

Chapter I

The Making of *Top Hat*

Production

RKO sought to capitalize on the enormous success of the Astaire/Rogers partnership in *Flying Down to Rio*, *The Gay Divorcee*, and *Roberta* – the latter two grossing \$661,500 and \$873,650 respectively, and becoming the sixth and twelfth most commercially successful films in the 1930s (Glancy and Sedgwick, 2007, p. 174) – with an even more lavish production in *Top Hat*. The inspirations for the story were two very closely related plays, *Scandal in Budapest* and *A Girl Who Dares*, by the Hungarian dramatists Alexander Farago and Laszlo Aladar, to which, after several rewrites by Taylor and Scott, *Top Hat* eventually bore only faint resemblance.¹ The links with the source texts were so minimal that the producers even felt it unnecessary to credit the authors in the final print, an omission rectified in the Press Book. The first source, *Scandal in Budapest*, made into a Hungarian film, *Romance in Budapest* by Karl Noti [1933], is the story of Eva Balogh, a tomboy who creates a disturbance in a smart Budapest hotel when she slaps the man she believes is her best friend's callow fiancé, and whom she accuses of a broken promise of marriage. This case of mistaken identity eventually resolves itself in marriage between Eva and her innocent victim. The second, *A Girl Who Dares*, has many similarities with *Scandal in Budapest*, but concentrates on Eva as a sort of flapper also determined to cause a scandal by slapping a man in public, on this

occasion, though, not the fiancé of her best friend, just any man. As noted, *Top Hat* eventually retained very little from these two texts, only the theme of mistaken identity and the slapping incident, where Jerry is slapped and mistaken for Horace by Dale. While the mistaken identity theme provides the narrative mechanism for Dale's confusion over Jerry, the slaps add piquancy, and comically draw attention to the pain of love, a gesture little appreciated by Astaire, the victim of Rogers's assaults.² In *A Girl Who Dares* female aggression is partly caused by poverty and envy of the privileged classes; in *Top Hat* Dale's assault on Jerry is prompted only by love. These two plays provided the inspiration, but perhaps an even more direct narrative source for *Top Hat* was *The Gay Divorcee*, where the successful formula of luxurious European settings, romantic interest, and comic secondary characters proved irresistible to audiences.

Top Hat's final script (by Dwight Taylor and Alan Scott, February 16, 1935) emerged after several versions and modifications of character, narrative, dialogue, and number that indicate changing priorities, as well as responses to Production Code censorship. While the main characters remained largely true to their original model, the jettisoning of the aristocratic identity of Horace and Madge is readable as evidence of reluctance to overdo the Englishness of a film intended primarily for American audiences. Horace loses some of the more characteristic linguistic English mannerisms, such as "old boy." Madge had started out as "Lady Belwater," but, played by Helen Broderick, the character acquires a dry American earthiness at the expense of the role's original patrician English sophistication.

The narrative, too, is pared down considerably. For instance, the earliest versions of the screenplay show Jerry's arrival at a West End theater being distracted by a "negro boy" busking on the street pavement. Taylor's "Rough Treatment" reads:

We open in the lobby of a fashionable West End theater during the entr'acte where Horton runs into Astaire. A little negro boy is

endeavoring to entertain the fashionably dressed throng by doing a desiccated Charleston which is not meeting with much success. Freddie offers to show the little boy how to do the step [...].³

The scene was cut, probably to avoid giving the impression of Jerry as a show-off. It is clearly one of the passages that led to Astaire's displeasure at early versions of the script where he felt his character was somewhat unsympathetic. Even as late as the final script (May 8, 1935) there are scenes that are omitted from the final print. Although in this version the busking boy has disappeared, the film's opening at the Thackeray Club has a bit of business with a kitten scampering up a curtain, "scared out of her wits" (p. 7) by Jerry's impromptu tap to arouse the torpid club members. Other linking scenes and shots, such as those between Horace and the director of the show that stars Jerry (now no longer merely attending but taking part in a show), are all omitted to maintain narrative pace.

Two further important cuts are made: the scene where a "little English curate and his faded wife" (p. 135) are horrified by Madge's declaration that a murder is about to be committed at the Lido hotel (Beddini's killing of Horace), and one of the Berlin songs, "Get Thee Behind Me Satan." The screenplay reads:

Dale paces up and down – not knowing whether to stay and face this man she's really in love with or return to the man she's just married. The lyrical content of the song is the struggle between her desire to leave the one whom she feels she should resist. Her soliloquy takes the form of the song "Satan get thee behind me." (pp. 136–7)

Clearly felt to be an unnecessary reiteration of Dale's dilemma here, the song eventually made its appearance in the next Astaire/Rogers film, *Follow the Fleet*, sung by Harriet Hilliard.

While this cut was down to concerns over form, others were made in obedience to the Production Code, mainly over sex-related matters, although, as Sue Rickard points out (1996, p. 75), the studios

adapted to the Code and found ways of camouflaging sexual innuendo, something the musical as a whole, and the Astaire/Rogers films in particular, managed very successfully. During a prolonged correspondence about *Top Hat* between Joseph Breen of the Hays Office and B. B. Kahane, President of RKO at the time (Breen, 1935a–f), the former objected to numerous items. In a letter of March 20, for instance, Breen writes (1935a) that, although the script is generally acceptable from the point of view of the Production Code, certain elements are open to objection. These include the florist’s remark at an early moment in the London hotel, where Jerry orders flowers to be sent to Dale. Breen writes: “there should be nothing suggestive in the reading ‘[...] and her niceties are very nice.’” The line was changed to “Mr. Beddini provides Miss Tremont with all her niceties; including her clothes,” arguably an even more suggestive observation. Additionally, Breen insists that the wordplay on “dam” and “damn” in the exchange between Dale and Jerry in the hansom cab should be deleted or changed. The remark made by Beddini, “We Beddinis have a motto – for the man the sword, for the woman the whip!” was also modified to “For the man the sword, for the woman the kiss!” (1935a).

Equally, the risqué nature of the tryst between Horace and Violet in the park was considered unacceptable since “it is seen by us as a play on the idea of adultery. Such comedy inference is, of course, open to very grave objection” (Breen, 1935a). All reference to storks (and therefore by inference to pregnancy) were censorable. These original lines between Jerry and Horace were deleted:

Horace: Good grief! You don’t think I’ll get into trouble?

Jerry: You get into trouble? – what about the poor girl that’s afraid of storks?

Breen’s objections to Horace’s adultery are compounded contradictorily by suspicions of his homosexuality: “The underlined position of the

following lines should be deleted or changed: ‘Nonsense! If Horace were lost in a harem all he would think of is how to get out!’” (Breen, 1935a).

Anxieties about sexual orientation were also expressed (July 30) over the treatment of Alberto:

“Why not? I’m rich and I am pretty.” This should be deleted. Care should be taken in the playing of the character of Alberto [Beddini] to avoid any idea of his being “pansy” in character. Bates’s reaction in scene 116 should be deleted or changed, for the reason that it makes this a “pansy” gag. (Breen, 1935f)

In a scene of reconciliation between the two, Beddini offers to kiss Horace in the knowledge that he is innocent of any designs on Dale. Madge looks on with an air of amused condescension and authorizes their unorthodox intimacy. After some discussion Breen agreed to allow Madge’s “Go right ahead boys, don’t mind me.” In reply to Breen’s objections (1935f) about a scene at the Lido hotel involving Beddini, Horace and Madge, a memo from Islin Auster reads: “I spoke to Mr. Pandro Berman yesterday and he agreed to trim Helen Broderick’s reaction to the kissing on both cheeks, and I agreed that the line ‘Go right ahead, boys, don’t mind me’ would be permissible.”)

While Breen was most exercised about sex, it is surprising how many of the risqué jokes and references survived. In the 1920s and early 1930s America was freer of homophobia than in later decades. So-called “Pansy Clubs” abounded in various cities, and an embryonic Gay Rights movement began, pioneered in 1925 by Henry Gerber’s Society for Human Rights.

But disturbed by the slightest heterosexual nuance, Breen went even as far as to insist that Alberto should not wear pajamas in the bridal suite, to avoid giving the impression that he is preparing to consummate his marriage on his wedding night. The Production Code chief’s nervousness about sex even extends in the April 24 letter (Breen, 1935c) to the exposure of Horace’s body in the bathroom

scene. Eventually, after examining the final script, edited in line with his comments, Breen wrote to Kahane (n. d.) confirming his office was: “happy to report that this appears to conform to the requirements of our Production Code, and contains little, if anything, that could be considered censorable. Accordingly, we attach hereto our Certificate of Approval No. 1099 for this picture.”

By this time, RKO had brought in Allan Scott to revise the original treatment and screenplay by Dwight Taylor. Taylor also worked on *The Gay Divorcee* and *Follow the Fleet*. Scott, who was co-writer on *Roberta*, *Follow the Fleet*, *Swing Time*, *Shall We Dance*, and *Carefree*, rejects Arlene Croce’s view that he was a “rewrite man” for Dwight Taylor, stating:

For example, on *Top Hat* (1935) he wrote the first script – breaking the story down, suggesting possible dance spots – [...] About three months before the piece was slated to go, I got it and made the second draft based on Dwight’s storyline. I never had a conference with Dwight – we never really collaborated – except I knew him of course. After I finished my draft, Mark and I would sit down and go over it page by page – improving it, making better suggestions for the lyrics – and finally I would give it a final polish.⁴

Significantly, though, while Taylor was paid \$13,333.33 for the story, Scott earned \$5,625.00 for the screenplay. Scott further claims that he worked very closely with Irving Berlin, integrating the songs into the narrative (Server, 1987, p. 190), and confirms the important contribution of Mark Sandrich, who, in his view, revolutionized the genre, providing an alternative to the backstage stories of films like *42nd Street* [Lloyd Bacon, 1933].

With all the creative and technical personnel in place, the film started shooting on April 8, 1935 and finished shooting on June 5, 1935. It cost \$637,131.05 in total: \$51,190 on art direction salaries and set design; \$20,138 on wardrobe (Rogers’s changes of costume costing \$3,025, and Astaire’s hair-lace toupé \$50), and the sets \$51,190. Berlin was paid \$75,000, Astaire \$40,000, Sandrich \$36,250, and Rogers \$7,172.50. It is

obvious why Rogers never felt truly appreciated, and fought continually for equal payment with the other stars at the studio.⁵

Promotion

Top Hat's Advance Information Booklet (RKO Pictures, 1935) emphasizes the importance of Irving Berlin, probably the most American of the great popular song composers, here for the first time responsible for a complete film score. His stature is also marked in the original trailer, which has a shot of him playing the piano while the titles of his songs for the film flit across the screen. The booklet cover shows one of the posters for the film where, although pride of place is naturally given at the top to images of Astaire and Rogers, who are described alliteratively as “the reigning rulers of rhythm,” Irving Berlin also appears, beneath them, referred to equally colorfully as “the mightiest monarch of melody.” All three combine, in relentlessly labored journalese playing with the film title, to “give the world the screen’s crowning musical.” Much is made in the booklet of the broadcast by Astaire with Lenny Hayton’s orchestra in New York City at NBC of the Berlin songs. There are innumerable suggestions for promoting the film through catch lines on the back of Berlin’s music, such as “Five great song hits by the world’s melody monarch,” or “every single melody in the show is glorious band material, singing material, dance material for the air shows, cafés, dance halls etc.” (RKO Pictures, 1935, p. 16).

Naturally, though, cinema managers were encouraged to promote *Top Hat* not primarily as a Berlin film, but as an Astaire/Rogers vehicle: “The sensational dancing stars of *Roberta* and the brilliant cast of *The Gay Divorcee* [...] rock the world anew with a dazzling blast of melody and mirth.” They were called, in further examples of purple prose, the “rhythm royalty of the screen” (RKO Pictures, 1935, p. 15), “the greatest singing, dancing and romancing star-team of the history of the

screen,” the “king and queen of Carioca [...] [who] still rule harmony heights” (RKO Pictures, 1935, p. 15). Publicists were also advised to remind cinema-goers of the earlier films, emphasizing the stars’ combination of musical talent, dazzling romance and comedy: “... He was fancy free for anything fancy ... she longed to dance with him cheek to cheek ... They got together in the romance region of sunny Italy” (RKO Pictures, 1935, p. 16). The film’s appeal is further promoted through mention of the huge expense for the lavish sets and wardrobe. Publicity for the shooting of the film on two RKO sound stages knocked together, done almost completely in white (and referred to as the BWS – Big White Set), conveyed an impression of no-expenses-spared fantasy glamour, a return to the opulence of the 1920s in the harsh economic realities of the 1930s. Arlene Croce defines *Top Hat* as a “Thirties romance of the Twenties” (Croce, 1977 [1972], p. 56). Indeed, the film often has the look of a John Held cartoon from the 1920s and early 1930s editions of *Vanity Fair* or *The New Yorker*.

Just as, across the road on Melrose Avenue, “Paris Paramount” was being created in the sophisticated European-set romantic comedies directed by Ernst Lubitsch and scripted by Samson Raphaelson, so on Gower Avenue an RKO Rialto was being built for *Top Hat* as a distraction from the Depression: “[...] a canal with gondolas afloat, graceful bridges that rival the majesty of the Italian resort that inspired it” (RKO Pictures, 1935, p. 5). In a memo from Mark Sandrich to Pandro Berman (January 9, 1935), some authentic location shooting was considered, though not ultimately followed up:

As the latter part of our picture plays in and around the Lido in Italy it has occurred to me that we may be able to get some tremendous values if we could have some authentic character scenes and backgrounds photographed in that locale.

The plan was aborted partly perhaps because Italy was in the grip of Fascism, but mostly because costs would have been prohibitive.

Sandrich's reputation for extravagance is noted in David Selznick's January 18 memo to Louis Brock, one of RKO's executive producers:

Kindly advise Sandrich that I am becoming increasingly annoyed by his attitude, and increasingly fearful of the results of extending an opportunity to a man in so obviously wrong a state of mind as he is. You may feel free to show him this note [...]. Sandrich, a complete novice as far as feature production goes, complains about a low budget and obviously does not know what the entire industry is up against.

Nevertheless, the heavy investment in the earlier Astaire/Rogers films led to record receipts and facilitated the lavish expenditure in *Top Hat* on sets and wardrobe. The expensive sets were matched by the outlay on the "stunningly gowned" Ginger Rogers. Much is made in the RKO Pictures *Advance Information Booklet* (RKO Pictures, 1935, p. 5) of Bernard Newman's designs:

Bernard Newman, famous New York couturier, who designed the clothes for *Roberta*, *Star of Midnight* and *Break of Hearts*, designed a complete new wardrobe for Ginger Rogers to wear in *Top Hat*. Fifteen outfits, displaying what the well dressed woman of fashion should wear for various occasions are included, ranging from the most tailored of sports to stunning cocktail and dance frocks. In addition to this parade of brilliant fashions, there are gowns of the gayest Italian styles for members of the dance ensemble.

The publicity copy refers to costume not as an expression of character but of consumerist display, of luxury that allows audiences to take momentary vicarious pleasure from contemplating the privileges of wealth. This is an example of what Michael E. Parrish describes as the use of cosmetics and fashion to sell youth and beauty as the essence of femininity (Parrish 1992, p. 151), part of a strategy that also exemplified the New Deal's attempts to solve the post-Depression crisis through consumerism.

Further advice for those promoting the film ranged from the making of huge top hats to be placed on top of cinema marquees, or

ordinary sized versions to be worn by cinema employees: “For your ushers, usherettes, your doorman, cashier ... even yourself ... get a top hat and see that they are constantly WORN. For the girls, get slightly small sizes, which can be worn in a slightly jaunty or cocky manner” (RKO Pictures, 1935, p. 18).

The instruction to keep the girls’ toppers at a “jaunty or cocky” angle is a reminder of the film’s tongue-in-cheek tone, a sentiment in keeping with the alliterative humor of the catch lines, the punning on the film title (e.g. “The topper of them all,” “The crowning topper of screen musicals”). Extra ideas for collaborations with local newspapers, clothing stores and men’s shop hook-ups were also made to maximize the profits of the film. The studio’s in-house news magazine, the *Radio Flash*, promoted the film (July 27, 1935) as the “most sensational tie-up in history. Gigantic *Lucky Strike*, Fred Astaire, *Top Hat* alliance,” reinforcing the notion of the construction of male and female identity through advertisements (Riley, 1986, p. 96; Eckert, 1990, p. 108) and consumerist products. This was estimated at bringing in revenue of \$250,000. The back cover of the August 24, 1935 *Radio Flash* edition (no. 33) has a “message of great importance” from one Ned E. Depinet, written on a drawing of a top hat: “[...] I know of none that possessed more genuine entertainment for all classes of audiences, nor one that had greater drawing power at the box-office than has *Top Hat*.” The May 1936 *Radio Foreign Flash* edition refers punningly to *Top Hat* as the “Topic of the World,” and recommends stunts such as an airplane pulling a kite with a huge top hat, in Sydney, or a colossal *Top Hat* sign built on a special bamboo backing in Shanghai for its run at the Metropole cinema.

Reception

Following Hollywood practice, *Top Hat* was sent out in July and August 1935 for previews before its public release on September 6. At these, audiences were supplied with cards asking three questions:

1. Did you like this picture or not? Why?
2. Was the action of the picture entirely clear?
3. Have you any other constructive suggestions to make?

Even though there were reservations over some aspects of the film, it was immediately clear that, if the completed questionnaires were any guide, the film was going to be a smash hit. Quibbles arose mainly over the failure to give Rogers more than a single song. For instance, one patron commented: “You should balance out your singing a little more by giving GINGER ROGERS at least one more song” (card dated July 23, 1935). Clearly taken with her beauty, this individual continues in a eulogy bordering on fetishism: “[...] a good scene was Ginger Rogers dancing in her riding togs giving us for the first time a good look at her foot and leg action.” But one viewer considered that the “ostrich feathers skirt worn by Rogers in one of her dances is too lifeless and does not express the grace of her movements at all” (card dated August 15, 1935), a view that would not have flattered the co-designer of the dress, Rogers herself. The other general criticism concerned the film’s length. On a card stating that “The entire picture seemed a bit long and the last dancing scene seemed unnecessary” (card dated July 25, 1935), there is a scribble from Pandro Berman to Mark Sandrich that reads: “Mark – note comments.” There was no additional song for Rogers, but the film was cut by approximately 20 minutes, and then restored to its full 101 minutes’ length in 1940.

The reviews of the film were extremely favorable. Above all, critics praised Astaire, the music, and the lavish sets. Most of the negative comment was directed, as in the preview questionnaires, at the film’s length, the flimsiness of plot and, surprisingly, on a few occasions, Ginger Rogers. The anonymous reviewer in *The New York Times* thought Rogers was “great” (Grenwald, 1935). But Louella Parsons, alongside Hedda Hopper, the most influential film reviewer of the day, wrote in the *Los Angeles Examiner* that, while Astaire was a “million dollar personality,” Rogers was not up to standard: “Let’s

have more of Fred Astaire. [...] He is the guiding spirit in RKO's musical *Top Hat*" (Parsons, 1935). When she writes about Ginger Rogers she is less than complimentary:

I looked carefully to try to see Miss Rogers through rose-colored glasses, but I must be truthful. Astaire carries her through her dance numbers, just as he did in *Roberta*. Ginger is certainly not in his class, and her costumes, which might have been designed by a country dress-maker, do not help to convey an idea of either beauty or smartness. However, no one performance can spoil *Top Hat* [...]

Louella Parsons's opinion of Rogers may well have been compromised by the favorable treatment from her great rival Hedda Hopper who, in Rogers's autobiography, is mentioned as having been grateful for Rogers's mother's refusal of an invitation to become the film reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*, leaving the way free for Hopper to accept it (Rogers, 1991, p. 219). The *Hollywood Reporter* took a different view: "Ginger Rogers [...] is fast making herself into the best female dancer to be seen [...]. If she really wants to look beautiful let her always look as she does in the "*Dancing Cheek to Cheek*" number" (Anon, 1935a, n. p.). Decades later most agree with this verdict, and Parsons's jaundiced comments seem ungenerous. The film was nominated for Best Picture, Art Direction, Original Song ("The Piccolino") and Dance Direction (Hermes Pan) at the Academy Awards, but was surprisingly unsuccessful in all categories.

On its own merits, as well as through publicity drives, the film broke box office records at Radio City, taking \$350,000 in its first three weeks, and earned RKO \$3,202,000 in rent and \$1,132,550 over 54 weeks (Glancy and Sedgwick, 2007, p. 173). Whereas most films could not fill cinemas on their own, and had to be part of a double bill with other attractions, *Top Hat* was one of only a handful that normally dispensed with such support. Only once in a 54-week run was *Top Hat* part of a double bill, and on only three occasions was it

coupled with a stage show. In the UK Astaire and Rogers were rated the second highest box office draws.⁶ *Top Hat* was one of very few films rated “outstanding” by *Picturegoer*, and as “outstandingly brilliant” by *Film Pictorial*, seemingly reflecting the views of the mass audience, as Annette Kuhn argues, that the Astaire/Rogers films were nothing if not “uplifting” (Kuhn, 2002, pp. 169–70).