

DANCING SIBLINGS *By Toni Bentley*

LET'S talk about Fred. And his partners: Rita, Cyd, Paulette, Vera-Ellen, Nanette, the two Powells — Eleanor and Jane — Judy, Leslie, Audrey, numerous couches and chairs, several tables (dining and coffee), a British ceiling and one supremely fortunate coat rack. But mainly, of course, there was the divine Ginger, always magnificently dressed, occasionally, as in "Top Hat," by three or four well-endowed ostriches.

While the Hays Office in the mid-'30s was in its most censorial early days, its enforc-

THE ASTAIRES

Fred & Adele.

By Kathleen Riley.

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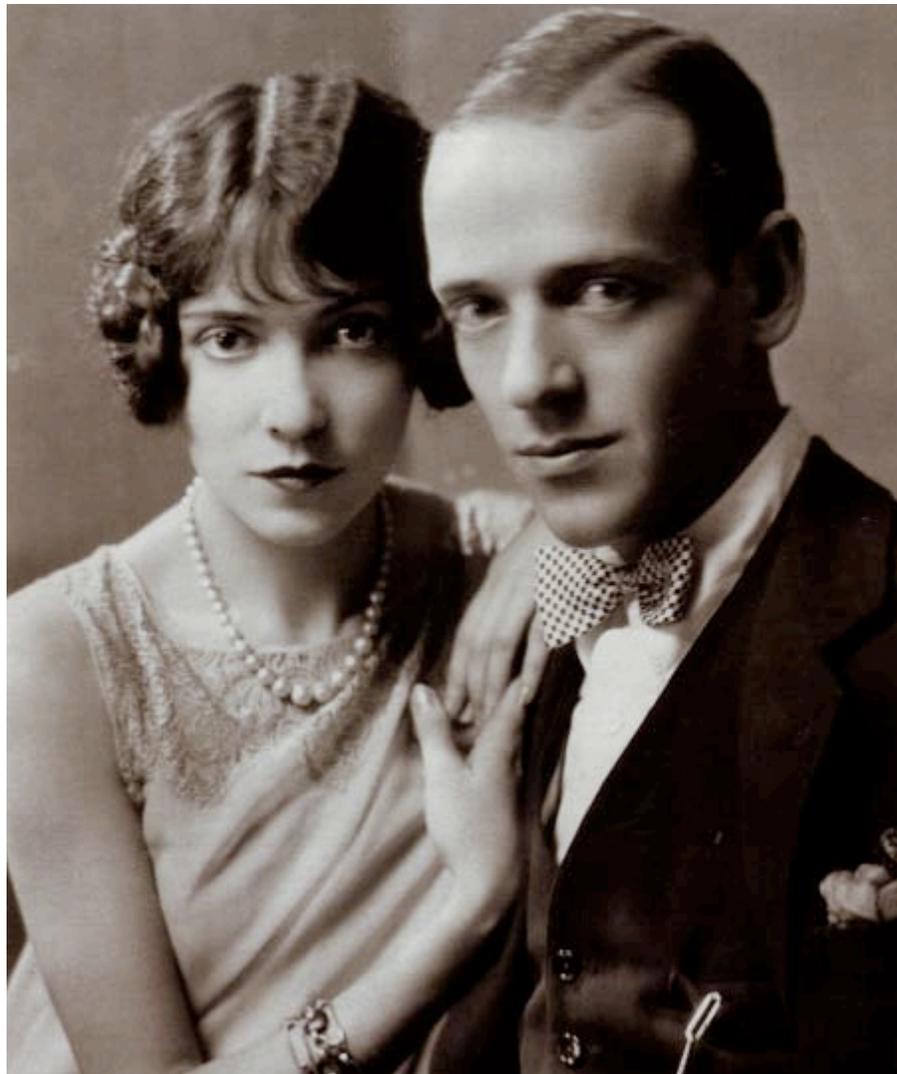
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ers changing any plotline or dialogue from which they could squeeze sexual innuendo, they managed in their verbal vigilance to, myopically, overlook Fred Astaire's duets with Ginger Rogers, in which he demonstrates clearly, concisely, even overtly, every move any aspiring lover might do well to adopt. Put down the Kama Sutra and its impossible acrobatics, rent "The Gay Divorcee" and watch Astaire seduce a resistant Rogers, transforming her from a feisty, fast-talking, fast-walking, too-good-for-you dame into a dewy-eyed ingénue, slowed and silenced by love.

In the Cole Porter number "Night and Day," Astaire pursues her about the dance floor with the wit of changing rhythms, sometimes syncopated, sometimes right on the beat, sometimes pausing to breathe the moment. He chases her, coaxes her, mirrors her, challenges her, and goes hip to hip with her. He even spoons her, vertically. She isn't sure, she turns away, she reconsiders, gives a little, gives a little more, then, overcome, bends backward and surrenders completely to the rhythm, the moment and the man. He flips her around, catches her, sends her off spinning alone only to meet her, unexpectedly, when she slows, pulls her in tight and takes her into a thrilling crescendo, then to a fantastically casual ending, as if to say, "That? Oh, that was nothing," his modesty after brilliance his most disarming charm.

Astaire is our American Casanova camouflaged in tux and tails or sailor suit as a clean-cut gentleman, sometimes a naïve goof, zooming about in Hollywood musical fluff. Good, solid, still funny fluff. As "Night and Day" closes Astaire lands Rogers gently on a steep incline — she's mes-

Toni Bentley danced with the New York City Ballet for 10 years. A one-woman play adapted from her book "The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir" will open this fall at the Teatro María Guerrero in Madrid in a production by the Spanish National Theater.



Stage partners: Adele and Fred Astaire in the 1920s. Their 27-year career together began when he was 5 and she was 8. She was the undisputed star of the duo.

merized by the magician who just took her on the ride of her life — bends over her suggestively, pulls back and says, "Cigarette?" Mute and dazed, she declines. But we need Paul Henreid to light one for us. Yep, the Hays Office really did miss the dance. Thank God.

Rogers was Astaire's best partner (the coat rack vying for a close second), though none, not even she, could match him as a dancer — watch how he takes off in his solos like Mercury in winged taps. But it didn't matter: they were good and gorgeous and he did the rest. Hermes Pan, Astaire's longtime choreographic collaborator, said, "Except for times Fred worked with real professional dancers like Cyd Charisse, it was a 25-year war." So why did these women look like goddesses with Astaire? Because of Adele.

Adele? Yes, his sister, Adele. For the duration of their astonishing 27-year partnership, the longest in his life — it began when Fred was 5 and Adele 8 — she was the undisputed star of the duo. In her fascinating new book "The Astaires," the Australian theater historian Kathleen Riley describes

the exploits of this brother-sister team in glorious detail. And it becomes clear that it was behind and beside, but never in front of, Adele that Fred learned not only how to dance, but how to present a woman, honor her and make her glow. It is now a mostly lost art, hard-won equality having removed woman's pedestal and left her prevaricating in the ditch of parallelism.

Fred Astaire, with his astounding physical abilities, didn't just redefine the notion of grace; he single-handedly (or, more accurately, double-footedly) pushed the concept further than anyone had before, or has since, on the great screen. While Gene Kelly sparred heroically in a mighty battle with gravity — like Atlas, he held the world aloft and you knew it — Astaire simply sidestepped the fight and actually came down upon gravity rather than trudging up it like most mortals. His dancing in such classic films as "Swing Time," "Roberta" and "Shall We Dance" provides not only an exhilarating experience, but a purifying one that crosses the border of sheer entertainment into a spiritual, moral realm. He can certainly

restore one's faith in humanity should it, by chance, ever falter — or at least in one extraordinary human being's capacity for beauty. "He is like Bach," George Balanchine said. "Astaire has that same concentration of genius; there is so much of the dance in him that it has been distilled."

Astaire's career in Hollywood had a less than promising start, with a screen test that elicited the now famous summation (which Riley regards as apocryphal) from one of those ever reliable executives: "Can't act. Slightly bald. Also dances." But David O. Selznick was so charmed by Astaire, despite "his enormous ears and bad chin line," that he signed him anyway. The rest really is history. Ah, but to live in a world, as in Astaire's films, where just around every corner lies a gleaming Art Deco ballroom and invisible orchestra — just in case one feels like dancing.

Riley performs the great service of giving us the history *before* the history, of Fred and Adele, the biggest vaudeville and musical theater stars of their time. It's a love story rarely told, of that between a sister and her brother, one bonded in blood but cemented by hoofing. It's also the tale of one more relentlessly devoted stage mother, who joins Rose Thompson Hovick in that distinguished pantheon of ambitious bulldozers.

Adele and Fred were born in Omaha. Their mother, Johanna Geilus, was a first-generation American, her parents having emigrated from East Prussia in 1878. Their father, Frederic Austerlitz, who went by Fritz, was born in Linz, Austria, in 1868, one year after his Jewish parents had converted to Catholicism, their pragmatic solution to anti-Semitism. The newborn Fritz was baptized in the Catholic Church.

Arriving at Ellis Island at age 24, Fritz had "theatrical yearnings and dandified ways" and dreamed of being a singer and musician. Moving to Omaha, he met the spunky 15-year-old Johanna Geilus at a Lutheran Church gathering, married her and eventually worked for the Storz Brewing Company. A kind and loving father, he also became an alcoholic. He died at age 56, but not before doing all he could to support and advise on his children's careers, and suffering the humiliation of being supported by those children.

Frederic Austerlitz II, blue-eyed and blond-haired, was born May 10, 1899, two years and eight months after his dark-eyed, dark-haired sister, Adele. He quickly followed his vivacious, mischievous sibling into the local dancing school, where his mother hoped the classes would strengthen her frail little boy. At age 4 he was found one day in a corner prancing about on his tippy-toes in a pair of pointe shoes, beautiful arches in evidence, a trick he would carry into his early vaudeville days.

A teacher's suggestion that the brother and sister might have a stage career if properly trained was all that was needed for the eager Austerlitzes to board a train

in January 1905, headed for New York and stardom. Remarkable for young parents to take such a risk based on so little — and on such little people — and to reap such stunning reward.

Fritz returned to work in Nebraska while mother and children moved into a boardinghouse, and Fred and Adele began their studies at Alviene Master School of the Theatre and Academy of Cultural Arts. Alviene tapped little Fred's head one day and said, "We're going to make a big star out of you." When Fred repeated this to his father, Fritz cried. Adele and Fred had plenty of incentive to succeed.

They made their debut only months later, in "The Wedding Cake," an elaborate 12-minute act designed for them, featuring the children as bride and groom, each atop a huge wedding cake, Adele in white satin and Fred, yes, in a miniature top hat, white tie and tails. Johanna knew that a less "foreign," not to mention less Jewish, name than Austerlitz was needed for the stage, and thus her children became "The Astaires," after various trial runs as "The Austers," "The Astiers" and "The Astares." She, in turn, became Ann Astaire. Just in case this tale seems all too prescient, Alviene might well have told all his new students and their eager, paying parents they would be "stars" — and besides, Fred returned in the second half of "The Wedding Cake" as a lobster.

The act was not a great success, but it was the first of many spanning their childhood. It took years of practice, new acts, new teachers and plenty of failure for them to acquire anything close to top billing. "My sister and I had to saw our way through," Astaire once wrote. They played many one-night stands in "every rat trap and chicken coop in the Middle West," he said, often receiving equal billing with trained seals, dogs and illusionists.

During these years Fred considered himself a liability to Adele, who was impulsive, funny, lively and bursting with charisma. "The girl seems to have talent," one theater manager opined, "but the boy can do nothing." Riley quotes a passage from the manuscript for Astaire's autobiography, "Steps in Time," in which he describes himself as "a small boy who went through the motions conscientiously, afraid he would forget his lines." Years later Vincente Minnelli, who directed Astaire in "The Band Wagon," said: "He lacks confidence to the most enormous degree. . . . He always thinks that he's no good." But lest Astaire's propensity to endlessly rehearse be pathologized in Freud's armchair, it is well to remember that Fred preferred to dance on that armchair, while most of us just sit.

At age 14 Fred took on the musical responsibilities for their act, frequenting Tin Pan Alley, where he met a 15-year-old George Gershwin in one of the cubicles at the music publisher Jerome H. Remick & Company. Gershwin was working for \$15

a week, plugging other people's songs, and the boys dreamed of George's writing a musical for Fred one day. "Lady, Be Good!" (1924) and "Funny Face" (1927) were two of those dreams.

During their last, and best, year in vaudeville, in 1917, the Astaires received telegrams from both an agent for the Shuberts — resulting in a two-year Broadway contract — and the impresario Charles Dillingham, who presented them in "Apple Blossoms" at his Globe Theatre (now the Lunt-Fontanne) in 1919. "We killed 'em in the first act," Fred said, "and 'panicked 'em' in the third." The score was by Fritz Kreisler, who played for their rehearsals. Of the Astaires' performance in "For Goodness Sake," in 1922 (which featured their star turn in the show's "nut" number, "The Whichness of the Whatness"), a critic raved, "Somewhere, sometime, perhaps there may have been a more charming juvenile team than Fred and Adele, but certainly not in the memory of anyone in the audience that filled the Lyric Theatre."

That same year, the "hard-drinking, banjo-playing satirist" Ashton Stevens, "dean of American drama critics" and escort to Sarah Bernhardt, became one of a long list of distinguished intellectuals to fall in love with Adele, some of whom took their adoration across the footlights. Stevens made his declaration in a subtle headline in The Chicago Herald-Examiner: "Falling in Love With Adele Astaire. In Which It Is Told How the Well-Known Heart of Ashton Stevens Is Stricken by the Deftest of the Dancing Girls." He went on to rhapsodize that "the pliant body of Miss Astaire . . . assumes a slanting partial paralysis which slays boredom where it sits." Oh, my. Such proclamations do make one wonder what delights have been lost to the annals of theater criticism in the intervening decades since the erection of that annoying fourth wall, a lame beard for bias prevention.

George Jean Nathan, editor with H. L. Mencken of The Smart Set and The American Mercury, went one further, choosing to compare George Bernard Shaw's play "Back to Methuselah" to Adele's dancing: "If the purpose of theater is to entertain, then I say that the Astaire girl entertains twice as greatly as Shaw's play." Nathan proceeded to squire Adele around town, had an eight-month romance with her, followed her to Europe and dedicated his book "The House of Satan" to her. The romance ended when Adele found out that the "French ambassador" her lover was meeting went by the name Lillian Gish. While Nathan conceded that brother Fred

was "a fellow of no mean foot," he asserted that "a dance without skirts is to me not a dance." Way to go, George.

When the Astaires crossed the pond for the first time, in 1923, to star in "Stop Flirting" at the Shaftesbury in London, their popularity kicked into a high gear from which it never descended — until Adele retired eight years later to marry into British aristocracy. The show ran for 16 months and each performance included no fewer than 18 dances, a tour de force that left British critics reaching for biblical superlatives: "Nothing like them since the Flood."

As the toasts of the town they cavorted with Noël Coward, the Prince of Wales (long before Mrs. Simpson) — he saw the show 10 times — and the prince's three brothers, who ushered the young Ameri-

tone: "Hers is not only the poetry of motion but its wit, its malice, its humor."

Back in the States they signed to star in the first Broadway collaboration by the Gershwin brothers, "Black-Eyed Susan." When the show premiered, happily renamed "Lady, Be Good!," Alexander Woollcott wrote that Fred Astaire's feet and Gershwin's music surely "were written in the same key." "The Man I Love" was created for Adele, but the elegiac ballad was thought to slow up Act II and was cut. It went on to quite a solo career, recorded by Billie Holiday, Lena Horne and Ella Fitzgerald, though alas never by Adele, its inspiration. Showbiz.

"Lady" was a sensation and ran for 330 performances on Broadway before moving to the West End for 326 more shows. "Funny Face" followed, and Riley has uncovered evidence that while George Gershwin and Adele had a flirtation, it came to nothing. "George loved all the girls," Adele said in an interview, previously unpublished, "but absolutely I know he was impotent. . . . I would have had George except he wasn't given to women. And he wasn't given to men either."

After a bomb called "Smiles," the Astaires starred in the musical revue "The Band Wagon" in 1931. (The subsequent 1953 film with Astaire and Cyd Charisse bore little resemblance to the original.) It was to be Adele's swan song before she retired from the stage, at 35, to marry Lord Charles Cavendish and move into his 200-room, one-bathroom (according to Adele) castle in Ireland.

Whether Fred would have a career of his own after losing Adele was a subject of considerable conjecture in the press. His first solo foray, in "Gay Divorce," with Claire Luce, was inconclusive, with one critic contending, "two Astaires are better than one." Both his mother and his sister were leading skeptics, possibly for selfish reasons, and together waged a war against their beloved Fred's even marrying a lovely, young divorced socialite, Phyllis Potter, on whom he had set his heart in a two-year pursuit. Adele went so far as to say she wished her brother was gay, so he would never leave her, while Ann Astaire monitored his every move — he was, apparently, still living with her.

"Mother is so difficult at times," Fred wrote to Adele in early 1933. "She'll have a fit I suppose if I get married to anybody within the next 10 years. I don't know what she expects me to do — keep a couple of tarts or play with myself. . . . I'm so tired

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"Pond's is so famous"
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MISS ADELE ASTAIRE

The one and only
Adele Astaire

Miss Astaire is a thorough little "original," there is no one else quite like her. Everything she does, she does in a style of her own, inspired by a lively brain, a particular sense of humor, and a genius for "being different." Her dancing combines perfection of technique with originality of execution. The career of these two Astaires, brother and sister, has been romantic throughout. Born of rich parents, ruined by the introduction of Prohibition into the U.S.A., they set out to make their own way; their one asset—their love of dancing. The popularity they have gained in their country can be gauged by the enthusiastic reception of "Funny Face" at the Winter Garden Theatre.

"English complexions are lovely."

"You know," said Miss Astaire, "I think your English complexions are lovely, and I'll tell you why. Because your climate is moister—I think that's the reason. Over in the States our air is terribly dry, and I think that is hard on the skin. Your girls have lovely, soft, delicate skins, and that's a very good reason why Pond's should be so popular. If you have the gift of an attractive complexion you are naturally anxious to take good care of it by a safe, sure method. I read somewhere in a newspaper the other day—how does it go?—'Pond's Vanishing Cream to protect in the daytime, and Pond's Cold Cream to cleanse at night.' Well, I think that's a very excellent rule—particularly the cleansing at night. Merely washing the face and hands is not good enough; you need Pond's Cold Cream to keep the pores and the little channels free and functioning properly."

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—but the first necessity is good health. Your diet has a great effect on the texture of your skin. I eat lots and lots of fruits and vegetables. I think this has helped a lot in keeping my complexion fresh and in good condition—that, and getting about as much as I can in the fresh air. I believe in making my life outside the theatre as healthy as I can—healthy exercise and long refreshing sleep, those are the secrets."

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THE ASTAIRES

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of sneaking in at night — having all my telephone conversations listened to. . . . I don't want to lose this girl." Eventually, Adele and Ann accepted the inevitable, and Fred married his beloved Phyllis and moved to Hollywood, where he danced a little.

Eight months before the 1934 premiere of "The Gay Divorcee," Astaire sent a telegram to his agent, Leland Hayward: "WHAT'S ALL THIS TALK ABOUT ME BEING TEAMED WITH GINGER ROGERS? I WILL NOT HAVE IT LELAND. . . . I'VE JUST MANAGED TO LIVE DOWN ONE PARTNERSHIP AND I DON'T WANT TO BE BOTHERED WITH ANY MORE." He went on, bothered or not, to make nine more movies with Rogers, thereby putting on celluloid the best dancing filmed to date.

Adele's marriage was unhappy and resulted in the stillborn death of a daughter and twins, followed by a miscarriage, alongside the devastating progression of her husband's acute alcoholism. Lord Cavendish, eventually an invalid in his own castle, died in 1944, age 38. The following year Irving Berlin asked Adele to return to the stage to play Annie Oakley in "Annie Get Your Gun," but Adele declined and remarried instead. (Hello, Ethel Merman.) During the war years she volunteered in London at the American Red Cross, dancing with the troops and writing letters for the wounded G.I.'s to send home, signing them, in a moving show of how her fame had receded, "Adele Astaire, Fred's sister" — and there she will always remain, "Fred's sister."



It is Riley's biggest challenge to describe Adele's electrifying qualities, especially as she was, indisputably, the "bigger star" of the pair, the "lilac flame," as one critic wrote. "It was not one dominant attribute but the anarchic coexistence, in one petite, sweetly brazen figure, of a seeming mass of bewitching, opalescent contradictions," Riley writes. "Underlying the irruptive element of danger and incorrigible gaiety . . . was a fundamental vulnerability." While likely an accurate assessment of Adele's appeal, and not too overblown at that, this does illustrate one of the interesting questions about criticism in general and academic books in particular.

Riley's book suffers, though not egregiously, from the rather humorless, linear reportage — the laundry-list narrative — and the slightly defensive tone of so much academic writing, in which being correct is clearly more valued than being interesting or, God forbid, entertaining, and resisting interpretation is preferred above such vulgarities as outright declaration. (For unsurpassed writing and out-on-a-limb — a good place to be with Astaire — assessment, see Arlene Croce's "Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers Book.")

But Riley is also generous with the quotations of those who were there. George Jean Nathan literally takes the cake, calling Adele "as unconscious as a peach shortcake, as careless about it all as a United States senator's necktie." Ah, yes, those ever-present careless senatorial ties. Despite his somewhat compromised position as her suitor, Nathan brings outrageous wit to his furious praise. But one can also feel his passion, and a madcapness matching Adele's. She is "a dozen Florestan cocktails filtered through silk," "a figure come out of Degas to a galloping ragtime tune."

While there is, sadly, no footage of Fred and Adele dancing together, there is one other way, besides Nathan's glorious flurries, to reach back in time and touch her, via a handful of audio recordings of the Astaires singing, made in the late 1920s. In "Funny Face" — written for them — they sing to each other, starting with Fred: "You've got all the qualities of Peter Pan/. . . You're a cutie/With more than beauty/You've got such a lot of/Personal-i-T-N-T."

When Adele counters back to



her brother in her soubrette soprano — she sounds like an untrained Gertrude Lawrence, her British contemporary — with "I love your funny face,/Your sunny, funny face," she lingers on the word "love" with such high-pitched, childlike ardor that one feels the force of the brother-sister love story Riley tells consolidated into sheer, albeit rather tremulous, sweetness.

Riley's book makes clear that during those three decades of dancing with Adele, Fred was driven, in part, by the belief that he was "a detriment to my sister," and thus honed his craft on so many levels, devising new levels in the process, that he became a creature, like Mayakovsky's "cloud in trousers," beyond his sister's obviously radiant, though possibly only-of-her-time, talent. While Adele charmed them in the spotlight, her brother became an artist of the highest order.

When Astaire was given a Life Achievement Award by the American Film Institute, in 1981, he was 81 years old. As he took the stage a single ring shone on his elegant hands: the gold signet pinky ring that Adele had given him in London over 50 years earlier. This ring can be seen in virtually all his films, circling his finger as he circles the waists of one beautiful woman after another. "My sister, Adele," he said in his unscripted speech, "was mostly responsible for my being in show business. She was the whole show, she really was. In all the vaudeville acts we had and the musical comedies we did together, Delly was the one that was the shining light and I was just there pushing away." Just pushing away. Like Bach. □

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