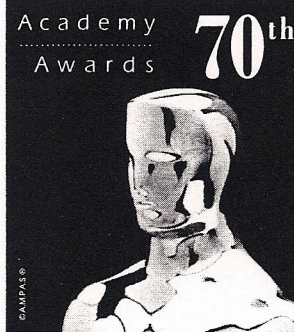


Singin' in the Frame



Choreographer turned director Stanley Donen knew how to fill the screen with elegance and style.

By Josh Chetwynd

Reviewing Stanley Donen's innovations as director, producer and choreographer, you might think he was the Thomas Edison of the Hollywood musical.

It was Donen who conceived and pulled off the scene in the 1949 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film "Royal Wedding," in which fleet-footed Fred Astaire defied gravity dancing on the walls and ceiling. Four years earlier, in "Anchors Aweigh," he co-choreographed a perfectly synchronized dancing duet between Gene Kelly and Jerry the Mouse, who was a second choice after Donen and Kelly failed to persuade Walt Disney to allow them to use Mickey Mouse.

Donen and Kelly also choreographed the "Alter Ego" number in the 1946 picture "Cover Girl," which, through a double-exposure of the negative, gave the appearance that Kelly was dancing with himself. In 1954, Donen filmed MGM's first Cinemascope picture, "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers," which included a complete musical sequence ("Lonesome Polecat") without a single cut.

And, his 1952 musical, "Singin' in the Rain," is considered by many critics to be not only one of the greatest musicals of all time, but also one of the top films ever made. A 1982 Cahiers du Cinema poll, for example, named the Kelly-Debbie Reynolds-Donald O'Connor starrer the second greatest film of all time behind Orson Welles' "Citizen Kane."

Tonight Donen will finally receive Hollywood's highest acclaim for his work



Stanley Donen (center), seen with Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly rehearsing "On the Town" (top left), directed such memorable films as (clockwise from top right) "Movie, Movie," "Royal Wedding," "Singin' in the Rain" and "Two for the Road."

when the 73 year old accepts an honorary Oscar from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Donen, who joins an impressive list of previous honorees including Kirk Douglas, Federico Fellini, Sophia Loren and Paul Newman, is being given the award "in appreciation of a body of work marked by grace, elegance, wit and visual innovation."

The road to Oscar night has been a long one for Donen, who, despite a 50-year-plus career, never received a single Oscar nomination let alone an Academy Award for his efforts on some 27 films.

It began in the 1930s in Columbia, S.C., where a 9-year-old Donen was inspired by seeing Astaire glide gracefully across the silver screen in "Flying Down to Rio." "The film wasn't even particularly good," says Donen who does not recall much else about the picture today. "But seeing him up there, I knew what I wanted to do."

After a series of chorus jobs on Broadway, the 17-year-old Donen put

enough money together to buy a ticket to Hollywood, although not with any hopes of an acting career. "I never had any desire to be a performer," he says. "I'm not about being on the screen. I like putting it on the screen."

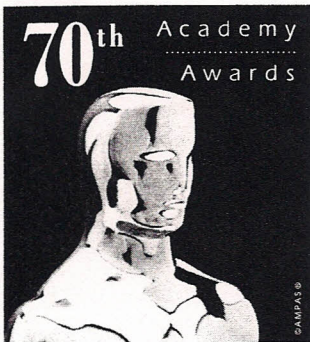
Still a teenager, Donen quickly became one of MGM's most valued choreographers and soon a director. Ironically, it was what Donen did not like more than what he did that shaped his approach to musical numbers. "I wanted [the dance numbers] to be about human beings not geometric patterns," he says. "I was going

against the Busby Berkeley style of musical numbers, but I had negative feelings toward that style."

Despite vast success in the musical genre, Donen was not satisfied merely with that form and so he diversified, bringing his elegant shooting style and use of color to a broad range of films. Coming off the success of a string of musicals including "Funny Face," with Audrey Hepburn, "The Pajama Game," starring Doris Day and "Damn Yankees," he segued into a romantic comedy in 1958 with "Indiscreet," which paired Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman in a story about an on-again, off-again affair between a rich actress and an American playboy.

He continued to branch out with "Charade," a critical and boxoffice success in 1963. The film, starring Grant and Hepburn, was a Hitchcockian thriller about a mystery man (Grant) who helps a widow (Hepburn) find her late husband's fortune.

In 1967, Donen switched gears again



Road to the Oscars

with "Two for the Road," a drama about the deterioration of a marital relationship that weaved together different vignettes during a series of trips in the South of France over a 12-year period. Hepburn and Albert Finney starred.

Although he has covered a wide array of genres, there are a number of characteristics that are apparent in every Donen film, according to writer Larry Gelbart, who scripted two Donen films — the 1977 comedy "Movie, Movie" and Donen's last feature, the 1984 romantic romp "Blame It on Rio."

"Stanley is a consummate professional who is interested in both everything that shows on the screen and doesn't show," Gelbart says. "He has an eye for elegant detail and he doesn't try to impose himself on the text — he doesn't try to make his signature larger than the picture."

The other common thread among his films has been consistent star power. Along with Donen's Kelly collaborations and his films with Grant (four times) and Hepburn (three), Donen has worked with the likes of Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor, Gregory Peck, Loren Douglas, Walter Matthau and Liza Minnelli. He even worked with his original inspiration, Astaire twice.

To Donen, there was no special strategy to enticing the stars. "It is very seductive to a (star) when a man or woman really admires you enormously and really feels that you are gifted," Donen says. "I can't fake that and I can't lie, so I let them know how I felt about their work." And now, finally, the Academy is returning the favor. □

CRITIC PICTURE ACTOR ACTRESS DIRECTOR

Nat'l Board of Review 12/9		"L.A. Confidential" Warner Bros.	 Jack Nicholson "As Good as It Gets"	 Helena Bonham Carter "The Wings of the Dove"	 Curtis Hanson "L.A. Confidential"
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New York Critics Circle 12/11		"L.A. Confidential" Warner Bros.	 Peter Fonda "Ulee's Gold"	 Julie Christie "Afterglow"	 Curtis Hanson "L.A. Confidential"
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Los Angeles Critics Assn. 12/13		"L.A. Confidential" Warner Bros.	 Robert Duvall "The Apostle"	 Helena Bonham Carter "The Wings of the Dove"	 Curtis Hanson "L.A. Confidential"
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Boston Film Critics 12/22		"L.A. Confidential" Warner Bros.	 Al Pacino "Donnie Brasco"	 Helena Bonham Carter "The Wings of the Dove"	 Curtis Hanson "L.A. Confidential"
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Society of Texas Critics 12/24		"The Sweet Hereafter" Fine Line	 Robert Duvall "The Apostle"	 Helena Bonham Carter "The Wings of the Dove"	 Atom Egoyan "The Sweet Hereafter"
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Nat'l Society of Film Critics 1/5		"L.A. Confidential" Warner Bros.	 Robert Duvall "The Apostle"	 Julie Christie "Afterglow"	 Curtis Hanson "L.A. Confidential"
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Golden Globes • DREWS • 1/18		"Titanic" Paramount	 Peter Fonda "Ulee's Gold"	 Judi Dench "Mrs. Brown"	 James Cameron "Titanic"
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• COMED • 1/18		"As Good as It Gets" Sony	 Jack Nicholson "As Good as It Gets"	 Helen Hunt "As Good as It Gets"	
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Broadcast Film Critics Assn. 1/19		"L.A. Confidential" Warner Bros.	 Jack Nicholson "As Good as It Gets"	 Helena Bonham Carter "The Wings of the Dove"	 James Cameron "Titanic"
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Chicago Critics 3/1		"L.A. Confidential" Warner Bros.	 Robert Duvall "The Apostle"	 Judi Dench "Mrs. Brown"	 Curtis Hanson "L.A. Confidential"
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SAG Awards 3/8		"The Full Monty" Fox Searchlight	 Jack Nicholson "As Good as It Gets"	 Helen Hunt "As Good as It Gets"	 James Cameron "Titanic"
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Directors Guild



James Cameron
"Titanic"

3/7

