

SINGIN' IN THE RAIN

Released: 1952

Production: Arthur Freed for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Direction: Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen

Screenplay: Adolph Green and Betty Comden; suggested by the song of the same name by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown

Cinematography: Harold Rosson

Editing: Adrienne Fazan

Choreography: Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen

Music direction: Lennie Hayton

Music: Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown

Running time: 102 minutes

Principal characters:

Don Lockwood	Gene Kelly
Cosmo Brown	Donald O'Connor
Kathy Selden	Debbie Reynolds
Lina Lamont	Jean Hagen
R. F. Simpson	Millard Mitchell
Dancer	Cyd Charisse

Often called Hollywood's most enjoyable musical, *Singin' in the Rain* is also one of the most optimistic and charming. Its appeal is due largely to its glossy, colorful look and its humorous view of a Hollywood in transition from silents to talkies. It was produced by the Freed Unit, which was responsible for M-G-M's best musicals of the 1940's and 1950's, such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *An American in Paris* (1951), and *The Band Wagon* (1953). Arthur Freed, head of the unit, was a former lyricist who had written many songs with Nacio Herb Brown and had become a producer at M-G-M in the late 1930's. He asked scriptwriters Betty Comden and Adolph Green to write a script that would use songs he had written with Brown. Realizing that most of the songs had been composed during the early sound phase of films, 1927-1931, they were inspired to set their story during this period, a time they both knew and loved.

The film opens with an exciting 1927 premiere at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood of the latest film of Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) and Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen). When Don and Lina arrive at the premiere, a famous gossip columnist, supposedly modeled on Louella Parsons, asks Don to comment on his success. Wearing a white polo coat and a white felt hat, Don recounts with a toothy grin his version of his rise to stardom as we see on the screen what actually happened. He assures his fans that he was educated at the finest schools, but we see him tap dancing in pool halls; he claims he received his musical training at a Conservatory, but we see him performing in a burlesque house with his friend, Cosmo Brown (Donald O'Connor).

Lina has always encouraged him, he says, but we see her snubbing him until his stunt work attracts the attention of the director and he becomes her costar. Significantly, Don does all the talking for the pair, and later we learn why. Lina's speaking voice is shrill and her accent uncouth, a handicap that destroyed the careers of many stars when talkies arrived.

On his way to a party after the film's premiere, Don is attacked by autograph seekers and is forced to escape by jumping into a car driven by Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds), an aspiring actress. She discourages Don's advances by saying she has not seen his films and does not think silent film stars really act. At the party, which is given by R. F. Simpson (Millard Mitchell), the head of the studio, there are two surprises for Don. First, Simpson shows a short demonstration of a talking picture. The guests are surprised, but they refuse to take it seriously. Then a huge cake is rolled into the room and out of it pops Kathy Selden, who is soon joined by a group of chorus girls performing the song "All I Do Is Dream of You." Don teases Kathy until finally, stung by his gibes, she throws a cake at him, but misses and hits Lina instead. Flustered, Kathy runs away although Don tries to stop her.

Sound pictures become more than a joke for a party when Warner Bros. makes a full-length sound picture, *The Jazz Singer*, and it becomes a huge success. Simpson stops the production of Don and Lina's current film, *The Dueling Cavalier*, in order to convert it to a sound film. Worried about Kathy Selden, whom he has not seen since the party, and worried about the impact of sound on his career, Don goes to the studio with his friend Cosmo. As they walk by movie sets, we catch glimpses of films in various stages of production—Westerns, comedies, costume dramas—all existing side by side in the same building. This brief look at the world of silent films and how they were made adds much to the charm of *Singin' in the Rain*. To cheer Don up, Cosmo does a cheerful, wacky song "Make 'Em Laugh," in which, among other antics, he falls down, runs into a brick wall, and falls off a couch.

Next, a montage of excerpts from musicals currently in production at the studio leads into a musical fashion show. This number serves as an excuse for a colorful display of 1920's fashions, and closes with an overhead shot of the chorus girls surrounding the male commentator in a kaleidoscopic pattern in the manner of Busby Berkeley. When Cosmo points out to Don that one of the girls in the show is Kathy Selden, he is delighted. After getting her a minor film role, Don then wins her love by singing to her "You Were Meant for Me," using a wind machine and dramatic lighting to create a romantic atmosphere on an empty sound stage.

By now everyone at the studio is taking diction lessons, including Don and Lina. Lina is not coping well with sound, but Don and Cosmo prove how well they have mastered their lessons by doing a novelty number for their diction coach, "Moses Supposes."

The production of *The Dueling Cavalier* as a sound film provides some

funny scenes, faithfully researched to give the proper look. The booth that houses the camera, the design and placement of the microphones, even the gate and sign "Monumental Pictures," are all based on photographs and designs of the period. The film tries, in fact, to duplicate M-G-M as it looked in 1927. These scenes contain some of the best comedy in the film. In order to pick up Lina's voice, the microphone is placed first in a bush, and finally in the bosom of Lina's low-cut gown. There, however, it also picks up Lina's heartbeat. Finally, the microphone is hidden in a corsage on her shoulder, but Simpson, visiting the set, trips over the cord and tips Lina head over heels. After many such problems, the film is finished; but at its preview the audience laughs at Lina's shrill, ungentle voice, the uneven sound, and terrible synchronization. It looks as if Don and Lina's careers may be ended.

During an all-night talk session at Don's house, however, Don, Cosmo, and Kathy try to cheer one another up. Finally, Cosmo has the idea of turning the film into a musical, with Kathy, who has a lovely singing and speaking voice, dubbing Lina's voice. Their relief and joy is evident as they sing "Good Mornin'," dancing on the furniture and around the house. Don then takes Kathy home; and after he leaves her, he expresses his happiness in the song "Singin' in the Rain." As a musical, the film, now called *The Dancing Cavalier*, is a great success. At the premiere the audience, especially impressed by Lina's singing, begs her to perform a number on stage for them. Lina prepares to mouth the words while Kathy sings behind a curtain, but Don, Simpson, and Cosmo pull up the curtain hiding Kathy to reveal the deception to the audience. Lina is laughed off the stage, and Don and Kathy have their happy ending.

Two of the musical numbers must be singled out for special comment: the title song, "Singin' in the Rain," and the film's big production number, "Broadway Rhythm." Many believe Kelly's solo dance on a rainy street with an umbrella represents some of his best work; it is a spontaneous expression of happiness. After kissing Kathy Selden good night, he walks along the street in the rain, singing. He is so happy that he lets water from a drain pipe splash on his upturned face, kicks up water with his feet, and splashes in puddles like a child. When a policeman finally walks over to see what he is doing, he reacts guiltily, then walks off defiantly, waving good-bye to the policeman. It is one of Kelly's most successful pieces of choreography, largely because it is unpretentious and unaffected. Unfortunately, the number's impact is lessened because it is not built up to with enough care to support all the exhilaration it expresses. Don and Kathy have already fallen in love, and he has already told her so in song ("You Were Meant for Me").

"Broadway Rhythm" is led up to by the simple device of having Don Lockwood first explain his idea for a big musical number to Simpson, and then we see the number he describes, which has no direct relation to the plot. Lockwood is a naïve, eager young dancer who arrives on Broadway with

glasses and a suitcase, looking for a break. He is rejected by several agents before being taken to a speakeasy where he lands a job. In an extraordinary scene Kelly and the audience suddenly see a woman's long shapely leg extended into the frame with Kelly's hat on the end of her foot. His eyes and the camera follow the shapely leg to the shapely figure of a dancer (Cyd Charisse). Leaving her silver-dollar-flipping gangster boyfriend, she flirts with Kelly, shaking her hips and blowing cigarette smoke into his face. Finally, she removes his steamy glasses, wipes them on her thigh, and kicks away both the hat and the glasses. When he tries to retrieve them, she puts her long cigarette holder in his mouth. They dance closely and sensuously, and she starts to kiss him but is lured away by the sight of a diamond bracelet in the hand of her gangster boyfriend. Later, the young dancer becomes a star, meets the beautiful girl again, and in his imagination sees himself dancing with her in a romantic setting, but in reality she spurns him again. After the number, Don asks Simpson what he thinks of the idea. "I can't quite visualize it," he responds. "I'll have to see it on film first." Like the rest of *Singin' in the Rain*, the ballet was inspired by the 1920's. The gangster boyfriend is a parody of the roles often played by George Raft, and Cyd Charisse is made up to look like Louise Brooks, a star of silent films.

Besides Gene Kelly's dance in the rain and Cyd Charisse's seductive dance in "Broadway Rhythm," another joy of the film is Jean Hagen's memorable comic performance as Lina Lamont. Comden and Green had Judy Holliday in mind when they created the character, and Hagen was instructed to act similar to Holliday portraying Billie Dawn in *Born Yesterday* (1950). Her characterization, from shrill voice to simpering mannerisms, is both funny and appealing.

Ideal in the leading role are Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, and Debbie Reynolds. All are exuberant, vivacious, and irrepresible, and work well together. As Don Lockwood, Kelly, who also collaborated in the direction and choreography, has several opportunities to show off his dancing style at its best—athletic and unpretentious. As Cosmo Brown, whose irreverent remarks and clever ideas provide not only a comic background but also solutions to the other characters' dilemmas, O'Connor demonstrates his abilities as a comedian and as a dancer, especially in the "Make 'Em Laugh" number; and Debbie Reynolds is a fresh and engaging Kathy Selden.

In *Singin' in the Rain* the dramatic and comic elements are as entertaining and as inventive as the musical ones, so there is no slackening of energy after a musical number. All the parts are expertly woven together under the direction of Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly. Certainly the clever, humorous script, the careful attention to detail and lavish production values, and the cheerful songs of Freed and Brown all contribute to the enduring popularity of this fine musical.

Julia Johnson