Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Legacy of Gene Kelly

Sarah Elgart · Wednesday, January 7th, 2015

It's a new year full of new promise, new ideas, and, of course, new dance films. But before moving ahead into the future, this week's *ScreenDance Diaries* is about taking a look back at the late, great, Gene Kelly, whose life and legendary work is the subject of a unique and compelling evening presented by his widow, biographer, and confidante, Patricia Ward Kelly. **Gene Kelly: The Legacy, An Evening with Patricia Ward Kelly** will be presented at The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts for a single performance on Saturday, January 10, 2015 at 8:00 pm in the Bram Goldsmith Theater.

An incredibly athletic dancer, Gene Kelly exuded a sense of absolute grace, masculinity, effortlessness, and often sheer joy that endured through the most challenging of dance numbers. I had the pleasure of speaking to Patricia Ward Kelly, and learning some of the many compelling facts about her late husband that her production is laced with.

"People don't realize the dimensions to him… That he read a book a day, that he read Latin, that he choreographed and directed, his humility, what kind of person he was… How romantic he was in the way he looked at the world."

Patricia's first job was as a journalist, and, in fact, they fell in love when she was hired by Kelly to write his memoirs and later married. She spent months sorting through piles of production records & notes (all of which are part of USC's Arthur Freed Collection) including minute-by-minute accounts of what took place on his sets. In addition to starring in them, Gene Kelly was often directing and choreographing his films, as well as conceiving numbers from the ground up. And he was committed to having dance be more than extractable eye candy. He understood the power of dance on film to move people emotionally, and equally importantly, he believed in its significance and potential as being an integral tool to moving a story along.

*"Films like **Singin' in the Rain** would have a batch of songs already written and then they would look at Gene and ask 'Gene, what are you going to do for that number?' And he would say, 'Well, I guess I'm going to have a guy dancing in the rain.'"*

But Kelly knew that for that number to soar off, the screen it had to be all about a guy in love.

Gene Kelly steps behind the camera to direct "Invitation to the Dance"

Passionate, precise, and dedicated, Gene Kelly was sometimes referred to as a taskmaster who

would not cut corners, but according to Patricia Kelly, *"He would never ask of someone else what he would not ask of himself."* Re-watching clips that Kelly both danced in and choreographed like "Singin' in the Rain" and "Make "Em Laugh", I was blown away by their detail and musicality (check out Donald O'Connor's face in the latter number) and amazed to learn that many of these elements were conceived and visualized by Kelly while *not* dancing:

"Gene was very intense & cerebral… He would often create things sitting in a chair at night. People would always try to attach deep meaning to things like "Singin' in the Rain" but for him the whole point of his work was to bring joy and to create something that was contemporary and yet timeless".

Having been invited years ago to participate as a choreographer/director in the Sundance Dance Film Labs and studying with the likes of Stanley Donen and the late great choreographer Michael Kidd, I was astonished to learn that Gene Kelly had brought Donen on as director, and co-directed this film with him. And I of course wanted to know how much Gene thought about the camera and the relationship of dance and film.

"Gene actually became a director in order to have more control over the way dance was seen. He choreographed exactly with the camera in mind. He was always thinking about how the camera would view the dance. He called the camera the 'one eyed monster', and came up with kinetics, and different things with light and color to create a third dimension. He also realized that what you created for the camera had to be shorter than for the stage… And he was very insistent that you shot the whole body from head to toe."

While today there is a whole new technology, very different points of view, new interfaces, and new genres of dance films, we owe a great debt of gratitude for the masterful work of Gene Kelly, whose stand for dance and whose iconic work has contributed to both the collective American cultural consciousness and to an amazing legacy of film history.

"No one looks at his work and says that it's so dated and old. Dancers and choreographers are still going to the well of that work and they look at it – classical jazz, hip-hop, and modern dancers alike… He died 19 years ago in February, and his films are still touching people and inspiring people."

Patricia Ward Kelly's presentation combines rare and familiar film clips, previously unreleased audio recordings, personal memorabilia and insights culled from the hours of interviews and conversations she had with her husband, and ultimately touches on the man, the legend, and his extraordinary work.

For tickets and info about **Gene Kelly: The Legacy, An Evening with Patricia Ward Kelly** go to: http://www.thewallis.org

http://youtu.be/rmCpOKtN8ME

This entry was posted on Wednesday, January 7th, 2015 at 9:51 pm and is filed under Film, Dance
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