Hollywood's ode to joy
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Sunday, May 24, 2009
5/24/2009 5:00:50 AM

Decades after its premiere, New York Times film critic Vincent Canby confessed that he had seen "Singin' in the Rain" more than half a dozen times: in first-run and last-run theaters, on a 16-millimeter projector, and in Paris with subtitles. The musical, he gushed, remains "extraordinarily exuberant, always youthful, and joyously indestructible."

Earl Hess, a professor of history at Lincoln Memorial University, and Pratibha Dabholkar, a professor of marketing at the University of Tennessee, agree that "Singin' in the Rain" is the greatest movie musical of all-time. In this well-researched book, they take readers backstage and behind the cameras, telling the inside story of the film.

The authors' prose does not dance. Their analysis is thin. But Hess and Dabholkar provide popcorn, cotton candy and an aisle seat for film buffs — and anyone interested in seeing "Singin' in the Rain" for the first time.

Some of their tidbits are trivial. In the final draft, we learn, screenwriters Betty Comden and Adolf Green changed one of the diction coach's exercises from "Charlie chooses chestnuts" to the more alliterative "Chester chooses chestnuts." For handing Kelly an umbrella at the end of his dance, the authors indicate, extra Harry "Snub" Pollard was paid $15.56.

Some of their revelations already are staples of Hollywood lore. With an untrained voice and little experience in dance, Hess and Dabholkar remind us, Debbie Reynolds started virtually from scratch. Two of her songs were dubbed by Betty Noyes, and, ironically, in a film about silent-screen stars making the transition to sound, actress Jean Hagen dubbed Debbie's voice in a scene about dubbing.

Happily, many details in "Singin' in the Rain" are delicious. "Make 'Em Laugh," the movie's homage to vaudeville, Hess and Dabholkar write, "bore a disquieting resemblance" to Cole Porter's song "Be a Clown." Because Porter was a friend of producer and lyricist Arthur Freed, they speculate, he looked the other way. The number, which ended with Donald O'Connor running up a wall, doing a backflip, crashing through plaster, and collapsing in mock exhaustion, was a tour de force.

The title song, which Freed wrote in 1927, had already been used in about a dozen movies. Kelly, the authors disclose, had the brilliant idea of dancing as well as singing a celebration of his newfound love. For comic effect, he had a puzzled policeman watch him, rattle his umbrella against a wrought-iron fence, splash through puddles, land on a lamppost, and walk away "with a decidedly Chaplinesque air."

It takes a village to make a musical. "Singin' in the Rain," Hess and Dabholkar argue, is immune to the "auteur theory," which identifies the director as the overriding creative force behind every film.

The authors acknowledge, however, that Gene Kelly, the choreographer, co-director and star, was "the leader of every group he entered." Having just completed the incomparable "An American in Paris" (1951), Kelly had reached the pinnacle of his career. "Singin' in the Rain" was surely his movie.

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Singin' in the Rain
the Making of an american Masterpiece
By Earl J. Hess and Pratibha A. Dabholkar
University Press of Kansas, $29.95

Donald O'Connor (left) and Gene Kelly appear in a dance scene from the 1952 movie musical "Singin' in the Rain." Associated Press file