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“Moses Supposes”: The Importance of Dance in *Singin' In the Rain*

Singin' in the Rain, the beloved classic musical remembered for its contagious song-and-dance numbers, has a serious side as well: *Singin' in the Rain* turns the camera in on itself and explores Hollywood's transition from silent films to “talkies,” giving the audience the backstage point-of-view as we follow the career of famous silent film star, Don Lockwood. In 1927, the film's temporal setting, Warner Brothers released the first talking picture entitled *The Jazz Singer* which began a shift in film-making as more and more studios tried to compete with this popular new film. During this transition from silent to talking, many famous actors struggled to keep their careers as they realized that they could not give satisfying performances while reciting scripted lines. In *Singin' in the Rain*, it was Don Lockwood's previous experience with Vaudeville, as well as his love of dance, that saved his career during a time when sound, image, and identity seemed impossible to sync, as exhibited by the song-and-dance sequence, “Moses Supposes.”

The scene opens in a dialect classroom with Don Lockwood's taking elocution lessons, which “spoofs the postsound elocutionist craze” that grew out of the panic of the shift from silent-films to talkies; This setting allows for dance to be portrayed as the language of truth and honesty as it is throughout *Singin' in the Rain* (Chumo II 11). Peter N Chumo II states in “Dance, Flexibility, and the Renewal of Genre in *Singin' in the Rain*,” that if image “is a first language of the movies and sound a second, then dance can be seen as a third as it combines movement with

music, and , in its most dramatic moments, does not rely on words” (4-5). He also reminds us that, “fluid movement is the key...that separates posing for silent films from dancing in a musical” (5). The scene implies that dance is a language in the way the two dancers, Don Lockwood and Cosmo Brown, dance in front of posters depicting “A,” “E,” “I,” “O,” and “U,” at one point straddling a chair, creating an “A” shape with it and their legs, while standing in front of the “A” poster. It is also implied in the way the dancers take turns seating the diction coach in a chair and pointing to each other’s feet as they dance, as if they are teaching *him* to speak. At the end of the scene, the duo cover the dialect coach on random objects from the room, which, according to Chumo, is “suggesting that dance itself needs no words, that the highest communication occurs in movement, not the rigid movement of silent films but rather the fluid movement of dance” (13). It seems necessary that the dancers teach the diction coach to speak since, at the beginning of the scene, he was instructing Don to spout nonsensical tongue twisters. The nonsense of the tongue twisters sharply contrasts the honesty of the dancing displayed by Don and Cosmo.

The lack of honesty and truth throughout the film which is reinforced by the nonsense Don is told to recite by the diction coach is similar to Don’s opening speech where he explains that his rise to fame was one of prestige, while the on-screen images show his playing in bars and performing clown routines, making his words complete nonsense. This leads one to think that the spoken word is not to be trusted, however, one should remember that images deceive as well, as exhibited by Don’s love scene with his co-star Lina Lamont in which the two show physical affection for each other while having an argument. This leads the audience to also realize that it is images that cannot be trusted. “If neither sound nor picture can be trusted to be free of artifice, all that is left to convey that truth is the dance” as Moses Supposes illustrates for the audience

(Ewing). While many times throughout the movie, image and sound are asynchronous, the tap dance duet performed by Cosmo Brown and Don Lockwood in *Moses Supposes* is completely in sync. Likewise, their motions are always in sync with the tapping of their shoes. The asynchronicity of image and sound, and the honesty of dance is apparent in the title of the film Don and Lina are making, called *The Dueling Cavalier*, which is eventually changed to *The Dancing Cavalier* to save the film from disaster. While “dueling” implies the duel between sound and image, “dancing” allows each to appear simultaneously. To close the “Moses Supposes” scene, Don and Cosmo pick up the poster that says, “Vowel A” and sing the same vowel, showing that with them, the dancers, sound and image are truly in sync.

Keeping dance, song, and image in sync also shows quite a bit of flexibility on the part of the performer. Dance is very much an indicator of a performer’s flexibility throughout the film: Performers who dance, such as Don, Kathy, and Cosmo, prevail at the film’s ending, while Lina, who is nothing more than a pretty face posing for the camera, is laughed out of Hollywood. “Just as dance requires physical flexibility in body movement and spontaneity, so does vital filmmaking....this versatility is linked to the talent to perform very physical dance numbers,” such as “Moses Supposes” (Chumo II 2). According to Janice La Pointe-Crump in “*Singin’ in the Rain*: Dancer, Dance, and Viewer Dialogues,” “Each dance in *Singin’ in the Rain* draws from a different technical and aesthetic base [which] form an elaborate grammar, the breadth and mastery of which was unique to dance” (5). This breadth shows the importance of flexibility in a performer. In the film, Don’s physicality is contrasted by characters such as Lina Lamont who is first seen lying on a board and receiving a manicure. The diction coach, as well, shows a lack of physicality, since his specialty is speaking, which requires no extraneous movement whatsoever. The diction coach remains seated throughout the scene while Don and Cosmo take control with

their dance routine. At one point in their dance, Don and Cosmo utilize chairs, but not in the way most people would: instead of sitting in them, they dance on them. Even when they *do* sit, they continue to move their legs; still dancing. Whenever the diction coach moves, it is because Don and Cosmo move him, as if he is some kind of doll. Even though he is the coach, he is useless for Don and Cosmo whose dancing places them on a superior level to the diction coach. This is shown in the blocking, which leaves the diction coach seated during the majority of the dancing, looking up at Don and Cosmo, especially when they dance on his desk. Also, the way the camera follows the dancers, especially at the end, where the music has increased in speed, keeps the dancing in focus, while the dialect coach, now useless, is no longer on camera except to be covered in trash and other random objects. The uselessness of the diction coach is likely playing with the fact that diction coaches often ruined careers for silent actors whose newly “cultured voices were often at odds with their on-screen personae” (Juddery). Essentially, they had lost their identity in their lack of flexibility.

Instead of losing his identity in the switch from silent films, Don Lockwood found his identity through dancing again. According to J. P. Tolette in “Ideology and the Kelly-Donen Musicals,” “Don Lockwood’s struggle to remain popular in the face of shifting public tastes thus parallels his own repression of his real talent for song and dance” (2). To become popular as a silent film star, he had to deny himself dancing. However, to remain popular after the death of the silent film, he had to show his flexibility and employ his dancing talents. In short, Don’s world was asynchronous: his career and his passion did not match. The cinematography of the “Moses Supposes” scene shows how Don, while dancing, has returned to his days of Vaudeville, where he performed song-and-dance sequences often. It is shot entirely in a wide shot, with tracking shots keeping the dancers centered, which feels like watching an on-stage performance.

In “Broadway Melody,” Don’s character, who mirrors Don Lockwood’s own Hollywood experience, sees a hooper on the street singing the phrase, “Gotta dance,” just as Don’s character once did, which reminds him why he began a career in showbusiness. This same experience occurs for Don in “Moses Supposes.” It is Cosmo, who never abandoned his musical roots, who begins poking fun at the diction coach and singing the nonsensical lines of “Moses Supposes.” Together, they return to their Vaudeville days, and through this, Don rediscovers his dancing talents. The end of the scene, where Don and Cosmo sing “A” while holding the poster, show that Don is now in sync, unlike in his opening scene where he spoke lies while the truth appeared in images on the screen.

The “Moses Supposes” scene from *Singin’ in the Rain* is the scene where Don Lockwood begins to find himself through the rediscovery of his true dancing talent, which is essentially the savior of his career in Hollywood. Throughout the film, and in “Moses Supposes” especially, dance is portrayed as a language of honesty and truth, as well as a sign of a performer’s flexibility. Through the honesty of dance, Don overcomes the asynchronicity of sound and image that plagued Hollywood during the shift from silent to talking pictures, and finds his true voice in the always-synchronous language of dance.

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