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Fred Astaire and the art of fun

An Oxford conference allows scholars, performers and fans to share their passion

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Fred Astaire, who was born in 1899 in Omaha, Nebraska, began performing on the vaudeville circuit with his sister Adele. She was six; he was four and a half. Twenty years later, they were Broadway stars in such shows as George and Ira Gershwin's *Lady Be Good*. This show and two others went on to even greater acclaim in London, where Adele met and married a British aristocrat, leaving Fred to forge a career on his own. Quickly, he made his way to Hollywood, where his "charm", as David O. Selznick would say, was "so tremendous" that it overcame the famously dismissive studio assessment: "can't act, can't sing, balding, can dance a little". Over the next twenty-five years, he would exert almost complete artistic control over some thirty films. George Balanchine and Mikhail Baryshnikov called him one of the greatest dancers in history, while Gershwin and Irving Berlin preferred him over all other vocalists. Astaire made art which, in the words of his character in *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949), seemed to be "fun set to music".

Film scholars, English professors, dance and music historians, performers and plain enthusiasts gathered at Oriel College, Oxford, last month to pay homage to this achievement with semiotic analysis and singalongs. The Fred Astaire Conference was conceived by Kathleen Riley, a post-doctoral Fellow at Corpus Christi College, and her American collaborator Chris Bamberger rather in the way that young people in old Hollywood musicals decide to "put on a show". That it was put on at Oxford had its rationale in Astaire's life-long affection for England, where he had so much early success and where he recorded some of his last, most personal albums. In some of his better films – *Top Hat*, *The Gay Divorcee*, *Damsel in Distress*, and *Royal Wedding* – Astaire sings and dances his way through ballrooms and drawing rooms, with English characters and manners as foils to his freewheeling American spirit. Indeed, Astaire as "the American", the New Man of the post-First World War era, was a subject addressed by a number of participants at the conference: fashion writer G. Bruce Boyer, for example, spoke to this point in his paper on sartorial style, noting how

Astaire's soft-collared shirts and comfortable sports jackets came to replace the high starched collars and constricting suits of his Europeanized counterparts. Astaire's wardrobe, like his blithe personality, graceful movement, and natural vocal style, represented a New World of playful ease against an Old World of entrenched formality.

One of the highlights of the conference was the presence of Astaire's daughter, Ava Astaire McKenzie, who bears a striking resemblance to her father and was game to answer questions dear to fans' hearts: "Is it true that Fred woke you up for school by dancing around the room?" "Only a few steps." "Did Fred ever watch his old movies with you?" "Not really. He didn't like to look back." Also present to give insight into Astaire's character and creative process was the veteran British record producer Ken Barnes, who worked with Johnny Mercer, Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, as well as Astaire. Barnes recalled how he had persuaded Crosby and Astaire to duet on an album in the 1970s, telling each that the other had signed before either had, and how he had cajoled Astaire, by now retired from dance, to record a few tap steps for one of the tracks by demonstrating what a facsimile of tap dancing would sound like. "Nothing sounds like feet but feet", Astaire protested, and proceeded to do the steps himself.

John Mueller, a professor of Political Science and the author of *Astaire Dancing* (1985), an authoritative work on Astaire's musicals, focused on Astaire's drive for continual innovation and perfection in his routines, showing clips in which he performs a "wraparound" movement – a series of steps in which he encircles his partner with one arm, then unwraps her and returns to their initial position. The move, Mueller pointed out, was originally described in Vernon and Irene Castle's dance manual, but Astaire improved and then elaborated on it each time he used it. The idea of variations on a form was taken up by Todd Decker, a professor of Musicology, who discussed Astaire's use of jazz motifs borrowed from African-American musicians such as Fats Waller and Lionel Hampton. Astaire was the only film dancer who danced to the Blues, and his deep understanding of jazz became apparent when Decker compared his dance routines with Hampton's recordings. Refuting the conventional wisdom that Astaire's musicals are cinematically undistinguished (a myth based perhaps on his famous remark: "either the camera dances or I do"), the film and television historian Patricia Tobias demonstrated Astaire's technical astuteness, showing how he made sure that camera tracking always complemented bodily movement and kept the dancing figure within the central third of the frame; editing was done with such subtlety as to be practically

invisible. The dance historian Beth Genné used video clips to show how Balanchine had incorporated Astaire's fluidity and posture into his repertory for the New York City Ballet (in one, the former Balanchine prima ballerina Maria Tallchief was seen telling two young dancers to "make it more Astaire").

A number of revelations, large and small, were offered: of Astaire's Jewish ancestry and of a rare clip of Astaire dancing on stage in *The Gay Divorce* (permitting comparison with the same number in the subsequent movie with Ginger Rogers). It was also revealed that Astaire could be difficult to dance with – at her debutante ball, Mrs McKenzie said, she and her father had been the only couple moving in the wrong direction. A Fred and Ginger panel examined that famous partnership in detail, John Mueller asserting that Ginger Rogers was among the best actresses of her time, a statement he backed up with clips showing her reactions as Astaire sang – what better test of acting talent than to react convincingly while someone croons to you? A lively discussion evolved around the subject of Rogers's dresses, traditionally maligned for being "in the way": a view that is now undergoing revision. Even the famous feather-shedding confection for "Cheek to Cheek" in *Top Hat* (a dress parodied by Judy Garland and Astaire in *Easter Parade*) found apologists. It was agreed that Rogers's dresses were often a "third partner" in the dance; her ability to "control" them, a notable feat. Finally put to rest was any suggestion that the two stars disliked each other. According to Mrs McKenzie, her father never said an unkind word about Rogers – but then, he seems never to have said an unkind word about anyone.

A feature of the conference was the continual stream of testimonials on how Astaire had, to borrow from the Gershwin song, "changed my life". (Many had first seen Astaire in *Top Hat* on television when they were twelve or thirteen, holding tape recorders up to the TV to capture the songs – a confession that could only be made in the company of fellow enthusiasts.) It concluded with tributes by professional performers and a presentation by the celebrated Gershwin expert and concert pianist Jack Gibbons, featuring bravura renderings of the Gershwin numbers from Astaire's movies, transcribed by Gibbons directly from the films. He interspersed these with a demonstration of Astaire's extraordinary piano-playing technique in the Harlem Stride Piano style, and recounted anecdotes about Astaire's friendship with Gershwin. It was no wonder the two men had an affinity for each other; they had a similar sense of rhythm and musical taste as well as a shared drive to challenge themselves and others. Gershwin's songs were preternaturally difficult to dance to, and Astaire was probably the only performer who could

properly dance to them.

If there had been any doubt as to Astaire's genius, or the cultural influence he exerted on the twentieth century, it was put to rest by the end of the conference. For many there, Fred Astaire had long been a solitary passion, so that this marked a rare opportunity for shared appreciation. The end might have brought its melancholy as the participants dispersed, but the spirit of Fred Astaire had been present, Ariel-like, infusing the proceedings with his magic.

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