Conducting the Invisible Orchestra:
Born to Dance (1936), an Almost-Integrated Book Musical

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for

Hollywood Cinema, Origins to 1960

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March 31, 1943. St. James Theater, New York City. Curtain up.

In a pastoral setting, a woman sits at center stage, calmly churning butter. From the wings a solitary male voice is heard singing a cappella, “There’s a bright, golden haze on the meadow. There’s a bright, golden haze on the meadow. The corn is as high as an elephant’s eye.” The orchestra swells. Curly enters, and a landmark moment in the history of the American musical theatre enters with him. “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning” from Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* may now seem a relic of entertainment yesteryear, but to the audience of the day “these first minutes of stage time were a surprise, with neither the big choral opening nor the bustling book scenes that virtually all musicals got into when the curtain went up.” (Mordden, 2013). What made that sequence innovative was not only the aesthetic departure, however, but the integration of song lyrics into narrative storytelling, as Hammerstein “summoned all the theatrical craft he had learned over the past twenty-five years, his lyrics distilling the character, personality, and perceptiveness of his protagonist.” (Purdum, 2018)

In the integrated book musical, both on-stage and on-screen, songs are more than spectacle for an observing audience; they are an acceptable manner of communication between characters in the narrative. (“Book” refers to the story and dialogue of the musical and was a replacement for opera’s “libretto.” I include it as I believe using the word “integrated” alone is insufficient.) The integrated book musical forges a new reality for the spectator, one in which characters sing as naturally as they speak; dance as naturally as they walk; where songs don’t serve a performative purpose but “are the purpose” (Basinger, 2019), the definitive characteristic of the formal structure. One could argue a proper definition of the integrated book musical would be a musical

wherein no narrative rationale is required for the existence of song and dance in the presented "reality." Again, these are not presentational songs or dances, but accepted modes of communication.

While some believe this new reality "antithetical to the genre" (Altman, 1987) what it signals is an "artful blending of song, dance and story to produce a combined effect" (Mueller, 1984), elevating song in the narrative hierarchy and – as choreographer Agnes DeMille also pioneered in *Oklahoma!* with her landmark dream ballet – utilizing dance as a "thematic and psychological instrument." (Mordden, 2013)

To believe the integrated book musical simply spawned from the genius of Hammerstein in 1943 is to approbate an all-too-convenient historiography of the musical, ignoring significant work on both the stage and screen in the decades prior. Who would argue that "Ol' Man River" and "Can't Help Lovin Dat Man" from Hammerstein's own *Showboat* (1927) were not integrated into the storytelling? And there were certainly hints of integration in the Broadway productions of the Gershwins' *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) and the Cole Porter classic *Anything Goes* (1934). On screen, a crowd sings and dances (without a diegetic orchestra) as they buoyantly board a disaster-bound zeppelin in Cecil B. DeMille's *Madam Satan* (1930). Al Jolson engages in an integrated patter song (referred to at the time as "rhythmic dialogue") in *Hallelujah I'm a Bum* (1933). The "Night and Day" dance duet between Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *The Gay Divorcee* (1934) is "thoroughly integrated into the story line. If it were cut from the film, Rogers' love for Astaire, evident in later scenes, would be incomprehensible." (Mueller, 1984) But the

most unique “attempt” at a fully realized integrated book musical is Roy Del Ruth’s *Born to Dance* (1936).

A footnote in the history of musicals, *Born to Dance* is perhaps best known for the inclusion of its male star: a 28-year-old James Stewart. “MGM was not yet quite sure what to do with Stewart. He could sing a little, dance a little, and had a relaxed charm that worked well in light comedy.” (Basinger, 218) In the film, Stewart plays Ted Barker, a sailor who falls in love with up-and-coming hoofer Nora Paige (played by Eleanor Powell) while on shore leave in New York City. (This in itself could be another subgenre of the musical – Sailor Shows - as it’s also the basic premise of the Gene Kelly vehicles *Anchors Aweigh* and *On the Town*.) While the film conforms to many of the tropes that define the “backstage musical” of the period, deeper analysis of its use of Cole Porter’s brilliant, original score reveals a film suffering from something of a genre personality disorder. Several songs are presented comfortably in the defined integrated book musical structure, while others flirt with the convention, only to retreat into what one might describe as a “reconstructed proscenium.” In her seminal work, *The Hollywood Musical*, Jane Feuer develops this concept:

> “In musicals which the stage is a world (backstage musicals), the proscenium is perceived as a barrier and every attempt is made to bridge the distance it creates. But when performance is taken outside the theater, the proscenium is reborn out of ordinary space and the world is a stage.” (Feuer, 1993)

This essay will look at two sets of songs in *Born to Dance*: those performed by the sailors aboard their ship and the three “love” songs sprinkled throughout the film.

A Ship and a Dog

Rick Altman, referring to a *New Republic* piece by Otis Ferguson, describes how logically bringing in the first number is the "chief problem" of the musical. (Altman, 1987) This problem, solved in the Bing Crosby films of the 40s and 50s by always establishing his character as a former crooner ready to break into song, is addressed structurally by the most essential innovation of the integrated book musical, the opening number. This is not merely a lavish production number to start the entertainment, but an essential device used to establish the form of the piece. (The opening number would be innovated further by the likes of Jerome Robbins and Harold Prince to serve a more prominent thematic role.)

Born to Dance has an opening number in this dramaturgical sense; "Rolling Home" is performed in the sail of Ted's ship, among torpedoes and periscopes. It is an opportunity for the sailors to express their excitement to be stateside and their desire to find love. In the song, Gunny Saks (Sid Silvers) sings the following phrase:

> JUST THINK OF IT, NO MORE HARDTACK, NO MORE BEANS
> NO MORE SALT HORSE AND CANNED SARDINES
> WE SAILED ON THE SEVEN SEAS, WE CROSSED EVERY POND
> FROM NOW ON, ITS DUCK SOUP AND A PURE, PLATINUM BLONDE

There is no reason to believe this is a known song for the men, and the proscenium is not reconstructed, as the sailors perform the number for each other, not the camera. As an aesthetic conceit, however, the song establishes the narrative world of *Born to Dance* as one where characters express themselves musically. There are no visible musicians on-screen, yet the music is clearly audible. As this is not a stage production, where the orchestra is assumed by the audience to be present in the room, that lack of visibility is essential to the creation of a new reality on-screen, with the characters singing words in the diegesis to a score performed non-

diegetically. This is the fundamental aesthetic marriage of the integrated book musical in cinema. (By contrast, Mervyn LeRoy's 1932 masterpiece *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* also opens with sailors singing aboard a ship. But that *is* known song, and the only music heard during the sequence is played on harmonica by a character in the diegesis of the scene.)

Later, the sailors deliver a Gilbert and Sullivan-inspired musical number announcing the arrival of a Broadway starlet to their ship, entitled, "The Entrance of Lucy James." Again, there is no visible orchestra, and the lyrics reflect the *specific* excitement of these *specific* men. The song is punctuated by Lucy (Virginia Bruce) performing a Porter oddity, "Love Me, Love My Pekingese." In the framework of a standard backstage musical, this number would simply be "performance" for the character; a reconstruction of the proscenium aboard the ship. She's an established singer and it would make narrative sense that she performs for her fans.

But this backstage musical trope is upended by her *actually holding* her Pekingese, followed by the animal's pivotal role in the coming plot. (The dog finds itself overboard and Ted dives into the water to save it.) Also, Lucy does not board the ship with musicians or background dancers/vocalists; she boards only with her dog. Understanding the context of the performance, it is impossible to read this song as anything more than Lucy explaining the importance of her pet to the sailors. (Why she would do that is a question for another essay.)

Ted and Nora and Lucy and the Cop

In character songs, as opposed to group numbers, how a scene transitions from dialogue to lyrics can be the definitive factor in whether it adheres to the integrated book musical's formal system.

"Hey, Babe, Hey" is a courtship song, sung by Ted to Nora, on the upstairs balcony of The Lonely Hearts Club, a New York City nightspot. If Ted were to turn to Nora and say, "Nora, there's a song my mother taught me that reminds me of you," and then proceed to sing it, this would be an example of the reconstructed proscenium; the song being assigned a rationale for being sung. *Born to Dance* makes no such assignation:

> Ted: Well, would you like to be married to an Army man?
>
> Nora: No.
>
> Ted: Think you could be true to the Navy?
>
> Nora: What???
>
> Stewart: Well, you know what I mean. *(Sings)* I'VE BEEN AROUND SUCH A LOT IN MY LIFE / I KNOW THE HAIRPINS BY HEART / THE WAY THEY CHASE AFTER ME, BABE IT'S A CRIME / AND THE WAY I MAKE LOVE, IT'S AN ART

Again, no visible orchestra performs the music, and Ted has already been established during the opening number as a character who articulates his desires in song. In this diegesis, the words being sung are Ted's words, not the words of a song already established in the world of the characters. In 1936, this would have been quite an innovative sequence.

But that innovation is short-lived. When the potential lovers exit the balcony and engage with the world of the film – the club and its patrons – the song ceases to belong to Ted. Suddenly, an orchestra is present, playing the melody, with men singing the chorus. "Hey, Babe, Hey" is soon performed by Gunny to his wife Jenny (Una Merkel) and Mush Tracy (a remarkably elastic Buddy Ebsen) to Peppy Turner (Frances Langford), with Ted and Nora joining that quartet for a lengthy dance sequence performed directly to the camera. The proscenium has been fully reconstructed, and the song relegated to mere spectacle.

On a stroll through Central Park later in the film, Ted and Nora perform a duet, the musical's "center of gravity" (Altman, 1987), in the song "Easy to Love." The transition from dialogue to lyrics is again consistent with the structure of the integrated book musical:

> Ted: I wish you knew what you amounted to with me.
>
> Nora: Tell me.
>
> Ted: I KNOW TOO WELL THAT I'M JUST WASTING PRECIOUS TIME / IN THINKING SUCH A THING COULD BE / THAT YOU COULD EVER CARE FOR ME / I'M SURE YOU'LL HATE TO HEAR THAT I ADORE YOU DEAR / BUT GRANT ME JUST THE SAME, I'M NOT ENTIRELY TO BLAME / YOU'D BE SO EASY TO LOVE

But this setup differs from their earlier exchange. This is not a courtship song, or a love song, but instead a song about the prospect of being in love; a conceit Hammerstein would be credited for inventing in *Oklahoma!* ("People Will Say We're in Love") and perfecting in *Carousel* ("If I Loved You"). The narrative function of these duets is to establish a love story without the existence of love between the characters, and to "create an ideal present into which the would-be lovers can slip." (Altman, 1987) They might be referred to as "potential love songs" and an argument can be made that in cinematic terms, *Born to Dance*, released almost twenty years prior to *Oklahoma*'s 1955 film adaptation, pioneers their inclusion in musical structure.

Since Powell was regarded as a "strong, hard-hitting tapper" (Basinger, 218), this sequence also involves dance. But unlike her earlier on-stage dance number ("Rap, Tap on Wood") and the aforementioned dance sequence to bookend "Hey, Babe, Hey," Nora is dancing for Ted as a form of individual expression. Feuer notes that "every time there is a cut to a view of the performance alone in a backstage musical, we feel that the performance is being addressed directly to us." (Feuer, 1993) By keeping Ted in-frame during much of the dance sequence, Del

Ruth avoids the reconstruction of the proscenium and anchors the dance in the narrative reality of an integrated book musical. Ted is the audience for Nora's dance, not us.

But once again, that integration crumbles when Ted and Nora encounter the greater world of the film, this time embodied by a police officer in the park. In the truly bizarre sequence that follows, the officer (Reginald Gardiner) removes his hat to reveal a disheveled, mad scientist-like appearance, and begins to conduct the invisible orchestra that had been providing the music track for Nora's dance. Suddenly, a character firmly within the diegesis is interacting with the non-diegetic music track. After Ted and Nora exit the park, the conducting continues for another several minutes, directly to camera. The reflexivity of this sequence undermines the newly established reality, making the audience acutely aware of the "presented" performance.

The officer.

The conductor.

There is one other sequence worth noting later in the film. In the story, Lucy James carries on a sham affair with Ted for the purposes of public relations. Soon, unsurprisingly, she falls for him. The third "love" song is sung by her to Ted, the standard "I've Got You Under My Skin". (The

song was introduced in this film.) The melody underscores an earlier ballroom dance sequence, but the first time we hear the lyrics is when Lucy sings them to Ted.

> Lucy James: I've been wondering about you.
> *(Sings)*
> I'VE GOT YOU UNDER MY SKIN.

Lucy and Ted never engage the outside world during the number, and thus it remains firmly within the structure of the integrated book musical throughout. It would be difficult to find a comparable sequence in the musicals of the period.

An Artistic Telos

Altman argues the integrated musicals of the early fifties were "treated as the genre's *telos*" and their existence used to denigrate other genre entries. (Altman, 1987) But one could argue musicals simply reached an *artistic telos* when song and dance sequences were psychologically blended into the narrative, and that this blending had begun soon after the introduction of sound to cinema.

While the subgenre of the integrated book musical has produced multiple film masterpieces, ranging from Norman Jewison's *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) to Steven Spielberg's *West Side Story* (2021), non-integrated musicals have hardly disappeared in the eighty years since *Oklahoma!* premiered. Bob Fosse stripped the non-cabaret numbers out of *Cabaret* (1972) and when Vincente Minnelli attended an early screening of the film he proclaimed, "I have just seen the perfect movie." (Gottfried, 1990) Rob Marshall converted all of the musical numbers in *Chicago* (2002) to dream sequences, removing them from the narrative reality they had enjoyed on stage, and won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Integrated book musicals do not

explicitly elevate the entertainment qualitatively; they merely elevate the dramaturgical relevance of song and dance within the entertainment. *Born to Dance* is a unique and often radical (for its time) example of a pivotal stage in the evolution of that elevation.

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