

Love Me Tonight

By Richard Barrios

It can and should be called many things: magical, rapturous, unique, charming, audacious, unforgettable and, to beat a dying warhorse, masterpiece. “Love Me Tonight” deserves all those words, plus one more that may be somewhat less blissful, yet more resonant: paradoxical. The roster of truly great musical films is not a large one, and this one is peculiarly Janus-like. It gazes back upon and sums up the first era of musical cinema, with its experimentation and adventure and try-anything-once vigor; at the same time, it looks ahead to all the gleam and polish that would follow. It culminates and it anticipates, drawing from its predecessors as it forges exciting new paths. Nor does the contradiction end there, for it is a work both Continental and American, elegant and brash, coming from a time in history fraught with despair yet rich in hopeful creativity. Many decades after its original release in 1932, it remains less well-known than it warrants even as vastly inferior works are enshrined. Its brilliant director, Rouben Mamoulian, has seldom received his due, and other key personnel—Maurice Chevalier, Jeanette MacDonald, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart—have been more celebrated for other, often lesser, work. There was also, sadly, the ignominy, in the late 1940s, of some ridiculous censorship cuts that have never been restored. All these, of course, are forces beyond the film itself. Let the work at hand speak, and sing and soar, for itself. It is, after all, quite a simple and provable truth: “Love Me Tonight” is a great film, and along with “Singin’ in the Rain” and a very few others it resides at the very pinnacle of movie musicals, and at the apex of popular art.

“Love Me Tonight” was not, strictly speaking, a wholly original work. It had its basis in a French play called “The Tailor in the Chateau,” and in a vaguer sense in the previous musical films in which Chevalier and MacDonald had appeared. Nevertheless, it makes its own innovative way from the very first frames of its Paramount trademark. The opening mood is one of odd expectancy, with plain and generic onscreen credits and underscoring made of hesitant little snatches, none of it necessarily announcing that a musical is about to unfold. Then, as a bell tolls on the soundtrack, a series of shots show



A tailor (Maurice Chevalier) examines Jeanette MacDonald's leg, for strictly professional reasons. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Paris in early morning, each edit hitting with a chime. The camera focuses on a sleepy district where a laborer strikes the pavement with his pickaxe. Cut to a bum snoring in an alley, then a charwoman sweeping a front step. Thump, snore, swish, and as more people rise to begin their day the sounds grow in number and rhythm, the editing faster and more percussive. Clearly, there's a nervy master in charge, and his name is Mamoulian. The collage of sound and image continues and builds, a riot of reckless decorum, until finally the camera peeps through a window to discover a straw hat. It hangs on a wall, above a set of plaster cracks that seem to describe a certain jaunty head and body. Pan to a head popping up through a turtleneck—and Maurice Chevalier begins his own day by complaining, “Lovely morning song of Paris, you are much too loud for me!” He bangs the window shut, then capitulates by saluting the city with “The Song of Páree.” Before many minutes, he will sing “Isn't It Romantic?,” which will travel through Paris and into the countryside to finally reach a lovelorn princess on the balcony of a remote castle. Chevalier has wakened to a Parisian song, and his own music will link him with Jeanette MacDonald even before they meet. Thus might the remainder of “Love Me Tonight” be termed a follow-through, and with such songs as “Lover” and “Mimi,” and in the company of such delightful performers as Charlie Ruggles and Myrna Loy, it's quite the bewitching journey. (Witty, too—Loy plays the most genial nymphomaniac in movie history.) Mamoulian's bag of tricks is bottomless: odd camera angles, unexpected sound effects

that make a dropped vase turn into a sonic boom, slow motion, direct-to-camera address, homage to silent film, and much more. When Chevalier and MacDonald finally have their big love scene, they do so at one remove, performing the title song in a split-screen, each asleep and dreaming of the other in duet. Mamoulian is, among many other things, quite the droll Cupid.

When it opened in early autumn of 1932, "Love Me Tonight" was not a financial success. In that dark a time, ecstatic reviews could not float a profit for an essentially intimate piece costing over a million dollars. In a sense, it was too good, surely too rarefied, for its own time. Musicals were virtually *persona non grata* at this point, and when they came back into currency the following year they would do so as brassy backstage stories ("42nd Street") or even operettas ("Naughty Marietta"), not chic fairy tales. Not that it wouldn't have great influence, since numerous films copied that "Romantic" song being carried along and tried to duplicate some of its effects. Still, there could be few or no rivals; work on this level is simply not reproducible. It holds more romantic sincerity than the Ernst Lubitsch mock-operettas, and more wry sophistication than is contained in the films Jeanette MacDonald would make with Nelson Eddy. The closest, in spirit and inventiveness, would be the

best of the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers canon, which are vastly different in most ways. (In "Love Me Tonight," the principals don't dance, and don't need to—the camera and microphone and editing take care of it.) Thus does Mamoulian's captivating fable remain singular and precious, a timeless interweaving of fine music, wonderful people, and abundant humor. And, yes, it is one of the great love stories. When that gorgeous Rodgers melody floats along to a distant balcony, a viewer can only agree with those enchanted lovers Maurice and Jeanette. "Isn't It Romantic?" Absolutely.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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