



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

An American in Paris

An American in Paris

Directed by: Vincente Minnelli

©/Produced by: Loew's Incorporated

Made by: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Produced by: Arthur Freed

Screen Play by: Alan Jay Lerner

Director of Photography: Alfred Gilks

Ballet Photographed by: John Alton

Technicolor Colour Consultants: Henri Jaffa,

James Gooch

Special Effects: Warren Newcombe, Irving G. Ries

Editor: Adrienne Fazan

Montage Sequences by: Peter Ballbusch

Art Directors: Cedric Gibbons, Preston Ames

Set Decorations: Edwin B. Willis

Associate: Keogh Gleason

Gene Kelly's Paintings by: Gene Grant

Costumes Designed by: Orry-Kelly

Beaux Arts Ball Costumes Designed by:

Walter Plunkett

Ballet Costumes Designed by: Irene Sharaff

Make-up Created by: William Tuttle

Hair Styles Designed by: Sydney Guilaroff

Music by: George Gershwin

Lyrics by: Ira Gershwin

Musical Direction: Johnny Green, Saul Chaplin

Orchestrations: Conrad Salinger

Choreography by: Gene Kelly

Recording Supervisor: Douglas Shearer

Sound System: Western Electric

Cast:

Gene Kelly (*Jerry Mulligan*)

Leslie Caron (*Lise Bourvier*)

Oscar Levant (*Adam Cook*)

Georges Guetary (*Henri Baurel*)

Nina Foch (*Milo Roberts*)

uncredited

Eugene Borden (*Georges Mattieu*)

Martha Bamattre (*Mathilde Mattieu*)

Mary Young (*old woman dancer*)

Ann Codee (*Therese*)

George Davis (*François*)

Hayden Rorke (*Tommy Baldwin*)

Paul Maxey (*John McDowd*)

Dick Wessel (*Ben Macrow*)

Don Quinn, Adele Coray (*honeymoon couple*)

Lucien Plauzoles, Christian Pasques,

Anthony Mazzola (*boys with bubblegum*)

Charles Bastin (*smiling young man*)

Jeanne Lafayette, Louise Laureau (*nuns*)

Captain Garcia (*man at shutters*)

Charles T. Millsfield (*man with books*)

Louise Colombet (*woman with cats*)

Alfred Paix (*postman*)

Noel Neill (*American girl*)

Nan Boardman (*maid*)

John Eldredge (*Jack Jansen*)

Anna Q. Nilsson (*Kay Jansen*)

Albert Pollet (*man at table*)

Madge Blake (*Edna Mae Bestram, customer*)

George Dee, Albert D'Arno (*waiters*)

Art DuPuis (*driver*)

Charles Mauu (*man*)

Greg McClure (*artist*)

André Charise (*dancing partner*)

Marie Antoinette Andrews (*news vendor*)

Dorothy Tuttle (*ballet dancer*)

Benny Carter and his Orchestra

USA 1951©

113 mins

Digital

When producer Jesse L. Lasky opened the envelope that revealed the name of the 1951 Best Picture Academy Award, he could not hide his disappointment. 'Oh dear' he declared, 'the winner is *An American in Paris*'. Lasky's ungracious aside came at the end of an award ceremony in which the MGM film had been riding high, garnering a raft of Oscars in all the major technical categories: art direction, cinematography, costume, musical score and screenplay. The film's star and choreographer Gene Kelly had been singled out for an Honorary Academy Award that celebrated his career as a performer, director and choreographer, while the Irving Thalberg Award went to the legendary Louis B. Mayer for his achievements as a producer at MGM. The clean sweep was marred only by the Academy's apparent snub to Vincent Minnelli, who would have to wait another seven years to receive Best Director recognition for second Paris film *Gigi* (1958). Minnelli's omission may have been entirely within the norms for a contract director of the era – genre directors tended to be seen as helmsmen rather than talented artists in their own right – but the slight rankled: as Minnelli remarked many years later in his autobiography: 'Some erudite types point to *An American in Paris* as the perfect example of the studio-as-auteur theory. I disagree. Though I don't minimise anyone's contributions, one man was responsible for bringing it all together. That man was me.'

Lasky's shock at the outcome was perhaps less surprising than it might appear now. In the 1940s, MGM was famed for its witty, colourful musical productions, many of which had been directed by Minnelli, and the genre was the particular fort of the MGM Arthur Freed Unit, an in-house production team with deep links to Broadway theatre. The studio's reputation for quality and excellence was underpinned by two factors: vast technical resources (overseen by MGM's supervising art director Cedric Gibbons) and a roster of top stars ('more stars than there are in heaven' as the publicity boasted). But the finished product was rarely considered to amount to more than the sum of its parts. In 1952, for the first time, an integrated, story-led musical was comprehensively acclaimed as accomplished and complex, and with the success of *An American in Paris*, the critical fortunes of the Hollywood musical were definitely remade.

An American in Paris was very much a pet project for Arthur Freed and his friend and frequent collaborator Minnelli. The film was structured entirely around the music of the composer George Gershwin, who had died of a brain tumour in 1937 at the age of only 38. The title rights to Gershwin's eponymous composition were acquired by Freed from Ira Gershwin, the late composer's brother, over a weekly poker game at the latter's home; the purchase price was \$300,000, and the condition was that only music from the Gershwin back catalogue would be used in any film that would be made. In an era when successful Broadway shows were forensically mined for film adaptations, the success of the former offering a guarantee of the success of the latter, *An American in Paris*, or Production 1507, represented something of a break with MGM practice: there was no pre-existing story to work with and no insistence that George Gershwin's life be the subject of the film. Indeed, the only certainties were those dictated by the title: the setting would be in Paris and the main character would be an American who lived there.

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Age of Innocence

Mon 16 Oct 14:30; Sat 4 Nov 14:20; Mon 13 Nov 17:50; Tue 28 Nov 20:20

The Private Life of Henry VIII

Mon 16 Oct 18:20; Tue 7 Nov 20:50; Mon 27 Nov 14:40

Pandora and the Flying Dutchman

Tue 17 Oct 14:30; Sat 21 Oct 12:30; Mon 20 Nov 20:30

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Tue 17 Oct 20:25; Sun 12 Nov 12:00

Phantom Thread

Wed 18 Oct 14:30; Fri 10 Nov 10:30; Thu 23 Nov 20:30

French Cancan

Wed 18 Oct 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Wed 1 Nov 14:30; Thu 9 Nov 20:30

Blood and Sand

Thu 19 Oct 14:30; Sun 22 Oct 15:00; Wed 1 Nov 18:10 (+ intro); Sat 18 Nov 20:30

An American in Paris

Thu 19 Oct 20:50; Tue 24 Oct 20:35; Thu 23 Nov 18:00; Sun 26 Nov 11:30

Casablanca

Fri 20 Oct 20:45; Mon 30 Oct 14:30; Sat 18 Nov 11:40

The Tempest

Mon 23 Oct 20:40; Sat 18 Nov 13:00; Wed 22 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by Claire Smith, BFI National Archive Senior Curator)

Blackmail

Wed 25 Oct 18:30 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI National Archive Curator); Sun 5 Nov 12:00

Black Orpheus

Thu 26 Oct 20:35; Wed 15 Nov 18:00 (+ intro by journalist and broadcaster Kevin Le Gendre)

Wings of Desire

Der Himmel über Berlin
Fri 27 Oct 18:00; Tue 21 Nov 14:30; Sat 25 Nov 20:25

Do the Right Thing

Sat 28 Oct 20:40; Fri 17 Nov 18:10

The Queen of Spades

Sun 29 Oct 12:20; Tue 31 Oct 14:40; Wed 8 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by Josephine Botting, BFI National Archive Curator); Thu 16 Nov 20:40

Orlando

Thu 2 Nov 20:50; Fri 10 Nov 14:30; Wed 29 Nov 18:20 (+ intro by writer, curator and researcher Jenny Chamarette)

The Grand Budapest Hotel

Fri 3 Nov 20:50; Sat 11 Nov 20:40; Fri 24 Nov 18:15

La Ronde

Tue 14 Nov 20:45; Sun 19 Nov 12:00; Thu 30 Nov 18:20

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Although the film was a popular and commercial success on release (grossing over \$8 million from a budget of \$2.7 million), critical reactions to it, as hinted in Lasky's reaction, were mixed. Many felt that while it was superbly crafted, the film was more memorable for its weaknesses than its strengths: the energetic Gene Kelly tied down to a painter's easel; a patently artificial Paris populated by Gallic stereotypes; a timid leading lady who doesn't sing; and a thin, at times quite cynical plot in which 'a kept man falls in love with a kept woman'. Its 17-minute ballet finale was widely admired, but was also criticised as an opportunistic imitation of the ballet in Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes*, the British film which had dominated the American box office in 1948. Admittedly, the film offered a feast of George Gershwin's music, but this came hot on the heels of the Irving Rapper biopic *Rhapsody in Blue* (1945), and offered none of its insights – however inaccurate – into the composer's short life. The view of *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther that the film was little more than 'a minor romantic compilation in the usual gaudy Hollywood gay Paree' was typical of many reactions. But for others, its flaws notwithstanding, it stood as the apogee of the craft of musical production. Among its supporters was producer David O. Selznick, who wrote to Freed: 'My most sincere congratulations to you on *An American in Paris*. It is that rarity – a truly great film, and unquestionably the most distinguished musical ever made'.

Sherwin Kane writing in *Motion Picture Daily* was effusive: 'If any serious fault can be found with *An American in Paris* it must be that it gives the customers too much for their money. It would be embarrassing, experience would indicate, if they expected as much every time they entered a theatre. The picture is a credit to the industry as well as the people and the studio who made it. No intelligent showman can sit through its unreeling without feeling proud that he is part of the industry in which it was produced. *An American in Paris* is Entertainment with a capital E, and of the highest order.'

As Minnelli so eloquently put it in his memoirs 'just as no one sets out to make a bad picture, rarely under the studio system did anyone set out to make a classic. *An American in Paris* certainly wasn't designed as such'. The film may have begun life as just another commercial entertainment project, but what coalesced around Production 1507 was a remarkable amount of talent and creative vision in the form of skilled artists and craftspeople for whom this project was deeply personal: a director reputed to be Hollywood's most flamboyant stylist; the leading dancer-choreographer of his generation; a new screen star direct from the Paris ballet; family and friends of the late George Gershwin; musicians who had learned their craft from him; designers and technical advisors who had lived, worked and even trained in Paris. And the unparalleled creative infrastructure at Culver City, Los Angeles was entirely at their disposal: 'We had the stages, we had the tools, we had the savvy, we had the manpower, and were geared to do this kind of thing' remembers art director Preston Ames. Seymour Peck, writing in *Compass*, was bowled over by the achievement, and understood immediately the impact the film would have with audiences: '*An American in Paris* shoots the works, it is a lush, lavish, large scale, supercolossal, all out MGM lovesong to a city. Who knows, it may even put Paris on the map'.

Extracted from *An American in Paris* by Sue Harris (BFI, 2015). Reproduced by kind permission of Bloomsbury Publishing. ©Sue Harris