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A man may give his life to his country in many different ways.

“Over There” is as powerful as a cannon.

— Franklin Roosevelt, in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*



Getting ready for the big show.

It should come as no surprise that when Hollywood decided to give itself a pat on the back for its collective work in producing propagandistic films during World War II, it chose a musical to do so. As Leo Braudy, Jane Feuer, Rick Altman, and others have pointed out, the Hollywood musical has consistently been a self-referential genre, one in which the apparatus of show-making is foregrounded and what Feuer calls the “myth of entertainment” is idealized.¹ Thus, when composer George M. Cohan is summoned to the White House at the beginning of the 1942 Warner Bros. musical *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (Michael Curtiz) to receive a Congressional Medal of Honor in recognition of his patriotic songs, it seems entirely fitting that President Roosevelt would use the occasion to tell Cohan what crucial work toward winning the war he had accomplished through his popular music. It seems clear, moreover, that the figure of Cohan (played by James Cagney in an Oscar-winning performance) serves as a stand-in for the wartime American entertainment industry as a whole. Just as the President has shown his appreciation for Cohan’s cultural contribution to the war effort, the audience in the movie theater is being asked to appreciate the patriotic work of Hollywood filmmakers.

This valorization of the “work” of entertainment acquired a particularly heavy charge, of course, in the crisis atmosphere of World War II, when rationing was the order of the day and virtually all Americans were being asked to work long hours, sacrifice leisure time, and put on hold their personal ambitions in order to win the war. For Hollywood filmmakers, then, there was a pressing sense that the movies had to accomplish two tasks at once: first, to give their overworked audience a pleasant diversion from the rigors of wartime production, and at the same time to make an ideological contribution to the war effort itself. Among all the genres at Hollywood’s disposal, the musical was best suited to this double-duty. Indeed, according to Rick Altman, the film musical in America had always grappled with the potential clash between work and pleasure:

Justifying the entire entertainment enterprise, the musical demonstrates that people who are insensitive to entertainment somehow miss the best part of life. In an important sense, the American film musical constitutes an apology for its existence: by setting up the work/entertainment polarity in such a way as to demonstrate the incomplete and potentially destructive nature of work ... as well as the desirable qualities of entertainment, the musical

justifies its own existence. Instead of simply supplanting the work ethic, however, entertainment values complement it, providing an able and energetic partner for the work ethic’s more sober and conservative approach.²

At no other time in American history was this ability to negotiate between the “potentially destructive” nature of work and the pleasures of entertainment more crucial than during World War II: for men, work had become the potentially life-threatening business of soldiering, while for women, work had moved outside the home and into industry, posing at least an ideological threat to the life of the American family. Resolving these new tensions was required the Hollywood musical to perform some heavy lifting.

To accomplish this task, Hollywood turned to what Altman calls the “show musical” (as distinct from either the “fantasy musical” or the “folk musical”) which, since Lloyd Bacon’s *42nd Street* in 1933, had been the predominant subgenre of the film musical, building its plot around the “creation of a show ... with the making of a romantic couple both symbolically and causally related to the success of the show.”³ To this basic paradigm were added two new forms: films featuring the servicemen’s club (e.g., *Stage Door Canteen* [Frank Borzage, 1943]; *Two Girls and a Sailor* [Richard Thorpe, 1944]; and *Hollywood Canteen* [Delmer Daves, 1944]); and those featuring the troop show (e.g., *Thousands Cheer* [George Sidney, 1943]; *Thank Your Lucky Stars* [David Butler, 1943]; and *Four Jills in a Jeep* [William Seiter, 1944]). Both of these new forms of the show musical proved popular with wartime audiences and gave Hollywood a chance to resolve the work/entertainment polarity while demonstrating its total commitment to winning the war. The following analysis of one of the wartime “troop show” musicals—Michael Curtiz’s *This is the Army* (1943)—attempts to show how the film uses generic conventions of the show musical to grapple with troubling contemporary social issues and thereby push for a total harmonization of American society in the war effort.

This is the Army (1943)

For Leo Braudy, “Formal self-consciousness, the shapes of individual energy, and the definition of the ideal community are the basic themes of the musical.”⁴ Jane Feuer offers a similar analytical scheme when she subdivides the larger “myth of entertainment” promulgated by the self-reflective art musical into three categories: the myth of spontaneity (the individual); the myth of integration (the community);

and the myth of the audience (formal self-consciousness).⁵ All three of those basic elements are brought into play in *This is the Army*, although it is the communal, integrating impulse that dominates the film. Indeed, the very structure of the film points to the importance of the American national community and to trans-generational links. The film is broken into three distinct sections: the first takes place in 1917-18, during World War I; the second occurs just after America's entry into World War II; and the third concerns the actual performance of the troop show itself. The narrative emphasis here is on history. In its overriding concern with larger national issues, then, *This is the Army* makes formal concerns and spontaneous individual energy subsidiary to its quest for the ideal wartime community.

Looking Back at World War I

The initial tasks that *This is the Army* seeks to accomplish are first, to posit an overarching historical integration in which the World War I era of American history is conflated with that of the contemporary United States of 1943, and second, to draw parallels between performing on stage and performing in the military. The opening twenty-one minutes are set in 1917-18, beginning with a shot that pans through several crowded New York City streets, stopping to focus on a group of musicians playing on a bandstand in front of an army recruiting office before moving on to a theater marquee that reads, "Jerry Jones and His All Star Revue." The camera then moves inside the theater, comes up from behind the silhouetted heads of audience members, goes to a front-row-seat point of view, and then cuts to a young woman watching the stage from the wings (a series of camera movements and cuts typical of the standard Hollywood show musical). As the woman watches Jerry Jones (George Murphy) dance onstage (bedecked in top hat and tails, presaging Fred Astaire, she says to an older man beside her (whose clipboard and harried demeanor mark him as the stage manager), "He's a great performer." "Well," the stage manager responds, looking down at the letter he holds in his hand, "he can get ready for the greatest performance of his life." When Jerry comes offstage and sees that the envelope's return address is the White House, he guesses out loud that perhaps it is an invitation for a "command performance" for the President; as it turns out, of course, the letter is an army induction notice. "I'll say it's a command per-

formance," Jerry says grimly. Without missing a beat Jerry turns to the woman and asks her to marry him that night, and she breathlessly agrees.

The point of this recapitulation of *This is the Army*'s opening scene is to illustrate the speed with which the film establishes the world of the Hollywood show musical, but moves in a new direction. The camera movement inside the theater certainly comes straight out the standard show musical, as does the stage-couple relationship between Jerry Jones and the woman in the wings. Indeed, with the sudden marriage proposal by Jerry, the film manages to compress into four minutes what it usually takes the show musical its entire narrative to achieve. While the camera, the theater, and the romantic couple may indicate the basic show musical formula, however, the parallel between "outside" (the recruiting band on the crowded city street) and "inside" (Jerry's show on the theatrical stage) performances signals that this particular show musical is going to evince greater interest in society at large. In fact, Rick Altman sees the development of the "troop show" musical as a generic evolutionary midpoint between what he calls the "stagey solutions of the thirties' entertainer-oriented fare" in the show musical and the interest shown in public "fables of nationalism" developed in the late forties in the folk musical.⁶ This direction away from the standard show musical and toward a more public-spirited solution is indicated in the association made early on in *This is the Army* between performing as a dancer onstage and performing as a soldier on the battlefield (a connection made neatly in the pun on "command performance").

The balance of the World War I beginning of *This is the Army* elaborates on the potential connections and oppositions between civilian and military performance. For instance, a secondary character, Eddie Dibble (Charles Butterworth), is first shown playing a cornet (badly) in his apartment while his wife mildly chastises him for having enlisted in the army. "This all comes from your wanting to march in parades and play in a band," she scolds. "It's all the fault of that darn cornet." Eddie responds, grinning, "From now on it'll be the bugle." As he starts into reveille the scene dissolves to rows of tents lined up in a military camp, which a title tells us is "Camp Upton, New York." If Eddie has made the performance transition from civilian to military smoothly, however, it is soon clear that Jerry Jones isn't faring so well: the graceful dancer cannot march as precisely as his drill sergeant wants. When the drill sergeant complains to the camp commander that Jerry is un-

able to march but still mysteriously finds the energy and ability to dance and amuse his fellow soldiers, the commander responds:

Sergeant, there's a very necessary element in soldiering. It goes by various names, but let's call it morale. ... What I mean is that war is a pretty grim business, and sometimes a song or a smile is just as vital to an army as food. Teach your men to fight, naturally, but don't discourage their attempts to entertain one another. As a matter of fact, encourage them.

Encourage Hollywood studios to make movies, one might add. As if any further proof of the value of entertainment were needed, the next scene in *This is the Army* displays a banner newspaper headline reading, "ARMY PLACES STAMP OF APPROVAL ON SOLDIER SHOWS." The unequivocal message is the same as that President Roosevelt gives George M. Cohan in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*: singing and dancing in the service of your country are just as important as fighting.

In the next sequence of the film's World War I section, Jerry Jones is seen excitedly directing his comrades-in-arms as they prepare for their soldier show, which has been dubbed *Yip Yip Yaphank*. As several dancers sloppily practice their steps, Jerry once again mixes the issue of military vs. civilian performance when he admonishes them, "Look, fellows, this isn't a five-mile hike. Think of the tempo, raise your feet." The show comes together quickly, of course, and suddenly the viewers are once again outside a theater looking up at a marquee, and again moving inside to a position behind the audience and finally front-row center. The next cut, however, is unusual and jarring: the camera returns to the outside of the theater, where a large convoy of military trucks is pulling up. An officer tells the drill sergeant, "We've changed the routine of the finale, and the men will march with full field equipment out through the audience to the trucks." Back inside the theater, *Yip Yip Yaphank* comes quickly to its end, and the soldiers begin their march off the stage, up the center aisle, and out of the theater. Jerry Jones's young wife realizes what is happening and shouts, "That's not the way they rehearsed it. It's real, they're going!"

Jeanine Basinger has made the observation that this rather startling device appears "more than once" in World War II-era musicals that contain references to World War I:

The soldiers who are going to combat are called directly from the theater (where they may be an audience, or part of the perfor-

mance) to board their war ships. Such a scene makes a powerful visual metaphor for the leaving behind of a joyous, peaceful life (a "musical" life) to enter the life of war. It also calls to mind the fact that both performing a musical number and carrying out battle orders are actions which must be planned, or "staged" to work properly. They must be directed and controlled to succeed.⁷

Rather than emphasizing the "leaving behind" of civilian life, however, this strategy is a powerful sign of the complete dissolution in wartime of the boundaries between the stage and "real life"; the actor-performers must pass directly through an audience of their families, friends, and ordinary Americans—including the spectators of the film—in order to reach the war. Often, members of the audience will leave their seats to join the soldiers in their march up the aisle. Perhaps more importantly, in *This is the Army* the soldiers never emerge from the theater to board the trucks; they remain mingled with the audience in a total merger of performer and society at large. Identification between actor and audience/spectator is as complete as the medium will allow.

In the final sequence of the World War I opening of *This is the Army*, Jerry Jones and his fellow soldiers do in fact go to war: a title reading "Somewhere in France" is superimposed over a standard combat scene in No Man's Land, replete with trenches and barbed wire, gunfire and the explosions of artillery shells, while Jerry and the other members of his unit cower under the barrage. "A lot different from *Yip Yip Yaphank*, hunh Jerry?" asks one soldier in the group. "Oh, not much," Jerry responds. "Sometimes it did seem a little noisier backstage." War is thus again linked to the idea of musical performance, a notion that is confirmed near the end of the war sequence when Eddie, sitting in a cafe with his fellow survivors, inscribes the names of the soldiers who didn't come out of combat alive onto his bugle, and assures everyone, "They're not dead. They'll live forever on this bugle." The scene ends when Jerry arrives, limping and with his lower leg shackled in a large metal brace. The group shares a drink to *Yip Yip Yaphank*. "Here's to a great show," says Jerry. "May there never be another one."

"Here's to a great show," says Jerry. "May there never be another one."

The World War I sequence of *This is the Army* thus makes a firm assertion of the parallel between performance on the stage and performance in war.

The parallel is not entirely consistent—at times the two performances are equated, while at others the terrible reality of war is depicted in contrast to the unreality of stage performance—but the linkage is nevertheless established. The remainder of the film will use that connection as a springboard for dealing with important contemporary social issues.

The Early Years of World War II

The second of the three major sections of *This is the Army* begins with a map of Poland in flames, signaling the leap ahead in time from 1918 to 1939, and then immediately cuts to a

scene in which Kate Smith sings “God Bless America” on a radio sound-stage.⁸ As Smith continues singing, a montage shuttles among scenes of the soldiers from the first section of the film; they are now all middle-aged, with businesses, wives, and draft-age sons of their own. The final shot shows Jerry Jones with his son, Johnny (played by Ronald Reagan), in their “Jones and Jones, Theatrical Producers” office. Another montage follows, this one depicting the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, bringing the film up to within a little more than a year of the date of its contemporary audience. What is most interesting about this opening sequence of the middle section is the swiftness and fluidity with which the film moves from the essentially conventional show musical format of its first section to what amounts to a kind of “reality programming” for the war era, featuring a popular music star and newsreel footage of the actual war, mixed with the fictitious montage. The film makes no distinction between the conventions of fiction and those of reality; all blends together here in a heady brew of patriotic signs.

The film returns to its show musical roots in the next sequence: firmly back in the genre when Johnny’s girlfriend, Eileen (Joan Leslie) appears, the audience quickly realizes that their relationship is go-

ing to present a problem that must be solved parallel with, and in the context of, the musical show that has not yet appeared but that the audience knows will. If the precise source of the show remains a mystery, however, the genesis of the problem in Johnny and Eileen’s relationship is shockingly clear: Johnny refuses to consider marriage until he has returned from the war, a sentiment connected with the grief he has witnessed in the mother, young wife, and infant child of a close friend, Blake, who was killed at Pearl Harbor.⁹ Four conversations on this painful subject of marriage will occur between Johnny and Eileen over the course of the rest of the film, and it is not until the very end, when the show is concluding its tour and Johnny is preparing to join his unit at the front, that Eileen finally convinces him that she is right. She sums up her argument in a final plea:

You don’t know what this war is about. We’re a free people fighting to be free. Free to marry. Free to raise a family. ... Open your heart. We’re all in this fight together. Women as well as men sharing our responsibilities. I want to be part of you—the part that goes with you on the battlefield. This is a free United States. If we want to get married—let’s get married.

Eileen has taken the additional step of bringing a military chaplain with her to the theater, after the show, she and Johnny take their vows in an alley outside. Eileen’s aggressive seizure of the initiative is symbolic of the new roles assumed by women during the war era, exhibiting what Allen L. Woll calls the “sharp reversal in male and female roles” often found in wartime musicals.¹⁰

Thus does *This is the Army* appropriate the conventional show musical device of the romantic couple’s marriage quest and bend it to fit the exigencies of the day. The contrast, moreover, between the difficulty of Johnny and Eileen’s marriage and the extraordinary ease with which Jerry Jones had convinced his bride-in-the-wings to marry him, is significant. There is a suggestion here that while World Wars I and II might share some common features—i.e., men going off to war while women stay home—the problems facing the contemporary audience of 1943 are more complex than those of the earlier, simpler age.

The Show Within a Show

The remaining plot structure of *This is the Army* demonstrates that genre, like romance, must be similarly updated to take account of the world’s greater complexity. Like their fathers before them, Johnny

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Free to marry. Free to raise a family.

Jones and the other sons of the World War I veterans are sent to Camp Upton for training, and soon they too find themselves preparing to put on a troop show. The new show (dubbed *This is the Army*), however, will be on a much larger scale, employing many more actors and featuring far more sophisticated sets, lighting, and other technological apparatus. In addition, *This is the Army* will enfold *Yip Yip Yaphank* within it; the World War I veterans will perform one act within the new, larger show.

The last half of the film is devoted to the *This is the Army* show itself, divided about equally between opening night in New York and closing night in Washington, D.C. All of the acts deal with various issues associated with becoming a soldier: a comedy team makes gender-bending jokes about wives and mothers assuming roles formerly reserved for men; a gymnastics act emphasizes the teamwork necessary for successful soldiering; a magic act humorously shows the transformation of a Sad Sack into a disciplined soldier; a "Negro" number entitled "That's What the Well-Dressed Man in Harlem Will Wear" (and including boxer Joe Louis) features former zoot-suiters now "struttin'" smartly in an "olive drab color scheme." Johnny Jones, meanwhile, is busy directing the cast backstage (he has to ask his over-enthusiastic but meddlesome father [a symbol of the old genre?] not to interfere) before Eileen arrives with the chaplain and her marriage proposal.

The cinematic handling of the show is, like its treatment of history and romance, generically eclectic. Most of the show is done from the front-row point of view, with cuts to backstage and to the audience for reaction shots. At times, however, cinematic liberties are taken with the camera, such as when audience shots of the embittered mother of Blake (Johnny's friend who was killed at Pearl Harbor) are mixed with shots of Blake himself aboard his plane as the show's cast sings a song in praise of the Air Corps; near the end of the song, the mother tearfully turns to her other son and tells him that she has changed her mind and it *is* all right if he enlists. In the show's grand finale, too, the camera suddenly assumes a Busby Berkeley-esque position on the ceiling and films the choreographed movements of hundreds of soldiers going through their patterned paces on stage.

It should be noted, too, that the *Yip Yip Yaphank* portion of the show includes two significant wrinkles. The first of these is the surprise inclusion of Jerry Jones in the dance number. Jerry, who since World War I has been reduced to limping with one stiff leg, using a cane for support, is called up to the stage

from the seat he had assumed in the audience, and he manages to take part in the dance. The second surprise comes when the flaps of a tent are pulled back (like stage curtains) to reveal Irving Berlin himself, who sings a rough-and-ready rendition of "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning." As the author of both *Yip Yip Yaphank* and *This is the Army*, as well as the hugely popular "God Bless America" featured earlier in the film, it is fitting that Berlin appear in a musical that uses virtually every generic trick to create a sense of integration between past and present, fiction and reality, music and ordinary life, actors and audience, soldiers and civilians, men and women, black and white, living and dead. *This is the Army* abolishes all boundaries, including those between the artist and his creation, in its quest for complete solidarity in the prosecution of total war.



Continuity between shows.

In the end, the soldier/actors of *This is the Army* march off the stage and into the audience alongside the veteran members of *Yip Yip Yaphank*. Though the song they sing is called "This Time is the Last Time," celebrating a future world that will have gone beyond war, the very fact that the scene is a reenactment of a similar one required in the last war seems to undermine the song's assertion. While *This is the Army* superficially deplores the necessity of fighting wars, the musical genre of which it is so unashamedly a part seems profoundly satisfied with the cyclical, inter-generational nature of war; indeed, it seems to relish the chance to show off its powers of integration and problem resolution. It seems, in short, that genre's abhorrence for closure remains potent, even when that closure might signal a development as important as the end of war.

Notes

¹See Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 140-42; Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in *Film Genre Reader*, Barry Keith Grant, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 329-31; and Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 59-62.

²Altman, 50-51.

³Altman, 200.

⁴Braudy, 155.

⁵Feuer, 331.

⁶Altman, 120.

⁷Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press), 246.

⁸Allen L. Woll, *The Hollywood Musical Goes to War* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), 62-63. As Woll explains, "God Bless America" was a "fortunate rediscovery" for Irving Berlin: "He recalled his experience in the camp show *Yip Yip Yaphank* in 1917, and remembered that he had written a patriotic finale for the show. The song was so patriotic that Berlin felt it might be a trifle excessive for the all-soldier show. The song remained unpublished until 1938. In that year Berlin returned from London after the Munich Pact and felt compelled to write a patriotic song, but he composed nothing that satisfied him. He remembered the old song that he had written and revised it slightly, giving it to Kate Smith to sing. 'God Bless America' became one of the most successful songs of modern popular music."

⁹This reverses the situation from that in another popular wartime musical, *For Me and My Gal* (Busby Berkeley, 1942), in which entertainer Gene Kelly loses Judy Garland when he purposefully injures his hand so that he will be declared ineligible for the draft. He only regains Garland after volunteering to join the war, becoming a hero, and returning to America.

¹⁰Woll, 101.

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