

Lights, Camera, Action!

One of the few great musicals

Dolly --- song and dance and simple delight

By LLOYD CHESLEY

It is generally considered that the most popular, most exciting form of movies is the musical. On top of that, if I wanted to be intellectual, I might say that the musical is the ultimate achievement of cinema art. But I don't want to be intellectual. I just saw Hello Dolly.

It is true that musicals are the best-loved type of film. Unfortunately, this love is built on a myth. For there have been few great musicals. Besides Astaire and directors Ernst Lubitsch and Rouben Mamoulian, there is little of classic worth. But in the fifties, when so much of the movie scene was an arid death valley, the myth came to life. The source was the MGM musicals, mostly centring on or influenced by Gene Kelly. Apologies to 20th Century Fox produced it, but in Hello Dolly the MGM golden age is reborn.

The essential ingredients to a musical are color, life, laughs and music. The last may seem obvious, but it seems that only Kelly, now in the director's chair for Dolly, can realize a film that is almost totally music and dance. Remembering An American in Paris and the best musical of all, Singin' In The Rain, is remembering song after song after dance after dance. And Dolly is the same. It seems that a number has barely ended when another starts.

And of course its more than the quantity that does this. For one thing, the previous number is so good that it is still running through your mind when the next begins. Also there is plenty of fine comedy to fill the gaps.

For some reason Kelly, who always choreographed his own work, has forsaken the job now that he is directing. Instead the job goes to Michael Kidd, who did Astaire's The Band Wagon and Seven Brides For Seven Brothers, two of the best of MGM's golden period.

Kidd does more athletic dances than Kelly. His people leap and prance about like acrobats at a fair. Here it is good. For it is easy for a good dancer to dance well, but it is hard for any dancer to project a personality and become great. Astaire lacks a lot, but no one has his personality. Kelly, when he dances is the best, for he makes up what he lacks in a perfect personality by dancing perfectly. The dances in Dolly are all kept nice and busy and so are we, enjoying away as fast as they can hop and twirl.

Color, color, color. The art design by Jack Martin Smith and Herman Blumenthal and the costumes by Irene Sharaff (I am including names you rarely see for these people deserve so much credit) are turned by photographer Harry Stradling into scenery as exciting as the dancing they decorate.

And Kelly takes all this together and creates simple delight. It isn't easy, for it requires all the charm, honesty and humor that he always projected on screen to do so. Right from the opening, where everybody sounds like sweeping and walking take on the rhythm of the dance through the comic scenes that mix slapstick and innuendo, it is a Gene Kelly picture, and it is him at his best.

Dolly has songs and a book that are not up to Gershwin and the writing team of Comden and Green, but the cast, always under the able thumb of Kelly, do well with what they've got.

There are a lot of leads and all do fine. Of special note is Michael Crawford (How I Won The War) as supporting male, dancing and charming in a way more reminiscent of Dick Van Dyke than Kelly. But he is a good hooper and a funny guy.

But when you talk about funny guys you are talking about Walter Matthau. I guess this is about the best he has ever been. Not only his delivery of lines, but his reactions are hilarious. He can get a bigger laugh with a raise of the eyebrows than most can with a good joke. And he and Kelly make

good use of his voice and accent in the songs, as well as his peculiar posture in the dances.

But the star of Dolly is Dolly and Dolly is Barbra Streisand. The stage show carried on by virtue of the nostalgia surrounding the old-timers that played the lead. Now it is a vital performer who has the part. It is said that Barbra is the biggest star around. As Groucho once said, "This is no coincidence."

She, by virtue of being the brightest talent of song and comedy we have, is capable of bringing more entertainment to more people than anyone else. She has a sort of Chaplin-esque importance, and she uses it well. She turns tired lines into bellylaughs, and tired melodies into moving, exciting numbers.

There are two notes of tragedy involved in this show.

One I have hinted at: it seems that Kelly will dance no more. He is the best, the true soul of the musical, and so all there is left is his past. That is more than I should hope for, but for the lack of future is sad. Anyway, he is great comic talent and

continues to direct, next giving us Hank Fonda and Jimmy Stewart in The Cheyenne Social Club.

The other tragedy is that Matthau and Streisand hate each other. Professionals that they are, they didn't let it show in the movie, so we are left with the only effort of what could have been a great team-up of the perfect nag and the perfect slow burn. But on their separate paths they should give more pleasure than I have the right to ask for.

It is hard to write about something when all you can do is rave. But when I see a great musical I know that I am seeing something too good to be true. It seems a fatuous art-form if you intellectualize, but in the odd instance when it is done well, it can be more affecting than anything else. It has its meaning, and it is a noble value, especially the way most of us feel most of the time these days.

I know that feeling when I walk out of a theatre and a little lilt comes to my otherwise leaden feet, and before I know it or can control myself, I'm singin' in the rain.



20th Century Fox's musical Hello Dolly is the rebirth of MGM's golden fifties.

Notes to the hopeful, would-be film-maker

By DAN MERKUR

There is an aspect of film-making that has almost entirely been forgotten of late, and that is professionalism.

The American cinema of today, in attempting to throw off the influences of Hollywood, has at the same time thrown off all that was of value under the old system. Hollywood of the 30s, 40s and even well into the 50s concerned itself primarily with one of two major themes in every film that was released.

Either a film had a romantic theme, or it was an action-adventure story. And to these films the great Hollywood machine applied its great talents in every department — from the art direction of Cedric Gibbons and Hans Drier, to scores by Max Steiner, Dmitri Tiomkin and Ernst Wolfgang Korngold.

Writers like William Faulkner and Lillian Hellman were brought in to write screenplays, and specialty men like Willis O'Brien, who animated King Kong, or Don Siegel, who did the Warner Brothers montage sequences, were held in high esteem and used to their best advantage.

Out of this machine came films like Casablanca, The Adventures of Robin Hood, The Philadelphia Story, Arsenic and Old Lace, The Maltese Falcon, Goodbye Mr. Chips, and Top Hat.

The films were light and frivolous. They had no earthshaking social importance. They were made simply to entertain. And they were perfectly crafted by top notch talents in order to do so. They simply entertain. They were professional and other groups of films has ever been.

In the 50s, trends in foreign cinema began to seriously affect the American film industry. While an American film had traditionally been concerned with getting the plot of a love, adventure or comedy story across, the foreign film had a message to tell the world.

For the foreign film-maker, the film was a medium for the dissemination of opinions. To Hollywood, the filmic medium was a variety stage that could bring top name entertainers into every little town that could put a sheet on one end of a hall, and lamp at the other.

In the 50s, Hollywood began to notice that the foreign product was more serious, more didactic. Oh, film-makers had always been aware of the 'highbrow' content of European films, but it was in the 50s that these same 'highbrow' films began making a good buck.

As a result, Hollywood, for the first time, was faced with the decision of what was to take priority — the entertainment, or the message. Foreign films obviously opted for the message. Which accounted for inferior lighting, camerawork, composition, scripting, scoring, etc.

The old Hollywood opted for the old standards of storytelling. But the younger Hollywood was caught in the middle — with little interest in entertaining, but just as little knowledge of how to get the theme across.

Occasionally a professional Hollywood piece is still made — action films like Butch Cassidy or The Wild Bunch, or romantic films like The Sterile Cuckoo. Adaptations of 'heavier' novels are still done, and when done properly, like The Reivers, they come off very well

indeed. But how much more frequent are all message and no storytelling style films like The Arrangement?

With the current situation in the American industry, with Hollywood dying because of mismanagement of the studios, multimillion dollar flops, crippling union restrictions, and general stupidity, strange things are in the offing.

Since Bonnie and Clyde made it big, with a script that had been turned down everywhere because unknowns had written it, it has become a good thing to buy unknown properties left and right.

Since Easy Rider, it has become a good thing to buy stars' homemade movies. Since Pretty Poison did it big, Hollywood is taking flyers on just about anything (including a ghastly short subject McMaster University put out.)

I seriously think the Hollywood market is in such a bad way that the roof is going to cave in shortly, and when it does, everybody is going to be starting from scratch again, making movies that people will enjoy watching.

I always figured that if you could get your plot across intelligently you were doing OK, and then if you could entertain you were doing better, and then if you could put a message on the end of it, you hit the jackpot. But without the plot and without the professionalism, the message was nowhere.

I can get the message of a film out of any review. The film still has to be worth two hours of watching. Most aren't these days. Think about it.