

An Interview with Leslie Caron



Leslie Caron in "Gigi" (1958)

In June of 2021, just a few weeks shy of her 90th birthday, Leslie Caron shared with the Library of Congress some of her favorite moments starring with Gene Kelly, Louis Jourdan and Cary Grant. She tells how she made her debut in “An American in Paris,” some behind the scenes of “Gigi,” the brilliance of Cecil Beaton and those beautiful costumes, and what her life was like post-war in France.

“Gigi” (1958) was inducted into the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 1991 and “An American in Paris” (1951) in 1993.

I am honored to be speaking with you. What an amazing career you’ve had!

Thank you! Well, compared to some other actresses, I think I’ve done so very little, but I was lucky. I had great partners and even greater directors, and that’s what matters.

Well, you are incredibly talented. Your dancing is stunning. Let's start with "An American in Paris."

Well you know, the thing was everybody was very young. We were, in fact, having loads of fun. There was sort of a *cool party* spirit during the film. Great enthusiasm and everybody loved Gershwin's music. It just was so wonderful putting a ballet company together. That's the thing that one forgets about ballet, about dancing, is how much fun we're having. Although, it's really really hard work, but at the same time, it's just lots and lots of fun.



Let's talk about Gene Kelly and the chemistry you had with him while dancing. I won't say he "found" you, because you were already a wonderful dancer, but he appreciated you enough to insist that you audition for the film. Is that how it went down for "An American in Paris?"

He sneaked into the audition, and told me "I could get fired for this, but I really think you could play the part." He said, "I was sent to Paris to audition another girl who is not such a good dancer and is not practicing like you are. But, I somewhat think you are going to be the one."

So, I accepted out of politeness to tell you the truth. I wasn't thinking about a career in the movies.

Who wouldn't want to dance with him?

I didn't know anything about him. I had never seen any of his films. I knew of the existence of Fred Astaire, because my mother did speak about him. Post war in France, nobody knew who Gene Kelly was. But, it so happened that I shared this dressing room at the *Les Ballets des Champs Elysee* with a Constantine. Her husband, Eddie, was a singer and he somehow he had a connection with Gene.

Eddie came and said "There is a great star who would like to meet you and make a test with you." I said, "What! Who? What is that?" I knew nothing about Gershwin or jazz, I was strictly into Bach and very classical, but to be polite, I said I would meet him.

I went to the George V (hotel) where Gene was staying and met him. He was very nice, polite and respectful. He made me speak a few lines. He said "I just want to hear the sound of your voice, and can you speak any English?" I said in a very strong French accent, "Nope, not really."

But, I did hear my mother and father speaking English when they didn't want us children to understand, which is the best way to learn a language. <laughs> But, I did the test and I thought that was that. I forgot entirely about it. Then, I got the phone call and here we are.

What are your favorite moments with Gene Kelly in the movie? Are there any moments that are endearing and that you will never forget?

Well, definitely not the acting. I had never spoken on a stage. Ballet is totally silent. I was extremely shy and somehow introverted, so that was difficult for me.

I had to call after him, "Jerry, if it means anything to you, I love you." I nearly died.

What I did love was dancing to Gershwin's music. I simply adored Gershwin. I took to Gershwin like a duck to water.



The 17 minute ballet is so beautiful. It must have taken forever to shoot with so many scenes and outfits. Tell us about those 17 beautiful minutes.

When we did the shoot, all of MGM thought that Arthur Freed, the producer, was insane to put a 17 minute ballet at the end of a film. They thought that he really had made a big mistake. But, as you know, he didn't.

No, it's probably one of the most famous beautiful and famous scenes in a movie!

It is! Every time you see a new costume, it meant a whole week they had to tear down the existing sets and build a new one. During which time, we rehearsed and got ready to film the new sequence. Shooting the ballet took about a month.

And, no doubt expensive!

In those days, everybody was under contract. From the top talent, to the shoe maker, to costume maker, and all the orchestra. Everybody was under contract with set salaries. I think this is a little bit of the reason why they stopped making musicals, because when you didn't have all those technicians under contract anymore it just became prohibitive.

Let's talk about Vincente Minnelli. He seemed to really love art. Between "An American in Paris" and "Gigi," he used a lot of art in those films.

Well, you know he was an art designer. That was his profession, a set designer to begin with. He came from a family that was on the road and performing, but I think from the start he had the talent to design. He was fascinated by paintings and sculptures.



As a matter of fact, on the set, he and I were always concerned with the colors and the set, and the placement of people. Are you in front of a door, in front of a lamp, or in front of a wall? All of that was very important to him, and to me. He was very concerned with the physical aspect of the set.

We got along so well, and I simply adored working with him because of his good taste and his sense of rhythm. This is why it's not dated.

In 1993, the Library of Congress put the film in the National Film Registry...

I thought it was for "Gigi!"

Both are in! "Gigi" went in first in 1991, but in 1993, "An American in Paris" was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry.

Oh wonderful, because everything about "Gigi" is so good. Everything from the colors, the photography, casting of all the actors is so right, and of course the direction is just wonderful. And, we had a great script writer.

You got to work with Minnelli again for "Gigi." In "Gigi," you don't dance. Now you are an actress.

Yes, but you know, I am the one who asked the producer Arthur Freed to do "Gigi." I was doing a little black and white musical called "Lili," and Arthur Freed said it was just not his style at all. He came to see me on the set, which was something he never did. He would never barge in on the set. "Lili" was not his production.



He was very upset and said "Look at what they are doing to you! This old costume you are wearing, this miserable hat, no make-up and you've got flat shoes. You look like an orphan."

I said "I am playing an orphan!" <laughs> He said, "I've got to glamorize you again! Have you any ideas?"

I came up with two or three ideas, and he said no. Then I said "What about Gigi?" He said "Ohhh, I'll get back to you on that."

It took him about a year and half to get the rights because Collette (the author) had so many lovers and husbands that she had distributed the rights to so many different people.

It was difficult to obtain the rights and then there was also a slight problem of censorship.

Well... it wasn't a slight problem.

The first version written by Alan J. Lerner was straight acting from the book. Arthur Freed must have felt that he was going to have trouble with censorship, so he decided to make it into a musical.

The censorship back then was the Hays Code, and “Gigi” rode the fine line of the Hays Code because the whole idea is that Gigi is becoming a courtesan and she was being groomed.

She is being groomed. All of those lessons were how to please men. You know, I knew more about that than the director did. American was very democratic and the profession of courtesan didn't exist. I am the one who had seen women light up the cigar for a man. I'd seen that in restaurants and fancy places. I am the one who directed that scene at Maxims.

I wonder if the fact that it was French maybe helped it get away with it?

It's well known that the French are very naughty and not correct in that sort of department. (laughs) There are women who sell their services and etcetera.

Yes, there are not a lot of people, like Maurice Chevalier, who could get away with singing “Thank Heaven for Little Girls.”

Nobody thought anything of that at the time.

I read that they made Gigi reach the age of consent. She was now old enough.

I was never made aware of that and we never talked about that during the film.

The costumes and the whole Maxims scene are really beautiful.

I think one of the major characters of that film is Cecil Beaton (the designer), and beauty of the décor and the costumes.

It's absolutely beautiful. Cecil was there every morning at 7am changing the vases and changing flowers on top of the hats. It was quite amusing to see. He had about 25 hat frames and every day he would change the *garniture* -whether it was ribbons, cherries or bows, roses or feathers- on top of the hat. He kept changing them for different costumes and different girls. He really contributed an awful lot to the beauty of the film. His name is not on the décor, but he is in fact the one who designed the décor.

Cecil Beaton was a great designer for that period. He was amazingly famous in England for everything Victorian, Edwardian and turn of the century.

He knew how the dresses had to be built, the corsets, the hats and the hair. He was fierce about the makeup. He did not want the girls to have false eyelashes or to have rouge, lipstick and all of that. It would not have been correct. Putting on lipstick was fashionable when we did the film, but unfashionable for 1900. Women didn't wear lipstick, they had a bit of rouge, very discreet, and the skin had to be very very white. Nobody was allowed to have a suntan. You had to have white skin.

Let's talk about your costumes. That white dress with the birds. Just beautiful!

I know. That was total chance. When he gave me the designs, I said "what a fabulous idea of the birds." He said "Birds? I didn't design birds, but if you want birds, we can have birds." He had designed velvet bows, but to me they looked like birds. If you saw the original drawing then you would say the same.

Louis Jourdan. Another handsome, talented leading man. Were you intimidated with him?

No, we were like cousins. He came from the south and was very good at cooking spaghetti. He had this melodious voice. His voice was just so charming. He was extremely charming and a wild personality that was quite spirited.

In real life, he was somebody who was obsessed with classical music. In between scenes to quiet himself, he would put on earphones and listen to classical music. He liked classic literature, was well-educated, loved history and loved classical theater. He was extremely polite and well-mannered. The manners you see him have on the screen were not directed by the director, he automatically was extremely courteous.

What made you recommend "Gigi" to Arthur Freed?

The reason that I had mentioned "Gigi" to the producer, Arthur Freed, was because I had read everything I could find written by Colette.

I was an avid reader of Colette's literature and her description of her young days at school. Everything she wrote was so fascinating. She was raw. In French, she used fancy words and said things as they were. She was very interested in what we called the "*living monde*" meaning the courtesan. It was the lot for women in those day. You were either a wife and were a sort of slave to your husband, or you were "living modern" and lived thanks to the generosity of gentleman. She was interested in both worlds.



Colette was a French country girl. Very bright and curious with a wonderful mother. Her writing is just the best thing to come out of Burgundy, except for the wine, which was also very good. <laughs> And of course, it is a masterpiece in France. It's considered a very important story.

Would Colette have liked the movie?

I think she would have adored it. She didn't live long enough. She died just before we started doing the film, but she would have absolutely adored it.

The scene of you (as Gigi) in Maxims where you have taken on the role of the courtesan, and he doesn't want that for you, is a very powerful scene.

Yes, he's sort of shocked to see what they are trying to make her out to be. Absolutely not what he wants.

It's not really what Gigi wants. She never wanted that either.

No, absolutely not. She thought it was the only exit to their relationship. She knows that in her family women do not marry. She thought that was going to have to be her lot.



In the end, she stood her ground...

She stood her ground. I think that she managed to manipulate him until the end of life. I think she had enough charm and wit, and personality and individuality to get him to behave well.

I think it is a very good match and a very good marriage.

Looking back, what is one of your fondest memories of filming "Gigi?"

We had fabulous fun on the beach. I just adored the scene where she is in between being a little girl and a young lady. She comes out with a "fru-fru" white dress. She thinks he is going to be impressed, and he calls her a "dressed up monkey." She is profoundly hurt. I loved that scene.

It was quite difficult to play, honestly. It's laughable. It's comic and touching, and I loved playing it.

The transformation is hard to do. We've seen that in other films with "Sabrina," "My Fair Lady," and in your case little Gigi to adult Gigi.

It demands rigorous honesty.

You are a fantastic singer. What happened with Gigi because there are parts where you are singing and parts where they dubbed you? I've never understood that.

Well, I'll explain. Ballet dancers breathe quite differently than a singer. In dancing, you have to hold your stomach in and that won't do for singing.

And you are a trained dancer and not a trained singer.

Exactly. I've never trained as a singer. As a matter of fact, I was quite nervous about my voice because in the ballet company they used to laugh at me when I sang because I had this little girl voice. They thought it was ludicrous.

What about singing in “An American in Paris?”

Gene does all of the singing, and George Guetary. Both of them sing away. Gene tried to make me sing, but I was quite reluctant and there was no time to teach me how to sing.

I don't know how they do all of those kids on Broadway who have powerful voices and they dance. I suppose if you start early enough, you can train yourself to do both, but I certainly couldn't.

If you could look back on the young Leslie Caron as she was starting “An American in Paris,” what advice would you give your younger self?

I wish I had not been so frightened about everything. It's difficult to explain what my attitude was when I arrived in America. We were so fresh from the war where we didn't have enough to eat. We had the enemy in our doorsteps. You brushed past a man with a machine gun and boots.

The atmosphere in France was still very deprived and very difficult. You couldn't buy clothes, you couldn't buy shoes. There was very little food and everything was on tickets.

So, after four or five years of that, you were traumatized seeing people dangling from trees and seeing the bombing every time you went to the movies. The news of all that horror. You became suspicious of people.

I remember at first when I arrived in Hollywood thinking that that can't be for real. They're lying. You expect everyone to be an enemy and it took quite a long time.

I remember I used to look at my paycheck every week, which was about 75 dollars, and thinking I can buy myself a belt. I could even buy a pair of shoes.

One morning, I came in a bit late and Gene said, “Listen kid, don't you have an alarm clock?” No, I don't. “Well, I've got news for you, the war is over, and you can go buy one.” That sort of opened my mind to a whole world of liberty and possibility.

I had to start working on myself about trusting people. They don't all want to kill you or put you in prison. The war *is* over. Acting was a major job, and I better learn quickly how to do this profession, because it might all end.

Even that you could buy yourself something good to eat?

Yes, ice cream. I could buy an ice cream. It's very difficult to explain to somebody who hasn't gone through it. The war didn't end at the end of the war. It dragged on and on and on.



I remember there were queues when I left Paris to go to America to do “An American in Paris” in 1950. People were so used to queuing for everything: to have your shoes mended, to buy bread, to buy the newspaper. You had to queue for everything. It was learning to live again.



WOW! How old were you?

I was 18 when I landed and quickly I became 19 during the film, but it just takes quite a long time to learn to trust people.

I was really lucky that I had a really swell brother in Gene Kelly. He was standing right by me because during the film I had mononucleosis. I was so under nourished during the war that I broke down.

He is the one who defended me and said “Listen, she can work one day and then one in day in bed, one day working, one day in bed.”

This makes me love him more. Thank you for that!

He was really a fraternal wonderful help and friend, and so was his wife Betsy.

Did you remain friends with him throughout the years?

Oh yes, until his death. Absolutely, I was very grateful to him. He has a sort of fraternal-paternal attitude toward all of the people helped. He helped quite a few performers. Stanley Donen had his career thanks to him. Stanley was a dancer and Gene promoted him to become a Director.

I know you weren't in the scene, but his musical number, “I Got Rhythm” with those children could be one of the most endearing scenes of a movie. He's just so sweet with the dancing, the singing, and interacting with the children. It's a perfect scene.

I quiet agree. I absolutely adored it. I was there watching when they were filming it. I thought it was so darling, so sweet.

How many takes do you think they had to do for that? That was a hard number to dance, sing, the children, the interaction. I'm in awe of it.

No... no...no, Gene had a way with children. They adored working with him. It was sort of easy. I don't think they did it many times. There were very tough rules that you couldn't work children too long, and Gene was just adored by children.

I'm glad you were there, because that is something you remember your whole life.

I was more or less to watch everything. I didn't know anything about movie making. I was there also to learn, but I loved watching, and gosh, he was so clever.

The waking up scene when he folds his bed, and everything is done in three swift movements. It's fantastic.

Wonderful! The Library of Congress has recommended it for preservation. You will be a part of that. How does that make you feel?

Thrilled beyond words. Absolutely thrilled beyond words. I wish my mother was there to hear this. To her, who was born in Topeka Kansas, she didn't live there, but she was born there. She was American called Petit. She had a brief career on Broadway as Margaret Petit. She would be thrilled beyond words. Library of Congress! I'm so impressed, my son is impressed and everyone around me is so impressed.

Long after we are all gone, your legacy will live on in the Library of Congress.

That's fabulous. I am also grateful that American has the generosity of being interested in things that are French and things of quality about French. Just wonderful for us.

We didn't even talk about Cary Grant. You got to work with Cary Grant!

I know! I kissed him and married him in the film. I have lots of good things to say about him. He was fabulous.

When you learned that you were going to be in the role with Cary Grant, how did you feel about that? This is for "Father Goose."

I thought it was a joke! I was married to the Director of the Royal Shakespeare Theater and I get this phone call that "Mr. Cary Grant would like to talk to you." I thought "is this a joke?"



After I did this rather dramatic film called, "The L-Shaped Room." He saw me in that film. I don't know why he thought I'd be good for a comedy. He will absolutely thrill. I don't know how many of his partners are still around, but he deserves to have someone to tell the details of his personality. He was fascinating.

I just watched "Arsenic and Old Lace" and he's over the top in it, but really just charming.

He could be both at once. Innocent and irresistible. And, funny!

What a career! So many diverse roles you've had.



And do you know that I was 26 when I played Gigi. I had just weened my son. He was three months old during the film. In the first scene we played, I was wearing the tartan outfit with the little bolero. I was quite generously endowed. I said to the dressmaker let's put some braiding there to keep the little bolero closed. Otherwise with the white of the shirt, I'm going to look too maternal.

Cecil Beaton had gone off on a holiday with Greta Garbo. He came back and saw the costume, and said. "I don't remember those braids."

I said, "No, Cecil, but you see I have just weened my baby and I've got to hide my generous bosoms." He was a bit shocked.

<laughs>

Look at it again. Look at the braids.

What are you doing in "retirement?"

I'm gardening. I enjoy going to the theater, going to restaurants and doing all of the things that I never allowed myself to do. I was somebody who never had time to sit down with a friend and have a cup of coffee or tea. Too much to do and too much to learn. Now I am taking the time to do all the things I really enjoy, and looking at other peoples work with great admiration.

Essay and interview by Stacie Seifrit-Griffin for the Library of Congress National Film Preservation Board and the National Film Registry. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Library of Congress.