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Afrita Hanem

Egypt, 1949 – 112 mins

Henri Barakat

Egypt, like India, had a busy movie industry from the 1930s and functioned as a sort of Arab Hollywood (or perhaps Bollywood), providing films for the Arabic Middle East and North Africa. The movie industries in 'less developed' countries like Egypt, India and Mexico experienced their 'golden ages' from the mid-1940s to the mid-60s, a little later than Hollywood, due partly to the later advent of television (though in each case, as everywhere, old movies provided essential television programming). Musicals of one kind or another were a – perhaps *the* – staple genre in industries dominated, like Hollywood, by studios and stars (see, for example, *Shree 420**, *Pyasa**, *Ansiedad**). Stars, in Egypt, often meant singing stars like Farid Al Atrache (the 'sad singer' and 'King of the *Oud*' [a lute-like instrument]) and Abdel Halim Hafez, established radio and recording stars, and dancers like Samia Gamal (declared by King Farouk in 1949 as Egypt's 'national dancer'), and many films were essentially vehicles for their performances (as they often were in Hollywood). Singing stars provided their own voices, as they did in Mexican cinema (in contrast to the 'playback' tradition in Indian cinema).

Afrita Hanem (known in English variously as *The Genie Lady*, *Lady Genie*, *Little Miss Devil*), a lively, somewhat screwball musical comedy, makes ample space for songs by star/producer/singer/composer Al Atrache and dances by Gamal, whether as stage performances or spontaneous song and dance. Humble stage singer Asfour (Al Atrache) pines after gold-digging dancer Aleya (Lola Sedki), who plans to marry a wealthy man to finance her theatre-owner father. Asfour discovers a magic lamp whose genie, Kahramana (Gamal), visible only to him, claims they were lovers a millennium earlier. Bound to grant his wishes, she is nevertheless determined to thwart his pursuit of Aleya. Granted his wish for a theatre of his own, Asfour auditions the dancer Semsema, identical

to the genie but very much flesh and blood and visible to everyone. After various comic misadventures, Asfour 'summons up' Kahramana/Semsema and, after passing through an expressionist netherworld (which may or may not be part of a stage show) whose lugubrious 'sultan'/Lucifer grants the couple their freedom, love reigns supreme.

Farid Al Atrache performs some celebrated poetic songs (in the – to western ears – rather mournful, recitative Arab style) and Samia Gamal's *raqs sharqi* (Oriental dance) routines (misleadingly known in the West as 'belly dance') are captivatingly sexy, but perhaps the chief pleasure is Gamal's infectious comic performance, as Kahramana uninhibitedly enjoys the chaotic fun she unleashes. Certainly, Gamal seems more at ease here than in high melodramas like *A Glass and a Cigarette* (1955) (though, as in many Indian films, the melodrama is paralleled by a comic plotline). Many Egyptian 'musicals' were (like Indian films) essentially melodramas, like *Days and Nights* (1955), a vehicle for young heart-throb singer Abdel Halim Hafez. Running through all these films (as through so many Indian films), exploring moral dilemmas in bourgeois family settings, is a discourse in which western modernity – cars, clothes, manners – is viewed negatively in relation to traditional values. The sage who presides over the genie in *Afrita Hanem* pops up from time to time to deliver homilies about materialistic greed and selfishness.

Samia Gamal also played in international films: she was an exotic dancer (of course) in the Hollywood film *Valley of the Kings* (1954), shot partly in Egypt, and co-starred with Fernandel in Jacques Becker's Moroccan-shot *Ali Baba et les quarante voleurs* (1954). JH

Dir: Henri Barakat; **Prod:** Farid Al Atrache; **Scr:** Henri Barakat, Abul Soud Al Ibyari; **DOP:** Julio de Luca (with Ahmed Adley, Umberto Lanzano) (b&w); **Song Music/Lyrics:** Farid Al Atrache, *et al.*; **Art:** Anton Bulizwis; **Main Cast:** Farid Al Atrache, Samia Gamal, Lola Sedki, Ismail Yassin, Abdel Salam Al Nabulsy; **Prod Co:** Ahmed Darwich Film.

An American in Paris

USA, 1951 – 115 mins

Vincente Minnelli

It is one of the marks of Arthur Freed's ambitions for *An American in Paris* that from the outset he intended to conclude his film with a ballet set to the whole of George Gershwin's 1928 tone poem from which the musical took its name. Ballets invariably offered opportunities to display the star dancers' virtuosity, but their stylised nature also enabled them to enact disturbed dreams or fantasies. The 'American in Paris' ballet begins with a desolate Jerry (Gene Kelly) thinking he has lost Lise (Leslie Caron in her first film) after their parting at the black-and-white ball, and its several episodes present a parallel version of their relationship in which Lise is lost, found and lost again. What is unique, however, is its combination of length (almost 17 minutes), its position at the end of the film and, most markedly, the ostentatious brilliance of its design and execution. Famously, the Parisian settings are each presented in the style of a different painter (Dufy, Renoir, Utrillo, Rousseau, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec), but the ballet as a whole is characterised by Minnelli's dazzling integration of the self-consciously sophisticated designs with Gershwin's music, Kelly's elaborately varied choreography and John Alton's unorthodox use of limited lighting.

The ballet is a fitting climax to a musical that was emphatically designed to impress. Perhaps as a result, *An American in Paris* is a film of mixed pleasures. Some of the most elaborate numbers are in effect, like the ballet, splendid set pieces, tied only minimally to the narrative: Adam (Oscar Levant)'s ingeniously created fantasy in which he becomes pianist, conductor, the whole orchestra and the audience in Gershwin's Concerto in F; the Folies Bergère-inspired staging of Henri Bourel (Georges Guétary) singing 'I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise'; even 'I've Got Rhythm', Jerry's English lesson for a crowd of kids, although set in the street, has something of this quality. On the other hand, some of the most delightful numbers arise unaffectedly from situation and setting in the

lovely studio-built recreation of Paris (the film's opening evokes the famous introduction to Paris in *Love Me Tonight**). 'Melody by Strauss' begins with Adam casually playing the piano and leads to Jerry dancing with the elderly ladies of the neighbourhood café; much later, Jerry and Henri, unwittingly both in love with Lise, burst into 'S Wonderful' and a dance double act in the same location; on the banks of the Seine, Jerry sings 'Our Love Is Here to Stay' to Lise and they dance tentatively together for the first time.

Their romance, however, like much of the plot, seems largely taken for granted. There is no significant development in the relationship from the moment that Lise's initial resistance to Jerry abruptly crumbles. Strangely enough, more fully developed – and distinctly uncomfortable – is Jerry's relationship with the needy but vulnerable Milo Roberts (Nina Foch), the American heiress who is fostering (and funding) his painting. The insensitivity and opportunism of his treatment of Milo are fascinating disturbances in the film's presentation of Jerry that her withdrawal from the scene and the film's romantic resolution cannot entirely erase.

An American in Paris was a triumph for the studio: it not only grossed over \$6 million more than its very considerable \$2.7 million budget but it won six Academy Awards, including Best Picture. At the same ceremony, both Arthur Freed and Gene Kelly were also honoured individually, Kelly with an Honorary Oscar and Freed with the Irving Thalberg Award for 'his extraordinary accomplishment in the making of musical pictures' (Fordin, 1975). DP

Dir: Vincente Minnelli; **Prod:** Arthur Freed; **Scr:** Alan Jay Lerner; **DOP:** Alfred Gilks, John Alton (colour); **Song Music/Lyrics:** George Gershwin/Ira Gershwin; **Musical Dir:** Johnny Green, Saul Chaplin; **Choreog:** Gene Kelly; **Art:** Cedric Gibbons, Preston Ames; **Main Cast:** Gene Kelly, Leslie Caron, Oscar Levant, Georges Guétary, Nina Foch; **Prod Co:** Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Anchors Aweigh

USA, 1945 – 141 mins

George Sidney

Before moving to MGM in 1941, Joe Pasternak produced the extremely popular Deanna Durbin musicals at Universal (see *100 Men and a Girl**). MGM musicals of the 1940s are now associated particularly with the production unit headed by Arthur Freed (see, among others, *An American in Paris**, *Easter Parade**, *Meet Me in St. Louis**, *On the Town**, *Summer Holiday**) but Pasternak became a key producer, contributing some of the biggest hits of the decade to the studio's large and profitable output of musicals. In particular, his work with Deanna Durbin made him the obvious person to work with the young soprano Kathryn Grayson, and he became central to the continuing strand of Hollywood musicals featuring operatic voices (he later worked with Mario Lanza on such films as *The Toast of New Orleans*, 1950, and *The Great Caruso*, 1951).

Anchors Aweigh feels now like an interesting hybrid. Its story of two sailors (Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra in the first of their buddy double acts) on a brief shore leave, meeting girls and falling in love, looks forward to *On the Town*. (In fact, the waitress from Brooklyn [Pamela Britton] that Clarence [Sinatra] eventually falls for even seems to anticipate Betty Garrett's much more developed role as Hildy in that film.) When their leave is derailed by a little boy (Dean Stockwell) who wants to join the navy and whom they have to escort home, they meet his Aunt Susie (Grayson), a movie extra and aspiring singer. First Clarence and then Joe (Kelly) fall for Susie, and much of the plot turns on their attempts (in echoes of *100 Men and a Girl*) to get her an audition with José Iturbi, the pianist and conductor who appeared as himself in several MGM films of this period. With performers split between popular and more classical musical styles, the film has to accommodate widely different numbers.

Perhaps inevitably, then, the pleasures of the film come less from the integration of number and narrative that characterises many of the great

Freed unit musicals, than from its separate parts. Many of the sixteen numbers are presented with minimal narrative motivation. Most famous is Kelly's remarkable song and dance ('The Worry Song') with Jerry the mouse, a seamless mixture of live action and animation. This springs from a story Joe is telling a group of school kids, and one of Kelly's later numbers ('The Mexican Hat Dance') is performed to and with a little girl (Sharon McManus). Susie amazes Joe and Clarence (and us) with the range and power of her voice when she performs 'Jealousy' in the restaurant where she works, and much later, in her screen test, sings to the waltz from Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*, a number staged to reveal much of the technology and many of the personnel of the sound stage. As Clarence, Sinatra has what are in effect three reflective soliloquies, the Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn songs 'What Makes the Sunset', 'The Charm of You' and 'I Fall in Love Too Easily'. Iturbi, too, has his own musical interludes, including a performance of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* with a mass of young pianists in the Hollywood Bowl. Yet the film's level of energy seems perceptibly to rise in the numbers Sinatra and Kelly share: 'We Hate to Leave', performed to Joe and Clarence's jealous shipmates as the friends prepare to go on leave; 'I Begged Her', their boastful account to fellow navy men of their fictitious romantic adventures; and their frenetic 'improvisation' of 'If You Knew Susie' to frighten off Susie's dinner date. DP

Dir: George Sidney; **Prod:** Joe Pasternak; **Scr:** Isabel Lennart, from a story by Natalie Marcin; **DOP:** Robert Planck, Charles Boyle (colour); *Tom and Jerry* cartoon by MGM Cartoon Studio; **Song Music/Lyrics:** Jule Styne/Sammy Cahn; Joseph Meyer/Buddy de Sylva, *et al.*; **Musical Dir:** George Stoll; **Choreog:** Gene Kelly, Stanley Donen; **Art:** Cedric Gibbons, Randall Duell; **Main Cast:** Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, Kathryn Grayson, José Iturbi, Dean Stockwell, Pamela Britton; **Prod Co:** Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Ansiedad

Mexico, 1953 – 110 mins

Miguel Zacarias

The Mexican film industry, like those in India and Egypt (see, for example, *Shree 420**, *Pyaasa**, *Afrita Hanem**), experienced a 'golden age' from the mid-1930s to around 1960, when it was the pre-eminent Spanish-language cinema, distributed widely in Central and Latin America.

During this period, a number of Mexican stars, such as Dolores del Rio, Cantinflas, María Félix, Pedro Armendiaz and Ricardo Montalban, appeared in Hollywood movies and elsewhere. Like Indian, Egyptian and Hollywood cinemas, Mexican cinema relied on genres and stars, with the musical and its stars among the most popular. None were more celebrated than Pedro Infante and Jorge Negrete, both also massively popular recording and radio artists, though neither achieved much fame outside Mexico. *Ansiedad* (*Anxiety*), a relatively typical musical from the time, is one of several in which Infante co-starred with 'Sweetheart of the Americas' Libertad Lamarque (Argentinian, though most of her films were made in Mexico), also a prolific recording artist.

Ansiedad combines the familiar melodrama narrative of twins separated at or near birth and growing up apart until their paths cross dramatically with the familiar musical narrative of singers' rise to fame and celebrity. Infante plays no fewer than three roles. An unemployed singer, he finds an abandoned baby which falls ill and dies, forcing him, via various complications, to give up one of his own twin baby sons; soon after, he is shot dead. Infante also plays both grown-up sons – Rafael, who has been raised by his singer mother María (Lamarque), and Carlos, who has grown up in a wealthy family. Both Rafael and María rise to fame as singers. Mother and son are exceptionally close, almost like lovers when they sing duets, despite tension caused by María's big secret about Rafael's twin. Inevitably, the paths of the mother and the twins cross, and the wealthy, powerful son, taking exception to their humble origins, stands in the way of Rafael's and María's careers and private lives.

Finally, of course, when the mother is almost fatally shot, the truth comes out and the brothers are reconciled. The film trades heavily on traditional values of family, maternal love, humility and hard work.

All the songs except one (Rafael's drunken duet with María, 'Ando muy boracho' ['I'm Very Drunk']) are performances of one kind or another. Lamarque gives fine renditions of her trademark tangos, 'Sus ojos se cerraron' ('His Eyes Closed') and 'Cuesta abajo' ('Downhill'), both by Carlos Gardel. Rafael's rise to fame allows Infante to sing in several different styles, whether popular *ranchera*-type songs set to *mariachi* music ('Tu recuerdo y yo' ['Your Memory and Me'], 'Amor de mis amores' ['Love of All My Loves']) or more romantic songs like Agustin Lara's 'Mujer' ('Woman'), which he sings on radio. The film charts Rafael's and María's rise to fame in terms of the venues they perform in, from small, humble theatres to larger, more elegant ones, society soirées and television. The extended television studio sequences ('Farolito' ['Little Streetlight'] and 'Marimba'), involving more 'American'-style elaborate sets, ballet-style dancers and mobile cameras, are a far cry from Rafael's simply shot *ranchera*-style debut in a small, basic theatre.

The film was photographed by Gabriel Figueroa, who shot numerous mainstream Mexican pictures as well as John Ford's 1947 *The Fugitive* and many of Luis Buñuel's 1950s/60s Mexican films; Figueroa's talent for moody, shadowy lighting is put to good use in the film's night-time exteriors. 卍

Dir/Prod: Miguel Zacarias; **Scr:** Edmundo Baez, Miguel Zacarias; **DOP:** Gabriel Figueroa (b&w); **Song Music/Lyrics:** Agustin Lara, Carlos Gardel, Jose Alfredo Jimenez, *et al.*; **Music:** Manuel Esperón; **Art:** Javier Torres Torija; **Main Cast:** Pedro Infante, Libertad Lamarque, Irma Dorantes, Arturo Soto Rangel; **Prod Co:** Producciones Zacarias S.A.

Applause

USA, 1929 – 79 mins

Rouben Mamoulian

Applause is not quite a fully-fledged musical like Rouben Mamoulian's later *Love Me Tonight**, *Summer Holiday** and *Silk Stockings**, but it affords an arresting representation of the backstage world of vaudeville and burlesque. It also features 1920s cabaret and Broadway torch singer Helen Morgan (most celebrated for playing Julie LaVerne in the 1927 Broadway and 1936 movie versions of *Show Boat**), who sings 'What Wouldn't I Do for That Man'. *Applause* is a classic maternal melodrama, almost in the class of *Stella Dallas* (1937): Kitty Darling (Morgan), a fading burlesque star, sends her daughter away from the vaudeville world to be educated in a convent but is pressured by her two-timing partner Hitch (Fuller Mellish Jr) to bring her now grown-up daughter April (Joan Peers) into the business. Repulsed by burlesque and the sexual attentions of Hitch, April nevertheless tries to support her mother, taking her place on stage as the abandoned and abused Kitty kills herself. Kitty's death frees April to leave the business and marry the nice sailor she has met, the couple framed before a Kitty Darling burlesque show poster as the film ends.

Mamoulian carried the stylishness and innovation of his work in opera, operetta and Broadway shows through to his movie debut at the coming of sound: 'Here I had been recruited as a stage expert on dialogue, and all I could think of was the marvellous things one could do with the camera and the exciting new potential of sound recording' (Sarris, 1971). *Applause* does give a strong sense of a newcomer experimenting with styles and techniques, some of which work admirably and some of which do not. The opening sequences evoke burlesque's false glamour and rancid sex appeal: the camera dollies and pans to follow a handbill for Kitty's show as it is blown along a rundown street; cuts show people rushing as the sound of distant ragtime music grows louder, and then we are in the parade itself; from this sequence, we cut

to the show in progress via shots of the hard-working band and a lateral track along the ungainly legs of the dancers and their no longer young upper halves. The sentiments of this sequence are strongly amplified later when April, fresh from the convent, is brutally introduced to the world of burlesque, recoiling in disgust amid a rapid montage of grotesque sweaty close-ups of leering male spectators and dancers' faces, legs and thighs. Mamoulian pushed for innovative uses of sound, insisting, for example, on two microphones (and subsequent track mixing) for a scene in which April quietly prays while her mother hums a lullaby. Less successful are some poorly motivated overhead shots and unduly expressionist uses of shadow and frame composition.

While Mamoulian established himself in the 1930s and 40s as an in-demand Hollywood movie director (though *Applause* was shot at New York's Astoria Studios), he remained active in Broadway theatre, directing a number of important shows, including the all-black *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and *St Louis Woman* (1946), as well as the first productions of *Oklahoma!* (1943) and *Carousel* (1945). The successful 1970 Betty Comden–Adolph Green Broadway musical *Applause* (Lauren Bacall's singing-dancing stage debut) was an adaptation of the 1950 film *All About Eve* and had nothing to do with the 1929 film. JH

Dir: Rouben Mamoulian; **Prod:** Monta Bell, Jesse L. Lasky, Walter Wanger; **Scr:** Garrett Fort, from a novel by Beth Brown; **DOP:** George Folsey (b&w); **Song Music/Lyrics:** Jay Gorney/E. Y. Harburg; Joe Burke/Dolly Morse; Fats Waller, Harry Link/Billy Rose; **Art:** not known; **Main Cast:** Helen Morgan, Joan Peers, Fuller Mellish Jr, Henry Wadsworth, Jack Cameron, Dorothy Cumming; **Prod Co:** Paramount.

The Band Wagon

USA, 1953 – 112 mins

Vincente Minnelli

The Band Wagon took its name from a 1931 Broadway revue in which Fred Astaire starred with his sister Adele. Twenty-two years later, the song catalogue of Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz, who wrote the numbers for the original revue, became the basis for a film in which Astaire's age and image are invoked even more overtly than in *Easter Parade**. Astaire's long history is the heart of *The Band Wagon's* highly self-conscious reassertion of traditional entertainment values in a time of change.

The identification of Tony Hunter (Astaire) with Fred Astaire himself could not be clearer. In the auction of Hollywood memorabilia that opens the film, the iconic top hat and cane of movie song and dance man Hunter fail to sell. Firmly associated with the past, when his train pulls into New York (where Ava Gardner takes all the press attention), Tony's first number is the introverted 'By Myself'. In contrast, his second ('A Shine on Your Shoes'), inspired by an amusement arcade on 42nd Street that has replaced one of the theatres he used to know, is an explosion of spontaneous song and dance that all but takes over the arcade and demonstrates to the film audience how far from finished Tony is.

Before that can be made clear in the world of the film, such intrinsically American popular forms are submerged by the transformation of the musical comedy written by Lily and Lester Marton (Nanette Fabray and Oscar Levant), into 'a modern version of Faust', by the imperious (and British) theatrical superstar, Jeffrey Cordova (Jack Buchanan). Challenged by Cordova to change, Tony is half persuaded by the film's first version of 'That's Entertainment' that on stage 'anything can go'. As rehearsals begin, however, Tony is intimidated by dancing with the ballet star Gabrielle Gerard (Cyd Charisse) and increasingly undermined by Cordova's grandiloquent vision, until finally, in a petulant but painful outburst ('I'm Mrs Hunter's little boy, Tony – a song and



Fred Astaire, Cyd Charisse, 'Girl Hunt Ballet'

dance man'), he quits. When he and Gaby discover (in one of the genre's most romantic numbers, 'Dancing in the Dark', set in Central Park) that they can actually dance together, Tony returns, but the overpowering artifice of the show lumbers on. After the New Haven opening, the buoyant backers of Cordova's Faustian folly are transformed into haggard individuals who creep silently out of the theatre.

At the 'wake' later that night, the forms of entertainment and the communal energy that have been suppressed burst out again in 'I Love

Louisa', the comic number Lester, Tony and Lily perform to cheer the assembled company. When Tony determines to save the show and artistic pretension is banished, success is suddenly effortless. We see no more rehearsals, as though true entertainment needs no labour – only a succession of vibrant numbers, one for each city on the out-of-town tour: 'I See a New Sun' (Gaby), 'I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan' (Tony and Jeff in top hat and tails), 'Louisiana Hayride' (Lily leading the company), and Tony, Lily and Jeff dressed as babies in 'Triplets'. Finally, on New York opening night, it is the 'Girl Hunt Ballet', a parody of a hard-boiled detective story in dance, featuring Tony and Gaby. Apparently abandoned after the show, Tony begins to sing 'By Myself' again, only to find the whole company waiting for him on the stage. Gaby declares her love and the film ends with all the principals, backed by the whole company, reprising 'That's Entertainment', but this time as the film's wholehearted endorsement of American popular song and dance. DP

Dir: Vincente Minnelli; **Prod:** Arthur Freed; **Scr:** Betty Comden, Adolph Green; **DOP:** Harry Jackson (George Folsey) (colour); **Song Music/Lyrics:** Arthur Schwartz/Howard Dietz; **Musical Dir:** Adolph Deutsch; **Choreog:** Michael Kidd (Fred Astaire uncredited); **Art:** Cedric Gibbons, Preston Ames; **Main Cast:** Fred Astaire, Cyd Charisse, Oscar Levant, Nanette Fabray, Jack Buchanan, James Mitchell; **Prod Co:** Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

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