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by Andrew Sarris

“SHOWBOAT” (the 1935 version) and **“ROBERTA”** are being double-billed at the Theatre 80 St. Marks from August 2 to 8, and I urge anyone who has ever tried to carry a tune to see and hear these two particular peaks of the '30s musical.

I also want to put in a plug for the Theatre 80 St. Marks as a temple of musical pleasure and scholarly research for the past year. It's not the most comfortable theatre in the world, and the prints are not always of the most extraordinary quality, but it performs a service that no other theatre in the world, no not even in Paris, is performing. One of my less fond memories of the Cinematheque Francaise was a screening of “Singin' in the Rain” dubbed into French. At the Theatre 80 St. Marks, the Hollywood musical has found out not only its native habitat, but also an understanding and sympathetic audience. I am especially grateful to the Theatre 80 St. Marks for making it possible for me to fill in on a genre that has generally received short shrift in the official film histories.

“Showboat” and “Roberta” remind us that Jerome Kern, bridging as he did the gap between the Victor Herbert-Rudolph Friml-Sigmund Romberg operetta and the Rodgers-Gershwin-Porter-Berlin-Loesser-Styne-Bernstein-Schwartz musical comedy, may have been our most melodious song-writer. People who think that “Cabaret” is the last word in the musical have obviously not spent much time at the Theatre 80 St. Marks. Unfortunately, there has always been a tendency to review musicals as if their musical elements were incidental to their plots. Hence, “Cabaret” is hailed for being about Hitler instead of being

about hugging and kissing. I wouldn't even bother discussing the plots or themes of “Showboat”, and “Roberta” or of most other musicals. Nor would I argue that every musical is an unalloyed delight. Indeed, what sets “Showboat” and “Roberta” apart from most other examples of the genre is their extraordinary assemblages of authentic talent. Helen Morgan, Paul Robeson, Irene Dunne, Charles Winninger are probably the best people ever to play their particular roles in any stage or screen production of “Showboat.” It is like having for all time a record of Laurette Taylor's performance in “The Glass Menagerie” or of Oliver's Oedipus.

“Roberta” is distinguished by the emergence of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers into full stardom after their debut as a team in “Flying Down to Rio.” Later when they were full-fledged stars in their own vehicles, they seemed always to be living on borrowed time. Here they are just starting out, wisecracking their way in comic counterpoint to the more solemnly romantic Irene Dunne and Randolph Scott. I like the balance here between the sentimental (Dunne-Scott) and the sarcastic (Astaire-Rogers). Later when Astaire and Rogers have no straight leads to play off against, their sarcasm will begin to corrode the very delicate chemistry of their relationship. Still, they are wonderful to behold. Astaire, particularly, has always been un-

derrated as a singer. There is something marvelously transparent in his rendering of a song, indeed the exact opposite of what we expect from a song stylist. Astaire gives us not the singer, but the song. Rather oddly, Ginger Rogers spends too much of her time imitating Lyda Roberti (who did the part on the stage) and Irene Dunne disconcerted me at first as a Russian emigre princess singing “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” with balalaikas in the background.

But why quibble? The Hollywood musical represents one of the most ecstatic of all the seductions of image by sound in the history of the cinema. If you can resist the glorious charms of “Showboat” and “Roberta,” you have established an allergy to the genre and you should be treated immediately with the bitter pills of realism and pretentiousness.