



My Love Affair with Fred and Ginger

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I fell for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers one cold January afternoon when I was twelve years old. It was love at first sight.

If my parents had been home, I wouldn't have been watching television on a Saturday afternoon. I would have been outside, no matter what the temperature, because my mother believed in fresh air and exercise.

I was opposed to both, so I spent as much time as possible indoors, reading and, since both my parents worked, taking care of my brother. He was five years younger and could have set the house on fire or run away from home while in my care for all the attention I paid him. Fortunately he was used to being on his own, and occupied his time building scale model forts out of matches. (Now that I look back on it, it is surprising that he didn't set us all on fire trying to get the requisite number of burned matches for the next guard tower.)

That particular Saturday, I must have read all the *Nancy Drew* and *Cherry Ames, Student Nurse* books that I'd gotten for Christmas. I was bored. It was only January, and I was already tired of winter. So I turned on the TV. There weren't that many channels to choose from in those days, and afternoon programming was particularly bleak. There was wrestling, of course, but I wasn't desperate enough to watch that.



Swing Time

So I flipped the dial again and there they were: Fred and Ginger in "Swing Time." She was gorgeous. He was elegant. I loved the songs and I loved the dancing and I fell hard for the tuxedos, the evening gowns, the apartments with a view of the city, the fur coats and perky hats.

But I fell hardest for Fred and Ginger. They were the perfect couple. I knew from the moment they laid eyes on each other that they were destined to fall in love. Sure, he's engaged to someone else. In fact, Astaire is in New York simply to make enough money to pay off his gambling debts and return to his fiancée. But one look at Ginger, and he falls madly in love. He follows her. She rebuffs him. He finds out she's a dance instructor and arranges a lesson with her. Ginger is not amused when Fred turns out to be a marvelous dancer. But Fred continues his pursuit, and they waltz off together at the end of the movie.

That day, I became a Fred and Ginger fanatic. I spent the rest of my teen years obsessing over the TV listings so I wouldn't miss one of their movies.

Years later, I happened upon a late night showing of "The Band Wagon" with Astaire and Cyd Charisse. She was stunning with a wonderful long-limbed body. They danced beautifully. I was never so bored in my life. I couldn't for one minute believe these two had any interest in each other.

What is it, then, that holds our interest and makes us true believers in the couples we see on the screen? It doesn't seem to have much to do with their offscreen relationships. After all, Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn were real life lovers for many, many years. Their movies are all funny movies, fine movies, in fact, but the two stars seem as distant as if they had been introduced a moment before the director yelled "Action."

In "Woman of the Year," for example, Tracy is a sports reporter and Hepburn a political journalist. They don't seem to have anything in common, but they marry suddenly in a ceremony scheduled between her appointments and interviews. Shortly after their wedding, without Tracy's agreement, Hepburn adopts a war orphan, for whom it's apparent she has little real feeling. In fact, Hepburn expects the child to stay by himself one evening while she and Tracy go to a banquet where she is to receive the Woman of the Year award. Tracy, upset by Hepburn's behavior toward the boy, opts out of the banquet and, while Hepburn is gone, returns the boy to the agency and moves back to his own apartment. The next day, Hepburn decides to repair the damage to their marriage by showing up at Tracy's apartment to cook his breakfast in an attempt to show her domestic side. Since she can't cook, the breakfast is a debacle, but this charms Tracy into a reconciliation. In the final scene, Hepburn, the capable Woman of the Year political journalist, gets all giggly and perches on Tracy's knee in a kitchen dripping with



Woman of the Year

exploded pancake batter. And Tracy solemnly assures her that she can "just be herself" and he'll love her. What on earth do these two have in common except a cold-hearted streak that lets them adopt, then return, a child--like a sweater that didn't fit? I don't get a warm, happily-ever-after feeling as this movie fades out. Rather I find Hepburn and Tracy to be unlikable, even a little distasteful.

In "Desk Set," Hepburn is in charge of a TV-network research department. The network hires Tracy, an efficiency expert, to modernize her department by installing a giant computer. Hepburn is wary of Tracy since she and her co-workers believe they'll be fired once the computer is up and running. Hepburn has had a crush for years on a network executive, Gig Young, who strings her along but isn't really interested. Suddenly, Young is jealous of Tracy and invites Hepburn to a network function with him. Hepburn is thrilled and canoodles around the office exclaiming "He asked me...He finally asked me." A co-worker stops Hepburn in mid-pirouette: "Geez, I thought he finally asked you to marry him, not just go to dinner." Once the computer is installed, Hepburn finds that Tracy never intended her to be fired. The network needs her to manage the computer, which she is able to do by inserting her hairpin in the thing when it threatens to malfunction. She not only gets to keep her job, she gets Tracy.

Do I honestly believe that Katharine Hepburn would twirl around an office because someone wants to date her? That Katharine Hepburn needs hairpins to keep her bun in place? That Tracy would be interested in someone who thinks Gig Young is a catch? Did I mention the giant plant that has tendrils in every corner of Hepburn's office that she's nurtured for years? Is Tracy likely to move that specimen into his apartment along with Hepburn? I don't think so.

The plots of the Hepburn/Tracy movies seem based on the opposites attract cliché. And opposites they certainly are. But to make the cliché work, at some point the couple has to fall for each other in a way that makes us believe it. With Hepburn and Tracy, there are no meaningful glances or lingering touches, no passionate clinches. They don't even appear to notice each other's differences, let alone overcome them or be attracted because of them.



Bringing Up Baby Compare the Hepburn and Tracy films to Hepburn and Cary Grant in movies like "Holiday," "Bringing up Baby," and "The Philadelphia Story." The plots are similar to the Hepburn/Tracy movies: a man and a woman not much interested in each other at first end up together by the end of the movie. But there is an electricity in the Grant/Hepburn movies that is missing in the Tracy/Hepburn ones. In "Holiday," Grant is engaged to Hepburn's sister. When they first meet, Hepburn takes Grant to the playroom on the top floor of the family mansion. Grant is entranced by the drum set, the piano, the trapeze. Hepburn explains "Mother thought there should be one room where people could have fun." While joyfully riding a tricycle around the room, Grant explains his philosophy to Hepburn. "I've been working since I was ten and I need a holiday. I'm going to knock off and see the world: retire young and work old." When Grant sees her sister in the hall, she says "Do you realize that life walked into the house today? He's a breath of fresh air — he's your chance." But the sister has other ideas. She tells Grant "There's no such thrill as making money." He recoils and later, at a New Year's Eve party where his engagement is to be announced, Grant finds Hepburn in the playroom. She asks if he would care to waltz with her as the old year dies. As they dance, her face glows with love for Grant. He tries to kiss her, but she rebuffs him and sends him downstairs to her sister. But Grant calls off the engagement and announces plans to sail for Europe. Hepburn tries to talk her sister into joining Grant. The sister is clearly not interested. Finally Hepburn asks "Don't you love him?" and the sister replies "No...I'm so relieved he's gone I could sing." Hepburn's face lights up and she races out into the night, headed for Grant's ship and her life with him.

In "Bringing Up Baby," Hepburn is a daffy society girl who gets mixed up with an absent-minded zoologist, Grant. Add a yappy dog, a pet leopard named Baby, a lost dinosaur bone, and Grant's jealous fiancée, and you have the definitive screwball comedy. It's also definitive in the way the movie uses the opposites-attract plot. From their first meeting on a golf course where Hepburn blithely insists on hitting Grant's golf ball to their efforts to move Baby from her Manhattan apartment to her aunt's country home, their positions on just about everything are poles apart. About the ruined golf game, she says "It's only a game, isn't it"? After wrestling Baby out of a pond, Grant says "You look at everything upside down." They no sooner get Baby safely locked in her aunt's barn than he escapes and Hepburn and Grant, armed with a croquet mallet and a butterfly net, go off together to find him. Their search involves sliding down hills, crawling through thorny bushes, and wading across streams. Grant believes he could search faster without Hepburn and asks that she go home while he continues. She is astounded and asks plaintively "After all the fun we've had?" and breaks into sobs. Now it's Grant's turn to be astounded. He replies "Your face is dirty, Susan. Please stop crying." He leans in for a kiss, but changes his mind at the last minute. They do eventually recapture Baby and recover the lost bone. But they aren't yet a couple. Instead, Grant's fiancée has dumped him and he's alone in his museum workspace fitting the lost bone into place. Hepburn comes calling and climbs a very long ladder to Grant's perch. Her face aglow, she explains her actions throughout their adventures: "I was trying to keep you near me." His face is a study in contrasts: part exasperation and part tenderness. Suddenly his face clears and he says "I just discovered that that was the best day I ever had in my life." Hepburn is thrilled and begins to sway dangerously on the ladder. As she starts to fall, Grant grabs her and manages to haul her to safety, but the dinosaur exhibit

collapses completely. Grant is speechless as he sees years of work gone in an instant, but Hepburn keeps right on talking "Oh, oh, you do love me."

In "The Philadelphia Story," we have Hepburn and Grant as an older and (maybe) wiser couple. They were married and are now divorced, and she's engaged to be married again. Grant has arranged for a writer (Stewart) to attend Hepburn's wedding and chronicle it for *Spy* magazine, a sleazy tabloid. Stewart believes Grant's action is a way to get even with Hepburn for divorcing him, but Grant has actually made the arrangements to protect Hepburn's family from a proposed *Spy* article about Hepburn's father who has recently left her mother for a chorus girl. Within minutes of Grant and Hepburn's appearance, sparks fly. Hepburn doesn't want Grant anywhere near her as she prepares for her wedding, and she doesn't want her father there either. She's been bitterly disappointed by both of them and wants nothing to do with either one. But Grant and the father refuse to go away. In fact, in short order they each confront Hepburn with some rather harsh views of her behavior towards them. Grant, a recovering alcoholic, tells her that during their brief marriage, she was less a helpmate than a scold about his drinking. "Strength is your religion," says Grant. "You could be the finest woman on the earth but for your prejudice against weakness... You need to have some regard for human frailty." Before Hepburn can recover from that assessment, her father weighs in. He's reconciled with her mother, against Hepburn's wishes as she believes her mother should sue for divorce immediately. Now he's trying to explain his affair to Hepburn which he says had nothing to do with her mother and everything to do with his reluctance to grow old. Hepburn recoils as her father says "You lack an understanding heart... You might just as well be made of bronze." The final blow comes from her fiancé, who attempts to bolster her confidence by confiding "You're like some marvelous distant queen — a beautiful purity like a statue." Hepburn is completely undone that all three men describe her much the same way. Although Hepburn doesn't drink and disapproves of those who do, she begins to down champagne at an alarming rate and continues throughout her pre-wedding dinner. She and Stewart sneak out of the party at dawn and head for the pool for a swim. On the way Stewart confesses his attraction for her and says "There's a magnificence in you — you're lit from within. You've got fires within you, full of life and warmth and delight." Hepburn glows: finally a man who doesn't think she's a cold-hearted goddess. They kiss passionately and head for the pool. Grant and the fiancé show up just in time to see Stewart carrying a very groggy Hepburn across the lawn. Stewart explains that "We went swimming and when she hit the water, the wine hit her." Stewart puts Hepburn to bed while the fiancé fumes and Grant chortles with glee. The next morning all gather before the wedding. The fiancé demands an explanation from a very hung-over Hepburn. She doesn't remember much from the previous evening but what she does remember clearly distresses her. She admits to Grant that she must have "breached common decency." Grant does nothing to disabuse her of the idea. But Hepburn rallies when the fiancé keeps pressing her for an apology. She wheels on him and says "Somehow I hoped you'd think better of me than that." She breaks her engagement just as the orchestra begins to play "The Wedding March." Her father and mother appear and are clearly delighted that the fiancé has been sent packing. Her father offers to make an announcement to the guests who are gathered inside. But Hepburn says "I won't be gotten out of anything anymore. I'll make my own announcement." The announcement she makes, with some help from Grant, is that everyone is gathered for a wedding and a wedding there will be...she's going to remarry Grant. As she prepares to walk down the aisle, her father remarks that she looks like a goddess, and she replies, "I feel like a human being."

If I were rating screen couples on a scale from 1 (unbelievable) to 10 (fantastic chemistry), I'd give Hepburn and Grant a 12. They bicker, they fight, they confuse and confound each other. They care for each other and it shows in every glance and movement.

Then there's the offscreen movie couple who are absolutely believable in their films together, though they seem a very unlikely duo. Who would have picked Humphrey Bogart out of a lineup of potential romantic leads to pair with Lauren Bacall? She's young — very young — tall, good looking. He's none of these. But in their films together, whether in "The Big Sleep," "Dark Passage," or "Key Largo," they light up the screen. Bogie, the tough guy who's seen it all, meets his match in Bacall. True to his screen character, he doesn't melt at the sight of Bacall. He's not the melting kind. And Bacall is no flirtatious maiden. She isn't swept off her feet. Of course, this is film noir not drawing-room comedy, so there's nothing light-hearted or funny about the couples they play. But that's what makes them believable. In each movie, Bogie and Bacall play tough characters who forge an alliance under dangerous circumstances. Their attraction grows as the danger increases and they learn that they can depend on each other's strength.



The Big Sleep

And what about the couples who make only one or two appearances together? They don't have a history in film or real life, but they make you believe they do. I'm thinking about Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in "Gone with the Wind," Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn in "The African Queen," Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in "Casablanca," Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland in "The Adventures of Robin Hood," Robert Redford and Paul Newman in "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid."

What do they have in common? A sense of humor, a lightness, an ease that makes you think there's a shared history. There's a passion, a respect for the other person, a friendship. So maybe what we're

looking for in screen couples is what we're looking for in our own lives: someone who loves us for what we are or could become, who respects us, who can share a laugh. Someone true to him- or herself. And, if we're very lucky, someone who can dance like Fred or Ginger.

VIDEOGRAPHY

"Swing Time," George Stevens, director. Starring Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Betty Furness, Victor Moore, Helen Broderick. Run time: 105 minutes. RKO Home Video, 1985 (theatrical release 1936).

"The Band Wagon," Vincente Minnelli, director. Starring Fred Astaire, Cyd Charisse, Jack Buchanan, Nanette Fabray. Run time: 112 minutes. MGM/UA Home Video, 1991 (theatrical release 1953).

"Woman of the Year," George Stevens, director. Starring Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Fay Bainter, Reginald Owens. Run time: 112 minutes. MGM/UA Home Video, 1997 (theatrical release 1942).

"Desk Set," Walter Lang, director. Starring Spencer Tracy, Katharine Hepburn, Joan Blondell, Dina Merrill, Gig Young. Run time: 103 minutes. Twentieth Century Fox, 1992 (theatrical release 1957).

"Holiday," George Cukor, director. Starring Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, Lew Ayres, Edward Everett Horton, Binnie Barnes. Run time: 93 minutes. Columbia Tristar Studios, 1993 (theatrical release 1938).

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"The Philadelphia Story," George Cukor, director. Starring Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, James Stewart, Ruth Hussey. Run time: 112 minutes. MGM/UA Home Video, 1992 (theatrical release 1940).

"The Big Sleep," Howard Hawks, director. Starring Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Martha Vickers, Bob Steele, Elisha Cook, Jr., Dorothy Malone. Run time: 114 minutes. MGM/UA Home Video, 1991 (theatrical release 1946).

"Dark Passage," Delmer Daves, director. Starring Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Bruce Bennett, Agnes Moorehead. Run time: 106 minutes. Warner Studios, 2000 (theatrical release 1947).

"Key Largo," John Huston, director. Starring Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Edward G. Robinson, Claire Trevor, Lionel Barrymore. Run time: 101 minutes. Warner Studios, 2000 (theatrical release 1948).

"Gone With the Wind," Victor Fleming, director. Starring Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Leslie Howard, Olivia de Havilland, Thomas Mitchell, Hattie McDaniel. Run time: 222 minutes. Warner Studios, 2000 (theatrical release 1939).

"The African Queen," John Huston, director. Starring Humphrey Bogart, Katharine Hepburn, Robert Morley, Theodore Bikel. Run time: 106 minutes. CBS/Fox Video, 1997 (theatrical release 1951)

"Casablanca," Michael Curtiz, director. Starring Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Claude Rains, Paul Henreid, Peter Lorre, Sydney Greenstreet. Run time: 102 minutes. MGM/UA Home Video, 1988 (theatrical release 1942).

"The Adventures of Robin Hood," Michael Curtiz, director. Starring Errol Flynn, Olivia de Havilland, Basil Rathbone, Claude Rains, Alan Hale, Sr. Run time: 106 minutes. Warner Studios, 2000 (theatrical release 1938).

"Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," George Roy Hill, director. Starring Paul Newman, Robert Redford, Katharine Ross. Run time: 112 minutes. CBS/Fox Home Video, 2000 (theatrical release 1969).