



Fred Astaire Vs. Gene Kelly: You Be The Judge

Description

The third of David Novek's movie series featured the two greatest male film dancers

By Byron Toben

Film publicist **David Novek** continued his *Movies, Musicals and Memories* series on November 7 at the **Cummings Centre** with *Fred Astaire Vs. Gene Kelly: You Be The Judge*, about the legendary film dancers.

Earlier lectures had featured the legendary singer/actress Doris Day and the legendary film scriptwriter Ben Hecht.

Mr. Novek himself is a legendary film publicist, as described in a [Montreal Gazette article](#) by the late filmmaker Kevin Tierney (Good Cop, Bad Cop).

Both Astaire and Kelly appreciated each other. In general, Astaire's approach was more studied and methodical although appearing effortless and graceful, whereas Kelly's, more athletic and improvisational.

As in all the series, this one was supplemented by many clips (some rare) of the subjects in action. What a treat that set many in the audience to tap their feet while watching!

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Fred Astaire (Frederick Austerlitz) was born in 1899 in Omaha, Nebraska to an Austrian immigrant brewer and his American wife.

Fred had an older sister, Adele, who evinced so much dancing talent that their parents moved to New York to develop them as a child dancing couple. For a while, she was considered the better of the two (shades of the young Mozart, whose sister was considered the better pianist!)



Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire – Image: RKO Radio Pictures [Public domain]

As she was taller than him, he was fitted with a top hat, which became a trademark of his, even into old age. They did attain great fame as a child dancing couple but that ended as they grew older and she married into the British aristocracy.

As a single, he appeared on stage until Hollywood called and he signed with RKO pictures, despite their initial appraisal of him as “Can’t act. Can’t sing. Balding. Can dance a little.” (Despite not having a powerful voice, many famous composers such as Irving Berlin praised his phraseology and the fact that you can understand each word – unlike many today.)

He eventually made 37 musical films of which nine were RKO musicals with his most famous dance partner, **Ginger Rogers** (of whom it was said... she did everything he did backwards and in high heels.)

In later years, often at MGM, he was paired with **Eleanor Powell** and **Rita Hayworth** and even **Audrey Hepburn**, **Leslie Caron** and **Cyd Charisse**.

His one screen appearance with Gene Kelly was in the 1945 *Ziegfeld Follies* film where they danced to the Gershwin tune, *The Babbit and the Bromide*. One of the most amusing clips was where Astaire danced on walls and ceiling in [You’re All the World to Me](#).

After many years with RKO, he switched to MGM, replacing an injured Gene Kelly in the Irving Berlin’s *Easter Parade* (1948) with **Judy Garland**. This led to other successful musicals, *The Barkleys of Broadway*, *Three Little Words* and *Royal Wedding*.

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However, a string of others less profitable at the box office and the advent of television led to his announcing his retirement from film. This retirement did not last long as he was enticed into both televised dancing and straight acting on television from 1957 to 1981.

Fred Astaire died in 1987 at age 88.

Gene Kelly (Eugene Curran Kelly) was born in 1912 in Pittsburgh.

His father was born in Peterborough, Ontario where his grandfather had emigrated from Derry, Ireland. Although he had dreamed of a baseball career, he entered college as a journalism major. The 1929 crash led him and younger brother Fred to earn prize money dancing. This further led them to open a dance studio, which in turn led to his being retained by the Beth Sholom synagogue to teach dance and stage their annual Kermesse (local festival).

This lasted for seven years before he left for New York. Unsuccessful there, he returned to Pittsburgh as a choreographer and actor.

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Connections there led to a return to New York in 1938 as a dancer. His big break on Broadway came with the Pulitzer Prize winner *The Time of Your Life* where he danced to his own choreography. Next was his lead role in *Pal Joey*.

This triggered calls from Hollywood and the MGM musical *For Me And My Gal* (1942) opposite Judy Garland.



Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds – Image: mptvimages.com



With *Cover Girl* (1944) opposite Rita Hayworth he danced to his own reflection. In *Anchors Aweigh* (1945) he danced with the animated cartoon mouse Jerry (of Tom and Jerry).

On The Town (1949), with Frank Sinatra, took the musical out of the studio and onto real locations.

With [An American in Paris](#) (1951) opposite Leslie Caron and [Singin' in the Rain](#) (1952) with **Debbie Reynolds**, Kelly created two of the most popular film musicals of all time.

The advent of television led to a down play of film musicals so Kelly returned to the stage as a director. He also appeared as journalist Hornbeck (based on acerbic H.L. Mencken) in the film version of *Inherit the Wind* (based on the Scopes monkey trial).

Late in his life he was awarded Irish citizenship under that country's Citizenship by Foreign Birth program.

Kelly died after a long illness in 1996 at age 83.

Mr. Novek has since lectured on ***And Let's Not Forget The Other Hoofers***, six other acclaimed male film dancers who were excellent but not quite attaining the heights as Astaire and Kelly.

His final lecture this term at the Cummings Centre will be on ***Running With The Rat Pack*** on **Thursday, December 5**.

Feature images: Fred Astaire, Public Domain / Gene Kelly, MGM – Public Domain

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