# Dance and the Hollywood Musical

Transcription of podcast 1

1. **Introducing the context**

My name is Sherril Dodds and welcome to my podcast on “Dance and the Hollywood Musical”. So why should we be so interested in the Hollywood musical?

The end of the silent era in 1928 marks the beginnings of Hollywood’s domination of the film industry and with this came the creation of the musical.

From the 1930s to the early 1950s there was a flood of film musicals produced by major Hollywood studios such as MGM, RKO and Warner Brothers.

Although the musicals employed a loose narrative structure, at regular intervals this would be suspended as the actors would break into elaborate song and dance routines. So put on your dancing shoes and let’s take a look in a little more depth!

We are going to explore the Hollywood musical through the work of film and television scholar Jane Feuer. In particular, we are going to look at her 1982 book *The Hollywood Musical*. Although this is a relatively old piece of research, she is one of the few film musical scholars to examine the dance itself. She also begins to raise some interesting arguments about the shift from live performance to the mass medium of film.

So my aim here is to draw out some of her key arguments and then leave you with a set of questions which I would like you to consider before we next meet. I therefore want to turn our attention to her first chapter which focuses entirely on the subject of dance. The title of this chapter is “Mass art as folk art”.

Her basic argument is that, although the musical is a mass art form, it sets out to create an impression of being folk art. So how did she arrive at this argument?

Before we go any further, we need to go back a little bit and look at the early days of film. One of the first people to move to live music hall entertainment to the movies was the popular singer Al Jolson. With the transition from stage to film, Jolson tried to develop a style of performing that would create a direct sense of direct contact between himself and the audience.

So in these early Hollywood musicals Jolson would play an entertainer based on his stage persona and use songs from his live shows that the audience could sing along to. His aim here was to break down the barrier of the cinema screen as if he was right there in front of his audience. Feuer argues that this approach then continued with the Hollywood musicals trying to capture the quality of live performance on screen.

So this brings us to the question: Why is it problematic to create a sense of live performance on screen? We can argue that the immediacy of live entertainment is placed in direct opposition to the technological reality of cinema. Film is not a live medium but a recorded art. Therefore what the Hollywood musical set out to do was create an impression of the direct spontaneous performance.

The thinking behind Feuer’s argument is that the medium of film alienates the film audience. What then does she mean by this alienation, and how did it come about? Her suggestion is that the advent of cinema and movie stars marks the transition from folk art to mass art. One of the characteristics of folk art is that there is no distinction between performers and audience and everyone participates in the live dancing moment.

The Hollywood musical however is different from folk art. First of all, it involved mechanical reproduction and mass distribution. Secondly, the people are spectators rather than participants. So it could be said to distance or alienate its audience. Whereas the folk community may all perform an event, in the Hollywood musical there is a separation of performer and audience. There is also a sense of alienation in terms of the screen. The live presence of the performer is removed via the screen and the performance is not direct, but a mediated one.

So what does the musical attempt to do to counteract this alienation? Well, Feuer suggests that the musical attempts to close the gap between the audience and the performer by pushing the notion of ‘community’ as an ideal concept.

So to compensate for the alienating or distancing effects of cinema as a mass art form, the Hollywood musical sets out to create an impression of folk relations in the film. Through a number of devices, it tries to create a strong sense of folk community. Feuer identifies four ways in which the Hollywood musical attempts to create an impression of folk art.

Before we look at these four approaches, I think it might be time to take a break and look at a film clip.

When this part of the podcast comes to an end, please look at clip number 1 from the film *Swing Time*. As you are watching it, begin to think about the extent to which you are drawn in as a viewer and the extent to which you feel alienated from what it is taking place on screen.