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# THE BAND WAGON

by PETER HOGUE



Vincente Minnelli's preoccupation with show business is obvious enough. *THE ZIEGFELD FOLLIES*, *THE PIRATE*, *THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL*, *THE BAND WAGON* and *TWO WEEKS IN ANOTHER TOWN* all deal with the subject—both as straight drama and as a pretext for some good musicals. Some of these films also concern themselves with the creative process, thus providing a link with the more venerated arts in *AN AMERICAN IN PARIS* and *LUST FOR LIFE*. But of this group, *THE BAND WAGON* is especially interesting for its treatment of art and art's effect on the artist.

Scripted by two masters of the film musical, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, *THE BAND WAGON* is a sort of Pirandellian comedy in which an aging Astaire-like hooper Tony Hunter (played, of course, by Fred Astaire) tries to revive a sagging career (like Astaire's own, at the time) through a stage production written by a Comden & Green-like team, the Martons (Oscar Levant and Nanette Fabray) and directed by an actor-producer named Jeff Cordova (Jack Buchanan) who is almost as "serious" as he is "flamboyant." The show-within-a-show pairs the hooper with ballet dancer Gabrielle Girard (played by ex-ballet dancer Cyd Charisse) and the result, at all levels, is an engaging concoction which consciously affirms the value of entertainment. But while this show business platitude is handled in a way that undercuts most pretensions to high art, the film's attitude toward its own attempts at entertainment becomes quite complex over the course of its action. "That's Entertainment," a number which launches the character's artistic collaboration, tells us that "The world is a stage, and the stage is a world—of entertainment." The line clearly represents a humorous Hollywood Americanization of Shakespeare, yet its fusion of art and reality consciously divorced from "seriousness" is entirely appropriate for a film which mixes pop cultural spontaneity and fun with a very modern (and modernist) self-consciousness.

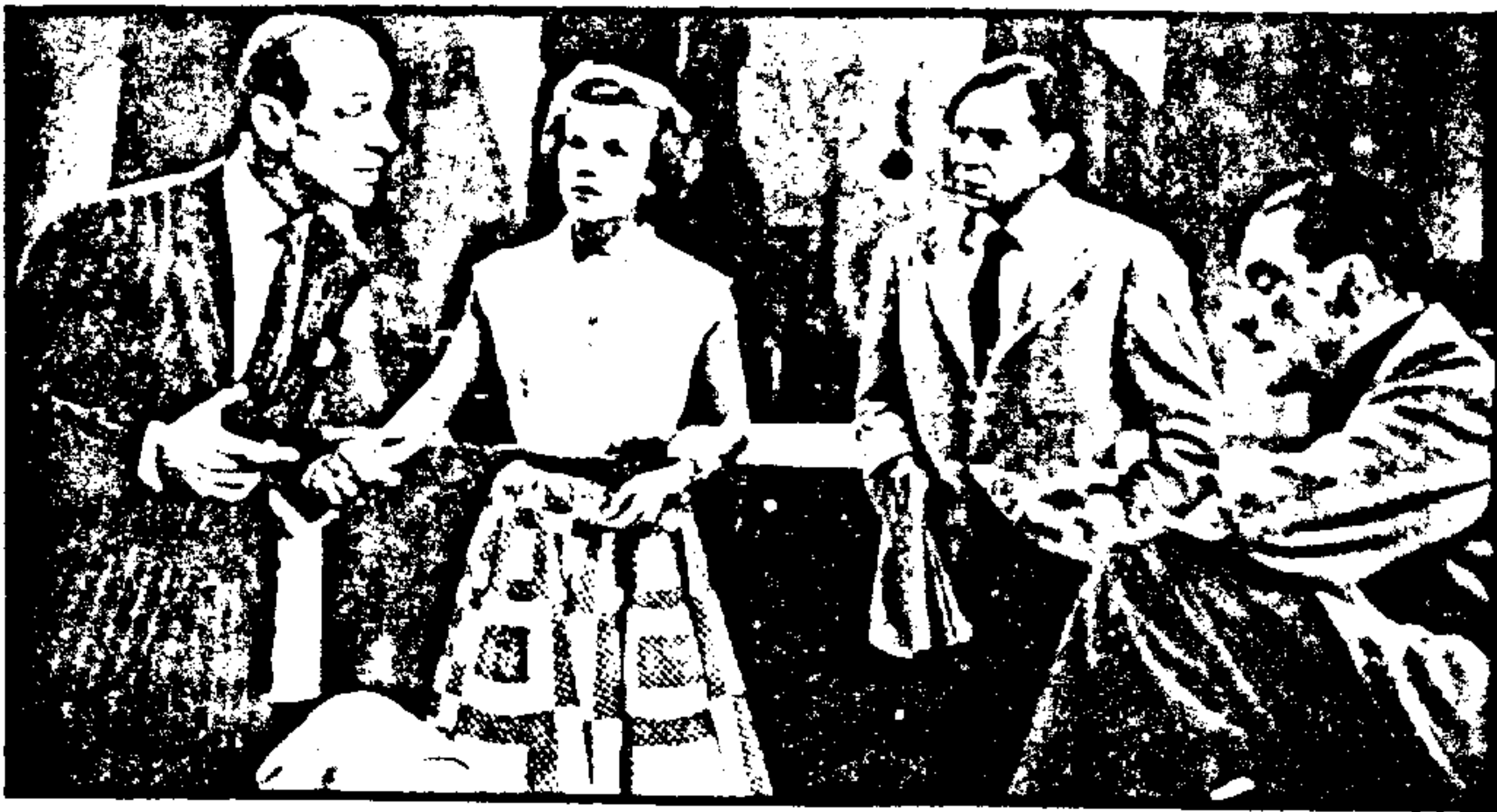
Through the character of Jeff Cordova, the film mocks intellectual theatricality. Cordova is first seen as a more-Wellesian-

than-Orson ego who takes a script of the Comden-Green sort and tries to wring a "modern Faust" out of it. He fails spectacularly with the film getting considerable comedy mileage out of his over-ambitious catastrophes, and in the end his cast takes over the production and reshapes it with an eye to "entertainment." Some of Cordova's abortive efforts suggest bad imitations of Minnelli spectacles, with their unique tone of slightly diluted "good taste" and their pyrotechnical displays of choreographed melancholy. And these hints of self-criticism and self-parody give the film a Pirandellian dimension which is more than just ironic. For if the Cordova character's mishaps draw a lesson in the primacy of "entertainment," they also serve to disguise the fundamental seriousness of "fun" in *THE BAND WAGON*.

Ultimately the collapse of Cordova's pretensions is less an assault on misplaced intellectuality than an ingenious counterweight to the film's subtle sense of its own importance. Especially through Hunter/Astaire, the film embodies an unpretentious exuberance. Yet Astaire's hooper is at once the consummate show biz pro and a deceptively casual version of the solitary modern artist. From the very first we are aware of Hunter not just as an old pro on the skids but also as an artist whose work sustains him spiritually as well as financially. At the outset, we see Hunter/Astaire as lonely man and forgotten star, no longer recognized by the public and hardly recognizing the New York to which he is returning. Though piqued by neglect, his vigor and sense of purpose are quickly renewed as his walk from the station inevitably (because of the genre) yet spontaneously (because of Astaire) elicits a song and dance. The song tells us of Hunter's determination to live in "a world of my own" and the dance reveals his inner resources for self-sustenance. In the early scenes in particular, dance is more than entertainment and more than art: it is both a catalyst for, and an expression of, the quintessential vitality which is itself the meaning of Hunter's life.

In some ways the contrast between Cordova and Hunter is





one of highbrow v. lowbrow, and of mind v. body. But *THE BAND WAGON* is much less concerned with dichotomies than with breaking down some of the distinctions between art and reality: "...the world is a stage, and the stage is a world..." Cordova is first seen in an in-progress performance of *OEDIPUS REX*, but one which Minnelli constantly juxtaposes with off-stage realities—for effects which are both funny and deflatingly ironic. With this interplay of art and everyday reality continually evoked, dance styles become central to the film's basic spirit. In the opening sequences and again in the Astaire-Charisse visit to the park, walking and dancing mingle so subtly that the two distinct kinds of action begin to partake of each other's qualities. Both times these collisions of the theatrical and the everyday come at crucial moments: first, for Hunter's self-contained renewal; then for the formation of an artistic union between the two previously unreconciled dancers. And here too, Minnelli invokes the solitary artist: Astaire and Charisse walk while surrounded by dancing couples, and dance only when finally alone. Their artistic union, meanwhile, is a catalyst for their off-stage union,

the flowering of which coincides with the opening (and flowering) of the revamped Cordova production.

This fusion of art and reality is enhanced by the film's blend of artifice and nature. There is the park that becomes a kind of theatre when the dancers dance and there is Cordova opening rehearsals with "That work light will be our sun and moon for the next four weeks." In a subtler way, Minnelli's use of color frequently evokes natural forces: when Hunter and Girard first meet, his red carnation and her green gloves complement each other and thus anticipate a relationship which neither can divine at that moment. Later they wear the same color (grey) during rehearsals and implicitly become a single unit against a backdrop of exotic color, emotional turmoil and artistic uncertainty. Girard's increasing disaffiliation from her dance-director boyfriend Paul Byrd (James Mitchell) is reflected in conflicts of colors they are wearing, while increasing artistic success is reflected in the shift from the greys v. the fiery backdrops during the rehearsal fiascoes to Girard wearing the colors of the red and yellow backdrop for the sun number in the revamped show. The color fusion of costume and backdrop implies a harmony between the human organism and the products of its artifice, and this is very much in keeping with the film's tendency to rely more on vitality than on cleverness where style is concerned. The musical numbers tend to celebrate color, form, and motion for their own sakes, and the film itself—and Astaire in particular—become expressions of a refined, self-aware *joie de vivre*.

Since *THE BAND WAGON* has little if any "realism," its fusion of art and reality is tilted in the direction of aestheticism. The fusion itself is almost pure artifice here, and that paradox leads us to Andrew Sarris' criticism of Minnelli's approach: "If he has a fatal flaw as an artist, it is his naive belief that style can invariably transcend substance and that our way of looking at the world is more important than the world itself." But with *THE BAND WAGON* the aesthete in Minnelli develops in an interesting and fruitful direction. Minnelli has spoken of the film's personal dimension, and through both the Astaire and Buchanan figures, the film begins to look a little like Minnelli's *8½*. Both characters seem suitable emblems for differing sides of Minnelli's directorial personality: graceful, spectacular in a refined way, stylish in a way that borders (sometimes deliciously) on the gratuitous, capable of seeming both "serious" and "vulgar," always a little exotic. And the chemistry of these personal dimensions finds a most effective expression in *THE BAND WAGON*. For here the style and the substance are completely in tune, giving an entire career its quintessential expression perhaps. Sarris tells us that Minnelli prefers beauty to art, but here the art and the beauty are one. The film's climactic production number, "Girl Hunt," is a blend of ballet, modern painting, film noir, and private eye satire. Though the mixture of highbrow and lowbrow leans ever so slightly toward the high, its chief appeal lies in Minnelli's way of taking entertainment—which is to say: seriously, but without deadening Cordovan pretensions. But ultimately *THE BAND WAGON* is a serious filmmaker's tribute to the popular arts, and the popular arts are celebrated precisely because of their immediacy and vitality. The film shows us that this vitality can sustain and renew the artist, and the performer in particular. At the same time, *THE BAND WAGON* does not insist on a parallel effect on the audience, though Astaire's popularity (e.g.) is probably inseparable from the energy which he communicates and to which audiences have obviously responded. But for the audience, these qualities are all the more impressive since their context is the dramatized predicament of Tony Hunter and the visible experience of Fred Astaire. Astaire's dancing skill and his ability to survive—physiologically, professionally and iconographically—make him into a convincing character and an eminently filmable legend. A good part of the film's appeal grows from just that. Above all, though, *THE BAND WAGON*'s energy has special meaning and emotion because the real and the fictional sides of Astaire include both technical skill and a sense of frailty and mortality. The film is a comedy—but a line spoken as satire ("Your cue is 'Dance, fools, dance!'" ) becomes a motto for the urgency behind its world of entertainment.

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