

The Gay Divorcee [1934]

by

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The Gay Divorcee begins with a musical number that ushered in a new form of American musical. In almost all previous musical films, the dance numbers were most often documentaries of what was performed on a stage. They actually interrupted the plot! With *The Gay Divorcee*, this changed.

Flying Down to Rio [1933] was the first pairing of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, but they had only incidental parts, the stars were Dolores del Rio and Gene Raymond. *The Gay Divorcee* was the first musical that combined the talents of Fred Astaire and choreographer Hermes Pan. Between them they invented a new form of song/dance number: one that didn't interrupt the flow of the story as in the previous musicals, but it became a part of the story telling, in integral part of the plot.

Thus, the first number of *The Gay Divorcee* takes place in Paris, outside the location of the film itself, London. It is an “outsider” number. Women are lined up around the inside of a circular, toroidal table. They do their dancing with their fingers disguised as doll legs. The symmetrical geometry, the mechanical feel, the sterility, the unemotionality, and the very hidden sexuality, all point toward the musical numbers of Busby Berkeley.

The *Night and Day* number becomes a turning point in the American Musical. It's worth a close look. Guy sees Mimi from a balcony and, after deciding not to jump down, he catches up with her in one of those empty, secluded dancing areas that were to populate Astaire's films in such convenient profusion. Not only does she express her dislike of Guy, but she is also embarrassed at being publicly recognized in a place where she will be undergoing the humiliating experience of being seen with a professional co-correspondent.

After a brief conversation, she turns to leave, but he entraps her with a song and then seduces her with a dance. This is the essence of all the Astaire-Rogers musicals to come. This number, similar to the stage show version, uses at least three devices to chart the couples' emotional transformation.

The first is directly physical: every time Mimi tries to escape, Guy physically blocks her path. Later in the dance number, she frees herself from his physical grip only to find herself in his emotional grip and no longer desirous to flee. Solo, she moves upstage to a balcony from which there is no escape and waits for Guy to come get her. (This move may have been modeled after the famous adagio in the second act of *Swan Lake* where the Swan Queen tries to escape from the Prince but he blocks her path and later willingly returns to his arms.)

The second device is the repeated figure Guy dances with varying responses from Mimi. The first time Mimi shrugs off his “dance invitation.” The second time he dances it, she echoes his steps, but simply turns and tries to walk away. The third time, she joins him in kind and willing expressions, in dance terms, that she has been won.

The third level of illustrating the change in their emotional relationship is Mimi’s sense of movement. At the beginning her movements are standoffish and stiff. Her movements are closed, as if entrapped. She then becomes very introverted, as if her dancing were a meditation on her physical and emotional position. It seems as if she is dancing for herself. When Guy grabs her hand and pulls her into his arms, she seems to snap out of her reverie. While at first she is unwilling to give in completely, she soon flows into his arms as they unite in dance.

Cole Porter wrote *Night and Day* with Astaire in mind. However, it is rather difficult to sing; it has several octave spanning jumps and even a difficult seventh at a very dramatic moment. This is contrasted by the pulsing, monotonous notes in the middle of the song. During the stage show, Astaire thought he couldn’t do it and it was about to be dropped. However, Porter insisted. The resulting success of the song proved Porter’s confidence in Astaire’s singing ability was correct. The song has since become a standard.

This number, the song and dance, work out perfectly the emotional transformation of the couple. During the song in which he pours out his heart to her, she seems aloof, but interested. She seems to be at once expressing bewilderment and a faint pleasure. At the same time, she seems embarrassed, often looking away from Guy.

Mimi tries to exit both to the right and to the left. Each time Guy blocks her exit. The third time, as she strides with even more determination than before, he grabs her rather roughly by the wrist. This is the first time he has touched her. Once he has gotten her attention, he does his little dance with a very hopeful expression on his face. It doesn’t work however, for as soon as he lets go, Mimi once again heads for the exit.

He athletically jumps after her, almost pouncing on her like a large cat; he pulls her firmly into her arms. The energy between them seems to disappear as they smoothly glide across the floor. However, all is not relaxed for they haven’t taken the typical dancers’ couple pose – rather there is tension between them for they are dancing eye-ball to eye-ball.

During the rest of the dance, he rolls her firmly into his arm, she again turns inward into an almost meditative state. Meanwhile, Astaire's free hand seems to flutter about her almost trying to hypnotize her. As the music rises into a bubbling lilt, they both join the music in a light, bouncy step.

The director then films the next few moments through a set of Venetian blinds. Largely unseen by the audience, the great emotional transition between Mimi and Guy takes place. In later films, this will take place on screen as the expressive talents of both the dancers and choreographers gathers in strength. When they exit from behind the blinds, a remarkable transformation has taken place. Mimi has given herself over to the music completely. The transformation is weakened by the director's need to film the dance in eight separate shots (in Astaire's next film, the romantic duet is rendered in two shots).

As the music drops away, Mimi seems to snap out of her reverie and seems almost surprised to find Guy there in front of her. She is still reticent. The turning point comes when Mimi roughly shoves Guy away with the heel of her hand on his chin. But she doesn't really put any weight behind the move, thus Guy's staggering across the floor is all dance – an outgrowth of the building emotional relationship of what has gone before. He quickly and gracefully recovers from his rejection. Mimi, rather than seizing this opportunity for escape, heads for the balcony where she knows there is no way out, and waits for Guy, looking over her shoulder.

After a moment of mock hesitation, he follows her and leads her back to the center of the floor. The dancing that follows has the only lift of the routine and briefly ends when Guy wraps himself in her arms in a mirror image of the movement that opened the number.

Guy again does his little step for her and this time she answers willingly and in kind. As if in celebration of their new relationship, he turns his back to her for the first time in the dance, confident that this time she won't run away. There follows a glorious and melting celebration of their emotions expressed through their dancing. They no longer dance nose-to-nose, but cheek-to-cheek. This is the first "integrated" dance number in a Hollywood Musical.

The producers weren't sure that Astaire and Rogers could handle the movie on their own, so they "insured" success with several of the best second bananas around; Edward Everett Horton, Eric Blore, and others. Betty Grable does one number with Horton and establishes herself as a force to contend with.

Interestingly, in England, the film was known as *The Gay Divorcee*, but American censors thought there should be nothing happy about the dissolution of a marriage and thus the name was changed to please them.