

ARTS & LETTERS

Musicals Then and Now

"Can't Stop the Musicals" by Dave Kehr, in *American Film* (May 1984), American Film Institute, Box 966, Farmingdale, N.Y. 11737.

Although Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers might not consider them worthy of the name, three of Hollywood's most successful movies last year—*Flashdance*, *Staying Alive*, *Yentl*—were musicals.

Movie musicals have changed drastically over the years, notes Kehr, film critic for the *Chicago Reader*. During the "golden age," from *Monte Carlo* in 1930 to *My Fair Lady* in 1964, the hallmark of the Hollywood musical was the sudden leap from a conventional story into a spectacular song and dance number—a form of escapism that provided the musicals' "deepest pleasure," says Kehr. The stars of these films could sing, dance, and act, helping to fuse all of the movies' elements.

Golden-age musicals were also the showcase for "Hollywood Magic"—the technical innovations and special effects that often awe audiences. Technicolor was introduced to the public in *La Cucaracha* (1934); Fred Astaire danced upside down in *Royal Wedding* (1951).

In 1964, the Beatles sang their way through their first movie, *A Hard Day's Night*, and musicals were never the same again. Rock music soundtracks posed a number of challenges to film-makers. Rock's rhythmic, nonmelodic character, its limited emotional range, and the monotony of rock dances such as the Twist all conspired against the musical's traditional format.

On top of all that, the Beatles' director, Richard Lester, had to work with four stars who could not dance. His solution to these problems was to rely on montage. The quick camera cuts and fragmentation supplied a sense of rhythm, energy, and exuberance akin to that of dance. The technique quickly became a staple of musicals. Montage, for example, allowed the makers of *Flashdance* to conceal the fact that a stand-in was used for most of star Jennifer Beals's dance scenes.

But montage also reflects some more fundamental changes. Contemporary musicals regularly feature singers who do not dance (Barbra Streisand in *Yentl*) or dancers who do not sing (John Travolta in *Staying Alive*). The characters these actors play are, in a sense, incomplete, not quite "at one" with the world. They are also alone: "The montage musical," Kehr argues, "produces not the romantic communion of a couple, but the isolated exaltation of a single person." *Yentl* ends when Streisand departs, alone, for America; Travolta in his film struts, solo, down Broadway.

Meanwhile, other film genres have encroached on the musical's old territory. Science-fiction films now hold the monopoly on special effects and other "Hollywood Magic"; comedies by the likes of Mel Brooks and Woody Allen frequently take the sudden surrealistic leap from reality.

Hollywood still produces a few musicals in the classic vein—*Annie*, *At Long Last Love*, *Pennies from Heaven*—but, says Kehr, they are growing "steadily more feeble."