They can't take that away from me

The elegance and allure of Astaire are eternal

By Glenn C. Altschuler  |  November 2, 2008

FRED ASTAIRE
By Joseph Epstein
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"There should be a half dozen special words for the vastly entertaining dances by the Adaires," wrote Broadway critic Alexander Woollcott at the end of World War I, misspelling the family name. Performing with his sister Adele, Woollcott added, that "nimble and lack-a-daisical Adaire named Fred" is "one of those extraordinary persons whose sense of rhythm and humor have been all mixed up."

By the 1930s everyone knew the name of Fred Astaire. Despite his "enormous ears" and "bad chin line," he danced away the Depression with his new partner, Ginger Rogers, in "The Gay Divorcee," "Roberta," "Top Hat," "Follow the Fleet," "Swing Time," "Shall We Dance," and "Carefree." Until his death in 1987, Astaire remained an icon, celebrated almost universally for elevating entertainment into an art.

In "Fred Astaire," Joseph Epstein, former editor of The American Scholar and author of "Snobbery," "Friendship," and "Fabulous Small Jews," among other books, tries to pin down Astaire's magic, sublimity, and allure. A deeply personal book, slim, lightly researched, but insightful and elegantly written, "Fred Astaire" is an homage to a perfectionist, "guarded about his personal life," who did most of his talking with his feet.

During the Depression, Epstein reminds us, frivolity and easy elegance seemed uplifting and, perhaps, "psychologically restorative." In the hands of the Hollywood dream factory, Astaire embodied an American democratic aristocracy. He didn't have an English accent. He wasn't stuck up, not even in a tux. With boy-next-door names like Pete Peters and Huck Haines, Astaire was skinny and likable, "just slightly big-city wise guy, but also gee-whiz small town," more glamorous than sexy, and never, never cynical.

A "dish," Rogers fit the stereotype of the passionate working-class girl, tough on the outside, but actually innocent and vulnerable. At 5 foot 3 or 4 and 105 pounds, she "seemed to fit into his arms more snuggly, more perfectly than any of his other partners." Twelve years younger than Astaire, she made him seem like a man of the world. In their first seven movies, though, Fred and Ginger didn't kiss. "No pressing need, really, for such a couple to dance between the sheets," Epstein writes, "when they danced so wondrously outside them."

The dazzling duo, Epstein indicates, didn't much care for each other. Thinking of herself, with good reason, as a gifted actress, ingénue, and comedienne, Rogers feared "being smothered under Astaire's brilliance" - and bristled at his lack of respect for her as a dancer. Astaire resented being "teamed" with her - or anyone. Nor did he always approve of her attire. For their dance to Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek" in "Top Hat," Rogers and her formidable mother insisted on a dress covered with blue ostrich feathers. The first take was like a snowstorm, with feathers in Fred's eyes, ears, mouth, and all over his white tie and tails. Why did they stay together? "Money and fame," Epstein opines, "are not bad reasons to bury tensions or even hide complicated feelings." And how did they fake the charming "chemistry" they seemed to exude? Stanislavsky, Epstein suggests, was mistaken: The real pros, far from diving deep into the wellsprings of emotion, actually feel nothing. Astaire "acted the part it was given him to act, and at the end of the day, like a good artisan, packed up his tools and returned home."

With no other partner - not Eleanor Powell, Jane Powell, Vera-Ellen, Judy Garland, Ann Miller, Audrey Hepburn, Betty Hutton, Barrie Chase, or Cyd Charisse - did Astaire get the snap he had with Ginger. Perhaps, Epstein suggests, Astaire was too daunting and demanding.

But even when the high-heeled hoofers dancing backward beside him were too short or too young, too distant, dramatic, sexy, or sweet, Astaire took "every dance up to the edge, teetering there, reaching beyond what seems to most the point of no return, riveting all our attention, and then landing oh so gently in the you-may-now-justifiably-applaud posture."
Epstein acknowledges that Astaire’s magic defies explanation. Ingenious and insouciant, it is never dated. Nor does it really matter that, apart from the dancing, his films are “deserts of witlessness,” pivoting on mistakes, misalliances, and malapropisms. Astaire had style - and he lived inside the music for which he did the choreography. Despite possessing a mediocre voice, he was a composer’s singer, with crystal-clear diction, at his best coaxing a pretty girl to patch things up and join him on the dance floor.

How, then, did this balletic tapster, "working in the tradition of low-grade acts like Maurice and Margo," become an American artist? Sometimes clichés come closest to the truth. Astaire married inspiration to perspiration. Blessed with natural talent, an infallible feel for rhythm and motion, he refused to quit until he polished to perfection every jot, jump, tittle, and tic. He aimed high - and reached the masses. "Do all that," Epstein concludes, "and I do believe you qualify as an icon."

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