varied significantly from what is considered as Vaudeville today.

While the name Vaudeville does owe its origins to France, the origins of the content of Vaudeville is much more varied. Vaudeville was ultimately more of an organic synthesis, highlighted by the merging of many different cultures. It has been described as a fusion of a number of century old traditions including English Music Hall, antebellum minstrel shows, and Yiddish theatre.

Vaudeville largely transitioned into its modern meaning in New York City, where performances were a way to bring theatre to the common man. Performances were designed to provide many short acts, helping keep an audience's attention with rapid humor to generate lots of laughs. Many of the first stand up comedians had their beginnings on Vaudeville including Abbot & Costello.

Does Vaudeville Still Exist?

Vaudeville lasted for roughly 50 years in the United States and Canada. Beginning in the 1880s and running through the 1930s. However, there are examples of Vaudeville that can still be seen if you were to look hard enough. More on that in a bit.

Why did something so immensely popular and widespread as Vaudeville see such a sudden end. Like many things, the growth of technology saw the death of Vaudeville. During the 1930s, talking motion pictures and a standardized method of film distribution created a cultural shift. Traditional theaters begin being wired for sound and motion pictures quickly overtook the variety show as the popular means of entertainment. While a few of the most popular theatres persevered for a time, the Great Depression shuttered them.

The best of the Vaudevillian performers found a new like in the evolution of entertainment. In fact, standup comedy largely originated from Vaudeville as some of the top comedians began performing on television and radio. Comedians like Milton Berle, Lenny Bruce, Don Rickles, and Sid Caesar found success here as well as in nightclubs that started springing up in major cities. Others like Abbot and Costello went on to make many movies.

In a way, you could say that Vaudeville did not technically die. Rather, it evolved.

What is Modern Vaudeville?

While Vaudeville's days as an entertainment mainstay are long past, you can still find aspects of modern Vaudeville today. A good place to look is the circus, which combines lots of short acts including juggling, acrobats, strong men, and animal entertainment. It is done much in the same style as classic Vaudeville and, in many ways, is a lens to the past.

Of course, it is possible to find some throwbacks to Vaudeville. If you go to Las Vegas, you can see shows like Absinthe or the Atomic Saloon Show from Spiegel World Entertainment Group. Their offerings have earned accolades as some of the best shows in the city and are based on the traditional Vaudeville format with short acts interspersed with comedy.

However, perhaps the most popular approximation of Vaudeville in today's world are the popular late-night comedy shows that you can find on television networks. Television shows like The Tonight Show, The Late Show, The Hour, and Jimmy Kimmel Live all borrow a bit from the classic Vaudeville recipe. They break up interviews with comedic monologues, slapstick, funny skits, and musical acts.

While you may find it difficult to catch a glimpse of Vaudeville in the world today, you can definitely see one of the art forms that evolved from it at Montreal comedy clubs. Comedyville Comedy Club prides itself on providing top Montreal stand-up comedy. We would love for you to come check out one of our shows on your next night out in Montreal!

Significant Events of 1927:

Entertainment:

- The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was founded by MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer). They would go on to create the Academy Awards (The Oscars).
- Bell Telephone Company pioneers long-distance television broadcasting by transmitting an image of Herbert Hoover to a television set. Philo Farnsworth achieved the first fully electric television.
- The Harlem Globetrotters basketball team played their first road game.
- The Roxy Theatre in New York City was opened.
- Kern and Hammerstein's musical Show Boat opens on Broadway
- Movietone, a method to synchronize sound and film, was introduced by Fox Studios.
- The opera Faust, taking place in Chicago, is the first national opera broadcast from a US opera house.
- His Master's Voice introduces the first automatic record changer.
- Babe Ruth hit his 19th and 20th home runs of the season in a New York Yankees win against the Cleveland Indians.
- The Columbia Broadcasting System (better known as CBS) goes on air with 47 radio stations.
- Duke Ellington opens at the Cotton Club in Harlem, New York.

Politics

- Calvin Coolidge was the president
- The League of Nations Slavery Commission signs a treaty to abolish all types of slavery.
- The Soviet Communist Party expelled Leon Trotsky, giving control of the Soviet Union to Joseph Stalin.
- In South Africa, trained athletes are hired by major companies during a diamond rush in order to stake claims.
- Bavaria lifted its ban on Adolf Hitler's speeches
- Fights between the Nazis and the Communists broke out in Berlin
- U.S. troops are sent to Nicaragua to intervene in the Nicaraguan Civil War

World Events

- Charles Lindbergh made the first solo, nonstop transatlantic airplane flight, from New York City to Paris, France, in his single-engined aircraft, the Spirit of St. Louis.
- The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 struck 700,000 people, the greatest natural disaster in American history at that time.
- The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) is established as a United States federal agency
- The carving of the sculptures at Mount Rushmore, South Dakota, begins.
- The first Model A Ford was sold, replacing the Ford Model T