

CONTENTS

THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL **02+03+04** • THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL, SINGIN' IN THE RAIN, AND PARODY **05+06**

SUBVERSIVE CONTENT IN THE MUSICAL **07+08+09** • THE MUSICAL: A GENRE FOR DREAMERS **10+11**

THE MUSICAL AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COLOUR IN FILM **12+13+14** • THE MUSICAL TODAY **15** • ACTIVITY ANSWER KEY **16**

CURRICULUM

This teaching guide has three curriculum objectives:

- To help students and teachers using films and videos in the context of the following secondary school curriculum – English Language Arts, Film and Media Studies, Social Studies, and Visual Arts
- To assist educators who are planning to teach film studies for the first time
- To suggest ways in which traditional literary concepts may be taught using a medium other than printed text

SINGIN' IN THE RAIN Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952

Singin' in the Rain is cinematic magic, bouncy, charming, joyful, and exuberant; just the kind of fun-loving movie it's so hard for audiences to love today. If you're not accustomed to 1950s Hollywood musicals, *Singin' in the Rain* is the best place to start. It'll make you smile, even if you think you don't want to.

Essentially, the story is built around a film studio that must adjust to the coming of sound in motion pictures. It's a story all too common to the history of Hollywood, but here it's used as a useful excuse for MGM to showcase some of their own song and dance numbers from their musicals of the 1920s and 1930s. If this sounds like an MGM slight-of-hand, it's a trick worthy of our attention. The film clip for the title number is perhaps the most often shown piece of film in the history of cinema. But as great as this number is, the rest of the film and, in particular, the Gene Kelly/Cyd Charisse "Broadway Ballet" number, are also wonderful. As Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, and eventually Debbie Reynolds help the studio to adjust to the new era of movie making, a beautiful, jubilant, and exciting masterpiece unfolds before our eyes.

Note: Classroom activities are provided after each section along with an answer key at the end of the guide. Answers are not provided for all activities as some questions depend on teachers to choose films they are already working with in their classes.

Question to think about prior to viewing the film:

The classic Hollywood musicals of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s can look odd or even silly to contemporary audiences. Whether you've seen a classic Hollywood musical or not, it is possible you have an idea about what these movies are like and whether or not you'll like them. As a class, describe your expectations of Hollywood musicals. Do you think you will enjoy *Singin' in the Rain*? Why or why not?

After watching *Singin' in the Rain*, as a class, discuss the following questions:

1. Did the film meet your expectations about Hollywood musicals, or did it surprise you in any way?
2. Discuss what you think life was like for teens living in the 1950s. Compare how your expectations might differ from those of audiences watching *Singin' in the Rain* in the 1950s.
3. Discuss whether you think the Hollywood musical is dead. If not, has it come back in another form? What would be the characteristics of any new musical?

THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL

In the age of music videos, it's difficult to appreciate the playful, charming, exuberant world of the Hollywood musical. More than any other genre in film history (save perhaps the western), it recalls a different age and different values, a different set of audience expectations, and a different culture of pop music and film.

Between the 1930s and 1950s the music of Hollywood musicals was popular culture; its stars were the idols and dreamboats of audiences; its mannerisms were the art of the people. Today, musicals can look like so much fluff and silliness. They can seem absurdly dated next to the codes of irony and cynicism that dominate contemporary movies and current pop culture. If this is so, however, the loss is ours. As out of date as some musicals may seem, there is still something wonderful in the pure joy and spectacle of movies like *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944), *An American in Paris* (Vincente Minnelli, 1951), or *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952). In many ways, it's good that classic Hollywood musicals aren't made anymore. A big, bright, and unrelentingly joyful new musical would look naïve today. This said, if we stand back from our own time just long enough to re-enter the world of song and dance, spectacle and excitement, brought to life in the classic Hollywood musical, there is much pleasure to behold.

Where did the musical come from?

Aside from the western, the musical may be the most characteristically American genre in the history of film. Other national cinemas have made contributions to the genre, but none have rivalled Hollywood for invention, wit, and audience appeal. For many, the musical began with the coming of sound to motion pictures. *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first fully synchronized sound picture, was essentially a musical masked as a dialogue picture. And yet, while it had ten songs, *The Jazz Singer* was not a musical in the true sense of the term. Critics may argue the point, but the first all-talking, all-singing, all-dancing, fully formed musical was MGM's *The Broadway Melody* (1929), a film which also established the "backstage" musical, the kind of movie where the lives and loves of stage performers provide the perfect pretext for having actors launch into production numbers. That MGM would produce the first musical is appropriate given that the studio was responsible for producing some of the most accomplished and successful pictures in the history of the genre, including all of the films mentioned above.

The Musical Genre

In one way, the musical is easy to define. It is a film where stars perform music, song, and dance as part of a film's story. The best way to clarify the characteristics of the genre is to examine the various transitions the musical has undergone throughout its history.

Early Musicals

In the 1930s, musicals (with the important exception of *The Wizard of Oz*) tended to be thinly veiled stage productions portraying the goings-on of show folk behind the scenes. Musical numbers were woven through scanty plots about love and life among entertainers like Ruby Keeler, Dick Powell, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Eleanor Powell, and Rita Hayworth. The films themselves tended to be extravagant productions, particularly in the hands of director and choreographer Busby Berkeley (*42nd Street*, [Lloyd Bacon, 1933], *Bright Lights* [1935], and *Gold Diggers of 1935*, [1935]), while the films' stories tended to disappear into the ever-present glitter and gold.

Musicals Come of Age

In the 1940s and 1950s, musicals changed, becoming even more lavish “integrated” productions where the performance numbers were woven into the storylines themselves. In theory, this suggested that songs and dances would serve to move stories along; in practice, “integrated” musicals produced the rather campy convention where characters would burst into song at the slightest dramatic provocation. *Singin’ in the Rain* includes a number of scenes where this convention is at work. Some sequences (such as “Moses Supposes”) use the convention in a manner that now seems entirely contrived, while others remain so striking and beautiful that it’s easy to go along with the convention even if it means ignoring oddities like the fact that Gene Kelly tap dances the film’s title sequence in the pouring rain. In other scenes (i.e., the “Broadway Melody” ballet), clearly artificial, eccentric sets make the use of conventions secondary to a fantastic *mise en scène* and a remarkable series of performances by Gene Kelly, Donald O’Connor, and Cyd Charisse.

The high point of the Hollywood musical occurred in the 1950s. MGM (among other studios) exploited audiences’ affections for the genre by regularly putting out box-office successes starring (or produced by) talent like Gene Kelly, Cyd Charisse, Judy Garland, producer Arthur Freed, and director Vincente Minnelli. By the end of the decade, the rising costs of film production and a shift in popular taste away from the musical suggested that the genre might be on the way out. This didn’t happen, but by the 1960s the musical changed shape dramatically.

In the decade of John F. Kennedy, civil rights, and the war in Vietnam, musicals became more realistic and less glamorous affairs (i.e., *West Side Story* [Robert Wise, 1961]). They also became bigger, more expensive, and more of a risk for studios. The last of the great box-office success stories for the genre came in the shape of *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965), a glossy adaptation of a Rodgers and Hammerstein stage musical about the true-life experience of the von Trapp family singers who escaped from Nazi-occupied Austria in the 1930s. So successful was the film—it grossed more than any American film made prior to *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975), and *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977)—it became known in the film industry as “The Sound of Money.” Other big-budget supermusicals attempted to follow on the success of the von Trapp family saga—*Star!* (Robert Wise, 1968), *Doctor Doolittle* (Richard Fleischer, 1967), and *Funny Girl* (William Wyler, 1968) to name only a few — but when they failed at the box office, the waning days of the genre seemed on the horizon.

The Demise of the Musical

In the 1970s, with the public glutted on musicals and the genre itself nearly destroyed by various box-office busts, the genre turned in a new direction with Bob Fosse’s intelligent, socially relevant, and beautifully made *Cabaret* (1972). Starring Liza Minnelli, the daughter of Judy Garland and Vincente Minnelli, *Cabaret* is set in Berlin in 1931 and is a sharp recreation of the confusing, perverse world of Weimar Germany. In the late 1970s, films like Bob Fosse’s *All That Jazz* (1979) and Milos Forman’s *Hair* (1979) carried on the socially conscious musical tradition. Unfortunately, in the 1980s Adrian Lyne’s *Flashdance* (1983) and Herbert Ross’ *Footloose* (1984) suggested that if the musical was to carry on at all, it would be in the form of music video-inspired romances that were ultimately big on sound and flash, and light on content and interest.

While it’s not true that the musical is altogether dead (see the discussion in *The Musical Today* for more on the future of the genre), something fundamental died when the last of the great MGM musicals was made. MGM’s mid-1950s song and dance extravaganzas were energetic, athletic masterpieces produced with a faith in the power of singing and dancing and connected with an almost religious belief in Hollywood as the great inheritor of musical entertainment.

THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL *continued*

activity 01

Many of you will have seen other major Hollywood musicals, like *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *White Christmas* (Michael Curtiz, 1954), or *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965). Compare any of these musicals (or any recent musical you have seen) with your reaction to *Singin' in the Rain*. Are there certain features or elements of older musicals that you appreciate? Are there certain characteristics of these older films that you definitely do not like? Or, do you only like more recent musicals, like *Moulin Rouge!* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001), or the Joel and Ethan Coen film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel Coen, 2000)? (Please see section entitled, *The Musical Today* for more details on these two movies.) If so, why? What is it about more recent musicals that you appreciate?

activity 02

It can be argued that the spirit of 1950s Hollywood musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* doesn't quite fit with the tone of contemporary pop culture. Today, music, movies, and TV are characterized by a sense of irony and cynicism that makes older musicals appear naïve. Because of this, the argument continues, musicals are not nearly as common today as they once were. What do you make of this argument? Do you agree that the tone of movies like *Singin' in the Rain* is too naïve and unsophisticated for audiences today? After watching *Singin' in the Rain*, are there any reasons to think that these kinds of movies could still be successful with audiences today?

*Working in small groups, decide whether your group favours the argument that older musicals are too naïve for modern audiences, or whether your group believes musicals like *Singin' in the Rain* could be successful in theatres today? Now construct an argument and presentation to defend your position in front of the rest of the class.*

*For instance, if you believe older musicals aren't sophisticated enough for modern audiences, use clips from more recent movies and evidence from box office reports (available on the Internet Movie Database Website at: www.imdb.com) to suggest which movies are successful today. Be sure to indicate how these movies are different in tone and spirit from musicals like *Singin' in the Rain*.*

*If you want to argue that classical musicals could be successful with audiences today, talk about what elements you saw in *Singin' in the Rain* that would work. You might also want to talk about the success of more recent musicals and whether this success has created an opportunity to produce more classical musicals.*