

Peter William Evans "TOP HAT"

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Top Hat, directed by Mark Sandrich and with a score by Irving Berlin, was the definitive film of the series starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, produced by RKO in the 1930s. Its considerable claims to Art and its resonant magic are the dual focus of this insightful and highly readable study by Peter William Evans. Evans devotes a chapter each to the "meanings" of the principal stars. He casts Astaire in the mould of the Baudelairean dandy, yet recognizes his essential Americanness as well as the classlessness and modernity of his brand of knight errantry. But he overemphasizes the initial imperviousness of the Astaire persona and fails to penetrate the secret of his unorthodox magnetism, which James Agate discerned in the pre-Hollywood Astaire – a virility based on vulnerability, a personality, at once knowing and guileless, that irresistibly combined ardent gallantry, restrained yearning, self-deprecation and self-confidence. Evans is better in his assessment of Rogers's appealing blend of fragility and toughness. There are two oft-quoted adages about Astaire and Rogers: "Fred gave Ginger class and Ginger gave Fred sex" and "Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did, but backwards and in high heels". In the course of his investigation, taking each of the film's musical numbers in turn, Evans provides a far more nuanced and accurate reading of the Astaire-Rogers dynamic and of the notion of gender equality the pair represented. He demonstrates how, through the crisp exchange of badinage and eloquent dance steps, they establish themselves on an equal "footing", and how it is through the medium of dance that the permutations and progress of their relationship (independence, rivalry, perfect complementarity) are most clearly defined. Especially strong is Evans's appreciation of "Isn't This a Lovely Day", a routine that best exemplifies the sophistication of Top Hat's sexual politics and in which we see Astaire and Rogers conversing through dance, bantering and sparring their way – with a seemingly improvisatory wit – towards the discovery of a glorious rapport. The volume has minor blemishes in the form of slight misquotations and the odd factual error, but it is, on the whole, a wellresearched and thoughtful appraisal. Evans approaches this most celebratory of musical comedies in celebratory mode but also with a deserved seriousness devoid of solemnity.

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