



The Main Feature

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The Band Wagon

USA 1953

112 mins. Certificate U

Director	Vincente Minnelli
Screenplay	Betty Comden and Adolph Green
Cinematography	Harry Jackson
Music	Alexander Courage, Adolph Deutsch and Conrad Salinger
Songs	Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz

Cast

Tony Hunter	Fred Astaire
Gabrielle Gerard	Cyd Charisse
Lester Marton	Oscar Levant
Lily Marton	Nenette Fabray
Jeffrey Cordoba	Jack Buchanan



In the early 1930s, when sound had reached Hollywood and been refined a little, the movie makers were quick to realise the potency of musicals as a draw to audiences, so produced them in abundance. One variety was the musicals of Busby Berkeley featuring armies of tap-dancing chorus girls hammering vast stages that no theatre could ever have contained and photographed from above to display the geometric splendour that would have gone unappreciated before film came along. Another, very different kind, were the small-scale musicals exploiting the exceptional dancing skills of Fred Astaire and his regular dancing partner at the time, Ginger Rogers.

Fred Astaire, born in 1899, had been dancing professionally, partnered by his sister Adele, from a very early age until she retired on marriage into the British aristocracy. He was a star of Broadway musicals before venturing into film but once his film partnership with Ginger had clicked never looked back. Their run of films together was a huge success through the 1930s and credited with keeping their studio afloat during parlous times. But eventually, Ginger withdrew from the partnership to concentrate on her acting career and Fred never had a regular dancing partner again. He continued making musicals which were generally successful but mostly with a different partner every second or third outing.

What has all of this got to do with *The Band Wagon*? Well, there were reflections between what was going on in Fred's own life and the story of the film he was invited to join. This concerned an aging star feeling his years and more inclined to move into a comfortable retirement than face the rigours of a new partnership with a younger woman from a different tradition. Cyd Charisse, who was



trained in ballet and was to play the younger woman, was not at all attracted by the notion of dancing with an older man who furthermore was shorter than herself. Eventually both were talked into signing on for the film and when they saw the completed work must have congratulated themselves for their decision. For *The Band Wagon* came to be recognised as one of the best post-war musicals, despite being outshone initially by the phenomenally popular *Singin' in the Rain* which was made in the same year.

The film was made by MGM who had become by the 1940s and 50s the prime Hollywood makers of musicals, and they gave the direction of the film to their most assured exponent, Vincent Minnelli. The script of the film sends up the old film staple of 'putting on a show' (which makes the introduction of the musical numbers so much easier) and does so with a crackling



script by the MGM experts, Comden and Green, which is exploited by Fred's acidic writer friends played by the ever-grumpy Oscar Levant and Nanette Fabray. Jack Buchanan, a well-known figure in London musical comedy theatre, comes close to stealing the film with his deliberately hammy playing of the flamboyant producer and must have been as surprised as everyone else to find himself partnering the great Fred Astaire in a tap-dancing

number. A fairly sedate one as far as I can recall. But the real stars are of course Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse, who show that despite their initial misgivings, they could combine to produce something which was generally thought to be quite wonderful, like the Dancing in the Dark sequence in this film. Throughout his long dancing career, which continued for quite a few years after this film, Fred was known as a perfectionist who did not lower his standards as he grew older and Cyd found that the disparity in their heights was largely dealt with if her footwear was ballet flats.

John Dance

V&A puts musical theatre centre-stage in new exhibition

Harriet Sherwood of *The Guardian* went to the Victoria and Albert Museum ...

Weighed down by diamante, rhinestones, pearls, crystal beads, sequins and long, pale gold bullion fringe, it is a miracle that Julie Andrews ever managed to navigate the stairs she descended at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane while singing *I Could Have Danced All Night*. The dress she wore when playing Eliza Doolittle in the 1958 production of *My Fair Lady* won acclaim for its designer, the legendary Cecil Beaton. The show ran in London for five and a half years, and was thought to be the most expensive then staged in the West End. Beaton's dress, made from ivory satin overlaid with fine chiffon and taffeta, has undergone more than 100 hours of meticulous conservation work before being displayed on a mannequin at V&A as a centrepiece of its new exhibition, *Re:Imagining Musicals* which runs until 27 November 2023.

It is one of 100 items, most of them being displayed for the first time, that celebrate the “transformative power” of musical theatre, combining “artistry, music, design, costumes, engineering and technology with the audience’s imagination”, said Simon Sladen, the V&A’s senior curator for modern and contemporary theatre and performance. The free display includes new acquisitions and objects – including posters, cast recordings, props and costumes – from the Bunnett-Muir Musical Theatre Archive, a private collection of memorabilia that was donated to the V&A in 2018.

The actor Paul O’Grady donated the dress and wig he wore when playing Miss Hannigan in *Annie* in 1998, a role he will reprise in a new UK tour of the show. Costumes from *Six the Musical*, *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie*, *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*, *Company*, and *A Chorus Line* have also been acquired for the exhibition.

A worn and patched pair of shoes worn by Elaine Paige when she played Grizabella in Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Cats* in 1981 illustrates a “show that really brought animals to the stage in a way we hadn’t seen before”, said Sladen. There is also the original cast recording of *Evita*, another award-winning Lloyd Webber musical. Opening in 1978, it starred Paige – “the first lady of musical theatre in this country”, according to Sladen – and David Essex. Other objects relate to performances by the late Angela Lansbury, a “titan of musical theatre and absolutely remarkable individual”.

The exhibition is arranged thematically. A section on literature, film and popular culture looks at adaptations and retellings, such as Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* reimagined as rivalrous New York teenage street gangs in the 1950s in *West Side Story*. More recently it inspired *Juliet*, a show that imagines a life after *Romeo* and includes numbers by Britney Spears and Ariana Grande.

The 1900 novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was first adapted as a musical by the author L Frank Baum in Chicago in 1902, and produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican in 1987. It inspired *Wicked*, a show telling the story from the perspective of the witches and exploring what it means to be an outsider.

Another section on history, society and conflict focuses on how musical theatre has drawn from real life. “You might think conflict is an odd thing to bring to the stage. But we’ve seen throughout the history of the musical, whether it’s the Vietnam war, the second world war, the first world war, American independence, that musicals can bring comfort, they can evaluate history, or they can be critical, they can shine a light on unknown stories or lighter moments,” said Sladen.

A third section on biographical musicals includes a costume from *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie*, a show that tells the story of the teenager Jamie Campbell, who wanted to wear girl’s clothes. “Bringing real people to the stage carries particular responsibilities,” said Sladen. The exhibition ends with a 20-minute video compilation from 30 productions, from *Oliver* at the Palladium in 1995 through to *Singin’ in the Rain*. “It’s a celebration of musical theatre – that wonderful vibrancy and vitality, but also the whole landscape of musical theatre from small venues to mega musicals in the West End. Shows that people know and love, like *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables* – but also those that many won’t have heard of. It’s our grand finale,” said Sladen.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/oct/13/va-puts-musical-theatre-centre-stage-in-new-exhibition>
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/reimagining-musicals>

Comments and reactions to: **Son of Saul**

No of reaction slips received = 15

Average score = 6.00

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	1	1	~	4	2	5	1	~	1

Excellent film but I couldn't watch again. Having visited Auschwitz, it was an insight into the horrors we could only imagine

Hard watch

Remarkable film

First half excellent. Second half too long and pointless, but worth seeing

Clever filming and sound, felt you were there

Dark, depressing and gritty

Camera brilliant. Good acting spoilt by story ending

Quite a hard watch but a reminder of an awful time in history

Harrowing!

A difficult film to watch. The relentless focus on the main character and the close camera work helped show how these hellish conditions drove people close to insanity

An unflinching, chillingly effective portrait of hell on earth. Depressing but vital

Incredible acting and filming. Difficult to follow what was going on at times. I enjoyed the lemon drizzle cake – it was delicious

Position	Film	Average score
1	Belfast	7.96
2	The Duke	7.75
3	Seven Chances	7.61
4	Mandela and de Klerk	7.47
5	After Love	7.36
6	Flee	6.79
7	Day for Night	6.57
8	Son of Saul	6.00
9	Guardians of the Galaxy	5.53
10	L'Eclisse	3.00

Forthcoming attraction: 23 February 2023 – **The Mole Agent**



The premise of The Mole Agent, a Chilean film by director Maite Alberdi, is an appealing one. Sergio Chamy, an elderly man who recently lost his wife, answers a bizarre wanted ad for a man “between 80 and 90.” The ad was placed by a private eye whose client worries that her mother is being mistreated in the nursing home where she lives. The job is to infiltrate the home as a spy—complete with a pen and glasses that record video—and determine whether or not that’s the case. [...]

Sounds like a light, charming comedy, no? That’s what I anticipated when I first saw trailers for the film. But what I missed [...] that elevates it to an entirely different

level of fascination: The Mole Agent is a documentary. Forbes