

## Stage-Worlds and World-Stages in Hollywood Musicals

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### 1. Introduction

Hollywood musicals combine two distinctive features: narrative and musical numbers, also referred to as “the real and the expressive” (Telotte 1980a, 4). These two equally important parts of any successful musical have to harmonize such that both seem appropriate in each scene and, ideally, supportive of each other. As musical numbers are traditionally seen as a “source of a tension” (ibid., 2) within the narrative, harmonization is not easy to achieve, and different directors as well as different sub-genres of the film musical have found different ways to deal with this tension. In this work, I will discuss two methods of integrating musical numbers into the plot of Hollywood musicals: the stage-worlds and the world-stages. While the former entails a certain kind of storyline, the latter refers to the setting of single numbers within the plot.

Whenever the storyline of a film musical centers on real stage shows, as most of the early musicals do, it *turns the stage into a world; the stage-world*. These so-called ‘backstage musicals’ permit “a maximum of singing with a minimum of justification” (Altman 1987, 210). Other musicals, which do not conveniently offer an official stage to sing and dance on, have to motivate musical numbers out of the character’s need for it (cf. ibid., 235). Often, the mere outburst of emotion is all that is necessary to justify the sudden expressive acts. These musical performances outside a theater backdrop *turn the world into a stage; the world-stage*. The latter might be true for every singing and dancing scene in a musical film, as the actors are supposed to sing and dance even when they are not performing on a real stage. Some of them, though, create a (theatrical) proscenium out of ordinary spaces, giving the illusion of stages within ‘reality’. This happens when a certain setting is given, which can be further emphasized by a particular view of the camera and the formation of spontaneous live audiences.

I will discuss in the next chapters both aspects of Hollywood musicals, the world-stages and the stage-worlds, in terms of their functions within the genre and within the movies themselves, with supporting examples of particular scenes. I will show that these two elements add to the musicals’ complexity and blur

the edge between onstage and offstage environments. Some musicals, illustrated later in Chapter 4, include both world-stages and stage-worlds and show fluent transitions from one into the other.

## 2. Turning the Stage into a World

Hollywood musical films derive from a long entertainment tradition on stage: the Broadway musicals. The musical theater and its on-screen cousin are connected not only by history, but often also by content and style (cf. Everett/Laird 2002, 213) – especially the first musical films. Musical films that integrate a stage show into the plot demonstrate the genre's tradition and early development.<sup>1</sup> These musicals provide a 'natural' environment for the characters to sing and dance in while simultaneously entertaining the audience. Furthermore, by focusing on the staging of a show in some way, musicals demonstrate the worthiness of show business (cf. Telotte 1981, 19).

Backstage musical films were most popular in the 1930s. Their plots center on the production of a stage-play, an intrigue that occurs behind the scenes or the making of musical stars.

The narratives of the 1930s backstage musicals generally concern a music man bent on reaching a stage where he can express his otherwise unrewarded or unrecognized virtues or talents, or where a couple or an entire chorus can realize their harmonic potential (Hay 1985, 100).

What Hay refers to as a "harmonic potential" might be the most important aspect of backstage musicals. The final show brings the staging process and the private lives of the characters together and solves any ongoing conflicts. Most often, during the final number lovers are united, conflicts are overcome, and team effort is celebrated. This 'grand finale' also provides a "sense of release" (ibid., 99); afterwards the audiences feel emotionally uplifted as they leave the cinematic world and return to their own reality. Audiences in the 1930s sought happiness and stories as a response to the Great Depression. Economic decline and private financial crises brought about Hollywood musicals that invited the audience to escape into a world where collective action, love and the free expression of feelings through song and dance outshine everyday sorrows. Fumento categorizes two types of Depression era musicals: the first exemplified by the Warner Brothers/Busby Berkeley productions with links to realism and a rather "sleazy" milieu of backstage theaters; the second a temporally indeterminate era of good and happy times, epitomized in the musicals featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers<sup>2</sup> (1981, 16).

<sup>1</sup> Musical films on screen, though, clearly differ from their ancestors on stage by breaking/with a certain stage-convention. On stage simultaneous singing and dancing is possible only to a limited degree, due to the performers' exhaustion. However, filmed musicals use prerecorded singing (since it was first introduced in *THE BROADWAY MELODY* (USA 1929, Harry Beaumont)), making singing with dancing and vice versa possible (cf. Mueller 1981, 145 and Cohan 2002, 13).

<sup>2</sup> More important for the argument of this article is yet another difference between these two types. While the Warner Brothers/Busby Berkeley musicals are manifestly categorized as backstage musicals (see Chapter 2.2), the musicals that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers used to star together in belong to the so-called 'integrated musicals'. The latter does not provide an

## 2.1 *The Great American Backstage Musical*

Before I go into the analysis of backstage musicals, I will first illustrate characteristics of this subgenre by introducing the aptly named stage show *The Great American Backstage Musical* (performed in Los Angeles in 1976 and in London in 1978). This 1970's stage play was written long after the era of the first backstage musicals. Instead of mimicking traditional backstage musicals, it is rather an illustrative parody of the subgenre. As parodies often reveal the truth about the subject by subverting it and/or making fun of it, I will use this show to elucidate characteristics of the traditional backstage musical films. *The Great American Backstage Musical* is set during the time of World War II. The French's Musical Library edition categorized the style of the play as a "mid 1940s Hollywood musical" (Solly 1979, 6). Its main location is a nightclub called Johnny's Bar and the stage within it. The main characters are all working in this club as singers or as songwriters. Location and characters resemble the typical setting of a traditional backstage musical – a public stage with young talented singers who are reaching out for more of life's rewards. Moreover, the notes on setting and costumes indicate that the show has to maintain a "bright, brisk pace" (ibid., 7) in order to be successful – a hint at the typically vital and overly joyous quality of the backstage musical.

The first scene gives an introduction to the setting, the plot's subject, and the stage play's parodic intent. Just before another show starts in Johnny's Bar, the actors meet backstage and talk about the upcoming performance and their private affairs. Johnny, the owner of the nightclub and an unsuccessful songwriter, had failed to sell his songs to a famous production company: "he didn't even get past the secretary" (ibid., 9). Two aspects of this scene are prototypical of backstage musicals. Firstly, the narrative incorporates the staging of a show; and secondly, the main character is an unsuccessful musician whose goal it is to earn a living through his songs. The opening number of the stage play is called *Nobody Listens to the Opening Number* and criticizes the audience's interest in the actors' costumes, style and private lives rather than the actual performance on stage. It also unveils the illusion of a perfect stage show that is often created by traditional backstage musicals. In these musical films the audience is completely elated by the performances and the actors are the happiest people alive. In the stage play, however, Johnny proclaims after the song is over: "thank God it is over and we can get on with the show" (ibid., 12). During the first song the singers address the audience in the bar directly. In a real stage show, this technique would equate the (invisible) bar audience and the show audience in the theater watching the stage play. This is a typical method of traditional backstage musical films which is usually further emphasized by certain camera techniques (see the analysis of scenes from *GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933* in Chapter 2.3). Being addressed by the show or film as a quasi intra-diegetic audience makes it easier for the people sitting in the cinema or theater to identify with the portrayed situation; or rather, it makes it almost impossible for the film audience to escape this illusion.

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official stage to sing and dance on but instead makes the numbers grow 'naturally' out of the narrative. Paradoxically, these musicals seem to be specifically stage-oriented as most of their numbers are performed on prosceniums built out of ordinary spaces (see Chapter 3).

The second song reveals another typical assumption of the first backstage musicals (and musicals in general). *I Got the What?* is about the inability to stand still. The performer sings about his uncontrollable desire to dance; it feels like a “bug”, and he describes this devotion as a “disease” (ibid., 12-17). However, the stage is only one side of the plot. Besides the liberating singing and dancing in the bar, the audience is introduced to the private sorrows of the performers. This action occurs backstage. Here, we find out that Johnny’s mission to become a successful songwriter is failing, that Sylvia desperately wants to become famous, that Harry loves Johnny’s girlfriend, Kelly, and that Sylvia is unhappily in love with Banjo. The latter is first revealed in scene four, where Banjo plays with Sylvia’s feelings only to obtain money from her; and a second time in the subsequent song *Crumbs in My Bed*. In this song, Sylvia sings about rejected love. Instead of having her loved one next to her, she only finds “crumbs in [her] bed” (ibid., 19f.). The song on stage parallels the backstage part of the plot – a very typical aspect of backstage musicals. Thus despite being acts in front of a paying audience, the songs can be used to deepen the characters’ feelings, to explain situations, to overcome conflicts, or to bring characters together. In any case, the songs and dances are predominantly integrated into the plot to express characters’ true emotions. It is the musical’s underlying assumption that these emotions cannot be expressed without music. However, in backstage musicals this expression happens almost solely onstage and not in the private lives of the characters. The songs and dances are clearly motivated by the plot. They are either part of a stage show, rehearsal, or audition. *The Great American Backstage Musical* gives examples of each of these situations.

Harry, one of the singers in Johnny’s Bar, is not the poor singer he pretends to be. In reality he is Harrison Cartwright the Third, the son of rich parents who will give him five million dollars once he marries. Again, two components stem from original backstage musicals. First, the false-identity-topic can be found in many backstage musicals, for example in *GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933*. Secondly, money plays an important role, especially in backstage musicals of the Depression era. Usually, the plot revolves around poor actors or singers who dream of becoming rich and famous by performing on big stages. This applies to the whole crew of Johnny’s Bar and is further epitomized in the song *When the Money Comes In*.

The Great Depression musicals were often considered to fulfill an escapist function. As reality was bleak, musicals provided the illusion of a better or easier world. These films always have happy endings. *The Great American Backstage Musical* refers to this convention when Kelly announces: “We are now in a state of war. The public wants escapist entertainment” (ibid., 44). Being a parody after all, Johnny further explains: “I think it means you have to pay to get out” (ibid., 45). This humorous comment might also refer to the most permanent criticism of musical films – that most of these films are entirely unreal and superficial.

After a rather complex plot development– Johnny’s girlfriend leaves him to become an actress, the bar is sold, and war begins – the stage play adheres to the traditional backstage musical’s convention of a harmonic ending. Harry finally marries, receives the five million dollar, buys the former Johnny’s Bar and brings them

all together on stage. Kelly and Johnny get back together and all join into the closing number entitled *The End*. This last song is just as self-reflexive and parodic as the other songs in the stage play. It states that the audience was almost badly awaiting the end and that it is now “the end of ‘Let’s Pretend’” (ibid., 63) – a final reference to the genre’s broadly discussed relationship between reality and fantasy (see, for example, Feuer 1993, Altman 1987, Babington/Evans 1985).

## 2.2 Hollywood Backstage Musicals

Having set up the most important features of backstage musicals, I will now elaborate on the aspect of ‘turning the stage into a world’ on the basis of four Hollywood backstage musicals. *GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933* belongs to the above mentioned Warner Brothers productions choreographed by Busby Berkeley. The plot illustrates the staging of a show in a time when money is rare and many shows close even before opening night (as shown in the very first scenes of the film). The narrative, as well as the introductory number (*We’re in the Money*), clearly refer to the Great Depression. As many backstage musicals do, *GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933* operates on “dual levels” (Feuer 1993, 69): the backstage plot and the show. While the relationship between Brad (Dick Powell) and Polly (Ruby Keeler) is complicated by Brad’s brother trying to prevent their marriage, a new show is being staged in which Brad and Polly play the leading roles. Although the musical numbers are set on stage and thus clearly separated from the world off stage, they reveal and support the characters’ emotions. In *Pettin’ in the Park*, for example, Brad and Polly sing about flirting and couples spending time together in a park, while at the same time (in private life) they are sharing such newfound love. The two sides of the plot often intervene, and the eventual union of the two lovers is mirrored in the final stage show. Thus, the final performance affirms the success of the entertainment business and of love simultaneously, linking the “fulfillment of a dream to the experience of entertainment” (ibid., 80).

There are many later musicals which do not belong to the most prominent era of backstage musicals, but still aim at ‘turning the stage into a world’. Although these movies might include slight changes to the traditional conventions of the subgenre, the focus and also the final message stay the same. *SHOWBOAT* (USA 1951, George Sidney) is one of them. Its main characters are show people and the main location is a show boat. It depicts the captain’s daughter’s love life as well as on her career in becoming a musical star. Although there is not a final spectacular show in which the family members are reunited, harmony is achieved at the end by emphasizing the power of imagination and thus theater business: “theater equals make believe equals harmony” (Shout 1982, 24).

*THE BAND WAGON* (USA 1953, Vincente Minelli) deals with the staging of a show. Here, there are also offstage performances, while the main part of the plot is still performed onstage (or in settings equivalent to a stage). The plot of the show centers on a former musical star (played by Fred Astaire who is fifty-four years

old by that time) trying to make for his comeback. The role of this character is, of course, filled with self-reflexivity and irony. The plot is complicated by the two protagonists' antipathy. Tony (Fred Astaire), the elder tap dancer, and Gabrielle (Cyd Charisse), a famous ballet dancer, are not able to harmonically work and dance together due to misunderstandings. In the end this conflict is solved through the art of dancing and the show (after a failure) finally becomes a huge success. What remains is the statement that is repeated more than once throughout the plot line: "The world is a stage, the stage is a world of entertainment."<sup>3</sup> (00:28:46)

A postmodern version of a backstage musical is *ALL THAT JAZZ* (USA 1979, Bob Fosse). This film musical is about the musical director Joe Gideon and his efforts to stage a new show. However, because this musical is a postmodern work, its song and dance numbers include ambivalence, and the film radically questions and deconstructs traditional (backstage) musical conceptions. Gideon "endlessly critiques [...] his own impulses and ambitions from the grave – a place that resembles a backstage dressing room and that necessitates a qualification of the term 'backstage' musical" (Hay 1985, 109). The main character does not conform to the typical stereotype of an adorable and pure-hearted singer or dancer, and song and dance do no longer produce harmony. In the end Gideon stars in his final spectacular show – a clear reference to traditional backstage musicals – but this show only exists in his mind (01:48:51 – 01:58:30). The final song, *Bye Bye Life*, is not about endless love or the binding powers of show business but about death. Here, the show that was to be staged in Gideon's 'real' life dies with him (cf. *ibid.*, 115).<sup>4</sup>

John Mueller gives a detailed analysis of the camera, editing and cutting techniques used in dance numbers by and with Fred Astaire. What we see above seems to be the typical implementation of these numbers. Not only is the dance choreographed, but also the camera itself (cf. Mueller 1981, 135). It is most important that the camera functions as an "involved but unobtrusive spectator" keeping a comfortable distance (*ibid.*). It should be used to "enhance the flow and the continuity" (*ibid.*) of the dance and not to interrupt or fragment it. Dance numbers by Fred Astaire are characterized by full-body shots showing the performers from head to toe throughout the whole dance, hardly noticeable and rarely used cuts<sup>5</sup>, and by a camera that moves with the dancers (cf. Mueller 136-140). Some aspects confirm the stage-illusion of these numbers, whereas other characteristics clearly separate them from a real stage show. Like in a theater, the dances finish fully on the camera "allowing both the audience and the performers to savor the moment of completion" (*ibid.*, 137f.). On the other hand, the camera view is spatially limited like "a one-eyed spectator who is wearing blinders" (*ibid.*, 140). Thus, the camera has to keep track of the dancers and moreover, the dancers are often seen dancing side by side, which is rather unlikely for stage-dancing but keeps them in the camera frame (*ibid.*,

<sup>3</sup> Which is, of course, a time-honored theatrical idea; cf. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2<sup>nd</sup> act, 7<sup>th</sup> scene, line 139ff.: „All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players: / They have their exits and entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts being seven ages.“

<sup>4</sup> Just as mocking as the final number is the very last scene of *ALL THAT JAZZ* when we see Gideon dead on a gurney. The moment a hand starts closing the body bag around him a last song starts: Ethel Merman's famous song and show business' self-praising hymn *There's no business like show business*.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers choreographed by Fred Astaire evolved the so-called „Single-shot myth“ (Mueller 1981, 136). Cuts were used so few sparsely and smoothly that one might think a whole number was filmed in a single shot only.

141). Also, the dancers usually do not move suddenly into space (as performers in a theater would by appearing from behind the curtains). Rather, “the camera [...] discovers the dancers, by means of cut” (ibid.). Overall, the medium is put “at the service of the dance” (ibid., 135).

These techniques illustrated above with *Isn't It a Lovely Day* can be observed in the proscenium number *Dancing in the Dark* from *THE BAND WAGON* as well. The two protagonists of this backstage musical, Tony (Fred Astaire) and Gabrielle (Cyd Charisse), feel a strong dislike against for each other in the beginning, which is based on misunderstanding. After having partly sorted out their problems they decide to leave the hotel to find out if they could possibly dance together. Instead of going to a dance club, they take a coach to the park. Walking side by side (and in lockstep), Tony having his hands in his pockets, they come to a public dance space with live music. However, they do not join the other couples, but cross the dance floor and move on to a quiet place apart from the official space. This indicates that their dance is not an official one, but private and more intimate. Thus, an official stage would not be appropriate for them. They finally find an open spot, and out of their walk Gabrielle suddenly moves into her first step (00:59:27). Tony follows her example moving naturally from walking into dancing and back into walking. Their ‘performance’ then begins with synchronized movements, the couple not touching each other. Tony holds his hands tightly behind his back. Further steps are danced with their arms wide open as if holding the partner, but still not touching each other. They get closer and closer in their movements until they finally dance tightly together – having overcome their conflicts by this artful expression of feelings. The open park spot has the city lights in the background like a romantic stage design. The camera follows the instructions mentioned above: full-body shots, eye-level, tracking the dancers as they are swaying from side to side, and keeping one perspective only. The camera view only changes once into a high-angle perspective when the dancers move up some stairs. On a raised platform (proscenium) the two dancers perform their final movements. The dance does not end until they are seated in the coach again (01:02:16). On their way back then, the two are holding hands (in contrast to their way to the park, where Tony was folding his arms and Gabrielle was holding hers in her lap).

The scene shows a performance of feelings and advances the plot in solving the protagonists’ conflict – they even fall in love with each other. The number also answers the question, asked by Gabrielle before they leave the hotel, “Tony, can you and I really dance together?” Tony replies, “I don’t know. Let’s find out.” (00:56:32) The dance sequence shows that they *can* dance with each other and they even do it in perfect harmony. Moreover, this number sets up the expressive mode as the only way to successfully communicate. In the hotel Tony says: “Here we are, the only animals given the greatest means of communication: human speech.” (00:55:45) The narrative already contradicts this assumption as their problems are based on misunderstandings and miscommunication. The dance then emphasizes that the only way to effectively ‘talk’ with each other is through dancing. “The language of gestures (dance)” ( Hay 1985, 98) is necessary as the verbal discourse turns out to be completely inadequate.

These two scenes (*Isn't It a Lovely Day* and *Dancing in the Dark*), although somewhat contradictory to removed from ordinary life, do not break with the movies' illusion of a romanticized world. Rather, they "sneak into song and dance as a small extension of natural reality" (Knapp 2006, 67). This reality only differs from the reality outside the cinema in that it allows such expressive activities. Knapp calls this condition the "Musically Enhanced Reality Mode [...] which permits both audio and visual violations of what might actually be possible" (ibid., 67). The audience has to accept this mode in order to fully gain get the expressive intention of the musical numbers. Instead of suddenly questioning why Jerry and Dale or Tony and Gabrielle are doing this, we are more likely to enjoy the presentation of their feelings towards each other. As Babington and Evans point out, this absence of realism is not perceived as a defect but as a positive merit (1985, 3). It makes the audience escape even further escape into this ideal world and absorbing the beauty of the performance, which is nevertheless embedded in the characters' 'ordinary life'. The audience does not expect realism, and that is one of the reasons why the shift from one mode into the other (narrative and musical number) is so easily accepted. Musicals "lead us into worlds where qualities lacking in our lives and societies in which we live them have freer rein" (ibid., 4). This lacking is the ability or allowance to express ourselves by singing and dancing whenever and wherever we feel like doing it. The inner desires are acted out by the characters in film musicals. According to Haver and Basinger, this technique of creating performances in everyday situations makes "dance [and song] seem possible, even probable" (1985, 23). Although the created proscenium limits the audience's sense of participation in the performance itself (we are aware that the performers are up there on a stage while we are sitting in the audience), it may nevertheless awaken in us the desire to sing and dance ourselves (cf. Feuer 1993, 31).

In addition to the enjoyment these performances give to the audience, a bridge is built by these scenes between the past and the present of the musical's history. The creation of prosceniums within the plot reminds us of the genre's background: theater stages and music halls. Although these former older forms of entertainment are turned into another genre – film – where the focus might generally be seen on the narrative and not predominantly on stage performances, these scenes still lean on theater tradition. They bring some of the theater's immediacy and flexibility into a genre that by definition is neither immediate nor flexible. This is how musical films give us the illusion of experiencing live entertainment while sitting in front of a screen.

According to Telotte, especially the 'New Musicals' like *GREASE* (USA 1978, Randal Kleiser) or *HAIR* (USA 1979, Milos Forman) are particularly "proscenium-oriented" (1980a, 4). He ascribes this realistic trend to the change of music and dancing in film narrative and in culture, stating that music failed in the life outside the movies (ibid., 2, 13). Thus, it is "no longer proper for a person to suddenly burst into song or go into dance" (ibid., 2). Although this assumption can be questioned, the realistic frames that are constructed around the expressive elements in 'New Musicals' are obvious. Musical numbers are specifically marked as 'performances' by channeling them into arenas, stages, enclosed areas "reaffirming that there exist distinct boundaries separating musical activity from the 'real' world" (ibid., 6). Often, the tension between the



performers and “a world in which singing and dancing seems out of place” (ibid.) is the very center of the movie’s plot. Rather than separating the two elements, stage and world, these ‘New Musicals’, too, end up with a mixture of the two modes. They, too, cannot completely hold this barrier while still keeping both modes simultaneously alive.

I conclude that when prosceniums are “reborn out of ordinary spaces” (Feuer 1993, 24) – and thus by turning the world into stages – dream and reality, everyday life and spectacular stage performances are merging together. Hence, the barrier between ordinary life and stage shows gets blurred. “[...] that inside/outside, stage/world dichotomy largely vanishes in favor of a sense of continuity or spontaneity, which makes that musical performance almost seem to arise from their environment” (Telotte 1980b, 17).

### 3. Blurring the Barrier

Not all every musical films can be clearly categorized as one that uses stage-worlds or one that uses world-stages exclusively. Rather, we can find both elements in one the same film musical, for example, proscenium-scenes in backstage musicals and stage-shows in musicals which focus on life offstage. Sometimes, we observe a fluent slide, a transition, from one realm into the other, and in the end it might be difficult to tell in which realm a number or part of the plot is situated. Thus, it is can be argued that musical films blur the barrier between the world on stage and off stage and consequently between fantasy and reality.

The two types of Depression Era musicals that were introduced in Chapter 2, Warner Brothers/Busby Berkeley productions and musicals featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, exhibit two distinct kinds of musical numbers,; both playing with the distinction between ‘onstage’ and ‘offstage’. While the former disguised the production numbers as dance numbers, the latter worked for the opposite effect (cf. Fumento 1981, 15-18). Fred Astaire was known for his stage-oriented dance numbers. Although these were predominantly emerged from born out of ordinary spaces, the style of the choreography and the use of prosceniums made them look like stage performances. In *TOP HAT*, for example, we have both world-stages and a stage-world. The protagonist, Jerry Travers, is a professional tap dancer and there is one official stage-show in the movie. Despite this fact about Jerry, the main storyline evolves offstage (in the park and in hotels). However, nearly all of the dances are set on prosceniums and choreographed as if performed for a theater audience.

Busby Berkeley on the other hand marked his numbers as production numbers rather than dance numbers. These numbers, although integrated into a backstage musical background and set on a real stage, could hardly be performed on onesuch. “From a very real, stage-bound world of the rehearsal hall, he plunges us

into a fantasy world with no boundaries” (ibid., 18). As a consequence we can neither categorize these numbers as offstage (plot reality) nor as onstage (theater stage). According to Telotte, it is Berkeley’s greatest contribution to the musical genre to remove the proscenium from the dance film; the author even calls it a “demolition of [the] proscenium” (1981, 19). By doing this the musical is able to deny its stage status and the limitations that come with it (see Chapter 3) (ibid., 19). Other musical films tried to achieve the opposite effect by bringing some of the stage glamour into ordinary environments. For them, prosceniums might be symbols of this glamour and of the freedom of self-expression. Berkeley substitutes this symbol with another in order to show the same kind of freedom. He pulls the characters of the show and the audience of the film into an overwhelming fantasy world. This unlimited world allows not only self-expression, but also destroys any boundaries or limitations. Furthermore, it is often marked by symmetrical dance figures, the use of neon lights, enormous settings and high-angle perspectives. Although most of the numbers start as numbers on stage, they soon turn into something that by no means could be performed on a real stage. Sometimes the whole setting changes massively within one onstage number. As an observer we soon do not feel like watching a stage-show anymore. The camera perspectives that Berkeley favors (high-angle from the very top, low-angle from the very bottom; even from under the stage) are not compatible with the live audience’s view.

Through almost magical effects afforded by that editing process, our perspective could be liberated from the normal human boundaries of place and time, certainly from our commonplace perspective on the sobering events of daily life (ibid.).

For Berkeley, these perspectives are necessary in order to show the symmetrical figures of the numbers. Only from the top can we, for example, see that the violinists with their glowing instruments move in the shape of a huge violin (*GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933*, 01:26:41). Busby Berkeley’s numbers give the illusion of “a practically limitless, even labyrinthine world, as complex and alive as that off-stage environment” (ibid., 19). As the following examples will demonstrate, this world might even be more than a resemblance of the offstage environment, it goes beyond reality.

*GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933* bears contains more than one number in the typical Busby Berkeley-style. During *Pettin’ in the Park*, the setting changes rapidly and even the season changes on stage. Polly (Ruby Keeler) and Brad (Dick Powell) are sitting on a bench on stage when suddenly, after zooming in on a box saying “Animal Wafers”, the setting changes into a spacious park environment. We see monkeys in a cage and many couples sitting on benches. Unexpectedly, wind starts blowing leaves around (00:38:27). The leaves soon turn into snow and we see people throwing snowballs and dancing with a giant snowman. A dance with huge snowballs is shown from a high angle perspective to present the symmetrical choreography (00:39:17). A cut separates this scene from the next, which depicts the park setting in spring time. However, all of a sudden it starts raining heavily and sounds of thunder underlie the singing (00:39:55). While this is happening, we

recognize the black background behind the two-dimensional stage design which gives away the fact that what we see is not a real park but still the theater stage. Whereas the song continues without a pause or shift in tone, the setting changes very quickly and goes along with fast cuts and wide ranging camera moves (up and down). These changes cannot possibly take place in a theater; they obviously surpass the forces of any stage designer working on a live show.

Another number that transforms from a stage-show into a real life environment and further into fantastic settings is *Remember My Forgotten Man*. In the beginning this number is clearly marked as a stage-show. We see a man backstage going from door to door, knocking at the doors and telling the performers to get ready for the “Forgotten Man Number” (01:30:25). A cut then shows the director of the orchestra in a medium shot. He gives the signal, a gesture with his hand, to begin the show (01:30:29). The next shot is a long-shot from behind the audience. The live audience in the film and the audience of the musical film then watch ‘together’ how the curtain rises. Next is a cut and from then on the stage alone fills the whole camera perspective. The stage setting resembles a town by night. Houses, streets and street lamps give the environment for the song. Carol (Joan Bondell) sings about her husband who contributed plenty to the country and is now one of the forgotten men. She seems to address the government, reminding them of these men, and also states that if they forget her man they will also forget her, because “a woman’s got to have a man” (01:32:35). The curtain suddenly opens again while there is no break in the song (01:34:18). We see marching soldiers and women cheering at them. The camera changes perspective and shows the marching soldiers from both sides. One perspective looks into the faces of the cheering women standing behind the soldiers, while the other shows a black background behind the soldiers (hence, the live audience disappeared). Then the curtain opens up a second time (01:34:38). The soldiers are still marching, but the setting has changed. It is raining now, the women are gone, and some of the men are wounded. This perspective also shows the moving walkway on which the soldiers are walking. This detail reveals the artificial character of the setting and reminds the audience that this is still supposed to be a number on stage. The curtain opens up a third time (01:35:02) and shows the soldiers waiting at the food counter for a meal. However, this time they are not dressed in their uniforms anymore. Back from the war, they are wearing suits, which contrasts with the poor situation the men now have to encounter. The curtain opens up a last time (01:35:53) and opens the perspective onto a spectacular stage-setting. This perspective is still framed by the curtain showing in the upper part of the screen. We are back on stage, but at the same time we feel or better see that this cannot be the same stage from the beginning of the number. The stage design is too fantastic; the set building is too huge and complex. However, the performers from the first part of the number are singing again. Surprisingly, this number does not end as a stage-show as we have seen in other numbers in this musical. There is no shot of the audience clapping, no shot of the curtain closing or of the musicians in the orchestra bowing. Instead, the screen fades into black which is not only the end of this number but also of the whole movie.

*Remember My Forgotten Man* plays with the barriers between onstage and offstage environments, real world and stage-show, reality and fantasy. The references I put into brackets in my description of the number demonstrate how fast the changes of the setting take place. In one moment, we see performers on stage, in the next we are in the middle of seemingly hundreds of marching soldiers. Only the repeatedly filmed curtain, which opens up several times, indicates the next change. These changes make us feel neither being in the theater anymore nor in a fully designed real life environment. We find ourselves in the middle of an imagination. It is the imagination of Busby Berkeley, who uses his creative powers to “reshape reality” (Telotte 1981, 19). Thus, the barrier between fantasy and reality (may it be the reality of the stage-show or the audience’s reality/the real world) becomes indistinct.

The content of this number is as surprising within the plot as the choreography is within the song. The musical’s storyline seems to end after when the protagonists are finally together, the brother has given in on Polly’s and Brad’s relationship and even two more couples have found each other. This looks like a backstage musical ending: every problem is solved, every identity revealed, everyone is happy, love wins and the show is a success. In opposition to many other musical films, *GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933* does not end here. As already mentioned, the last number is still about to be performed: *Remember My Forgotten Man*. This final number mixes the main storyline with a contemporary theme from outside the theaters: the Great Depression and war. It suddenly brings back thoughts and sorrows that must have been very real to the audience of this Hollywood musical back in the 1930s. Thus not only the barrier between onstage and offstage (plot reality) is blurred, but also between the musical’s reality and the audience’s reality. Telotte concludes that the musicals build up continuity “not only between the musical number and the musical world, but between that realm and the viewer’s realm” (1982, 192). This process of dissolving the boundary has yet another consequence. According to Feuer, the illusion of reality in musical films can be extended and can eventually make the musical itself appear to be ‘real’: “If we can’t tell the difference between illusion and reality, the musical film itself may appear as ‘real’ as ordinary life” (1993, 77).

The combination of the two worlds, onstage and offstage, turns film musical into a complex medium. What Babington and Evans describe as the “extreme aestheticism of the genre” (1985, 2) is based not solely on the cinematic spectaculars some of them present to us but even more so on the well-organized structure they exhibit (combining and reflecting the themes in narratives, songs and dances) and on multifaceted scenes just like the ones analyzed above. The genre’s aestheticism and complexity is reflected in its playing with dualities within the plot: female versus male, work versus entertainment, single life versus marriage, dream versus reality and many more. The majority of these oppositions are deeply rooted in most societies and represent two sides that are both seen as desirable and yet mutually exclusive. Altman adds that every society possesses certain texts which obscure this paradox and prevent it from being threatening and thus assure a certain stability (1987, 27). The film musical might be one of the most important types to serve this function (ibid.). In this sense, blurring the boundaries has not the effect of confusion but serves a broader purpose. It

combines two mutually desirable and needed sides in order to balance our desires and thus put us into a more stable position.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper I described and interpreted two aspects of Hollywood musicals. By choosing certain plots and settings musical films aim on turning the stage into a world, as I have demonstrated on the subgenre of backstage musicals. On the other hand, musical films have the ability to turn the world into a stage by creating prosceniums out of ordinary spaces. As explained in Chapter 4, these elements, and also the musical's very basic formulas, blur the barrier between reality and fantasy, between onstage settings and offstage environments. Feuer calls these dichotomies false in the first place (1993, 71): "Because in the musical, the show is a dream and the dream is a show, the Hollywood musical offers itself as the spectator's dream, the spectator's show" (ibid.).

The analysis in the previous chapters concludes that the musical film is a) a combining text and b) an illusory text. By definition, the musical combines narrative and music (song and/or dance). These elements are usually paralleled by blending life and art and making them become one. As shown above, the same goes for the combination of other binary oppositions within the plots. The film musical plays with the mixing of realms and also with the creation of illusions. It bears the implication that the production we watch on screen is live entertainment, theater. It also gives us the illusion that singing and dancing is possible even outside the theater. Moreover, it creates the illusion of an image that we hope resembles our world (cf. Telotte 1980b, 23); "a world where our dreams miraculously and effortlessly come true" (Telotte 1980a, 13). Telotte takes the function of this illusion further by saying that it helps us handling the real world, giving it an almost didactic meaning.<sup>6</sup> "Even if we could not dance like Astaire and Rogers, we might possibly relate to the world around us in a similar way" (1980b, 23). Thus, the musical succeeds in putting us at ease about the anxieties of the world and show us a way to focus on self-expression and happiness. This happiness will reign particularly for those who sing and dance, no matter if they do it on world-stages or in stage-worlds.

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<sup>6</sup> Shout agrees pointing out that especially songs like *That's entertainment* from *THE BAND WAGON* or *Be a clown* from *THE PIRATE* serve this didactic function (cf. 1982, 26). Besides demonstrating to the audience a way of self-expression, these songs also affirm the status of entertainment (see also Feuer's analysis of on "reflexive songs" (1993, 50f.)).

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## Filmography

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GREASE (USA 1978, Randal Kleiser).  
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MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS (USA 1944, Vincente Minelli).  
ONE NIGHT OF LOVE (USA 1934, Victor Schertzinger).  
SHOWBOAT (USA 1951, George Sidney).  
THE BAND WAGON (USA 1953, Vincente Minelli).  
THE GREAT CARUSO (USA 1951, Richard Thorpe).  
THE PIRATE (USA 1948, Vincente Minelli).  
TOP HAT (USA 1935, Mark Sandrich).  
WOODSTOCK (USA 1970, Michael Wadleigh).  
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