CARRIE RICKEY

The Movie Musical! by Jeanine Basinger

The Movie Musical! combines keen analysis and giddy fun in considering films ranging from The Jazz Singer (Richard Fleischer, 1927) to Straight Outta Compton (F. Gary Gray, 2015). Jeanine Basinger’s comprehensive and sprightly analysis of her favorite movie genre is a biography of the Hollywood form all the way from its birth through developmental leaps and missteps, death rattles, and comebacks. When Basinger punctuates her insights with witty asides and deadpan observations about the sexual subtext in the Hollywood musical, I laughed so hard that I dropped the book. How often does that happen while you’re reading a serious study?

“Unlike most genres, the film musical has a clearly delineated starting point” (25), Basinger says. That would be the widespread adoption of sound movies in 1927. While Thomas Edison thought that the developing medium of motion pictures would eventually be paired with his invention, the phonograph, he himself did not perfect the synchronization of sound and image in the 1890s. Even if he had, he would not have found enough theaters interested in wiring for sound to make talking pictures commercially feasible.

Pointing out that the first all-talkie was Lights of New York (Bryan Foy, 1928), Basinger asks why the myth persists that The Jazz Singer (Alan Crosland, 1927), which had some talking and singing parts but was mostly devoid of sound, is still widely considered the first talkie (32). She suggests that by showcasing sound in the form of music rather than speech, The Jazz Singer provided audiences with a more memorable introduction to the new technology.

The film musical had its identity forged between 1929 and 1931 in a crucible of technological transition and economic depression. One of Basinger’s theses is that this transition period gave rise to everything that the musical could and would become: “innovation and experimentation coupled with a grounding in what was already known and familiar from vaudeville and Broadway” (35). In introducing the subgenres that were present at the creation of the film musical, Basinger helps the reader see how each evolved (or not) over the century.

Known and familiar films included Show of Shows (John G. Adolfi, 1929), a musical and dramatic revue that threw everything at the audience to see what might stick, and The Cocoanuts (Robert Florey and Joseph Santley, 1929), an adaptation of the Marx Brothers’ Broadway comedy with musical interludes. The directors filmed as if sitting in an orchestra seat in a Broadway theater, not immediately recognizing that the movies could do things live theater could not, such as providing medium close-ups to bring audiences closer to the talent. Also familiar was the category of the backstage musical, like The Broadway Melody (Harry Beaumont, 1929), which required no explanation for why its characters sing or dance; they are in show business, so it’s understood.

More innovative was Sunny Side Up (David Butler, 1929), an original musical comedy that didn’t come from Broadway and wasn’t shot like it, but rather was developed afresh for the screen. This is the film, says Basinger, in which the naturalistic musical begins to take form. When the lead character, a poor tenement girl played by Janet Gaynor, sees a photo in the newspaper of a handsome rich boy, played by Charles Farrell, she’s moved to sing. Gaynor’s look into the camera lens, establishing a direct connection as she performs...
“I’m a Dreamer, Aren’t We All?,” makes those in the audience understand that Gaynor is singing her emotions because words aren’t enough to contain her feelings.

Ernst Lubitsch’s two most exquisite films—The Love Parade (1929), pairing Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald; and Monte Carlo (1930), pairing MacDonald with Jack Buchanan—are both innovative and experimental. The results, however, varied, as Basinger acknowledges: “Depending on what part of The Love Parade you’re looking at, you’re either seeing a work of cinematic genius that’s solving the problems of sound and embracing the new possibilities... or you’re watching a clumsy example of how no one knew what to do other than stand in front of a camera and sing, keeping in everyone’s sightlines” (50).

By laying a song over a sequence—like that of MacDonald in a train, singing “Beyond the Blue Horizon” as the world speeds by outside her window—Lubitsch shows how music could propel the viewer through time and space without a need for dance. Instead of filming a performance with a passive camera, Lubitsch used framing and editing to turbocharge the action of his films.

As Basinger tells it, the 1932-33 period marked another milestone in the American musical. The reason usually given is that audiences, who by 1931 had tired of musicals, got excited by 42nd Street (Lloyd Bacon, 1933). The more nuanced explanation would point out that a lot happened during these two years while directors like Lubitsch and Rouben Mamoulian innovated and while Fred Astaire and Busby Berkeley emerged as the defining creators of film dance.

“In the early years of musical experimentation, Lubitsch’s films, particularly One Hour with You (1932), stand out—if everyone had followed its lead, the history of the musical would be very different” (64–65), she says. Making a virtue of the inherent artifice of the musical, Lubitsch broke the fourth wall and used direct audience address. Its characters “sing as they talk and talk as they sing” (65).

With original songs by Rodgers and Hart and camerawork that sings and dances, Love Me Tonight (1932, Rouben Mamoulian) is, simply, the best American movie musical ever made. As Basinger puts it, while it may lack dance, it is “one long piece of total choreography” (67) that presents a rhythm of editing and artificial “movements,” including slo-mo and cranked-up action synchronized to slower and faster passages of music, respectively. (The cinema-literate will note that it also parodies Soviet film montage.) For Basinger and most cinephiles, “Love Me Tonight” has never been surpassed for its organic integration of music, plot and character. . . . [It] showed everyone in the film business what the musical could be” (69).

As Lubitsch and Mamoulian made musical stories cinematic, Fred Astaire (at RKO) and choreographer Busby Berkeley (at Warner Bros.) made dance cinematic: Astaire, through camera angle and continuity; Berkeley, through camera angle and dynamic editing. Each demanded complete control. Astaire insisted, “Either the camera will dance or I will dance” (71), demanding continuous takes of his dance numbers; Berkeley wanted the camera to dance, relegating singers and dancers to individual elements of a larger design. Berkeley’s numbers didn’t advance the movie narrative but remained apart, stories unto themselves.

Though others may have directed the movies on which they worked, Astaire and Berkeley are the true auteurs of their musical numbers because they understood that movie choreography is a dance among the camera, dancer, and audience. For a later innovator, Gene Kelly, “The history of dance on film begins with Fred Astaire.” Though the Berkeley films lacked dramatic force and grace, they abounded in rhythmical and geometric abstraction. His direction of musical numbers told the viewer that “the prosenium arch is a lie” and that “the cinema is not a theater.”

In only six years after the introduction of sound, the musical proved its flexibility of form and box-office reliability. Hollywood was principally about stars and stories, though, so the studios began shaping musical narratives around a star personality.

The fulcrum of Basinger’s account is its third chapter, an analysis titled “Stars and Strategies,” which constitutes half of the book. She compares and contrasts the high-energy, unstoppable Al Jolson, the low-key Bing Crosby, and the plainspoken Frank Sinatra, popular recording stars who all became movie stars. “Jolson’s Stardom was created by using his already-developing performing personality” (136), while Crosby’s was created over time through the films he starred in. (Only John Wayne and Clint Eastwood outrank Crosby for having their names appear more often on the top-ten box-office list).

One of Basinger’s previous books, The Star Machine, described how studios manufactured stars. Her keen understanding of performative styles and star “manufacturing” informs this one. She reports that “Jolson learned to work an audience directly, and carried that electric, pump-it-up style into the modern media” (140). He almost always had to play show-business types. On the other hand, Crosby learned to “move an audience by working through a recorded form to reach them” (140). He was a voice first and an image later. His screen characters could be ordinary people.

Though Frank Sinatra came to movies as a popular singer, early cast as the shy guy opposite Gene Kelly’s wolf,
the young singer evolved from the singing star who sometimes made musicals to the dramatic actor who only rarely did so. Neither Jolson nor Crosby possessed Sinatra’s ability to project deep emotion on-screen.

Among the classic singing actresses Basinger goes deep on are Ethel Merman and Doris Day. While beauty wasn’t a prerequisite for female stars of Broadway musicals, it was for their movie sisters. Merman had the pipes but not the looks. She had great stage presence but never commanded movie space like screen-musical stars.

And there was yet another difference between the Broadway musical and its Hollywood counterpart: “Great Broadway singing stars seldom become famous movie stars” (185). Of course, Julie Andrews and Barbra Streisand are notable exceptions. Broadway singing stardom and movie singing stardom are different, as Basinger notes: “Broadway was always about the music, the song itself, and Hollywood was always about the star personality” (185).

Day, like Sinatra, began as a big-band vocalist and had a warm voice and instant rapport with the camera. Also like Sinatra (with whom she would costar in Gordon Douglas’s 1954 film Young at Heart), she could dance as well as emotionally access the sad feelings not otherwise visible within the sunny persona. This made her a great dramatic actress as well, as in Hitchcock’s The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956). Like Judy Garland, Day “was an actress who sang and a singer who acted her lyrics out” (206).

At first, Basinger writes, Hollywood studios made musicals without thinking, but then they started thinking about it: “The desire to create a musical about being musical took hold” (422). Enter the musical as art form, the apotheosis of the genre that evolved between 1939 and 1959. The principal players in Basinger’s apotheosis are Vincente Minnelli, Stanley Donen, and Gene Kelly, all of whom worked in Arthur Freed’s unit at MGM. All of them began their careers when it was expected that the musical was either set in a universe where musical performance was logical because it was a backstage musical or biopic, or set in a universe of fantasy.

The Freed unit directors wanted to make musicals that could embrace reality and fantasy at the same time. In order to do this, there was a range of questions that they asked and then had to solve. How is the viewer made aware that he or she is entering a world where people will sing or dance? How closely integrated are the film’s songs and plot? How often do the song or dance numbers occur, and how long should the intervals between them be?

Basinger finds that it is crucial to establish the musical universe almost immediately. She offers Meet Me in St. Louis (Vincente Minnelli, 1949) as “a perfect positive example” (436). It opens at the home of the Smiths as they look forward to the upcoming St. Louis World’s Fair. In the opening sequence, the movie’s theme song is sung sequentially by various family members. “The audience knows right away where they are, and what will be the terms on which to receive the rest of the movie” (437). The film integrates its songs with the plot, with the intervals between numbers neither so long as to forget it’s a musical nor so short as to feel bombarded by numbers one after another.

An American in Paris (Vincente Minnelli, 1951), Singin’ in the Rain (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952), and The Band Wagon (Vincente Minnelli, 1953) form the trifecta of integrated musicals, and they are all originals, all created for the screen. Minnelli would win Best Picture Oscars for An American in Paris and Gigi (1958), his exquisite adaptation of the Lerner and Loewe musical, shot mostly in Paris. Finally, with these awards, Hollywood had validated the musical as an American art form.

Despite the innovations of these fifties musicals, by the next decade, with the exception of Mary Poppins (Robert Stevenson, 1965), the studios, under siege from television, axed contract directors and music departments that might have innovated original musicals. It was easier to option Broadway adaptations like West Side Story (Robert Wise, 1961), My Fair Lady (George Cukor, 1964), The Sound of Music (Robert Wise, 1965), and Funny Girl (William Wyler, 1968). The combined song power and star power of these vehicles were powerful enough to pack movie theaters without much in the way of innovation besides liberating the stories from Hollywood soundstages and letting them breathe on actual locations.

Basinger neglects to consider how America’s changing musical tastes—and the consequent changes in songwriting—negatively impacted the movie musical in this same period. In 1927, Tin Pan Alley composers wrote songs to be sung by everyone. With the rise of the singer-songwriter in the fifties, pop singers began to write for their own voices even as Broadway composers continued to write musicals for the voices of others. Soon it became cheaper and more profitable to make a quickie musical with Elvis Presley, like Jailhouse Rock (Richard Thorpe, 1957), or with the Beatles, like A Hard Day’s Night (Richard Lester, 1964). By the sixties and seventies, many of those weaned on Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals fulfilled their desire for theatrical music not with movies but with the live concerts by Elton John, Carole King, Aretha Franklin, or Bruce Springsteen.

By 1970, the musical faced a dilemma: “What was its purpose now that times had changed, and would anyone still
want it?” (517). Audiences flocked to see Cabaret (Bob Fosse, 1972), which, like the classical musicals, depended on a charismatic star, Liza Minnelli, daughter of Hollywood musical icons Vincente Minnelli and Judy Garland. But its setting and presentation could not have been more different from those of its precursors. This was not Meet Me in St. Louis, it was Berlin in the thirties, with the rise of inflation and Nazism. Its musical numbers were no longer escapist fantasies; instead, they now offered brutal realities in a distorted-mirror reflection of the real events occurring on the Berlin streets outside the cabaret were they are performed. With music and lyrics by the celebrated Broadway team of John Kander and Fred Ebb, “the music is used for a purpose other than lightening our hearts” (520).

Five years later, though, the audience stayed away from the metamusical New York, New York (Martin Scorsese, 1977), a film that likewise starred Minnelli and again featured Kander and Ebb songs. “The movie embraces the conflict between the real and unreal worlds of the kind that exists in musicals, and both celebrates and criticizes the format” (524). Unlike with Cabaret, a prior knowledge of Hollywood musical tropes was necessary to appreciate Scorsese’s genre-bending approach; without it, the audience could not understand what the director was doing.

These metamusicals marked the end of an era. Yes, musicals would continue to be made; yet, Basinger reflects, “when Hollywood began moving the musical toward a cerebral experience rather than its former, more visceral or participatory one, it essentially killed the musical at its core” (528).

Though pundits proclaim the death of the movie musical every few years, the genre still survives. Most often, though, the characters are real people in a documentary performing live (e.g., Jonathan Demme’s 1984 Talking Heads tribute, Stop Making Sense), or actors playing real singers like Johnny Cash and June Carter (James Mangold’s 2005 biopic, Walk the Line), or not human at all but animated figures (cue Ron Clements and John Musker’s 1989 Disney extravaganza, The Little Mermaid). One can disagree with Basinger’s lack of enthusiasm for recent musicals such as Across the Universe (Julie Taymor, 2007) and La La Land (Damien Chazelle, 2016), but still agree with her that contemporary filmmakers are trying too hard to outsmart the classic directors like Lubitsch, Mamoulian, and Minnelli.

Because she looks at the musical from every conceivable angle—from structure to archetypes, casting to lyrical compositions, camera positions to editing—Basinger’s book is not simply a history of the musical but also a useful guide to how to make one and even a unified theory of the genre. Basinger finds that the musicals that excel, the ones that really sing and dance, have three key factors: charismatic stars who can do both, and well; music and lyrics that enable the performers to act the feelings of their characters through song and dance; and, finally, a director who immediately brings the audience into the musical realm and can integrate the musical sequences with the story through dynamic camerawork and editing. None of that sounds hard—until she reminds you how few filmmakers have done it.

KATIE MODEL

In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema by Ivone Margulies

In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema, the first book-length study on reenactment in film, centers on what Ivone Margulies calls the “real/actor.” Margulies’s choice to refer to the person who replays their own past on camera as the real/actor visually and conceptually underscores the “constitutive dualities” of in-person reenactment—in particular, the temporal and ontological instability she identifies—asking: Is this an actor or person? Past or present? Representation or presentation? Theatricality or authenticity? Margulies wields the reenactment mode as analytic instrument, creating new paths into important well-known works while also giving lesser-known ones their due consideration. The book is a remarkable feat; it maintains exceptional rigor, precision, and theoretical astuteness while also leaving room for the central concept to adapt to varying sociohistorical contexts. Like the works that it examines, wrestles with, and unlocks, In Person demands careful attention; it should not be rushed through.

There has been excellent writing on reenactment, notably by Bill Nichols and Jonathan Kahana, which unveils reenactment’s emergence and remission in documentary and its at times troublesome relationship within the genre. In her new book, Margulies draws on their important scholarship and at the same time distinguishes her contribution in numerous ways. In her first book, Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman’s Hyperrealist Everyday, Margulies investigated the relationship between theatricality and film in Chantal Akerman’s oeuvre, and in her chapter for her earlier edited anthology, Rites of Realism: Essays on