

Dance Article

Gene Kelly – Dancer, Singer, Actor, Director, Choreographer

Gene Kelly was born on August 23, 1912 in Pittsburgh. He preferred sports to dancing. Adept at gymnastics, ice hockey, swimming, football, and baseball, he truly hoped to one day play professional baseball for the Pittsburgh Pirates. Gene's athletic prowess later proved beneficial in a way he probably did not expect - in dancing.

In 1932, The Gene Kelly Studio of the Dance was founded, with one studio in Pittsburgh and one in Johnstown. It was a family affair with Gene and his brother Fred, and sister Louise as dance teachers. One of their many students recalls that as a teacher Gene was always enthusiastic, always energetic. This former student always remembered that Gene took the time with each student to make sure they did not fall behind. He also choreographed and directed shows at the Pittsburgh Playhouse and "Cap and Gown" shows at the University of Pittsburgh.

In 1933 Gene graduated from the University of Pittsburgh as an economics major. By this time the Depression had hit the family hard. Gene worked at many jobs to put himself through school, including ditch-digging and working as a soda jerk. The one he enjoyed the most, however, was dancing. After college Gene attended the University of Pittsburgh to study law, but his heart belonged to dance.

By 1938 Gene had achieved all he could as a teacher, and Broadway beckoned. His first Broadway job was as a dancer in *Leave It to Me*, which is best remembered today as Mary Martin's debut, not as Gene's. This was followed by a slightly larger role in *One for the Money* in 1939.

Gene's big break came starring as Harry the Hooper in William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*. The play ran for 22 weeks and won the Drama Critic's Award that year.

Next Gene worked as a choreographer for *Diamond Horseshoe*. Early in 1940, Gene was chosen to star in *Pal Joey* as Joey Evans, a sleazy nightclub owner who stops at nothing to get what he wants. The show, and Gene, became an instant hit. *Pal Joey* ran for 270 performances before breaking for the summer. During the break, Gene choreographed George Abbott's *Best Foot Forward*. After his successful performance in *Pal Joey*, Hollywood offered him a contract.

Gene Kelly's Hollywood debut was in *For Me and My Gal* with Judy Garland. The role was not too far removed from his Joey Evans, but Gene learned that dancing on film was quite different than dancing live on stage to a live audience. The film was successful, and Gene credits Judy with helping him learn about the movies.

In 1944, MGM lent Gene's services to Columbia Pictures for a little musical with Rita Hayworth called *Cover Girl*. MGM never let him out of their sight again. *Cover Girl* was extremely successful and represented the first time that Gene did major choreography. Also, it was the first to showcase his ability to create a dance that was uniquely cinematic--the "alter ego" dance in which he dances with himself.

Realizing Gene's talent for musicals, MGM placed him in the Pasternak vehicle *Anchors Aweigh*. Gene, costarring with Kathryn Grayson, Frank Sinatra, Jose Iturbi,

and a young Dean Stockwell, earned an Academy Award nomination for best actor. Once again he created dances unique to film, specifically his "Worry Song" dance with the animated Jerry the Mouse. The movie proved beneficial to Sinatra as well, who learned how to dance in 6 short weeks from Teacher Kelly.

Returning from the war Gene was placed in mostly musicals, including *Living in a Big Way*, *The Pirate*, and *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*. The latter proved to be a trial run for *On the Town*, the directorial debut of both Kelly and Donen. *On the Town* proved to be the first of several major musical successes. The movie broke new cinematic ground as the first to film outdoors instead of in the studio. Although it is only the opening montage that was shot amid the hustle of New York, it was a first.

Quickly on the heels of that success came *An American in Paris*, winner of the 1951 Academy Award for Best Picture. The film won six other Oscars as well, including one to Gene Kelly for his "extreme versatility as an actor, singer, director, and dancer, but specifically for his brilliant achievement in the art of choreography on film."

Gene immediately followed the success of *An American in Paris* with the wonderful spoof of early movie-making, *Singin' in the Rain*. *Singin' in the Rain* has since become one of America's most popular musicals. Gene's most remembered and most loved number seems to be the title dance. To quote Will Friedwald, "it's not only the four most rapturous minutes in the history of cinema, but everything that dance should be--a glorious affirmation of everything that it means to be alive."

After *Singin' in the Rain*, Gene began work on what he hoped would be the highlight of his career--a film called *Invitation to the Dance*, an all-dancing film directed and choreographed by Gene. MGM delayed distribution of the film, and while it did well for an "art" film, it did not achieve the success that Gene had hoped for.

The late 1950s proved to be disastrous for Gene, both in his personal life and working life. Gene "split" from longtime friend Donen, his marriage to Betsy Blair ended in divorce, and he began to become unhappy with his relationship with MGM.

In 1960, Gene married Jeannie Coyne, his longtime dance assistant. It was also during this time that Gene began some different projects, including directing (*Guide for the Married Man*, *Hello Dolly*, *Cheyenne Social Club*) and television work (numerous specials, "Going My Way"). Tragedy struck in 1973 with the death of Jeannie from cancer.

During the 1970s and 1980s Gene was seen most in retrospectives and awards shows. *That's Entertainment!* was extremely successful, and a whole new generation became enthralled by the magic of movie musicals. In 1982, Gene received the Kennedy Center Honors, and in 1985, a lifetime achievement award from the American Film Institute.

Gene married writer Patricia Ward in 1990. For the last years of his life he was hard at work on his autobiography, which was unfinished at the time of his death. Gene died at home on February 2, 1996 after a series of strokes.