

## A C T O N E

*Like Kissing Your Sister*

Astaire—something in the name suggests brilliance, dazzle. Astaire implies “a star”; so, too, a stairway, perhaps one leading to Paradise (“with a new step every day”); Astarte is also, the mythologies report, the name of a minor goddess, one of high and productive energy. The name Astaire enlivens even the otherwise somewhat stodgy name of Fred. “Ladies and Gentlemen, the Academy is proud to honor that greatest of all dancers, male or female, classical or modern, ballet or ballroom, rap or tap, break or flake, highbrow or low, Mr. Fred Astaire.” Thunderous, nearly unrelenting applause follows.

In fact, Fred Astaire’s name at birth—he was born on May 10, 1899—was Frederick Austerlitz, II. His father,

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Frederic (without a k) I, known to family and friends as Fritz, was rather a bust. He had left the Austrian army in 1892 and, departing Vienna, came to the New World to strike it rich. He struck it, from most accounts, scarcely at all. After shoring up in Omaha, Nebraska, Fritz Austerlitz (the name rhymes in a way that suggests unseriousness) took a series of dead-end jobs: in the leather business, as a cook, as a drummer of fancy goods, and eventually as a salesman for a brewery. (His son claimed he prospered at this last job, though there is no strong evidence about whether this is true.) Not without charm, the twenty-seven-year-old Fritz Austerlitz met and in fairly short order made pregnant a seventeen-year-old girl named Johanna Geilus; no one seems to know the precise fate of the child of this early pregnancy, who must have died either in a miscarriage or at birth. Two years later the Austerlitzes had a daughter Adele, and two and a half years after that a son Frederick, Freddie, Fred (hold the Fritz), the subject of the slender disquisition now in your hands and, not at all by the way, by general consensus the world's greatest male ballroom and tap dancer.

Turn-of-the-century Omaha may have had its virtues, but the absence of snobbery evidently wasn't high among them. The Austerlitzes were nowhere near the top of such social heap as the city mounted. From Frederic père's

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shaky hold on his job, and from photographs of the family's modest house, they look to have been closer to lower middle class, with some danger of sliding a touch or two farther down the splintery pole of the early-twentieth-century American class system. The Austerlitzes appeared, in short, to be a family going no place fast.

The children, Adele and Fred, seemed normal and happy enough. They did decently in school; they enjoyed each other's companionship. Johanna decided to enroll Adele, who early showed promise of being a great beauty, in a local dancing class. Her younger brother was also enrolled. A bad moment came when Adele and Freddie lost out in a contest to be among the attendants for a king and queen parade put on by a local lodge called the Kings of Ak-Sar-Ben (Nebraska spelled backwards). They lost not for want of talent but because only the well heeled and well born, by the Omaha standard of the day, were picked. The experience gave Johanna Austerlitz an overpowering sense that her children's fortunes were best sought outside Omaha.

A modest woman, given to backing her children completely, though not bragging unduly about them, Johanna Austerlitz had the thought of grooming her beautiful daughter for a career as a dancer, with her son Freddie, at least at this point, going along for the ride. So when her

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daughter was not yet eight, her son still five, she herself twenty-six, she took them off to New York to attend dancing school and prepare for a living in show business. The radical plan was to leave her husband back in Nebraska, whence he would send money to keep the enterprise afloat, though it is unclear whether he was able to do so in a sustained way. One of Fred Astaire's biographers even claims that Fritz had a child with another woman in Nebraska, a second Mrs. Austerlitz, though Astaire, who always defended his father, held him up as a solid and good man.

The Austerlitzes (mère, soeur, et frère) arrived in New York knowing no one but the name of a dancing teacher given them by the children's dancing teacher in Omaha. They checked into a hotel near the dance studio at 23rd Street near Eighth Avenue. On the advice of their new dance teacher, the children's surname was changed to Astaire; the mother later dropped the *Job* and became Anna Astaire, later Ann to friends. The director of the dance school, a man named Claude Alvienne, thought that Adele and Fred were talented, though he was not about to say for certain that they had a real future in show business. Ann in effect "home-schooled" her kids, except for a two-year lull in their career when they attended a regular school in New Jersey. If there was dis-

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harmony, or even sadness, among this brave little trio, it was never mentioned, then or later. Somehow or other they made their way.

Claude Alvienne worked up routines for Adele and Fred as a brother-and-sister act, and such an act they would remain until Adele's retirement in her early thirties. In one of their childhood numbers, Adele, then the taller of the two, played Cyrano to Fred's Roxanne. Alvienne arranged bookings at small fees for them at second-line New Jersey theaters. Soon enough they went on the road, where their bookings were neither plentiful nor hugely rewarding. They continued their dance education; in New York they lived in a small furnished apartment. Adele was the natural of the two children, all shimmering beauty and spontaneity, with great élan; Fred, who had to work harder at everything, took his dancing more seriously. Most theater managers who booked them considered Adele the one with the smashing career ahead of her.

Through practice and persistence they eventually connected with the Orpheum theatrical circuit, which sent them on the road for a fee of \$150 a week plus expenses. A dance teacher and director named Ned Wayman wrote a new act for them, at the price of \$1,000, payable in installments. In big-city theaters the glow of their performance

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was dimmed by such glamorous names on the same bill as Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. (later a friend of Fred's in Hollywood). They continued to work hard, to grind it out, appearing alongside animal acts, acrobats, and low comedians. It was onward and upward, but in what must have seemed excruciatingly slow motion.

Ann Austerlitz Astaire was a careful money manager, and she worked things out so that when they weren't touring, she and her children stayed at swank resorts. Social mobility, clearly, was part of the grand plan. As adolescents, Fred and Adele developed a taste for the good, even the high, life. At one such resort, a place called Water Gap House in Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania, Fred reports in his memoir, *Steps in Time*, he "first learned to play golf, swim, and ride." Boys took a powerful interest in Adele, who seemed to give off fumes of sexual promise the way Eula Varner, that luscious girl in Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, did—Eula who could transform anywhere she went, as Faulkner put it, into "a grove of Venus." Mary Pickford, shooting a film nearby, stayed at Water Gap House the second year the Astaires were there. Peter Arno, the *New Yorker* cartoonist, was another guest. The allure of the posh was not lost on the Astaire kids. By the time they were in their twenties, Fred and Adele would rate as pretty damn posh themselves.

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They acquired a new dance teacher, a man named Aurelia Coccia, a veteran vaudeville performer who streamlined their act, getting rid of their old skits and turning Fred and Adele into a straight song-and-dance act. They revised and rehearsed, polished and honed, found fresh songs, altered and added new dances. They played New England, where Adele attracted the boys from Yale. Thinking Fred her older brother, the Yalies took him up, as a way to get to Adele.

The contrast between Fred and Adele showed up early in their career as a team. Along with being hardworking, a perfectionist, Fred was a worrier: worried above all about little screwups in performance that would get in the way of his modest but unrelenting ambition, which was, as he told Edward R. Murrow much later in his life, “to knock ’em in the aisles as often as I could.”

Adele was beautiful, effortlessly talented, candid, one of those rare women who could be attractively coarse. She was the perennial live wire, highest possible altitude and voltage. From an early age she knew that men were interested in her, and she could tell you, with blatant precision, why. At seventeen she allowed that “I’ve already got quite used to people grabbing my fanny backstage—that is, when they weren’t all homos.” She didn’t mind calling a stagehand “a stupid fucker,” or asking someone

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she caught looking up her skirt whether he saw “the ace of spades.” When her brother apologized for her raw frankness, she might add, “Why the fuck shouldn’t I say what I feel?” One of the reasons that to this day some people think that Fred Astaire is Jewish is that during the 1930s, with Hitler in power, someone made an anti-Semitic remark about Adele’s friend the actress Lilli Palmer, prompting Adele to tell the offender to take it back, and quickly, claiming that she herself was Jewish.

If Adele was utterly at ease with men, Fred was careful with women, and waited until his middle thirties to marry a woman who was not in show business and who had a four-year-old son. He adored her. Let the record show that he was always faithful to her despite what must have been endless opportunities. Adele, on the other hand, appears to have been stimulated by worthlessness in men. She is said to have lost her virginity to George Jean Nathan, the theater critic who was H. L. Mencken’s partner on the *Smart Set*, a man many years older than she, and, from various accounts, far from an appetizing specimen. She later bedded Cecil Beaton, providing him a pause (evidently not one that much refreshed) in an otherwise largely gay life (though Beaton and Greta Garbo were often thought, in the phrase of the day, an item).

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When Adele married at thirty-four, she chose an English nobleman, Charles Cavendish, the sixth child of the Duke of Devonshire, nine years younger than she and a dedicated drinker who pegged out with cirrhosis of the liver before he was forty. She was gutsy, Adele, gallant, amusing to be with, and generous in spirit. John Green, who later served as musical director of two Fred Astaire movies, *Easter Parade* and *Royal Wedding*, remembered Adele as “able to be pert without being precious; cute but never coy; hokey, when appropriate, but never corny; moving without being maudlin. She had an uncanny sense of the fine line between sentiment and sentimentality, was sexy but never vulgar, and always utterly beguiling.” Noël Coward, who loathed falsity, adored Adele. Her spirit is nicely captured in a needlepoint cushion she made for her brother and sister-in-law: on one side there was a floral design, on the other the words “Fuck Off.”

Fred was much tighter, in every way. Once married, he was a homebody. His wife was his dearest friend, and perhaps his only confidante. His politics were apparently Republican, though he never pushed them; politics bored him. He was churchgoing, religious in a way he never cared to speak about, though his religion was evidently important to him. But then he never made a big thing about any aspect of his personal life. He gave

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dull interviews, making journalists feel—who is to say wrongly?—that his private life was his business. He golfed, for God’s sake, and in great earnest. As soon as he could afford them, he bought racehorses, and one of them, a horse named Triplicate, turned out to be a big money winner for him. But above all he put effort, relentless effort, into making his own vision about the art of the dance look perfectly effortless.

Without Adele as his partner at the beginning of his career, Fred Astaire might have ended up a suburban husband, selling swank high-line cars (for which he had a lifelong taste). In their early years as a dance team, Adele supplied the main excitement. But the commitment to perfection was not in her in the way that it was in her brother. “It was different for me,” she is quoted saying in the Tim Satchell biography of Fred Astaire, “but show business and dancing and worrying were in my brother’s blood—it was not just his work, it was his life.” Endless hard work is more than a theme in Astaire’s career; it was the reason his career ascended to the heights it did.

The dance team of Astaire and Astaire slowly rose on the marquee of the theaters they played, as did their fees, soon hitting \$350 a week. This was the age of the impresario, of Abe Erlanger, Flo Ziegfeld, and the Brothers Shubert, with their revues and extravaganzas. The As-

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taires were bidden by the Shuberts to appear in *Over the Top*, a show originally called *The Nine O'Clock Revue* because of a plan to start half an hour after most theatrical performances in New York. This was it, Broadway, the big time. No smash, the show nonetheless did do decent business, in New York and afterward on the road. In his memoir Fred Astaire quotes the verdict of Louis Sherwin, the critic of the *New York Globe*: "One of the prettiest features of the show is the dancing of the two Astaires. The girl, a light, spritelike little creature, has really an exquisite floating style in her caperings, while the young man combines eccentric agility with humor." Not exactly "I greet you at the beginning of a great career," but a start.

The Astaires did another show for the Shuberts, *The Passing Show of 1918*, from which they garnered more praise. The journalist Heywood Broun, that human unmade bed, awarded them this gentle critical kiss: "In an evening in which there was an abundance of good dancing, Fred Astaire stood out. He and his partner, Adele Astaire, made the show pause early in the evening with a beautiful loose-limbed dance. It almost seemed as if the two young persons had been poured into the dance." *Poured into the dance* is a metaphor that, like Broun himself, could use a little pressing, but the praise comes through.

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Once the Astaires arrived on Broadway, it really was onward and upward. They appeared on bills with such great names of the day as Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, and Charlie Ruggles. Their price went up to \$550 a week, enough for Fred to think about acquiring a sports car. Alexander Woollcott, spelling their name wrong, noted that “there should be a half dozen special words for the vastly entertaining dances by the Adaires, in particular for that nimble and lack-a-daisical Adaire named Fred. He is one of those extraordinary persons whose sense of rhythm and humor have been all mixed up, whose very muscles of which he seems to have an extra supply, are facetious.” Facetious muscles aren’t easily visualized, but let that, too, pass. Hey, as long as they spell your name wrong!

By 1920 the Astaires were making \$750 a week. They spent lots of their free time in smart nightclubs. A choreographer in a dud show they did called *The Love Letter* taught them a dance in which they ran around, shoulder to shoulder, as if on a six-day bicycle racetrack; it later came to be called the “Oompah Trot,” and they used it over and over because it was an unfailing showstopper. When reviewers panned shows Adele and Fred were in, exceptions tended to be made for them. “When they dance,” Robert Benchley wrote in *Life*, “everything seems brighter and their comedy alone would be good

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enough to carry them through even if they were to stop dancing (which God forbid!).” Now that is what real praise looks like.

Backstage one night in their dressing room appeared a brilliant young Englishman named Noël Coward, a contemporary who would become a lifelong friend and who suggested that the Astaires take their act to London, where they were certain to be a knockout. A young not yet fully fledged producer named Alex Aarons, whom Astaire met when Aarons was working at Sulka’s, the men’s shop noted for its robes and dazzling neckties, later pushed them to take his show *For Goodness Sake* to London, which they agreed to do. Their English success was instantaneous. “Your success here is assured,” Coward told Adele. “You’ve got youth, energy, humor, looks, and fun. That’s exactly what the English like.” *Autre temps, autre mœurs*; as we have sadly come to learn, there wasn’t always to be an England, at least not of the kind Noël Coward described.

Soon Fred Astaire—in his accent, his clothes, his general manner—came to appear mid-Atlantic, so strong did the English influence on him seem, while his sister married an Englishman and eventually became Lady Adele Cavendish. At one of the Astaires’ early shows in England, Prince Albert—son of King George V and, at

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his brother Edward's abdication to marry the dour Mrs. Wallis Simpson, one day to be King George VI—turned up. He adored the Astaires and brought his friends and family to see them. He began inviting Fred and Adele out to dinner and parties after performances. The King of England is supposed to have said of the Astaires: "They seem a decent sort of American." They couldn't possibly have been any more *in*. England still had what the journalists called Smart Society—a blend of pedigree, money, and talent, the beau and haute monde combined—and Fred and Adele Astaire found themselves very much in the thick of it.

Fred acquired an English valet, began his habit of buying racehorses, shopped Savile Row, eventually acquired a small black Rolls-Royce, known as a baby Rolls. The Astaires could have served as characters in an Anthony Powell novel, though perhaps Adele's raucous candor would have made her a better fit in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*. They were comfortable in England, and the English were comfortable with them, on and off the stage. The Prince of Wales claimed to have seen their show *Stop Flirting* no fewer than ten times, and Fred made a note of the elegant cut of the lapels on the prince's white waistcoat, which he had English tailors imitate for him. James Barrie and George Bernard Shaw were both quite gone

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on Adele, with Barrie suggesting that she consider playing Peter Pan.

In America Jock Whitney and Alfred Vanderbilt were part of their circle, or, more accurately, the Astaires were part of theirs; Tallulah Bankhead, Somerset Maugham, Noël Coward, and Gertrude Lawrence were also friends. They were the toast of two continents. Even Fred, with what Henry James called an imagination of disaster, the dubious talent of always being able to see the worst of things, had little about which to complain. They were leading the good life, the high life, a fine breeze stirring them gently on their way in the fast lane.

The Astaires didn't suffer greatly during the Depression, which in fact was good for show business, causing people to seek out escapism more ardently than ever. In America, Flo Ziegfeld paid them five thousand dollars a week to be in one of his shows. They scored in *The Band Wagon*, a Broadway hit that Fred would later redo, with major surgery, as a movie with Cyd Charisse. The reviews they received sounded as if they had written them themselves. Brooks Atkinson, the then still quite young *New York Times* theater critic, wrote, "This revue is without flaw." Other papers spoke of Fred's graduating from mere hooper to a genuine comic talent. In the Astaire partnership, Fred was emerging from his role as the lesser,

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younger brother; some reviewers thought that he had surpassed his sister in energy and flair.

The last time Fred and Adele danced together on stage was March 5, 1932, in a road-company version of *The Band Wagon*. Nearly thirty-five, Adele was ready to toss in the taps, and did so by marrying the dipsomaniacal Charlie Cavendish. Adele was in most ways her brother's perfect partner; just the right size (5-foot-3 and 106 pounds), with great physical charm centering on her large eyes, wittily pouting mouth, and easy comic gifts. Their increased fame as a brother-and-sister act allowed them to ignore the need to dance romantically as a couple—"it's like kissing your sister" being an old saying suggesting an experience of the utterly thrill-free sort, unless of course one's taste runs to incest.

The only complaint Fred Astaire ever had against Adele was that she was not as hard a worker as he, not much given to the ardor for perfection that was central to his character. He was a man who lay awake at night working out ideas for new dances. She found rehearsals a drag, and perfection nice enough in its way, though scarcely worth giving up the charms of social life; certainly nothing to lie awake at night for, at least not alone.

With his sister's retirement, Fred Astaire faced the question of whether he could make it on his own. Before

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taking up that problem in earnest, he had met and fallen (perhaps the only serious fall in his adult career) in love with a divorcée named Phyllis Potter. She was roughly the same height as Adele, slender, and also, in looks, again like his sister, the type of the gamine. She was socially well connected, brought up by an aunt and uncle when her mother had remarried. The uncle, Henry Bull, was president of the Turf and Field Club; she pronounced her r's as w's, as in "Fweddie, Fweddie, dawling." According to Fred, when they first met, at a golf luncheon given by Mrs. Virginia Graham Fair Vanderbilt, Phyllis had never heard of him. He was thirty-two, she twenty-four, and he tactfully laid siege to her. His mother was less than pleased, thinking her son would make his way more easily in the world unencumbered by a divorced woman with a four-year-old son. Fred, not his mother, prevailed. He and his wife would have two children of their own, Fred, Jr., and Ava, neither of whom ever danced professionally.

Not much is known about Fred Astaire as a ladies' man. No stories exist about him as a masher, roué, or even a serious chaser. The man who taught America to dance "The Continental" ("You kiss while you're dancing"), who held Ginger Rogers, Rita Hayworth, Paulette Goddard, Audrey Hepburn, Barrie Chase, and other beautiful

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women in his arms, bending them gently backward, whirling them about—but who himself didn't often kiss on stage, claiming that he did his lovemaking with his feet—this same man seems to have been too well mannered and otherwise centered on his work to give women other than second place in his life. He was a faithful and good husband, whose life almost came apart when his wife died of lung cancer at the age of forty-six, leaving him a widower at fifty-four. He married again, in 1980 at the age of eighty, this time to a woman who was a former jockey named Robyn Smith. She was forty-three years younger than he and previously the squeeze of Alfred Vanderbilt, whose horses she sometimes rode. Robyn Smith, as the English say, saw Astaire out at his death at eighty-eight.

Lots of stories are told about Fred Astaire's entrée into Hollywood. The best known—alas, never authenticated—has to do with the unidentified studio operative who, after watching Astaire's screen test, is supposed to have reported: "Balding. Can't sing. Dances a little." In different versions the wording is altered slightly.

In fact, David O. Selznick, then the head of RKO, though soon to become an executive at MGM, where his father-in-law Louis B. Mayer most powerfully presided, thought Fred Astaire likely to be a great movie per-

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former. "I am tremendously enthused about the suggestion New York [by which he meant his agents there] has made of using Fred Astaire," he wrote in 1933 to two underlings at RKO. "If he photographs (I have ordered a test), he may prove to be a really sensational bet. . . . Astaire is one of the great artists of the day: a magnificent performer, a man conceded to be perhaps, next to Leslie Howard, the most charming in the American theater, and unquestionably the outstanding young leader of American musical comedy." Selznick later showed some hesitation, but didn't finally back down: "I am a little uncertain about the man, but I feel, in spite of his enormous ears and bad chin line, that his charm is so tremendous that it comes through even in this wretched [screen] test, and I would be perfectly willing to go ahead with him [in a movie then in the planning stage]."

MGM signed Fred Astaire to a three-week contract at fifteen hundred dollars per week. He was to dance, playing a character named Fred Astaire, with Joan Crawford in an eminently forgettable flick called *Dancing Lady*. They gave him, in other words, a shot. He volleyed it back at them for an authoritative winner. Whatever his screen test might have shown, whatever his physical deficiencies, Fred Astaire came across splendidly on the screen. He was the masculine equivalent of what the

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French call a *belle laide*: a feature-by-feature homely woman who is somehow nevertheless stunning. His attractiveness may have resided partly in his clothes and the way he wore them; it had a great deal to do, of course, with the way he moved, including his most casual moves. Whatever the magical ingredients that made for movie charm, he possessed them. He lit up the joint—any joint he may have been in—turning the silver screen quite golden.

Of what did Astaire's magic consist? Why even now, more than twenty years after his death, more than fifty years since the days of his prime as a dancer-singer-actor, why do his old movies still shimmer with glamour, why do so many people still find the sight and sound of him enchanting, why does the very idea of Fred Astaire continue to cast its own lovely liting glow? We are, my dear Watson, obviously in the presence of a mystery.