"The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there."—L. P. HARTLEY

THE MAGIC FACTORY

How MGM Made An American in Paris

DONALD KNOX III

Foreword by Andrew Sarris

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emotionally; but, number two, his eye, his experience, is just invaluable. Nobody does a musical alone. Nobody! Minnelli's eye for color is the great thing. I don't think you can find a better costume designer in the world than Irene Sharaff, but, when you get all the choreography done and get everybody down on the stage floor, you can always find that Minnelli will have some way to adjust the color so that we'll have a better composition, a better look. In the ballet, for example, when he came out of doing *Father's Little Dividend*, which just took him six weeks in all, the whole ballet was planned and staged. It was all ready. All we had to do was say, "Roll 'em." But Vincente was able to polish it even more.

One setting in the ballet, the Toulouse-Lautrec café scene, with various characters here and there, is a good indication of what he could do.

We both came out of the school of John Murray Anderson on Broadway; he was sort of our mentor. He knew what to do with color and light. He was a great man of the theater, and Minnelli and I had worked under him. He was just great! Anderson could put a blue light on a scene and make the scene work where it wouldn't work with an amber or pink light. Like Minnelli, he was not a dance director. He just had this kind of an eye. Anyway, I remember, in the Toulouse-Lautrec scene Minnelli said, "Let's switch these two people around," and he switched them. He put the chap who's in blue down front, I remember very well, moved him down front and moved somebody else about 5 feet in back, and it was suddenly much better than Irene and I had visualized it.

Arthur Freed (Producer):

Then we just did it. We shot the ballet in a couple of weeks, without a flaw. You've got to prepare; then it's easy.

Preston Ames:

Arthur Freed was purring like a Cheshire cat because now this thing which he had always wanted to do had come to life. It had happened.

7

Postproduction

Gene Kelly (Actor and Choreographer):

People in the business thought we were crazy. They heard about the ballet—you know, seventeen minutes' worth of dance. Everybody said, "Oh, my God! What are they up to now?" I ran into one of the deans of show business one night, and he said, "I hear you did a ballet with no songs." He shook his head solemnly and said, "I hope you know what you're doing, kid."

Preston Ames (Art Director):

At the point following the ballet, we were at a complete loss on how to end the picture. How do you bring two people together when one of them, Gene, is on the top of a platform, looking down on a street, which was four levels below, where stood Leslie.

Knowing how Vincente loved stairs, anything that had levels, I mustered my courage and said to him, "What would you think of the idea of having Gene running down steps, Leslie running up steps, and having them finally meet, overlooking all of Paris?" Well, you threw a crumb to Vincente and he expected a banquet back. He said, "I don't know how you're going to do it, but do it."

As a hubcap to this whole thing, we had built some cement stairs for our version of *Kismet*, the one that was done with Ronald Colman and Marlene Dietrich, back five or ten years previous to this, and here these stairs were, sitting on our back lot. They were great stairs; they were wide, and they afforded us enough room to do something. They probably went twenty feet in the air, but I needed three of them, and I only had one. I needed Kelly's platform and then three runs down to a street, which would then overlook all of Paris. So I went up on a boatswain's chair with a boom, and I had them drag me all over the place at the level which I thought this would work. I went back and sketched the operation as I saw it should be. To make a sketch of this was one thing; to face reality was something else. With Vincente, you never presented him just a pretty picture. You had to substantiate it with the fact that you could get this on camera. Vincente was always one for looking through his camera and setting up his people accordingly. It was almost a fetish with him. The camera operator, the cameraman—sure they knew their jobs, but he had to give the final little touches which were indispensable to his way of operating. Anything that you gave him he had to be able to actually do.

Going back now to our stairway, we showed him a sketch of these three stairs going down, with the platform foreground where Gene is and the street below and all of Paris in the background. Obviously, the first question is "Vincente, is this what you had in mind?" It isn't a question of "Do you like it or don't you?" It is, rather, "Is this the story you wanted to tell?" It was, and he was very happy with it. Then we went into step two, which was the realization of this thing.

At this time, we had at our studio a man by the name of Dupy, and Dupy, in the Matte Painting Department, had developed a device called the Dupy Duplicator. Everybody thinks that the duplicator was part of his name, but it wasn't. His duplicating machine allowed us to record a camera operation—tilting or painting—so that, if we were to go on our back lot where the stairs were and photograph a scene with this particular thing and then tilt our camera up, we would be able to take this same camera and the duplicator and put it back in the studio and, with our matte painting, do the same operation on a painted background. The details of this operation are quite complicated, but be satisfied in knowing that the Dupy Duplicator allowed us to finish the picture as we had planned, using our one staircase from *Kismet* and a six- by five-foot painting of Paris. On the screen, Kelly and Caron run

up three flights of stairs and embrace in front of a landscape that is a 180-degree view of Paris at night. This whole operation—the running up the steps, bringing the film back into the studio, and rephotographing it in front of the painting of Paris—I imagine took three or four weeks. Incidentally, the Dupy Duplicator won an Academy Award this same year.

Ed Woehler (Unit Production Manager):

The last day they shot the ballet, I'm finished with it. Then it goes into the postproduction period—the dubbing and the editing. Our department still paid for the orders and ordered the actors. It still dribbled on. If they needed an actor for dubbing, or they needed more music, or they wanted to go back to do a retake, or if they needed anything, then it's still alive. Until the picture is finally released, it isn't finished in our department. There's always that little bit that has to still be done. Somebody's got to do it, and they always call. They'll call and say "we need" this or "we need" that, and then we have to execute that piece, providing it fits into the general plan and they want to spend the money.

Rick Ingersoll (Office Boy):

Gene Kelly threw me off the set once. After they had finished shooting, they were still there, doing poster art. I brought a tour in. He and Leslie were posing for the eight-by-ten camera in dance positions that they would use for advertising. He bawled me out because he didn't realize that I had permission to go on the set. Later, he found that out and came up to the office in the clipping room to apologize.

Preston Ames:

The person with whom I became very closely associated, once we finished shooting, was the film editor. She was a gal that I had never met, because I had never worked before with a film editor. This girl needed my help in very few places. It wasn't a question of whether I

could contribute in the sense of telling her how to cut her film, because she knew more about cutting film than most people at the studio, but it was a question of timing. Did I have an idea for a particular little kind of tricky sequence that we had laid out for popping in pictures, or a transition from one to another? "How did this work?" and "How can we cut from one thing to another?" There was a togetherness which was terrific on that. The girl's name is Adrienne Fazan, an extraordinarily outspoken, strange, wonderful, creative female. She was quite something.

Adrienne Fazan (Editor):

I had Editing Room 21. As you came into MGM from the Washington Boulevard side, there were two narrow buildings, with an alley between them that leads to the commissary. There are stairs going up one of those buildings to a balcony and a bridge, and that bridge led right into my cutting room.

It was always agreeable, working on a picture with Freed. He was one of the producers (thank God) that would run with the director and the cutter. There are some producers who won't do that, and there are some directors who will not run, or work, with the producer. That makes it difficult, when the cutter is in the middle. I would run with a director, and when he wanted so-and-so I'd say, "But the producer said" this and that. "Aw, the hell with that; do it!" But Freed wasn't like that, and he trusted Minnelli. When he hired a director on a picture, he gave him the responsibility and trusted him. It was easy working on the Freed pictures. Besides, it's easier to cut musicals than dramatic films. With musical numbers, you go by the music; it's very easy. The dancers and the director take great pains to match action.

Gene Kelly:

In the cutting stage of the picture, I had a steady day-to-day work relationship with Adrienne. The dance numbers were all shot to be cut on a certain beat. When you get a good cutter like Adrienne you say, "Now, in the middle of that turn on the third beat of the bar, as I'm turning, cut to this other angle, and it won't look like a cut"; it won't look like a change. It's not that it won't look like a cut to the

practiced eye; it will be a cut, but the audience will not be aware of it. If you want to make the audience aware of a cut, then make them aware of it. If you want the feel of flow, in soft numbers, in numbers with continuity of movement and, let's say, a certain slowness, it's good not to make quick cuts unless you're going for an effect of quick cutting within that framework. That's been done in commercials, but if you want the dance to have a very slow fluid feeling, let's say, "Our Love is Here to Stay," you don't make the audience aware of the change in camera angles.

In filming a dance, you compose each piece of film so it goes together with the next piece. It always matches, because dancers, you see, do the same thing every time. If they don't, they hit each other in the nose or they trip each other. You have to rehearse so that the turn you do this take is exactly the same turn next take, whether the camera's here or there. It's done exactly on the same beat on the sound track.

People have often asked me about the choreography on certain pictures, and I find that they do not understand that a really good film choreographer, as opposed to a stage choreographer, will compose for the camera. Each series of steps has to be shot from a certain angle to be seen best. There is always a "best" angle. You don't, or, I should say, you shouldn't, go down on the set with a dance number and then start trying out different angles on it. It should be composed for certain camera setups to *begin* with. The cutting of it, therefore, should be pretty much mechanical. I would say that there are times when accidental elements creep in, but very rarely. If you look at the ballet and, all of a sudden, in front of that fountain, the *pompiers* come by in their gleaming helmets, and they wipe across the frame and go into the next cut, you know, that can't be an accident, that has to be down pat.

I cut, my philosophy anyway, just simply, so that people can see the scene better. If we have a scene, and the camera is over your shoulder, and you say to me, "Now, what did you do?" and I say, "I shot him." Cut! I'd say "Oh, my God! I certainly can't be over your shoulder and see the expression in your eyes at the same time." That's a very simple way of doing it. Sometimes, in the dance number, no matter how well prepared you are when you're doing this kind of cut, you're going over here and I bring the camera over there. In that case, Adrienne will say, "Let's delay it for another beat before the turn." Sure that happens, but rarely. If it doesn't happen the way you've set it up on the stage, then I'd be very sad indeed.

Adrienne Fazan:

The dailies were very important. In fact, if some of the scenes were too dark or too light or too red or too yellow or too something or other, we would order new prints at the lab's expense. In those days, they had a different system than they have now. Nowadays, if we want a corrected reprint, the studio has to pay for it because nowadays they print everything on a one-color basis. But in 1950 we had corrected prints for the dailies. Everybody wanted the best, even for a work print. They couldn't wait to see how good it was or how beautiful the colors came through.

Minnelli would only look at the film in the projection room and almost never on the moviola. He'd say, "That's not long enough; stay longer. I want him to disappear." He always liked long dissolves, like ten-foot dissolves. In those days, because of colors, the norm was a four-foot dissolve.

Minnelli would never shoot a lot of film. He would only give me enough for the sequence he liked especially well. Mr. Minnelli was a little stingy. He never gave me enough close-ups. He wouldn't break up a sequence the normal way. Every director shoots a long shot, medium shot, close-up, over the shoulder, and so forth. Well, Minnelli wouldn't do that. He'd give me a close-up here and there, sometimes not where I wanted it so that we could cut out a whole page of dialogue that wasn't needed. Sometimes we would take a two-shot of two people and blow it up so it would become a close-up of one person—just for a look or something, in order to eliminate some unnecessary footage. Minnelli sometimes fell in love with certain sequences, and he didn't want them to be broken up or shortened. So he shot that way on purpose, so that it could not be changed in the editing room.

He also moved his camera from here to hell and back. That didn't present me with any problems, because I didn't have any cutting to do. All I did was a little cussing. The producer or Margaret Booth, MGM's Editorial Supervisor, would say, "Go to a close-up; cut in some close-ups." "I haven't got them!" That's why we sometimes would blow up.

Leslie Caron (Actress):

When the film was over I was put on layoff. Twelve weeks out of the year, we were not paid. It was called layoff, and so it was very hard. Of course, I was very economical. I had even put a little money aside, not trusting anyone to help me, ever. I was really like an orphan. I had no work. There was nothing for a long time. They waited to see the results of *An American in Paris*. There must have been three months where I didn't do anything, just nothing. I started giving classes and started acting with my teacher. I also moved to a new apartment, which I think cost $50 a month. It was one room.

Adrienne Fazan:

After I had sequences cut, I would show them to the director, and he would make comments. With Minnelli, he would mostly say, "Too tight," especially if it was somebody walking. He would count very slowly, "one, twooo, threeee, fourrrrrrr, cut!" When I got the film on the moviola, I would count a little faster, which, of course, was all right because I could lengthen the scenes later the way he wanted them. In the final editing, Freed would come in. Then it was up to the producer and the director to argue it out, and they would tighten the picture. Margaret Booth would yell and scream. "It's too slow!" She liked everything very tight, so I would trim it down some more.

Mr. Freed and Minnelli were the first ones to see the first cut. They ran the picture right through and did not make any remarks. The next day, after they had mulled it over in their minds, we would look at one reel at a time and then start to make changes. Changes would mostly be elimination. Once in a while, they would see a close-up and say, "Take it out; stay in the master shot," or "Put a close-up in," or "Stay on the shot longer," or "Trim it." Mostly, it depended on the time of the picture, how long it was. If it ran over two hours, which the first cut always did, they would look for places to eliminate a whole sequence.

Gene Kelly:

Two numbers were cut out because the picture was just too long. This was Freed's decision.

Every picture that I've ever done, we've had to cut one ballad, and sometimes two. Mainly, the reason is that ballads are love songs that come late in the picture—somebody singing, "I Love You"—and it's a *fait accompli*, it's been done. The audience already knows it. No matter

how beautifully it's done, they're really wrapped up in the story by this time, and the ballad slows things down. So out goes the ballad. That happened in *On the Town* and in *Summer Stock*. Judy recorded a ballad called "Boys and Girls Like You and Me, We Go On and On," a Rodgers-and-Hammerstein song, one of the greatest ballads ever written. I think she did it in two pictures. Frank Sinatra did it also. It's never been in an MGM musical. "Boys and girls like you and me, we go on and on. Kings and everything, they have their day and are gone." It's applicable to anything. It always had to be done near the end of the picture and, therefore, was expendable.

Now, about "Crush on You" in *An American in Paris:* In my great wisdom, I said, "Well, since I have this whisky Irish tenor and nobody's interested, I'm going to sing a love song, which is a short love song, and it's going to be done with such humor and panache that it will just have to survive." It was cut! Guetary's number, around the same section of the picture, was also cut. He did his number thinking in the bistro, and I was sitting up in the window, again at my place, and the cuts were from where he was to where I am. That's one Vince and I worked out together. There was no dancing to it. It was just a musical number, and we liked it. We saw the rushes and were crazy about it. But that's one of those things.

What really hurt, though, was cutting "I've Got a Crush on You." I love that song; it's one of my favorites. It was all done in the little area of my room. It was charming, just dancing around in my little, silly room. Oh, I put in so much work! God! I rehearsed longer on that than I did on the whole "Singin' in the Rain" number! Then to lose it!

Nina Foch (Actress):

Now, after the picture was over, there was a scene that I had that's gone on the cutting-room floor. I always built a characterization so that, at one moment only, or possibly two, you really see the human being underneath. In life we do not speak what we mean, ever; we bullshit! I mean, we've been taught as children to say, "Kiss Aunt Louise," and you hate Aunt Louise. Normally, we talk about nothing in life, and so I build characterizations in that way so they're like a Persian carpet; there are thousands of little things that I build, so I don't give a shit if you see any particular one of them, because they will accumulate. So

I build this Persian carpet, and I decide the moment at which I'm going to let you have it to let you see who I really am. It'll suddenly come, and if you miss it you've missed it. If I want you to understand, if I am busy trying to make you understand the person I am, you won't understand the person I am, right? One of the cardinal rules of acting: You must not want to explain; it must just happen. All right, the explanation of Milo in *An American in Paris* is in this last scene. Earlier on, she is really Vivienne Segal in *Pay Joey;* she's a killer. But the thing that makes Milo so touching was in this last scene at the black-and-white ball, where I get drunk because I realize that I've lost Gene, and I'm sitting at the table with Oscar Levant, talking about men and why men don't love me. Minnelli says, "Let's do the scene; let's not rehearse; let's just do it." Beautiful. So we did it, and it was marvelous, absolutely *marvelous!* I think it's one of the best pieces of acting I've ever done. I'm just buzzing, about to be a weepy drunk, half-laughing, and suddenly up comes this truly lonely, lonely little girl whose daddy never loved her. That's not in the lines, but you can see she's that kind of woman. A piece of confetti gets in my champagne glass, and I see it, take it out, and look at it. I stop in the middle of the scene, and Oscar takes the time to really look at it. I look up; then I think about it, what it is that's in my glass. "Oh, it's a pill," and I take it like a pill. It's a beautiful moment. I saw the scene, and I knew I had that picture wrapped up. In this scene I reveal how really lost and desperate I am; I mean that's what's in it. It looked ridiculous for Gene to go off with Leslie when you see that scene, because the sympathy is all with Milo; it's got to be.

Acting is my business, and I'm not one to grab the prize, but when I saw this I said to myself, "Oh boy! Shit, man! You've got this. You've got it." I mean I can smell it when it's there; it has a smell after a while. I knew in *John Loves Mary;* I didn't have to wait for the critics. It's all over you; it stinks on you. It smells the other way, too. I've had that other smell, too—"flop sweat" we call it in the theater. Anyway, I got this letter from Arthur Freed, which I have in my files somewhere, saying that he was terribly sorry but that he had to cut this scene out of the picture because it made Leslie seem unsympathetic for Gene to go off with, considering how my scene had played, and that he was forced to take it out of the picture. He wanted me to know, however, that it was an incredibly fine piece of work. So I have a letter for my pains. But you can't eat letters, right?

Adrienne Fazan:

After the first cut, I would make my changes. Then we would run it again, and they might make a few more changes, mostly very little, unless the picture was in trouble. We would finally run it for the music people, reel by reel. After each reel, the producer and the director would talk scoring, and I would order my dissolves or whatever opticals had to be ordered and get it ready for scoring and sound effects.

Preston Ames:

My final budget figures worked out this way: I had a budget of $79,000 on the book, and I spent $81,000. That's 2½ per cent off, which is not bad. With the ballet, I had as a budget $37,000, and, as it turned out, I spent $49,000, which is 30 per cent over. Actually, when you consider what we had, that wasn't too bad either. There were constant changes of treatment and then constant corrections. Nobody was ever happy with it until it was finally finished. We were groping half the time for the right thing before we hit upon it. Well, that experiment might cost 10 or 20 per cent more than you anticipated, but we were out to do it properly or not at all, and that's why there's the difference in the overage between the book and the ballet.

George Gibson (Head of the Scenic Art Department):

After we had finished with the backings for the ballet (let's take the Renoir), I would assign a stock number to it; say, it was 5747, then the name of the picture, *An American in Paris*, then the set and the size of the backing. Then there would be a description—"Renoir: *Pont Neuf*, *American in Paris* Dream Sequence." Then it would say "day" (or "night"). I had a standard chart on which I added each thing as we did it.

After the backing was shot, it would be struck, and it would come back to the basement and be assigned a rack number and recorded in the stock book as number 5747 in Rack D #57. Now, naturally, how many times are you going to use a Renoir or a Dufy backing? Not many

FORM 75

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES

INTER-OFFICE COMMUNICATION

To [illegible]

Subject [illegible] OF PRODUCTION #1507

From [illegible] Date 1-17-51

Jan. 1951

PROD: 1507 - "AN AMERICAN IN PARIS"

Prod: Started: 8-1-50
Prod: Closed 1-8-51

		A/C - 711 Estm. Cost	A/C - 711 Actual Cost	A/C - 712-1 Estm. Cost	A/C - 712-1 Actual Cost
01.	Ext. Montmartre St & Square	3068	4803	---	9
02.	Ext. & Int. Cafe	11,433	11,039	825	471
03.	Int. Pension Stair & Hall	5339	6128	---	20
04.	Int. Pension 3rd Floor	4113	4471	107	343
05.	Ext. Beach & Quai	10,784	10,015	---	229
06.	Int. Maison Nucles	1300	1377	---	---
07.	Int. Henri's Apt.	1996	2135	---	18
08.	Ext. Cafe & Quai	1155	872	---	---
09.	Int. Milo's Hotel	1211	902	---	---
10.	Int. Cafe Florida	3601	3405	---	---
11.	Int. 2nd Fl. Bed Room	450	580	---	---
12.	Int. Milo's Hotel Suite	968	939	---	---
13.	Ext. Stage Door & Alley	817	901	---	---
14.	Int. Tapes Stair	3863	9460	---	359
15.	Int. Artists' Ball	11,704	8617	---	506
16.	Int. Nicer Studio	841	850	---	8
17.	Int. School des Beaux Arts	---	98	---	---
18.	Ext. Perfume Shop	463	740	---	---
19.	Ext. Nicer Studio	310	343	---	---
20.	Ext. Terrace - Artists' Ball	2631	3042	---	423
21.	Ext. Artists' Ball & Stairs	4166	2390	---	201
22.	Int. Symphony Hall	4710	2936	234	360
23.	Int. Henri's Bar	96	105	---	---
25.	Ext. Montmartre St. - Ballet	2782	3220	379	417
26.	Ext. Champs Elysees - Ballet	1467	1772	---	42
27.	Int. Moulin Rouge Ballet	3006	3436	135	133
28.	Ext. Place de la Concorde- Ballet	14,506	24,073	2618	1996
29.	Int. Baroque Set	498	1153	60	83
30.	Int. Victorian Set	396	671	---	---
31.	Int. Louis XVI Set	488	948	---	17
32.	Int. Modern Set	447	743	---	---
33.	Int. Jacobean Set	497	898	---	7
34.	Int. Biedermier Set	487	798	---	---
36.	Ext. Opera Ballet	7672	9052	250	398
37.	Ext. Carnival Square - Ballet	6736	7435	276	218
38.	Ext. Flower Mart - Ballet	3728	4364	---	83
39.	Ext. Oustary Poster	110	150	---	---
40.	Ext. Sketch	198	396	---	---
41.	Ext. Quai - Montage of Sketch	100	167	---	---
43.	Ext. Montmartre St.	200	43	---	---
44.	Ext. Fountain - Ballet	385	586	---	---
	Sub-totals	126,417. 14 506 111911	136,089. 24 073 111956	4863.	6946.

Closing Costs for Art Department

FORM 75

METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES
CULVER CITY CALIFORNIA

INTER-OFFICE COMMUNICATION

To MR. GIBBONS

Subject CLOSING COSTS OF PRODUCTION #1507

From ESTIMATING ART DEPT Date 1-17-52

PROD: #1507 -"AMERICAN IN PARIS"	A/C - 711 Estm. Cost	A/C - 711 Actual Cost	A/C - 712-1 Estm. Cost	A/C - 712-1 Actual Cost
70. Int. Milo's Car	80	118	---	---
71. Int. Jerry's Taxi	35	78	---	---
72. Ext. Notre Dame - Montage	65	32	---	---
73. Ext. Opera Montage	50	103	---	---
Sub-totals	230	331	---	---
TOTALS - - - - - - - - -	126,647	136,360	4883	6246
Cost - A/C 711 & 712-1		142,606.		

times. So I decided that this was something that could be written off completely as subject matter in our stock. Along comes a need for something else, so you take the Renoir backing out and you repaint it with another subject matter entirely. It will still carry the same stock number, but now it will have a new description, which has to be inserted, for example, "Arizona desert, day cloud sky, yellow foreground." We repainted all the *An American in Paris* ballet backings in this fashion.

Adrienne Fazan:

After we got a final cut from Freed, the negative was taken and cut at Technicolor. They take the master print and match it to the cutting print. Before they would make the first answer print, we would run the work print with them. The director, especially, would be there to tell them that certain scenes weren't dark enough or light enough or red enough or something. He would tell them, "This is to be a special effect." After the negative was cut, I would get the first answer print. After we got it back, we would all look at it and scream at the color.

It would go back to Technicolor for corrections until we got what we wanted in a release print.

The camera original film was destroyed because MGM didn't have the room to store it. They would keep the work print sometimes for five

American in Paris Ballet

Set	Budget	Estimate	Cost
Est. Champs Elysées b & w & color- Dufy	3600	1467-	1547
Est. Place de la Concorde Dufy-	9500	14506-	22,070
Est. Flower Market Renoir-	3400	3728-	4168
Est. Montmartre Street Utrillo.-	4400	2792-	2755
Est. Fountain (Blues Number) revamp	3900		585
Est. Place de l'Opera. Van Gogh-	3900	7672-	8047
Est. Moulin Rouge. Toulouse Lautrec	3900	3006-	3045
Est. Carnival Square. Henri Rousseau	4400	6735-	7066
Total	37.000-		49,283-
	Over budget	12,283-	(30%)

	simple scheme	perforated screen	Cost
Fountain on place de la Concorde.	3500	7000	9500

Budget Memo