

# FILM CRITICISM

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## Star Images:

- Fred Astaire
- Burt Reynolds
- Sergi López

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# Vincente Minnelli's Dream of Tony Hunter's *Band Wagon*'s "Girl Hunt"

Arturo Silva

## Introduction

With its high degree of self-reflection, historical star awareness (the Fred Astaire persona), and laying bare of the musical's many elements, Vincente Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953) has long been recognized along with *Singin' In the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952) and *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor, 1954) as one of those films that bring the classic phase of the Hollywood musical to a close. Similarities include all three belonging to the musical sub-genre "The Show Musical" (as defined by Rick Altman in *The American Film Musical*); both the Donen/Kelly and Minnelli films are written by Betty Comden and Adolphe Green; and the Minnelli and Cukor films incorporate details of the bio-filmographies of their stars, Astaire and Judy Garland. And, while *Singin' In the Rain* and *A Star is Born* are pretty straight-forward stories with narratives and numbers perfectly integrated from beginning to end, *The Band Wagon*'s very short conclusion is preceded by a long sequence of four numbers, plus the famous "Girl Hunt," all of which appear to have almost no connection whatsoever to anything that has preceded them, besides bearing no clear – or even opaque – relation with each other. Most accounts of the film's long ending write it off in a casual "that's entertainment!"

manner, thereby acknowledging the obvious – the end is odd and does not seem to make narrative sense – while also avoiding any real attempt at trying to account for it. But a careful reading of the elements of this long concluding section, and particularly the "Girl Hunt's" mise-en-scène, can, I believe, not only clear up the "mystery of the mystery" of the "Girl Hunt," but of much more besides, giving *The Band Wagon* a hitherto unperceived coherency and wholeness that reaches even beyond itself. This paper will attempt such a reading, looking first at the film's various sources and at those four unconnected numbers as well as other issues the film raises, and read the whole as a bricolage of elements which, paradoxically, makes the film utterly Minnelli's own. The second part will offer a detailed reading of "The Girl Hunt," revealing it to be a dream of the hero's desire for the heroine and whose themes and images derive from the main body of *The Band Wagon*'s narrative.

## Part One: *The Band Wagon*

### I. The Narrative

*The Band Wagon* is the story of Tony Hunter (Astaire), a former stage musical star now down on his luck. He is persuaded by his writer friends Lili and Lester Marton (Nanette Fabray and Oscar Levant) to star in their new musical, which they hope to have produced by Jeffrey Cordova (Jack Buchanan). Their idea is of a children's book writer, to be played by Tony, who moonlights by writing crime thrillers. But Cordova wants to turn the "light, intimate" musical (read: Low Art) into a "modern, musical morality play ... with meaning and stature" (read: High Art). He wants – gasp! – to turn it into a modern-day *Faust*. Further, he wants Tony's co-star to be the ballerina (read again: High Art) Gabrielle Gerard.<sup>1</sup> Tony is skeptical, but he is convinced to give it a try after Cordova and the Martons convince him in song what it's really all about: "That's Entertainment." However, Tony and Gabrielle meet very un-cute, take an instant dislike to one another, and during a rehearsal he walks out. Gabrielle comes to apologize, and they discover in the exquisite "Dancing in the Dark,"<sup>2</sup> that they really can dance together. But come opening night, *Faust*<sup>3</sup> proves to be the flop that the disastrous pre-opening dress rehearsal revealed it would be. Finally, Tony, Gaby (as she comes to be called), and "the kids" (the team of supporting dancers and singers) decide to "yank out all that [Faustian] junk," go back to the original Marton script of *The Band*

*Wagon* and try it out on the road. Even Cordova acquiesces: "One man has to be at the helm," he says. Then – and this is the point where the straight narrative breaks off – come a series of four different numbers, followed by "The Girl Hunt," and the brief conclusion, a declaration of love and a reprise of "That's Entertainment."

## II. The Mystery

What has always interested me about *The Band Wagon* is this apparently sheer abandonment on Minnelli's part of any pretence to narrative cohesion. Many musicals, from *The Gay Divorcée* (1934) with its "Continental" dance to Minnelli's own *An American in Paris*, (1951) have extremely long numbers at the end, but these are also easily explained within the contexts of the overall narratives. But this ending is so odd because, again, the four numbers do not relate to one another, and do not relate to the narrative. Nothing at all has prepared us for them. The "Girl Hunt" takes this strangeness to an even further extreme by being both a number and a narrative that again seems to relate to nothing that precedes it. Instead of integration, we have aggregation – separation into discreet, independent numbers. What's going on here? How can we explain a straight-ahead story suddenly changing directions so completely and surprisingly that perhaps "changing dimensions" might be a better description? As mentioned, it is usually explained – or explained away – in a couple of ways. The first might be called the "that's entertainment" argument, and is exemplified by Gary Carey in his essay "Vincente Minnelli and the 1940s Musical":

"When the musicalized *Faust* flops out of town, not only is 'art' thrown out of the window but so is the story-line, and *The Band Wagon* follows suit: it becomes a glittering revue of boffo production numbers. The 'message' of *The Band Wagon* seems to be that the musical had over-refined itself; that, in its attempt to be taken seriously, it had become too serious, cutting itself off from its true *raison d'être* – the exhilaration that results when a gifted performer, for no particular reason, goes into a song and dance."

The second explanation might be called the "de-Faust" approach, and is taken by Stephen Harvey in his *Directed by Vincente Minnelli*: "There's a logic to this seeming imbalance, for these sequences

mark the progress of the new, de-Mephistophelized extravaganza during its trek through the provinces en route to Broadway." Harvey then hits the mark when he asks, "One unanswered question – which musical-comedy book, however elastic, could encompass this cornucopia of showstoppers?" He then hints at a point that I hope to make explicit: "Starting with the high-gloss cheeriness of 'New Sun in the Sky' these specialties hit a wide range of notes in the musical-revue spectrum, from the urbane ('I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan'), to tongue-in-cheek cornpone ('Louisiana Hayride') and dizzy farce ('Triplets')." Then, like Carey again, he lays it all on "entertainment": "What unites them is the performers' unflappable élan." "Boffo entertainment" and "unflappable élan" sound wonderful, of course – and have satisfied viewers for five decades – but are they enough to provide spectatorial narrative satisfaction? They also raise the opposition between passive entertainment and the more involved enjoyment – the pleasure-of-the-text – that *The Band Wagon* certainly offers and involves us in as we try to make fuller sense of it.

As has been noticed, the opposition of High versus Low Art is another one of the film's themes. Even Low Art, apparently, has its relative degrees. The very Low Penny Arcade of 42<sup>nd</sup> Street, for example, had once been home to, if I may put it this way, "High Low" Musical Theater or, as Tony puts it, "strictly carriage trade." But the great leveler is "entertainment." The following witty lyrics from the song "That's Entertainment" put things into proper perspective when they comment on two of western art's greatest – and Highest – productions: "It could be *Oedipus Rex*, where a chap kills his father, and causes a lot of bother"; and, "Or some great Shakespearean scene, where a ghost and a prince meet, and everyone ends in mincemeat." Cordova is the pivotal character here. While he is performing as *Oedipus* and now wants to add *Faust*, with the ballerina Gaby as co-star, he is also the one – the leveler, as it were – who reminds Tony, when he resists the Faust idea, that it is all "entertainment." In other words, there is no real opposition between High and Low art. Alongside this High versus Low argument, is the question of art's commerce – its negotiation. (And, to anticipate my argument regarding the "Girl Hunt," what is a dream but a negotiation?) When Tony spontaneously decides to sell his collection of Degas' and Monets to help support the new post-*Faust* production, he casually remarks, "Those fellas loved the theater." Tony, too, is a leveller, but without a sense of opposition.

### III. *The Band Wagon* as Bricolage

Although Minnelli is “at the helm” of *The Band Wagon* (I’ll be returning to the significance of that phrase), there are other creative forces at work as well. The principal source – the idea was Producer Arthur Freed’s – was the catalogue of songs by Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz; indeed, the songs were drawn from a number of Schwartz/Dietz shows, including one called *The Band Wagon*, which opened in June 1931 at the New Amsterdam, and starred no one less than Fred Astaire, and, in their last performances together, his sister Adele. Comden and Green’s task was to weave their book around the odd assortment of Freed-chosen songs. Carey points out in fact that Comden and Green saw the movie as a “film à clef.” Allusions to Astaire’s career were also added. *The Band Wagon* is then something created out of a variety of elements at hand, which should remind us of what Jane Feuer calls “tinkering” numbers (the term is based on Claude Levi-Strauss’s notion of “bricolage”), such as Astaire’s dance with a coat rack in *Royal Wedding* (Donen, 1951) or Judy Garland’s makeshift film studio/living room in *A Star is Born*.

*The Band Wagon* – one large piece of bricolage – has its own tinkering number, “Shine on Your Shoes,” which comes early in the film. It is also a mini-narrative-into-itself and one that comments on what is to follow. (*We watch the film again and again, forwards and back.*) Its narrative side is slight, but it’s there: Tony is aghast at the changes that have occurred on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. He even mentions the New Amsterdam: “I had one of my biggest successes there, it ran a year and a half,” a possibly loose reference to the original *Band Wagon*, which in fact ran for 260 performances, closing in May 1932. He enters a penny arcade and fumbles among its many diversions – fortune-tellers, distorting mirrors, throwing games, etc. He then encounters a morose bootblack (played by Leroy Daniels), who not only shines his shoes but also performs a terrific duet with him. Tony begins to sing and dance as Daniels shines his shoes. While the song’s message seems to be a simple (“if you look good, you’ll feel good”) and becomes almost a paean to dandyism – just look at Tony’s blue socks, or Daniels’ pink ones and Hawaiian shirt – it is more besides. Once he has gotten his shine, Tony triumphs over the arcade games he had previously failed at. The mini-drama here then is one of joyous triumph over adversity – the value of work that many see as one of Minnelli’s principal themes – and in a way, a celebration of partnership: with a black man in 1953!

The Low Art Penny Arcade also stands in sharp contrast to the scene that immediately follows, our gloomy look at the High Art *Oedipus Rex*. “Shine on Your Shoes” also features one of the first “Girl Hunt” dream-clues, the distorting mirror, about which more below. After all, a dream is on the ostensible level nothing but a piece of bricolage, a putting together of assorted and seemingly unrelated elements – clues, residues – in which we look at ourselves through a distorting mirror.

### IV. The Four Numbers as Minnelli’s Assertion of Mastery

As Harvey asks, what sort of show could possibly contain this odd mix of numbers? As I hope to demonstrate, the show that we watch is not so much the Tony Hunter staging of the Lesters’ *Band Wagon* as Minnelli’s genre bricolage, a show-of-shows in fact. Let me offer some brief comments on each of the four numbers before looking at how they work together within and beyond the film. Looked at closely, I hope to show that each of the numbers does in fact contain oblique references to the narrative that has preceded it, thus giving them a hitherto unnoticed, self-reflective coherence, as well as being examples of the musical’s various sub-genres.

“New Sun in the Sky” is a short bravura piece by Charisse and boys in attendance with resplendent Technicolor/Minnellian sun ablaze. It functions as a vibrant, sensuous counter to her earlier, bland balletic number. Gaby overcomes here her early “serious art” self for pure and passionate entertainment. “New Sun” is followed by “I Guess I’ll Have to Change My Plans,” a duet by Astaire and Buchanan complete with top hat, tails and cane. The song-and-dance obviously recalls, like some self-reflecting time-warp, the Astaire role of the great Astaire/Rodgers films of the 30s and the Tony Hunter role referred to in the film’s opening scene (an auction of Tony’s old props), thus reaching both within and beyond this specific film/story. Generically, this type of number comes from what Altman has called the fairy tale musical sub-genre. Then we watch “Louisiana Hayride,” a pure hokum number by Fabray and company that recalls the folk musical (again Altman’s term). Indeed, recall here Lester, who, at the post-*Faust* party expressed a typical folk musical sentiment, “Why can’t us kids get together and put on ourselves a show? Maybe we could find ourselves a barn or something.” “Hayride” is also a weird sort of number, with its catalogue of names (“Jonquil Jezebel ... Primrose Paradise”), and hints at rollicking hayride sex.<sup>4</sup> It is followed by a brief

interlude on the train where Tony admits to Lester his love for Gaby. Finally, "Triplets," is a hilarious number performed by Tony, Cordova, and Lily playing quarrelling triplets and apparently performed by the trio dancing on their knees. The "kids'" behavior should remind us of the first performance of "That's Entertainment" where we also saw the three trying to out-foot each other. "Triplets" is a reductio-ad-absurdum of musical numbers by child stars such as Shirley Temple or Margaret O'Brien.

I believe we can see this sequence of numbers as Minnelli's own quick takes – self-reflection, tour-de-force, parody – on the very genre he is working in. They are self-reflective not only to the film they appear in, but to the original *Band Wagon* as well. Of the four numbers here, only "New Sun" is from that stage version (though "Dancing in the Dark" and "I Love Louisa" are too), but, apparently, the 1931 staging was, like these seemingly unconnected numbers, a compilation or revue of sketches, songs, dances, and topical references without any attempt at an overarching narrative. Cohesion was accomplished only by means of the same singers and dancers appearing throughout, as they do here. One has to wonder: did 1953 audiences experience a lack of narrative cohesion, or, being closer in time and experience to Thirties' musical revues, have no problem with the last five numbers? As regards tour-de-force and parody, if ever there was an assertion of mastery, this is it. Minnelli refers to the extravagances of his own career ("New Sun," the *Faust* disaster); his star's earlier RKO career ("Change My Plans"); the Folk Musical ("Hayride"); and the "kiddie show" ("Triplets"). Not only does Minnelli create a self-contained genre-revue/review in these numbers, we now see that the four numbers are also motivated both by the narrative that contains them and the overall creative force(s) behind them, including the director's oeuvre. In other words, two decades before MGM created its own musical compilation film *That's Entertainment* (1974), Minnelli had already made his own MGM/Minnelli compilation.<sup>5</sup>

## Part Two: "The Girl Hunt"

### I. "The Girl Hunt" and its Clues

"The Girl Hunt" also draws upon elements from the larger story. You probably won't notice it the first time you watch "The Girl Hunt," but maybe on a second or third viewing, it'll begin to happen: that "hey, haven't-I-seen-that-somewhere-before?" feeling. For me, it

began with "a hank of hair." In this section, I will recount the narrative of the "Girl Hunt," segment-by-segment, and intersperse italicized comments pointing out the various "clues" (in bold) it leaves behind for us to put together, as I shall then do.

Following a view of the turning pages of the program for *The Band Wagon* – the show within the movie, that is – and which inform us that we are about to watch a number called the "Girl Hunt, A Murder Mystery in Jazz" (and not "The Girl Hunt Ballet" as it is often called), the stage curtain opens, and we see yet another curtain, this one plastered with lurid 50s crime novel covers, including one called "Girl Hunt," and with this line running across the top: "She had to die." The number obviously spins a riff on the then-popular Mickey Spillane and clichés of crime films in general, complete with parodic tough-talk voice-over and the knocked-out hero's head spinning. Shots ring out and split the second curtain in two; we then see the stage proper, a cool, gray, empty city street. Striding forth is Tony Hunter as private dick Rod Riley. Suddenly shots ring out again, and a blonde in distress appears; she is played by Gaby wearing a pale yellow trench coat. A gunman rushes in, there's an explosion, the smoke clears, the girl's gone, and three clues are left: "a rag, a bone, and a hank of hair," and where the girl had been a large piece of green jade.

*Let's look at these "clues" – no, not the ones Rod picks up, but the ones the pre-"Hunt" film offers us. The book **covers and posters** on the wall remind us of the movie posters and marquees we saw in the Penny Arcade sequence. As for the Blonde's **yellow coat**: Tony wore something similar (more of a dressing gown, but unmistakably alike) during Cordova's pep-talk just before the *Faust* opening. There were also lots of **explosions**, big and small, during the *Faust* rehearsals. Where did we see that **hank of hair** before? Oh yes, when Tony met Cordova, he pulled off his Oedipus wig and shook hands with Tony while still holding the wig. It was a throwaway gag, worth a chuckle, but soon forgotten. But when two wigs appear in a movie, something has to be up. And the jewel? I can't recall any such item, but that green is certainly reminiscent of the gloves Gaby wore when she and Tony first met at Cordova's apartment – just*

*before becoming enemies.*

Rod then enters a fashion house with lavender walls inscribed with vaguely 18th century French drawings and candelabra incorporating human figures. Models strut before immobile mink-coated elderly women, their hair gray, like their furs. A brunette, also played by Gaby, emerges and lures Rod into the backroom, which is crowded with models, fabrics, and dummy body parts. There he gets into a violent confrontation with a couple of killers posing as dummies.

*The lavender walls will definitely remind viewers of the walls of one of Cordova's apartment rooms, where we earlier saw him pitching Faust to a group of elderly couples, the women gray-haired, and all possessing a fur. The drawings on the wallpaper recall part of the sets for Faust. And the candelabra? There is a brief glimpse of Faust extras parading forth and someone shouting, "Men in armor, light your chandeliers!" (The men are "walking chandeliers" in the shot.) But I know I've seen them somewhere else before, too. Or was it in another movie? (See below.) The "back room" is certainly a "backstage" of sorts. The models and dummies might be construed as supporting players.*

Next we see Rod in the Times Square and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street subway, where killers dance behind him and where again the blonde appears. "There was something about this kid that made you want to protect her – for life," he remarks. They dance a brief duet, but more shots ring out, and again she disappears.

*While Tony had earlier been seen in two brief train scenes, those were not subways. But, of course, we also earlier saw him at Times Square.*

Then we see Rod from behind the display window of a wig-shop, his face distorted, followed by a brief, beautiful, stand-alone shot of Rod running up a red staircase against a pale blue background. He then enters a woman's toilette, with a masked woman in the bath. He is knocked unconscious, but awakes with his head in the lap of a green jade statue of a nude woman.

*Wigs again, and remember, in the penny arcade*

*Tony looked into a **distorting mirror**. And here's yet more **jade**, obviously sexualized.*

Finally, Rod puts the pieces together – as I am trying to do – and locates the gang at Dem Bones Café, where he encounters the Brunette, with whom he dances a steamy number, kills off the gang, and then shoots "Mr. Big" – who turns out to be the Blonde, and who, in a penultimate gesture – her last is a kiss – gives Rod her jade ring (an erotic offer?). Job finished, we see Rod alone again in that empty street we first saw him in. He says in voice-over, "I felt good; but something was missing." He pads his coat looking for a match – and the Brunette appears, match in hand. "She was bad, she was dangerous. I wouldn't trust her any more than I could throw her. But she was my kind of woman." They walk off, partners.

*The Brunette's coat is lined in red, like Mephistopheles' cape; and when we first heard "That's Entertainment," there was a little bit with Cordova padding his jacket for a light, and Lester providing it.*

The narrative of the "Girl Hunt" itself is clear enough: Rod is attacked, he discovers some clues, encounters two different women, locates the gang, kills Mr. Big, and gets the girl. As for the "Girl Hunt"'s fit within the film's narrative, we have seen that disparate elements from *there* – the "straight" narrative – have cropped up *here*, thus lending it a degree of narrative continuity. Now we have seen how Harvey's cursory reading accounts for it all – it's simply the Martons' *Band Wagon* plus some of the *Faust* props recycled and "all that junk yanked out" – "entertainment!" Well, not quite. The real mystery of the "Girl Hunt" is *what is it doing here at all* at the end of *The Band Wagon*, both movie and theatrical musical? While it is the fifth in a series of stand alone numbers, it is obviously stylistically very different from the four that come before it. It is, of course, much longer, too. But more important is the difference between the *theatrical*, the four numbers, and the *cinematic*, the "Girl Hunt." The four numbers can be characterized as stylistically conventional, that is, comprised of long takes – as always in the musical, the "proof" of the performer's abilities ("Dancing in the Dark" consists of only three shots, the first one lasting two minutes) – and medium and long shots, and much typically Minnellian crane movement, with an occasional close-up, which we might imagine as the theater viewer's taking up

his or her opera glasses. Only “Triplets” possesses a bit of complex editing as Minnelli cuts rapidly from character to character, and from medium to close shots, while also being generally firmly founded in a still medium shot. These stylistics are also true to those of the musicals of the early Thirties and are in their own way also “true” to the idea of the original 1931 theatrical version: numbers seen as they would be by a viewer in a theater. In a word, they are eminently theatrical in the sense that one can easily imagine these numbers being performed on a stage; they possess a certain verisimilitude with the main thrust of the narrative.

The “Girl Hunt” is an other order of being, that is, it is wholly cinematic; one cannot imagine it being staged in a theater. In this regard it harkens back to the stylistics of Busby Berkeley, who also filmed the “impossible-to-stage.” Only think of the third shot, following the curtain opening: at the sound of a trumpet Rod looks up, and the camera cuts to an overhead view (as the camera pulls back) of an apartment corner, obviously a painted set, but with someone actually playing a trumpet in a window (Fig. 1). This angle is utterly dizzying; it seems like a point-of-view shot, but it would require street-level Rod to suddenly be at least three-stories above; there is also the artifice of the set and the reality of the trumpeter. The scene in the fashion house contains two fairly narrow sets; no theater viewer with or without binoculars could follow Cyd Charisse as does Minnelli’s camera as she slinks about and from one room to the other; the editing is also far more cinematic than theatrical. The scene on the subway would be maddening to any theater viewer, but cinematically it possesses a sheer expressivity (Fig. 2). The gray, yellow, and white set is offset by the pale blue of the woman’s dress; the romantic music of the Astaire-Charisse duet is played against the bullets-blazing duets of the cartwheeling killers in the background; and all of it is further dramatized by the lights that continually flash by. But this is to mention only three instances in a twelve-minute sequence that goes through at least six set changes (plus the wig shop window and the red staircase)(Fig. 3). The “Girl Hunt” is flamboyant and extravagant in its overall *mise-en-scène*: sets, color (the pink instruments of the Dem Bones band!), camera movement, and editing are virtuosic.

The “Girl Hunt” also does not seem to belong to any musical sub-genre – to return to the question of its presence here– there are no lyrics either telling a story or describing character; rather it can

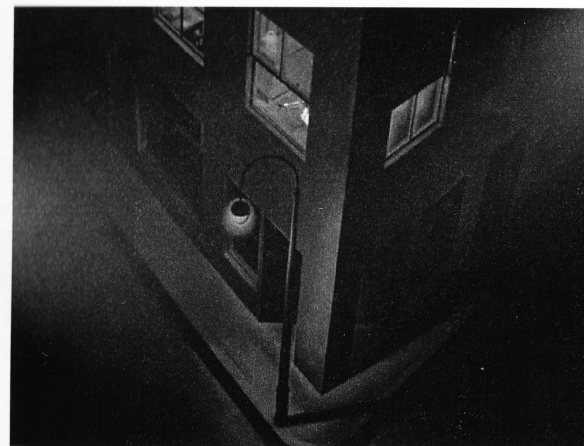


Figure 1 (Courtesy Photofest)



Figure 2 (Courtesy Photofest)



Figure 3 (Courtesy Photofest)

be seen as a balletic parody of film noir conventions. Entertainment aside, if we consider the “de-Mephistophelized extravaganza” argument and then look at the many clues I have toted up, only the explosion, the chandeliers, and the wall drawings could be inferred as having been taken directly from *Faust*; the yellow coat “belongs” to it only indirectly, as do the furs and the elderly women. The workroom is any generic “backstage,” while the wig and the hand-with-match come from the *Oedipus Rex* backstage scene. The jewel, again, is a transformed reference to the green gloves Gaby wears when she and Tony first meet. The subway, the ads, and the distorting mirror belong to Tony’s private cache of experiences. Something much more mysterious is taking place here.

## II. “The Girl Hunt” as Tony Hunter’s Dream

I believe that “The Girl Hunt” functions like a dream – is a dream, in fact, is *Tony Hunter’s dream* – that comes after the “waking life” of *The Band Wagon*, the Minnelli film we have been watching so far. The many arbitrary elements that I have pointed out and that have gone virtually unnoticed, are, in this view, nothing less than what Freudian dream analysis calls “the day’s residues.” The wig is a throw-away gag, the wall drawings are decorative, the furs are natural artifacts belonging to minor characters. In a word, Tony Hunter has taken elements of what has proceeded him from his arrival in New York through the disaster of *Faust* and transformed them into a dream. But if a dream, then a dream of what? Isn’t a dream supposed to “work something through”? Yes, indeed: I call “The Girl Hunt” the dream of Tony’s desire for Gaby.

Until Tony and Gaby danced alone, she was the haughty and austere property of her Svengali-like choreographer Paul Byrd (James Mitchell). Though from the very beginning Tony was content to “go my way by myself,” when he and Gaby dance together in the park – “in the dark”: is this a reference to cinema’s oneiric/erotic powers? – he clearly found a partner but failed to act upon the realization, as he will now in his dream. Once *Faust* failed and Gaby opted to go along with the gang and try out the new show, Tony fell in love with Gaby, as we have seen him admit to Lester. At the stage door, just before the musical’s opening, he almost declares his love to Gaby but instead only inquires if Paul will be in the audience. So then, as we see “The Girl Hunt” begin, Tony is in a state of anxiety. He is in love

with his dance partner but does not know if she is still in love with Paul. His dream begins, as — nudging us deeper and deeper into his unconscious — two curtains of illusion part.

He is Tony (the) *Hunter* playing *Rod* Riley, alone, cool, and phallic – necessarily so, because in this dream he must triumph, must assert his sexual self. He is attacked. A girl enters, she seems innocent and in need of care; she is wearing a/his yellow coat, signifying his desire to *embrace* Gaby. He is attacked again, and then in a fashion house – a theater of sorts – he encounters another woman, “bad ... dangerous.” Finally, he puts the clues together. He shoots Mr. Big, whom I interpret as a dream condensation of both Paul and Cordova, controlling male figures, but from inside Mr. Big’s coat emerges the “kid,” the Blonde, whom I see as the pre-“Dancing in the Dark” Gaby, the passive/masochistic Gaby, who allows Paul to run her career. Before Tony kills Mr. Big, the Brunette is there once more, and their hot number begins. Obviously, this is the post-“Dancing in the Dark” Gaby, the post-Paul Gaby: the sexually freed Gaby. She too needs that sexual assertion, needs to “kill” the pastel “kid” version of herself – “she had to die” – who is smothered by Cordova and Paul. As she dies, the “kid” hands him the jewel: can’t we also see this as Tony’s wish to un-do the past, that awful first meeting? Finally, the violence over, Rod is alone again, and as much as Tony (consciously) can say to himself once more that he is content to be “by myself,” in his dream he admits that “something was missing” – and the Brunette appears, and together they walk away, partners.<sup>6</sup>

## III. “The Girl Hunt” as Vincente Minnelli’s Dream

But is the dream only Tony’s? Is he the sole author of his dream? This being Hollywood, after all, and not Vienna, I think we are permitted to speak thus. What about those book covers, the posters and billboards, and even the candelabra? With titles such as “Dames Kill Me,” “Stab Me Sugar,” and “Kill Me Cutie,” the book covers, besides being a take on Spillane’s *Kiss Me Deadly*, are obviously masochistic as opposed to the more aggressive “*Girl Hunt*,” another reversal typical of dreams. The movie titles are melodramatic (“Journey to Love” and “Tears for Tomorrow”) as well as aggressive (“Jungle Tigress”). But there is one title that occurs in both the Penny Arcade scene and on “The Girl Hunt” wall: “The Proud Land.” As Stephen Harvey points out, “The Proud Land” is “the name of the fiasco that ruins Jonathan

Shields' career in *The Bad and the Beautiful*," which Minnelli made just prior to *The Band Wagon*.<sup>7</sup> As for the candelabra, they are not only reminiscent of those from the *Faust* set but also from the finale of *Lovely to Look At* (1952), which Minnelli filmed as a favor to Mervyn LeRoy (also pointed out by Harvey). So now we have at least two references from outside this film but within Minnelli's oeuvre inserting themselves into Tony's dream. Meaning what? Musicals as self-reflexive as *The Band Wagon* are also about the making of art, and about their own status as art objects. Recall the line concerning "someone has to be at the helm": it occurs no less than three times in the film, Cordova and each of the Martons saying it. Surely this is Minnelli's own self-assertion of directorial control. Another moment concerning art-making occurs just prior to "Dancing in the Dark" when Gaby and Tony proclaim that "We're the only things that matter in this whole thing, not those geniuses out there telling us what to do ... We're the ones who have to get up on that stage and make idiots of ourselves!" In this regard, I would suggest that Minnelli is asserting that yes, someone has to be at the helm, and certainly putting on a show – or making a film – is a collaborative effort, but more importantly, for any show or movie to be a success, the eventual responsibilities lie not so much with its director as especially with his star. Minnelli, ever the company man as his reputation would have it, is simply acknowledging the facts of the industry: except for cinephiles, no one goes to see a Vincente Minnelli film, they go to see one with stars such as Astaire and Charisse (possible exceptions being a Fellini or a Kubrick, and these days perhaps a Spielberg). The director may be at the helm, may add his technique and even artistry to the overall production, but the stars sell the tickets. In other words, we are confronted by the two issues of money and director-stars, or commerce and art.

*The Band Wagon* is awash with references to money, not only many small gestures or mentions of it (various tips, as well as references to *Faust* as a "gold mine," and the theater as "a place of business," and so on), but there are at least three major scenes involving commerce. The opening credits scene is all about Tony selling off his personal memorabilia so as, presumably, to maintain a certain lifestyle (just look at his luggage), and ends with the humiliation of nothing being sold. After the failure of the "*Faust*" *Band Wagon*, he generously offers to sell some more of his possessions, 19<sup>th</sup> century French paintings. He places the possession and actualization of his

own art, dancing, above his collection of art. But the crucial scene involving money is the one at Jeff's apartment when he convinces the backers to finance the play. Cordova's method is two-fold, histrionic, and humiliating. He acts out the parts of the play in such a way as to both amuse and startle his patrons. When his partners, Tony, the Martons, Paul, look in they are utterly baffled. He seems to have no pride in his art, but rather abuses it – he veritably grovels – in order to ensure a production. Tony, on the other hand, becomes his own backer. The second issue, the director-star, compounds the problem of the director "at the helm" and the stars as the "only things that matter." Tony has it both ways, he is director and star. Or we might say that Minnelli directs the *Band Wagon*, the film, while Tony directs under Minnelli's helmsmanship, and stars in the "Girl Hunt." Tony is a wholly dedicated artist who calmly acknowledges the role of finances in his art's realization. Although this reading poses a problem for an auteurist view of Minnelli, the critical world has always been divided about this issue, regarding him as, at the least, very talented but always the MGM employee. In Andrew Sarris's famous assessment he lies "This Side of Paradise," and "believes more in beauty than in art." I would simply conclude that Minnelli, like Tony, has it both ways: he is employee and auteur, he is the director at the helm who realizes the necessity of his stars for his art's (aesthetic and commercial) success.

Finally, Minnelli's honoring of his star, this "dream collaboration" of director and star, might be the most telling instance of the very many that refer to Fred Astaire's career in *The Band Wagon*: from the opening credits (cane and top hat) and the references to "Tony Hunter's" career in such films as *Sailing Down to Panama* (read *Flying Down to Rio*, 1933), to the first non-view of him behind a newspaper (as we first "do not" see him in *Top Hat*, 1935), and on to the mention of a "Gay Divorcée" in "That's Entertainment," and several more. Long before a dissolve enshrined Cary Grant's face on Mt. Rushmore in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) and just a year before Cukor would hint at Judy Garland's troubled life in *A Star is Born*, here was Minnelli honoring Fred Astaire. Curiously, although the main body of *The Band Wagon* is strewn with references to Astaire's career, I cannot detect any at all in "The Girl Hunt," making it even more pure a dream. If a "Utopian, liberating vision lies at the heart of the musical genre," as Jane Feuer claims in *The Hollywood Musical*, and "all Minnelli's films aspire to the condition

of the musical,” as Thomas Elsaesser asserts in his famous article on the director, then “The Girl Hunt” might be called the most sublime expression of that double, Minnellian/Astairean, wish.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion

Finally, I hope we can say that “the mystery of the mystery” of the “Girl Hunt” has been solved, as well as that of the four numbers that precede it and the “straight” narrative” that precedes them all. The film is a bricolage: of its type, the show musical sub-genre, as well as the various other sub-genres alluded to in the four numbers; a bricolage of its making: the Astaire career, the Comden and Green script, the Dietz and Schwartz songs; and a bricolage of its maker: *The Bad and the Beautiful*, Minnelli’s long, crucial involvement in the musical, *Lovely to Look At*, and other references. As well, it contains a bricolage number, “Shine on Your Shoes.” (Even the opening credits are comprised of three songs.) And, once it has abandoned any clear narrative trajectory or coherence (although unconsciously it’s there: get the girl, make the show a success), it closes on yet another number – the “Girl Hunt” – that possesses its own narrative and that is only *seemingly* unrelated to anything that has gone before, and that is furthermore a bricolage made of the elements of the film itself. “The Girl Hunt” is a dream – Tony Hunter’s Dream – that lies within a larger film/musical dream-assemblage of entertainment and satisfaction—of work and business, of art and partnership—dreamed by Vincente Minnelli, and called *The Band Wagon*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Her name is spelled both Gerard and Girard in the film, something MGM seemed not to notice, but then this paper is about what most viewers seem not to have noticed.

<sup>2</sup>This is certainly one of the great examples of what might be called “the American sublime,” alongside the church dance sequence of John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine* (1939), and Gene Kelly’s rendition of the title song in *Singin’ in the Rain*.

<sup>3</sup>As I will refer to it; it is actually billed as *The Band Wagon*, but this for now will serve to keep the potentially confusing productions clearer.

<sup>4</sup>*The Band Wagon*, it must be said, is also a curiously asexual film – that is, heterosexually asexual. “By Myself” Astaire just manages to make us believe that he and Charisse will find both artistic and

perhaps romantic partnership. Fabray’s attempts at sexual “oomph” fall flat. Levant, in one brief scene, ogles an overripe chorine, his obvious fantasy sexual partner of choice. Gaby is in artistic and sexual thrall to the cold-blooded Paul.

However, the film is also, and not too quietly, gay-coded. First place must go to Cordova (Minnelli displacing his own directorial role and his own supposed homosexuality here?), with his fastidious ways, mincing step and nellyish nervous gestures, his primping before a mirror, his calling Paul “Sweetie,” and the pastels of his apartment décor. Of course this can all be simply called theatrical excess, and not necessarily gay, but ambiguity – 1953, remember – is the point. Recall too those male chandeliers, and Mr. Big in drag. While one might see the Jack and Tony number “I Guess I’ll Have to Change My Plans” as two aging queens mourning lost love and going *their way* by themselves arm in arm, a more telling relationship might be that between Cordova and Hal (played by Robert Gist), identified as Jack’s “general manager,” and whom we see being quite at home in Cordova’s apartment, even emerging from one room at 3AM. In fact, this relationship between star producer and general manager might also be a backward glance to that between the director character Julian Marsh and his right-hand man Andy Lee in *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1933), a homosexual relationship that is hinted at in the film, but is explicit in the original source novel (though there it is between the director and a singer, the Dick Powell character, in fact).

<sup>5</sup>Perhaps it ought to be acknowledged that *The Band Wagon* is not, unhappily, a perfect film. Some of the dialog falls flat; *Shoe Shine* goes on too long; and finally, the film simply really is marred by Oscar Levant’s annoying performance.

<sup>6</sup>But recall too that outside the dream, at the actual conclusion of the film, after the show of “The Band Wagon” is over, Tony, still not knowing the condition of Paul and Gaby’s relationship, is once again content to go “by myself.” In the dream he may be sexually assertive and desiring, but in “real-life” he remains the stoic gallant; only recall also how in “Dancing in the Dark,” he let Gaby make the first move, something we can’t imagine the Astaire of the Ginger Rodgers films doing. And what about that line concerning the Brunette, “I wouldn’t trust her as far as I could throw her”? In the logic of dream language, I think Tony is saying to himself that he *would trust* her as far as he *could catch her*, and that would be very, very close; and that in

this phrase, and in these words, he is recalling his earlier humiliating failure to catch Gaby during a rehearsal, which led to his quitting the *Faust* production. As an aside, we might wonder here too why the number "Two Faced Woman" – available on the DVD – was cut from the original film. If my assumption of this double Gaby is correct, then perhaps the song might have appeared too obvious, superfluous even.<sup>7</sup> *The Proud Land* is also billed as being played by the "Clark Gibson Co." Can one hear here the echo of a swipe at MGM Art Director supreme Cedric Gibbons, with whom Minnelli famously did not get along?

<sup>8</sup> Further, could "The Girl Hunt" also be seen as the *audience's dream* of all that has gone before, thereby making it the most audience-involving of musicals, and thus achieving what Feuer and Altman desire, that is, not only an "audience identification" with the performers – or at least their audience – but in reading the film as I have been doing make us its real producers, the ones who finally "put it all together"? After all, I have only come to my reading of the film through repeated – and hardly passive – re-viewings of the film; my dream-reading has become one with Tony's. The viewer becomes the detective, reading the film both forwards and back, putting the clues together, and solving the case (the hunt, the dream), while Rod puts his few clues together – but for what end? After all, the "case" comes to him, not he to it; and what is his case anyway? Someone wants him dead; is that it? – we put together his clues, plus those of the film, in order to understand his (unconscious) desire, his – in both senses – "case"; and in order to understand the film, and thus, put the whole story together so as to achieve – as I am trying to do here – narrative cohesion.

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