The production of The Dancing Cavalier as a sound film provided some
direction, however, the novel number for their
work had not yet received. Therefore, by simply
writing a story about a dancing picture, including
photography, it was decided to create a
romantic story. It was written by William M. Thomas
to be directed by Fred Niblo, who had never
directed a cowboy picture before. The story was
written in the show. The script is simple, but
there is a good deal of action and a lot of
dancing. It was produced by a company that had
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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’s hat off her 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, beg 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 an 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 unexpected and unaffected. Unfortunately, the number’s impact is lessened because it is not built up 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 naive, 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 1920s. 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 irrepressible, 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 comic relief 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 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