Mark Sandrich (26 October 1901, New York City, New York, USA—4 March 1945, Hollywood, California, USA, heart disease) Blue Skies (1946), So Proudly We Hail! (1943), Holiday Inn (1942), Buck Benny Rides Again (1940), Shall We Dance (1937), A Woman Rebels (1936), Follow the Fleet (1936), Top Hat (1935), Everything’s Ducky (1934), The Gay Divorcee (1934), Cockeyed Cavaliers (1934), Hips, Hips, Hooray! (1934), Aggie Appleby Maker of Men (1933), The Druggist’s Dilemma (1933), Hokus Focus (1933), Private Wives (1933), Thru Thin and Thicket; or, Who’s Zoo in Africa (1933), The Iceman’s Ball (1932), Strife of the Party (1931), False Roomers (1931), The Wife o’ Riley (1931), Moonlight and Monkey Business (1930), General Ginsberg (1930), Gunboat Ginsberg (1930), Two Gun Ginsberg (1929), Runaway Girls (1928), Hello Sailor (1927), Monty of the Mounted (1927), Brave Cowards (1927), A Midsummer Night’s Steam (1927), Big Business (1926), Napoleon, Jr. (1926).

Irving Berlin (Israel Isidore Baline. Mogliev, Belarus, Russian Empire, May 11, 1888 – September 22, 1989). From Wikipedia: American composer and lyricist widely considered one of the greatest songwriters in history. His father, a Jewish cantor at the synagogue, had to uproot the family when he was five because of Russia's pogroms which destroyed their village. They settled in New York City's Lower East Side in 1893, but a few years later, when he was eight years old, his father died suddenly, requiring that he quit school and sell newspapers to help support the family. When he turned fourteen, he left home and began living on the streets of the Bowery. After a few years of doing odd jobs, he found work as a singing waiter in saloons, deriving most of his income from tips. He taught himself to play piano by picking out tunes in the back after the bars closed for the night. While working, he would sometimes sing patriotic songs to the patrons—his Irish boss calling him a "Yiddishe Yankee Doodle!"

His talent was first noticed by an employee of a New York music publisher who often visited the saloon, later telling his boss, "I have discovered a great kid." By the time he turned twenty he was hired as a staff lyricist with the Ted Snyder Company. From this early position he began a "meteoric rise as a songwriter" in Tin Pan Alley and then on Broadway, with his first world-famous hit song, "Alexander's Ragtime Band", in 1911. The song sparked an international dance craze in places as far away as Russia, which also "flung itself into the ragtime beat with an abandon bordering on mania." As his music developed over the years, he made every effort to write lyrics in the American vernacular: uncomplicated, simple and direct, with his stated ambition being to "reach the heart of the average American", whom he saw as the "real soul of the country."
In his early years he wrote hundreds of songs, many of which became major hits, making him "a legend" before he turned thirty. During his 60-year career he wrote an estimated 1,500 songs, including the scores for 19 Broadway shows and 18 Hollywood films, with his songs nominated eight times for Academy Awards. Besides "Alexander's Ragtime Band", he wrote songs like "Cheek to Cheek", "Blue Skies", and "Puttin' On The Ritz". Some of his songs have become popular themes and anthems, such as "Easter Parade", "White Christmas", "Happy Holiday", "This is the Army, Mr. Jones", and "There's No Business Like Show Business". In 1917, after being drafted by the army to write patriotic songs during World War I, he composed an all-soldier musical revue as a patriotic tribute to the army. Twenty-five years later, during World War II, it was remade into a hit Broadway musical and film, This is the Army. It co-starred Ronald Reagan and had Kate Smith again singing Berlin's "God Bless America", which had already become the unofficial national anthem after she first sang it on the radio in 1938. After 9-11, it again became the #1 song after Celine Dion recorded it as a tribute.

Berlin's songs have reached the top of the charts 25 times and been re-recorded countless times by singers including Frank Sinatra, Barbara Streisand, Linda Ronstadt, Rosemary Clooney, Diana Ross, Bing Crosby, Al Jolson, Nat King Cole, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald. Composer Douglas Moore sets Berlin apart from all other contemporary songwriters, and includes him instead with Stephen Foster, Walt Whitman, and Carl Sandburg, as a "great American minstrel" – someone who has "caught and immortalized in his songs what we say, what we think and what we believe." Composer George Gershwin called him "the greatest songwriter that has ever lived", and composer Jerome Kern concluded that "Irving Berlin has no place in American music - he is American music."

Fred Astaire (10 May 1899, Omaha, Nebraska, USA-- 22 June 1987, Los Angeles, California, USA, pneumonia) The Man in the Santa Claus Suit (1979), "Battlestar Galactica" (1 episode, 1979), The Amazing Doberman (1976, Top Hat—2

Sandrich—TOP HAT—2

Erik Rhodes (10 February 1906, El Reno, Indian Territory, USA. [now Oklahoma, USA]—17 February 1990, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA, pneumonia) "The Adams Chronicles" (1976) (unknown episodes), "Naked City" (1 episode, 1961), "Perry Mason" (1 episode, 1961), On Your Toes (1939), It in French (1938), Mr. Moto (1938), Meet the Girls (1938), Fight for Your Lady (1937), Music for Madame (1937), Woman Chases Man (1937), Criminal Lawyer (1937), Smartest Girl in Town (1936), Wife (1936), Two in the Dark (1936), Top Hat (1935), Old Man Rhythm (1935), The Nitwits (1935), A Night at the Ritz/ King of the Ritz (1935), Charlie Chan in Paris (1935), The Gay Divorcee (1934), Give Her a Ring (1934).

Eric Blore (23 December 1887, London, England, UK—2 March 1959, Hollywood, California, USA, heart attack) Bovary to Bagdad (1955), Fancy Pants (1950), Happy (1949), The Wind in the Willows (1949), The Lone Wolf in London (1947), Winter Wonderland (1947), The Lone Wolf in Mexico (1947), Abie's Irish Rose (1946), The Notorious Lone Wolf (1946), Men in Her Diary (1945), Easy to Look at (1945), I Was a Criminal (1945), Passport to Suez (1943), Submarine Base (1943), The Sky's the Limit (1943), Forever and a Day (1943), Sullivan's Travels (1941), Three Girls About Town (1941), Lady Scarface (1941), The Lone Wolf Takes a Chance (1941), The Lady Eve (1941), The Lone Wolf Keeps a Date (1940), South of Suez (1940), The Boys from Syracuse (1940), The Lone Wolf Meets a Lady (1940), Til We Meet Again (1940), The Lone Wolf Strikes (1940), A Gentleman's Gentleman (1939), Shall We Dance (1937), Swing Time (1936), Seven Keys to Baldpate (1935), Diamond Jim (1935), Top Hat (1935), Old Man Rhythm (1935), Folies Bergère de Paris (1935), The Gay Divorcee (1934), Flying Down to Rio (1933), The Great Gatsby (1926), Night Out and a Day In (1920).

Helen Broderick (11 August 1891, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA—25 September 1959, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, California, USA, natural causes) Because of Him (1946), Honor and Goodbye (1945), Three Is a Family (1944), Father Takes a Wife (1941), No, No, Nanette (1940), The Captain Is a Lady (1940), Naughty But Nice (1939), The Road to Reno (1938), Rage of Paris (1938), Smartest Girl in Town (1936), Swing Time (1936), Love on a Bet (1936), Top Hat (1935), Cold Turkey (1931), 50 Million Frenchmen (1931), Nile Green (1930).

David Abel (15 December 1884, Amsterdam, Noord-Holland, Netherlands—12 November 1973, Los Angeles, California, USA) Holiday Inn (1942), Shall We Dance (1937), Criminal Lawyer (1937), Follow the Fleet (1936), I Dream Too Much (1935), Top Hat (1935), The Case of the Curious Bride (1935), A Notorious Gentleman (1935), Gay Divorcee (1934), Cockeyed Cavaliers (1934), This Man Is Mine (1934), Hips, Hips, Hooray! (1934), Pick-up (1933), The Crime of the Century (1933), Madame Butterfly (1932), Ladies of the Big House (1931), Huckleberry Finn (1931), The Santa Fe Trail (1930), The Grand Parade (1930), Tenth Avenue (1928), Midnight Madness (1928), Stand and Deliver (1928), The Forbidden Woman (1927), The First Auto (1927), What Every Girl Should Know (1927), His Jazz Bride (1926), The Dark Swan (1924), The Lover of Camille (1924), Babbitt (1924), Beau Brummel (1924), The Primitive Lover (1922), Rip Van Winkle (1921), The Way of a Woman (1919), The Hun Within (1918), Thais (1917/1), The Heiress at Coffee Dan's (1916), Youth's Endearing Charm (1916).

Mark Sandrich, by Audrey Kupferberg on Film Reference:
The signature of Mark Sandrich is blurred. With a string of significant features to his credit, it would seem that a few books on Sandrich should have been published. Yet there have been no career evaluations of this director/producer. The reason is two-fold. First of all, Sandrich's efforts are upstaged by the star power in his films. Secondly, Sandrich died in early middle age in 1945, cutting short his screen legacy at a time when the major studio factory system was beginning to be derailed and director/producers of his caliber were just starting to assert their position as auteurs within an about-to-be newly designed Hollywood.

With few exceptions, Sandrich's most important films are comedies featuring legendary performers in legendary performances. The best known are the several Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers musicals that he made at RKO. No matter how often these films are packaged, they never are tagged "Mark Sandrich films." Instead, they are the Astaire-Rogers musicals. Even so, it is Sandrich's contribution that allowed for the creation of Astaire-
Rogers as one of the 1930's most popular and exciting screen teams. Sandrich employed his extensive experience in screen comedy to mold a bland-looking Fred Astaire from a stage dancer/singer into a lively and charming screen presence.

Directing dozens of silent and early sound comedy shorts gave Sandrich an expert's viewpoint on presenting screen comedy. With his sharpened eye, he determined how best to complement Astaire's rather stogy manner and distant formality with the more free-flowing, vivacious Rogers. The results were dynamic. When The Gay Divorcee was being made, Rogers had more screen experience than Astaire. She acts more loosely for the camera than Astaire, whose theatrical gestures and reactions are a bit heavily-handed for films. Realizing this, Sandrich adjusts the placement of the camera to accommodate each of his actors. The film unfolds with a series of brief comedy sequences involving Astaire, Rogers, and a number of character actors. When Sandrich films Astaire, he does so in a series of quick takes, and he does not bring the camera in for a close shot. When Astaire and Rogers "meet cute" over a large trunk in which Rogers' dress is caught, Sandrich moves in for a couple close shots of Rogers reacting to the situation, but he keeps Astaire at a distance. By recognizing the comfort zone of his stars, he brings out the most effective performance for each.

Sandrich seems to savor the comedy scenes in his films. His attention to camera placement and fast-paced editing result in efficient comedy sequences that bring quick laughs and prevent overly long reaction shots. *Hips, Hips, Hooray* and *Cockeyed Cavaliers*, both of which star the zany comedy duo of Wheeler and Woolsey, offer examples of this technique. *Buck Benny Rides Again* and *Love Thy Neighbor*, offbeat comedies featuring Jack Benny and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, work because Sandrich is sensitive to Benny's precise comic timing, as well as the humorous styles of other popular radio comedians who make appearances in the film.

Sandrich produced as well as directed his films from 1940 until his death. Taking a break from comedy, he made an outstanding World War II patriotic melodrama of brave nurses caring for fighting men in the Pacific. In *So Proudly We Hail!*, Sandrich emphasized accuracy and brought in several experienced combat nurses to document details of their experience. That authentication was particularly important to audiences since the film was in production when the war was in progress. This project, plus a follow-up called *I Love a Soldier*, a drama about wartime marriage which re-teams several of the *So Proudly We Hail!* stars, demonstrates Sandrich's willingness to expand his cinematic repertoire, and make films that are serious as well as escapist.

Because of Sandrich's sudden death, one only can speculate whether he would have further developed his talents during the postwar era, perhaps in a manner similar to director George Stevens, whose early career parallels Sandrich's.

Between 1933 and 1939, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers appeared in nine films for RKO, beginning with *Flying Down to Rio* and ending with *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle*. The fourth of these, *Top Hat*, epitomizes their legendary elegance, charm, sophistication and dancing style. Indeed, if one film is more associated with their names than any of the others, and if one film crystallizes their screen personalities, it is *Top Hat*, the most popular and arguably the best. The film has achieved the status of a classic and has endured as one of the great dance musicals.

The film continues the mood and tone of the previous Astaire-Rogers musicals with its spontaneity, smooth integration of the musical numbers into the plot, and use of the songs and dances to deepen and enhance the emotions and moods expressed in the story. In a typical Astaire-Rogers musical, the two usually play strangers who meet by accident. Astaire almost always falls in love with Rogers immediately, but she is antagonistic to him or annoyed by his advances and tries to escape or evade him until finally, persuaded by a romantic dance number, she succumbs. In their films the dances communicate the romantic interludes depicted in the stories surrounding them, revealing the nuances of the characters’ relationship more dramatically than words. Through the dances the audience can identify the moods of the characters played by Astaire and Rogers and the depth of their involvement with each other.

*Top Hat* opens with the credits superimposed over a top hat which turns out to belong to a gentleman about to enter the Thackery Club in London. The quiet, hushed atmosphere is so profound that the crackle of a newspaper disturbs the elderly members. The noisy newspaper belongs to the American dancer, Jerry Travers (Fred Astaire), who is waiting for his friend, Horace Hardwick (Edward Everett Horton), the producer of his London stage show. Before leaving the club with Horace, Jerry turns and delivers a staccato burst of taps that awakens all the members.

…

Irving Berlin reportedly regards his score for *Top Hat* as the best he has ever written. He attended all script conferences for the film with the result that the songs develop specific plot points or illuminate the characters’ feelings. Indeed, the songs are such an integral part of the film that none of them except "Piccolino" could be eliminated without substituting dialogue scenes in their place.

The thoughtfully conceived and beautifully executed dances in the film give resonance and meaning to the slender plot surrounding them, not only dramatizing the characters’ moods and the depth of their involvement with each other, but also developing the story line and giving the film added momentum. Although he did not receive screen credit for choreographing or directing his dance numbers, Astaire was largely responsible for them and the way they were filmed. He disliked the idea of using reaction shots (showing other people watching the dancers), unusual camera angles, or close-ups showing only the head or the feet of the dancer. His method was to film a dance straight through, keeping the full length of the dancer in the camera frame and the flow of the dance intact. He felt that in any dance, even tap, the movement of the upper part of the body was as important as the feet. Always trying to keep the audience from being aware of the camera, Astaire placed it at eye level and seldom changed angles. Thus, the flow of the dance was never interrupted, and, since film presents the dance from the ideal perspective, the audience can follow intricate steps that would be lost on a theater stage. It was not only with the camera that Astaire concerned himself, however. He also
supervised every stage of the development of a dance number from the orchestration through the final recording and editing of the sound and picture for it.

“No Strings” both defines the character played by Fred Astaire—exuberant, footloose, fancy free, ready for romance—and provided the mechanism for his meeting with the character played by Ginger Rogers. (She is awakened by his dancing and goes to his room to complain.) The dance in the rain to “Isn’t This a Lovely Day?” is the crucial one in the development of their relationship. She is cold and distant, determined to maintain her haughty reserve. He breachess her defenses by first singing to her, then by shrewdly challenging her to join him in an increasingly joyous and complicated tap duet. She cannot resist the challenge and not only copies him but also varies his steps with original twists of her own. It is the dance equivalent of an argumentative, increasingly flirtatious conversation. At first the movements are tentative as the two test each other, but they pick up speed and intensity until the two whirl each other around in an enthusiastic embrace, no longer trying to hide or to contain their feelings. Their acquaintance, courtship, and romance is vividly dramatized in this one brief dance, the kinetic equivalent of several dialogue scenes.

In “Cheek to Cheek” the lyrics express Jerry’s joy at dancing with Dale again, and their dance displays their emotional harmony and perfect teamwork. It is only afterwards that reality and common sense reassert themselves as Dale remembers that Jerry is, as she mistakenly believes, married to her best friend Madge.

The songs and dances in the film are supported by the able comic performances of Erik Rhodes as ineffectual Alberto Beddini, Eric Blore as the stately valet Bates, Edward Everett Horton as fussy Horace Hardwick, and Helen Broderick as the sardonic Madge Hardwick. Their adroit handling of comic lines and scenes adds to the fun of Top Hat.

Top Hat has a special quality which goes beyond the excellence of the dancing, singing, and acting. It lies in the affinity of the screen personalities of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Neither technical proficiency nor talent alone is enough for a film performer to reach audiences successfully. In both Astaire and Rogers we find not only a talent but also a distinctive screen presence. Together they create a style and a mood which is still remembered and, many would say, unequalled.


There is more energy, more originality, more excitement, more art, in American kitsch like Gunga Din, Easy Living, the Rogers and Astaire pictures like Swingtime and Top Hat, in Strangers on a Train, His Girl Friday, The Crimson Pirate, Citizen Kane, The Lady Eve, To Have and Have Not, The African Queen, Singin’ in the Rain, Sweet Smell of Success, or, more recently, The Hustler, Lolita, The Manchurian Candidate, Hud, Charade, than in the presumed “High Culture” of Hiroshima Mon Amour, Marienbad, La Notte, The Eclipse, and the Torre Nilsson pictures. As Nabokov remarked, “Nothing is more invigorating than Philistine vulgarity.” ... People go to the movies for the various ways they express the experiences of our lives, and as a means of avoiding and postponing the pressures we feel. This latter function of art—generally referred to disparagingly as escapism—may also be considered as refreshment, and in terms of modern big city life and small town boredom, it may be a major factor in keeping us sane.

Astaire/Rogers film collaborations:

Flying Down to Rio (1933), with Astaire/Rogers not in the lead roles, but billed after Dolores del Rio, Gene Raymond, and Raul Roulien
The Gay Divorcee (1934)
Roberta (1935)
Top Hat (1935)
Follow the Fleet (1936)
Swing Time (1936)
Shall We Dance (1937)
Carefree (1938)
The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle (1939)
The Barkleys of Broadway (1949)

Letter to the NY Times 8/23/2009 from Richard Orlando, Montreal

Rogers once said that what she and Astaire gave to future generations was a gift. And indeed it is: the gift of transcendence over troubled times, strife and anxiety. They offer us an escape into the world of glamour, romance and humor.
**COMING UP IN BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XIX:**

- **Sept 8** Raoul Walsh *High Sierra* 1941
- **Sept 15** Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger *Black Narcissus* 1947
- **Sept 22** Jules Dassin *Du rififi chez les hommes/Rififi* 1955
- **Sept 29** Kenji Misoguchi *Akasen chūtai/Street of Shame* 1956
- **Oct 6** Richard Brooks *Elmer Gantry* 1960
- **Oct 13** Roman Polanski *Nóż w wodzie/Knife in the Water* 1962
- **Oct 20** Stanley Kubrick *Lolita* 1962
- **Oct 27** Carl Theodor Dreyer *Gertrud* 1964
- **Nov 3** Eric Rohmer *Ma nuit chez Maud/My Night at Maude’s* 1969
- **Nov 10** Andrei Tarkovsky *Solaris* 1972
- **Nov 17** Arthur Penn *Night Moves* 1975
- **Nov 24** Abbas Kiarostami *Nema-ye Nazdik/Close Up* 1990
- **Dec 1** Bela Tarr *Werckmeister harmoniák/Werckmeister Harmonies* 2000
- **Dec 8** Mike Leigh *Topsy-Turvy* 1999

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