

# American MovieMakers

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VINCENTE MINNELLI

## Biography

"Basically, I work to please myself," Vincente Minnelli wrote in his autobiography, I Remember It Well. "But I'm the hardest person to please that I know. I'm not an artist in the classical sense. I'm still not sure if movies are an art form. And if they're not, let them inscribe on my tombstone what they could about any craftsman who loves his job: 'Here Lies Vincente Minnelli. He died of hard work.'"

Vincente Minnelli (1903-86) was a unique filmmaker who combined special affinities for composition, color, and visual detail with an innate sensitivity and sophistication to create some of Hollywood's most memorable and dazzling films.

From his film directorial debut in 1943 with Cabin in the Sky (1943) -- an all-black musical featuring Ethel Waters, Lena Horne, Eddie (Rochester) Anderson, and Louis Armstrong -- to such musical classics as Meet Me in St. Louis (1944), An American in Paris (1951), The Band Wagon (1953), and Gigi (1958), the dramas Lust for Life (1956) and The Bad and the Beautiful (1953), and the comedies The Long, Long Trailer (1954) and Father of the Bride (1950), Minnelli put his special stamp on a treasured and unequalled movie legacy.

"I approach each film as an entirely new experience growing out of the particular material involved," he once said. "Musical, romantic comedy or tragic drama, each contains different aspects of the same basic problem. That is, to tell a story through characters, dialogue, sometimes through dance or pantomime, in a manner as nearly unique for that particular film as ability, resourcefulness, and inspiration will permit. All of this is done with the

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hope that, somewhere along the way, you will be lucky enough to create a little magic."

Minnelli was born in 1903 in Chicago to an Italian theatrical family, which toured the Midwest performing plays in which his actress mother would star. He made his stage debut as a small child, painted signs as a schoolboy, and, after graduating from high school in Delaware, Ohio, went to work as an apprentice show-window display designer at Marshall Field's department store in Chicago. He attended the Art Institute of Chicago and became a costume designer for the Balaban & Katz movie theater chain, which also presented stage shows and brought him to New York in 1931. From 1933 to 1935 he was art director for the new Radio City Music Hall, where he staged ballets and produced a new show every month.

Seeking to gain recognition on Broadway, Minnelli added directing to his design credits with At Home Abroad (1935), starring Beatrice Lillie and Eleanor Powell. The production was a success and was followed by directorial turns with The Show Is On, Hooray for What!, and Very Warm for May. He also designed The Ziegfeld Follies of 1936, which featured Fanny Brice, Bob Hope, and Josephine Baker.

In 1940, after a brief stint at Paramount and a return to the Broadway stage, Minnelli was summoned by producer Arthur Freed to MGM, where he spent two years learning all aspects of filmmaking. It was the beginning of a twenty-six year relationship with the studio.

In 1944, following his second film I Dood It (1943), Minnelli directed what would become one of his greatest musicals -- Meet Me in St. Louis (1944) -- a delicate portrait of life in St. Louis at the turn of the century, which featured such standards as "The Boy Next Door" and "Trolley Song" and starred Judy Garland. Minnelli married Garland a year later, and their daughter Liza

was born in 1946. Minnelli went on to direct Garland in the wartime romance The Clock (1945), Ziegfeld Follies (1944), and The Pirate (1948). Their marriage ended in 1951.

The ensuing years were filled with Minnelli hits: Father of the Bride (1950), the domestic comedy starring Spencer Tracy and Elizabeth Taylor, and An American in Paris (1951), a film that epitomized Minnelli's love for sweeping canvases and dreamlike, surrealistic atmosphere. Starring Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron, An American in Paris won an Academy Award for best picture, and featured a seventeen-minute dramatic ballet, which the French-born film scholar Jean-Pierre Coursodon termed "unquestionably the greatest set piece in the entire history of the film musical."

In the following decade, Minnelli directed a variety of successful musicals, dramas, and comedies, including The Bad and the Beautiful (1953), a film produced by John Houseman dramatizing the story of a ruthless Hollywood producer; The Band Wagon (1953), one of MGM's great musicals, starring Fred Astaire as a washed-up star attempting a Broadway comeback; The Long, Long Trailer (1954), a comedy starring Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz; Lust for Life (1956) -- Minnelli's favorite -- a biographical drama about the tormented life of painter Vincent Van Gogh, portrayed by Kirk Douglas, and filmed in France on the actual locations that inspired Van Gogh's paintings; and Gigi (1958), the Colette tale of a French girl groomed to be a courtesan, for which Minnelli won an Oscar (the movie won a total of nine) and a Directors Guild of America award.

Among Minnelli's other films are Madame Bovary (1949), Father's Little Dividend (1951), Brigadoon (1954), The Cobweb (1955), Kismet (1955), Tea and Sympathy (1956), Designing Woman (1957), The Reluctant Debutante (1958), Some Came Running (1958), Home from the Hill (1960), Bells Are Ringing (1960), The

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1962), Two Weeks in Another Town (1962), The Courtship of Eddie's Father (1964), Goodbye Charlie (1964), The Sandpiper (1965), and On a Clear Day You Can See Forever (1970). In 1976, he fulfilled his longtime ambition to direct his daughter, Liza, in a film; A Matter of Time was the last movie he ever made.

Minnelli, who was married four times, died at his home in Los Angeles on July 25, 1986.

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No. 120

November 1989