

Meet Me in St Louis (USA, 1944) – The ‘classic’ Hollywood Musical

Director – Vincente Minnelli

Producer – Arthur Freed

Script – Fred Finklehoffe and Irving Brecher (based on Sally Benson’s novel)

Art Direction – Cedric Gibbons

Cinematography – George Folsey

Cast – Judy Garland, Margaret O’Brien, Mary Astor, Leon Ames

By the end of the 1920s the ‘classical’ Hollywood ‘dream factory’ was in place and the industry survived the Depression by offering ‘escapist’ entertainment. At the end of the 1930s, prestigious productions had the added benefit of colour, used to dramatic effect in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Arthur Freed was an assistant on *Oz* and soon after was running his own independent unit within MGM.

The Freed unit was instrumental in the development of the Hollywood musical. During the 1930s the genre had been dominated by the ‘backstage’ musical, where the songs and dances were motivated by the narrative’s setting and characters. Freed worked to create a seamless mix of drama and musical numbers. This was done in *Oz*, though the fantasy milieu made this easier to justify in narrative terms.

Classical narrative tries to work ‘efficiently’ by only focusing on a story’s essential elements. When confronted by a musical number the plot can grind to a halt. However in *Meet Me in St Louis* the numbers move the narrative forward; for example, ‘The Boy Next Door’ sets up an important narrative problem – Esther’s desire for John – that needs to be resolved in the film.

Whilst most Hollywood movies have happy endings, musicals are particularly cheerful films; the *joie de vivre* of song and dance sets the positive tone. It is rare for musicals to be melancholy in tone; *It’s Always Fair Weather* (1955) is one such exception. Richard Dyer (in Altman, 1981), in his influential essay ‘Entertainment and Utopia’, used the musical to exemplify escapist entertainment.¹ He argued, the entertainment offers audiences the *idea* of utopia where the negative aspects of the real world (such as, poverty, exhausting routine, political manipulation) were eradicated in favour of abundance, energy and transparency. *Meet Me in St Louis* does offer a ‘feel good’ narrative however the darker, repressed side of bourgeois family life surfaces in the near-Expressionist scene where Tootie destroys the ‘father’ snowman. Thomas Elsaesser argues that this dark undercurrent is typical of Minnelli’s films:

‘Tragedy is present as a particular kind of unfreedom, as the constraint of an emotional or artistic temperament in a world that becomes claustrophobic, where reality suddenly reveals itself as mere décor, unbearably false and oppressive. That is when the dream changes into nightmare, when desire becomes obsession, and the creative will turns into mad frenzy.’ (Elsaesser, 1981, p. 17)²

Although it would be stretching a point to suggest *Meet Me in St Louis* is a subversive film, in the way many 1950s melodramas came to be seen in the light of feminist criticism, however the happy ending is contingent upon *all* the family getting their own way.

Richard Dyer, in his analysis of Judy Garland’s star persona, suggests much of her appeal to Gay audiences lies in the contradiction between the wholesome and normal characters she plays and the evident ‘problems’ that lie just beneath the surface. Garland’s energy, which Dyer terms her ‘peppiness’, is evident in *St Louis*, however:

This pep must be confined if she is to get the boy next door and end up like her mother – by pinching the ‘bloom’ out of her cheeks, by squeezing herself into the tightest corset, by accepting the humiliation of going with Grandad to the Christmas ball and dancing with the least attractive men. It is only after all this that John proposes to her. (Dyer, 1986, p. 163)³

¹ Rick Altman (edited) ‘Genre: The Music’ (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, Boston and Henley) (1981).

² Thomas Elsaesser (1981) ‘Vincente Minnelli’ in Rick Altman (edited) ‘Genre: The Music’ (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, Boston and Henley) (1981).

³ Richard Dyer (1986) *Heavenly Bodies* (Macmillan Press: Basingstoke and London)

Meet Me in St Louis exemplifies 'classical', and so conventional, Hollywood narrative but even films made within this rigid framework can be absolutely fascinating works of art.