

*Meet Me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944)

### **An Outline History of the Film Musical**

*Meet Me in St. Louis* appears in the middle of the Golden Age of Hollywood musicals, which had its centre at the MGM studios.

- 1927 *The Jazz Singer* (first movie with synchronized dialogue; first feature musical)
- 1929 *The Broadway Melody* (advertised as the first "All-Talking, All-Singing, All-Dancing" feature film) wins Academy Award for Best Picture
- 1930 Hollywood releases more than 100 musical films
- 1933 Busby Berkeley introduces elaborately choreographed films with kaleidoscopic patterns viewed from above
- 1935 *Top Hat*, part of a ten-year run of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals
- 1944 *Meet Me in St. Louis* produced by the Arthur Freed unit at MGM, also responsible for *Easter Parade* (1948), *On the Town* (1949), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *The Band Wagon* (1953).
- 1967 By the early 50s, popular taste had changed, but it took awhile for the message to get across. Many Broadway hits failed to make a successful transition to the screen. *Camelot*, one of a series of expensive flops in the 60s and 70s including *Finian's Rainbow*, *Hello Dolly!*, *Sweet Charity*, *Doctor Dolittle*, *Star!*, *Darling Lili*, *Paint Your Wagon*, *Song of Norway*, *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Lost Horizon* and *Mame*.
- 1991 *Beauty and the Beast*, part of Disney's "second golden age" of animated musical including *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, and *Pocahontas*

*Meet Me in St. Louis* originated in a series of twelve short stories by Sally Benson first published in *The New Yorker Magazine* and then collected into a book entitled *Meet Me in St. Louis* and released at the same time as the film.

### **What is the story about?**

*A series of vignettes, observing the conventions of the Hollywood musical, depict a father out of step with his family, a story told through music.*

### **How do you know that this is what it is about?**

#### **"A series of vignettes"**

The four sections of the film trace the seasons of 1903-1904 leading up to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis.

#### Summer 1903

- Smith family introduced, each member humming or singing sections of the title song and offering an opinion on the ketchup being made in the kitchen by Mrs. Anna Smith (Mary Astor) and the household maid, Katie (Marjorie Main).
- Esther (Judy Garland), unsuccessful at attracting the attention of neighbour John Truett (Tom Drake), sings "The Boy Next Door."
- Tootie (Margaret O'Brien) accompanies the ice-man Mr. Neely (Chill Wills) on his rounds.
- Mr. Smith (Leon Ames) arrives and presides over dinner as Rose (Lucille Bremer) waits in vain for a long-distance proposal from her boyfriend, Warren Sheffield (Robert Sully), while the family hangs on every word.
- A going-away party for Princeton-bound Lon (Henry H. Daniels, Jr.) includes an impromptu Virginia reel and a cakewalk performed by Esther and Tootie.
- As the guests depart, John accompanies Esther in turning out all the gaslights and she sings "Over the Bannister" to him.

- A group of young people sing “The Trolley Song” en route to the fairgrounds to inspect preparations for the World’s Fair, still six months off

#### Autumn 1903

- Agnes (Joan Carroll) and Tootie join the rest of the neighbourhood kids in a Halloween celebration featuring a bonfire and a flour attack by Tootie on the dreaded Mr. Braukoff
- When Tootie comes home in tears, alleging that John Truett has attacked her, Esther rushes next door to beat him up. When the truth comes out—John was hiding Tootie from the police after a prank—Esther apologizes and receives her first kiss.
- Mr. Smith’s announcement that he has been transferred to New York and that the family will move just after Christmas upsets the entire family. Loyal, Mrs. Smith accompanies him at the piano as he sings “You and I.”

#### Winter 1903

- Rose, dateless for the Christmas Ball, reluctantly agrees to go with her brother Lon. When John Truett’s tuxedo is locked in the store, Esther agrees to attend the dance with her grandfather (Harry Davenport).
- An elegant ball scene, with partners re-paired: Lucille Ballard (June Lockhart) with Lon, Rose with Warren. Eventually John arrives properly attired.
- In a moonlit scene, John proposes to Esther, their future entirely uncertain.
- Esther tries to console the distraught Tootie with a song, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” but Tootie, traumatized at the prospect of the family’s move, rushes into the backyard and destroys a family of Snow People.
- Mr. Smith, witnessing the destruction, reconsiders, then assembles the family to announce that they will not move to New York after all. Warren Sheffield arrives abruptly and blurts out a proposal to Rose.

#### Spring 2004

- The entire family, splendidly decked out, attends the opening of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, featuring a display of electric lighting at the Palace of Electricity.

#### ***“observing the conventions of the Hollywood musical”***

1. Folk Art (to bridge the gap between amateur and professional, e.g., “Skip to My Lou”)

*Skip to My Lou*—danced to the traditional folk song, achieves its fresh, unrehearsed quality by emerging imperceptibly from the natural groupings and movements at the party where it is danced. Boys and girls try out a few ‘involuntary’ steps which blend out of a moment of chaos into the dance proper. Narrative connections further naturalize the dance movements, as in the ‘lost my partner’ refrain, referring to Esther’s interest in the boy next door. *Skip to My Lou* projects a folk quality through and through. Fiddle and ukulele lend a country flavour, bowed and strummed by the party-goers in that communal effort which defines folk art. All can participate in steps which are simple, natural and easily learned. The amateur group dance adds local color to the palette of natural choreography in the Hollywood musical. The pure ‘folk’ performance represents the bottom line of audience manipulation in that performer and audience are one and the same. In the group folk dance, the choreographer is the community; in the MGM group folk dance the choreographer is Charles Walters masquerading as the community. MGM passes off the latter as the former; the choreography forces us to accept the illusion. (pp.10-11)

2. Spontaneity—the illusion of unrehearsed performance (e.g., “Under the Bamboo Tree” cakewalk)

An illusion of spontaneity ultimately serves to cancel out the place musicals occupy in the history of entertainment as mass art becomes folk art. We are never allowed to realize that musical entertainment is an industrial product and that putting on a show (or putting on a Hollywood musical) is a matter of a labor force producing a product for consumption. If we were to think about that, if we were to think at all, it wouldn't be entertainment any more.

When Judy Garland stands up to sing in MGM musicals, more likely than not she's performing on an amateur basis at a party or in a barn. "Amateur" from the Latin, lover. It is precisely the distinction between singing and dancing for the love of it, and singing and dancing for profit in a formal arena, that distinguishes the professional from the amateur entertainer. This means that all folk art is amateur entertainment. ... Amateur entertainers can't exploit us because they *are* us. In the Hollywood musical, singing and dancing may emerge from the joys of ordinary life. We accept St. Louis as a "folk" community setting—in such locales amateur forms of entertainment often employing folk motifs could emerge naturally.

[14] Perhaps the consummate example of the rhetorical gains such a situation may provide is the cakewalk number performed by Judy Garland and Margaret O'Brien in *Meet Me in St. Louis*. No matter how many times one sees the film, this performance comes across as absolutely natural and spontaneous. ... No performer in the Hollywood musical had more talent than Judy Garland, and no performer more frequently portrayed the amateur, a girl who sings for love instead of money. Judy Garland's child-like qualities were exploited in her films in order to lend an amateur feeling to all her performances. Even her vocal quality is kept within an amateur range, with a singing voice that had a sound innocent of anything that smacked of artful management.

3. The Impromptu Proscenium (e.g., the window in "The Boy Next Door" or the arch in "Under the Bamboo Tree")

In *Meet Me in St. Louis* every musical performance is either framed or placed on a stage-like platform. In *The Boy Next Door* and *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, Judy Garland is framed by windows. In the cakewalk number, she and Margaret O'Brien consciously use the arch created by the passage into the dining area as a proscenium arch. In *The Trolley Song* the moving trolley serves as a platform. Far from wanting to eliminate stages entirely, *Meet Me in St. Louis* seems to want to put stages where there are none. And in truth, whenever a number commences in any musical, the world does become a stage. [23-24]

4. The Natural Audience (the group of young people in "Under the Bamboo Tree")

Spurred on by the directorial brilliance of Vincente Minnelli and the persona of Gene Kelly, MGM musicals of the 1940s began to create "natural audiences" that would spontaneously gather around the impromptu numbers of an Astaire or a Kelly, [31] or in the case of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Judy Garland and Margaret O'Brien.

5. Nostalgia (period songs, instrumental numbers and dances, e.g., one-step and cakewalk)

Even the folk musical is full of longing for all varieties of archaic entertainment forms: the cakewalk in *Meet Me in St. Louis* ... [93] (Also the Virginia reel and the one-step at the ball) Nothing succeeds more at evoking nostalgia than the popular songs of an earlier era. [97] (Cf. Title song of *Meet Me in St. Louis*, "Goodbye My Lady Love," "Auld Lang Syne," etc)

Recycling of musical numbers: e.g., virtually all of the numbers in *Singin' in the Rain* came from earlier Hollywood musicals

Remember that *Meet Me in St. Louis* was released in 1944, during World War II. Its emphasis on family values and the simpler life of an earlier era was designed to appeal to audiences whose families would have been sundered by the war.

**“depict a father out of step with his family”**

- Father hates the title song
- Father not told reason for family wanting to eat early
- When Tootie is hurt, a doctor is summoned rather than Mr. Smith: “What good could he do?”
- Wants to move the family to New York for financial reasons when the family is more concerned with personal relationships (Grandpa, Katie, boyfriends)
- Mr. Smith is the only one to eat Katie’s Halloween cake
- Yet Mrs. Smith accompanies him in a song they have presumably sung together before

**“a story told through music”**

- The title song, passed from one character to the next, conveys the unity of the Smith family. Grandpa mistakes some of the words and has forgotten others. Mr. Smith’s interruption of the song, which he detests, sets him apart from the rest of the family.
- The use of period music ties the film to its 1904 time frame
- In the *Skip to My Lou* sequence, the phrase “lost my partner” refers to Esther’s efforts to connect with neighbour John Truett
- Mrs. Smith, accompanying her husband in the sentimental “You and I,” transposes the song down to his range, a musical indication of her loyalty
- Modern songs, from 1944, convey emotions that could not be expressed either verbally or musically in the language available in 1904: Esther’s affections for John in “The Boy Next Door” and “The Trolley Song,” deeply felt family ties in “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas”

**Songs Old and New**

Old Songs	New Songs
"Meet Me in St. Louis, Louis" 1904	"The Boy Next Door", 1944
"Skip to My Lou", Traditional	"Over the Banister" 1944
"Under the Bamboo Tree" 1902	"The Trolley Song" 1944
"Goodbye, My Lady Love" (Instrumental) 1904	"You and I" 1944
"Little Brown Jug" (Instrumental) 1869	"Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" 1944
"Down at the Old Bull and Bush" (Instrumental) 1903	
"Home! Sweet Home!" (Instrumental) 1823	
"Auld Lang Syne" (Instrumental) traditional	

**Clip 1** (5:00—Opening Credits, Meet Me in St. Louis)

- Each section of the movie opens as a vignette—notice the artificial framing
- Song passed along: Agnes sneezes and snuffles; Grandpa misses a few words; four-part harmony for the final cadence as the older children arrive home

**Clip 2** (7:00—Skip to My Lou; I Was Drunk Last Night: Under the Bamboo Tree)

- Trumpet solo framed by door; impromptu audience; trumpeter appears to struggle in final high note; Lon on mandolin that a friend tosses him in exchange for the girl’s trumpet
- Choreography disguised; ends in an “error” (girl falls down)
- Duet framed by dining room arch, serving as proscenium; bowler hats chosen from those brought by the guests; Esther gives Rose and Lon last-minute instructions on the accompaniment

- Cakewalk: Tootie’s errors in timing and gesture—this is an amateur performance

**Clip 3** (5:00—The Trolley Song)

- Young people singing “spontaneously”; Esther unable to join in until she sees John Pruett safely aboard
- Trolley as stage: note the rear projection technique
- Emotions expressible in modern song lyrics (not in period songs)

**Clip 4** (11:30—Papa’s Announcement; Wrecking Everybody’s Life; You and I)

- Framed with family members in groups, father isolated in frame (and when he enters, he’s unaware of the latest disaster involving Tootie)
- One by one they all desert him except for Mrs. Smith. No one will eat the cake; Grandpa refuses a cribbage game; Mr. Smith retreats to the living room and sulks
- Music of reconciliation: Mrs. Smith transposes song to his key, coaches him on words (discreet orchestral embellishment in the background)
- Other family members return, Grandpa sets up cribbage board; all eat cake; Esther feeds Tootie; Mr. and Mrs. Smith sing in harmony

**Clip 5** (10:00—Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas; Tears on the Snow; The Nicest Present)

- Tootie’s tears; lip-synching; framed in window
- Original lyrics made reference to soldiers; Judy Garland objected
- “We’re all going to be together; that’s what really counts.”
- Bare outline of absent pictures on wall
- Father in darkness; lights match = idea; strains of title song—almost as if Mr. Smith can hear this music, which inspires his announcement
- Family assembles in the light; Father reverts to being “out of it” as Rose’s beau appears
- Christmas presents opened against faint strains of “The First Nowell”

**Clip 6** (4:00—Right Here at the Fair)

- Costumes
- No computer-generated graphics: MGM back-lot
- Only Father knows the way to the French restaurant
- “Right here in St. Louis”

Quotations from Feuer, Jane (1982). *The Hollywood Musical*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.