

On Ginger's Dress

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Ginger Rogers (1911-1995) was twenty-three years old in 1934 and preparing a duet with the legendary dancer Fred Astaire (1899-1987) for the film "Top Hat," their second film together. Fred and Ginger's dance was to the song "Cheek to Cheek" and set in Venice by a canal. The elaborate canal set occupied two sound stages at the Hollywood movie studio and included water and gondolas. This thought has to do with a conflict that arose over what dress Ginger should wear for her "Cheek to Cheek" dance with Fred. I think the way Ginger handled this episode illustrates exemplary care for one's work, and great personal integrity and courage. And I think it also says something about how a parent can encourage those qualities. Even though "Top Hat" was early in Fred's movie career, he was already a major figure in the entertainment world, having been highly successful in vaudeville and on Broadway. Ginger, in contrast, was just starting out. Plus Fred was the prime force in the film they were making; for all practical purposes he was Ginger's employer. So Fred was somebody, and standing up to him, as Ginger did, was something.

During rehearsals for "Top Hat," the dress designer for the film, Bernard Newman, asked Ginger what kind of dress she wanted for "Cheek to Cheek." "I want a blue dress," she replied. "Pure blue with no green in it at all. Like the blue you find in the paintings of Monet." "Top Hat" was to be a black and white film, but Ginger knew that color mattered even if the audience would never see it. It would affect the mood and thus her and Fred's performance. "I would love the dress to be made of satin with myriads of ostrich feathers," Ginger continued, "and that it be low in the back and high in the front." Newman saw to it that a dress was made in accordance with Ginger's wishes.

On the morning of the day of shooting "Cheek to Cheek," Fred and Ginger rehearsed in ordinary clothes. Filming the dance in costume was to be in the afternoon. During the mid-day break Ginger was in her dressing room. The director of the film, Mark Sandrich, came to talk to her: "Ginger, when we saw the dress being brought in, all of us around the camera immediately disliked it. I really would like to send upstairs to wardrobe and get your 'Gay

Divorcee' dress [a white dress that Ginger had worn in a dance with Fred in their first film]." Ginger suspected that it was really Fred—not "all of us"—that didn't like the dress, and that Fred had sent Sandrich to do his dirty work. Fred's memoirs, written decades later, reveal that Ginger's suspicions were well founded.

"But Mark," Ginger responded, "that white dress has already been seen by the public."

"They won't remember it, Ginger."

Ginger didn't immediately accede to what amounted to an order to change the dress, even though she was pretty sure it had come from the top, Fred, and that her job could well be on the line. Instead, she said, "I want to call my mother about this."

When Ginger's mother arrived, Ginger explained the situation to her. "Ah, Lela," said Sandrich, "I'm so glad that you are here. You can convince Ginger to wear this graceful white dress she wore in 'Gay Divorcee' instead of this, this, this . . . feathered thing."

"I think this blue one is beautiful," Ginger interjected.

Ginger's mother inspected the dress. "It's gorgeous, Ginger. You mean Mark wants you to wear that worn-out white dress instead of this lovely blue feathered one? Mark, I'm sorry, but I agree with Ginger. This blue feathered thing, as you call it, is a lovely gown, and I think she should wear it."

"Mother, it's either that dress or home I go. So wait here for a while. You may have to take me home."

"Don't go back [to the sound stage] unless you really want to," her mother told her.

Sandrich then excused himself, saying he had to get back to the set.

After a few minutes, Ginger and her mother began walking out of the film studio and, very possibly, for Ginger, away from a movie career.

An assistant caught up with them on the street. "Miss Rogers, would you come back on stage? Mr. Sandrich suggests you rehearse once in the dress . . . the blue one."

When Ginger got to the set it was clear from the look on his face that Fred really didn't like the dress, and he was cool and aloof through a run-through. Nevertheless Ginger was determined to press on and they filmed the dance in the blue dress. "My 105 pounds couldn't have gotten me through without my mother," Ginger said later. "She was there to support me."

The next day everyone gathered to watch the rushes (unedited takes of the filming) of “Cheek to Cheek.” Coldness still prevailed: no one in the room, including Fred, as much as acknowledged Ginger’s presence. The lights lowered and all eyes turned to the screen and the images of Fred and Ginger as they glided and whirled in Venice. “As I was saw my beautiful dress in motion,” Ginger said later, “I was incredibly pleased and happy. I was enthralled just watching it move across the screen.” And so was everyone else in the room enthralled. And so have been those who have seen it in the many decades since, first in theaters and now on DVD: that dance, and the dress with the feathers that contributed so much to it, has become a classic part of movie history.

After the great success of “Top Hat” and the “Cheek to Cheek” duet, Ginger received a plain white box with a tailored bow in the mail. Inside were a gold feather and a card that said:

Dear Feathers,

I love ya.

Fred.

Source: Robert Gottlieb, editor, *Reading Dance: A Gathering of Memoirs, Reportage, Criticism, Profiles, Interviews, and Some Uncategorizable Extras* (Pantheon Books, 2008).