

FEATURE

LIZA REMEMBERS VINCENTE MINNELLI

"My father," says Liza Minnelli, "was a funny, wonderful man and people loved him, but on the set -- he was an absolute czar."

For twenty-six years, Vincente Minnelli ruled the MGM sets with a strong will and a gentle touch. Mastering the genres of musical, melodrama, and sophisticated comedy dramas, he directed some of Hollywood's most memorable films: Meet Me in St. Louis, An American in Paris, The Band Wagon, Gigi, Lust for Life, The Bad and the Beautiful, The Long, Long Trailer, and Father of the Bride, to name a few.

The thirty-four feature films he made between 1943 and 1976 will be shown in "American MovieMakers: Directed by Vincente Minnelli," a complete retrospective to be presented from December 15, 1989, through January 28, 1990, at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. The retrospective is part of a two-fold program that includes "The Dawn of Sound" (November 17 - December 4), a celebration of the development of talkies through the Vitaphone process. Both are sponsored by AT&T.

Liza Minnelli began visiting her father's film sets at an early age. Born in 1946, she was the happy product of a union between Vincente Minnelli and Judy Garland, the leading lady of his third film, Meet Me in St. Louis. They were married in 1945.

As a child, Liza would ride with her father on the camera boom, sit in his office during meetings, or hide under the lights watching the filming. She

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remembers throwing confetti at the ball scene in An American in Paris and observing dance rehearsals with Fred Astaire and Cyd Charisse.

"I grew up on the set watching my dad," says Ms. Minnelli. "The set was my home."

Her MGM home was peopled with Hollywood stars and friendly crew members who made her cakes and helped her celebrate birthdays, and where she watched her father "moving cameras and people around" and heard his voice yelling, "Quiet on the set!" and "Action!"

"He'd scream for quiet," Ms. Minnelli recalls with a laugh. "If anybody moved, he'd go crazy. If I got up and moved, he wouldn't say a word.

"I was fascinated to hear him yelling and screaming -- but always nicely," she notes. "He was always gentle with actors. But he wanted it to be perfect. He would wait for hours for the lighting until he got it perfect. Then he'd get the shot in ten minutes."

Her father, who died in 1986, was born in Chicago to an Italian theatrical family. As a young man he had worked as an apprentice show-window display designer at Marshall Field's department store in Chicago, studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, and worked as a costume designer. He brought his artist's eye and special flair for color to both the film set and to the homes he shared with Ms. Garland and their daughter.

"The houses reflected his taste," recalls Ms. Minnelli. "They were very warm, with French, Italian, and African influences. The colors of the rooms were always different. One living room was in tones of cream and yellow; another was in beautiful shades of gray. My bedroom was always powder blue. My father found beauty in all colors; it was the combination of colors and how they were used that was so interesting."

The houses also contained mementos of Minnelli's films: a quilt from Gigi, a coffee table from An American in Paris, a brass and iron bed -- which Liza slept in -- from Designing Woman. And, when he wasn't sketching shots for his art directors, he would paint and draw, and even make costumes for his daughter.

"He'd say, 'What do you want to be?'" recalls Ms. Minnelli. "I'd say, 'I don't know -- a matador!' So he made me a cape with red crepe paper and a toreador jacket, all attached with safety pins.

"He also would ask which costumes from his movies I liked," she says. "For Christmas, he would have a miniature of them made for me. I got about five a year. I dressed up in them all the time -- they were strictly costumes to make magic at home. I could be anybody I wanted to be. He stretched my imagination."

Liza's imagination was constantly stretched by her father's myriad interests and keen intellect. He took her everywhere -- to parties at Oscar Levant's house, the ice capades, and the Electric Circus -- and told her stories about Colette when other children were learning about Heidi. He taught her how to dance, and watched, with patience and enthusiasm, her little made-up performances when he came home from the studio.

"His intellect was startling," she says. "He knew so much about everything. He was fascinated by all sides of life, and he always told me there was beauty in everything. When I indicated that I wanted to be a performer, he encouraged me to keep my mind open and to learn everything I could. He left such an immense mark on me."

Minnelli's influence on his daughter is subtle and for her, difficult to describe. She speaks of his "wonderful sense of color, simplicity and elegance," and notes that she painted her bedroom in what the French call

"Minnelli Red," and wore a dress in one of his favorite shades of yellow "for good luck" when she won an Academy Award.

In her professional life, he helped her with each of her movies. "He would guide me," she says, "so that I would find the way to it myself."

In 1976, Vincente Minnelli fulfilled his longtime dream of directing his daughter in a movie. A Matter of Time, which was filmed entirely in Italy, featured Liza as a maid.

"He was an incredible director," she says. "I followed his every word and watched him constantly for what he wanted from me."

One of his requests was that she learn to make a bed "in about two seconds" and to turn a mattress quickly and efficiently. "It was learning how to do everything a maid does, but twice as well and twice as fast," she explains. "He wanted reality, and that, of course, is what you want as an actress."

Ms. Minnelli has many favorites from her father's oeuvre: The Band Wagon, The Bad and the Beautiful, Gigi, Lust for Life -- and Meet Me in St. Louis.

"I wouldn't be here if it weren't for Meet Me in St. Louis," she says with a laugh. "But I also love it for its values and simplicity. It's about a family, and the message is: If you stick together and love each other, life is great. He brought simple, American, Midwestern values to a sophisticated and voluptuously told story.

"He changed so much of cinema," she continues. "Before Meet Me in St. Louis, for example, musicals basically were about people on the stage, such as the star who broke her leg. They always tried to have a reason to sing. Daddy said that there's music in all of life, and in Meet Me in St. Louis, people sing not on the stage or screen, but in their own homes. It didn't look strange. He changed musicals that way.

"Also, he brought ballet to film (in An American in Paris) in the most interesting way it's been done because he understood it. He was from the theater, the Belle Epoch interested him terrifically, and he was influenced by Diaghilev and Nijinsky."

Liza Minnelli, who calls her father "the gentlest, funniest, most charming man I ever met," says that his greatest influence on her was "what he taught me about the mind -- how there's a way to accomplish what you want to accomplish if you go about it the right way, if you put your mind to it and think it through.

"Your greatest gift is your brain," she says. "If you put an idea up there and fry it around and let it stir, you'll figure out how to do something and do it differently and make it special and unique.

"By watching my father," Ms. Minnelli says, "you learned not to settle for less."

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