

## Turning Points: 50 works that shaped the century

### Number 40: Fred Astaire in *Flying Down to Rio*



Photo Kobal

**"In a century whose art was about the triumph of the common people, he showed that vernacular dancing could be as exalting as ballet"**

HIS ordinariness was a crucial factor. The most notorious verdict on him was the anonymous scribble at a screen test: "Can't act. Can't sing. Balding. Can dance a little." But that was 1928, five years before Fred Astaire caused a revolution.

It's unthinkable to cover the biggest influences in 20th-century dance without mentioning Astaire - and yet alongside Nijinsky? Cunningham? Isadora Duncan? Did he innovate as they did? Alter posterity as they did? Yes, he did, although at first glance he might seem less radical than he was.

After all, he was only a mongrel vaudeville dancer who blended tap, ballroom and ballet without being spectacular at any of them (Ann Miller said his ballet was "the world's worst"). What made Astaire spectacular was his phenomenal musicality, and his embodiment of the transforming powers of dance. He was a mousy, skinny bloke - and his dancing made him beautiful. In a century whose art was above all about the triumph of the common people, he showed that vernacular dancing could be as exalting as ballet.

Everyone will have their favourite Astaire film, and it is unlikely to be *Flying Down to Rio*, the first movie he made with Ginger Rogers, in 1933. It is a hilariously clumsy, naive movie, and within 18 months the pair had made *The Gay Divorcé*, *Roberta* and *Top Hat*.

But *Rio* marked not just the start of the immortal partnership - it advanced the movie industry by a great leap. Astaire, says the American critic Arlene Croce, "was technically the greatest revolutionary in the history of the movie musical. He forced camerawork, cutting, synchronisation and scoring to ever higher standards of sensitivity and precision. He fought on every front, and in the cutting room he was a terror."

We must go back a little. Astaire was born in 1899 as Frederick Austerlitz, and from the age of five was dancing professionally with his older sister, the starry Adele. She was adored; her blasé younger brother was just bored.

The Twenties were a time of musical theatre, vaudeville, Charlie Chaplin and the brilliant Negro tap-dancers at the Cotton Club in Harlem. Astaire developed his suave rhythmic complexity from watching black stars such as John Bubbles; he added "ballet arms" and a creative musical responsiveness. "He sells body-motion, not tap," said the top hooper Honi Coles.

When talkie pictures began, in 1928, the coordination between sound and picture was primitive beyond belief. Dancers performed routines to a rehearsal pianist; their visuals were roughly married with an orchestral recording, with much cutting to fudge the worst eye/ear discords. Good dancers kept well away from movies.

Until Astaire. When Adele retired in 1932, her brother headed for Hollywood. His debut in *Dancing Lady* with Joan Crawford was unremarkable. But in *Flying Down to Rio* new leaves turned in all sorts of directions. The head of RKO Pictures was also a director of Pan American Airways, and they had a new air service between Miami and South America. Shamelessly, the idea was born of a film starring aviation itself, set enticingly in Miami and Rio de Janeiro, with further handy product-placements such as radiograms (a telegraph developed by RKO's associate company RCA) written in.

Astaire was not the star - the leads were the dusky Dolores del Rio and the white-blond Gene Raymond (black-and-white film loved this picture) - but he was the "entertainment", and was given unprecedented power to shoot and edit the dance numbers.

There isn't that much dance in the film - unless you count the flying finale over Rio Bay with chorus-girls tied to airplanes - but the one big number, the Carioca, is unforgettable. The key element to the Carioca step (invented by the 22-year-old dance assistant, Hermes Pan) was for couples to lock foreheads and never lose head contact, even when turning.

At the start we see a Latin couple doing a breathtakingly erotic swirl together, heads and loins fused, their hands joined high and elegant overhead, plunging towards the floor in a spiral dive like snakes in ecstasy. Then Fred and Ginger decide to join in, like eager tourists. They touch foreheads and tap out some steps. Fred, aged 34, is confident; young Ginger, only 22, looks terrified of goofing. When they go into a hold, his body curves forward over hers like a gigolo's, and she sways backwards, her hips practically fitting into his pockets. Her trust in his driving is the secret of their

fantastic speed together.

WITH hindsight you can read this two-minute duet as a fast-lane audition by Fred of the new girl. In a lovely moment, he smiles at Ginger while she's hoofing, her eyes down at his feet to see if she's doing it right. She glances up, catches his expression and grins back. It's explosive - two people suddenly realising they're bang in tune.

The mass Carioca that follows positively begs one to join in, its catchy beat matched to incredible production kitsch and extravagant action shots. Over at Goldwyn, Busby Berkeley was using cameras to make lively patterns from static girls; here Astaire and Pan showed he was cheating - they were filling the screen with real dancing, and what a difference it made.

Though much of the film comes nowhere near this level, it's hard not to feel a blast of excitement from it all. Flying, technology, travel, these all became available to everyone before long; and Astaire and Rogers are "together" in a way we comprehend. He is unromantic, nerdy, a precursor of Woody Allen; Ginger, her beautiful, reedy body swaying with him, makes him desirable. Suddenly dance isn't any more confined to heroes, princes and exotics - it's our everyday love that shines, through this pair.

There is a bitter aftertaste though. The same year that Astaire invented the movie dance-musical with *Rio*, Balanchine arrived in the US and started American ballet. Between them, they caused the death of the Negro musical theatre to which Astaire owed so much. It was a long time before black dance and dancers finally achieved their due recognition.

*Further reading: 'The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book' by Arlene Croce (W H Allen), 'Tap!' by Rusty E Frank (Da Capo Press, NY), 'Jazz Dance' by Marshall and Jean Stearns (Da Capo Press, NY), 'The Dance Handbook' by Allen Robertson and Donald Hutera (Longman). Source: Dance books (0171 836 2314 or [www.dancebooks.co.uk](http://www.dancebooks.co.uk)). Viewing: 'Flying Down to Rio' (PolyGram Video)*