**Castles in the Air**

by pickyourselfupfred

Summary

This begins the story of their last film at RKO and there are many true incidents included in this story. It wasn’t perhaps the swansong the public wanted but it did pay homage to the dance partnership of a previous generation. My thanks to all of you out there who continue to read my stories and revisit them now and then. It’s a pleasure to write for you all.

They sat, side by side, in the semi gloom, Ginger’s fingers lightly touching the back of his hand, and watched the flickering black and white images on the screen before them. The were sitting in one of RKO’s screening rooms and for the last half hour they’d been looking at the same short reel of film repeated over and over. Finally Fred raised his hand to signal they had seen enough and as the lights came up turned to her saying, ‘God they were good dancers Gin’.

They had been watching the only existing footage of Vernon and Irene Castle dancing. It was a silent reel but they had sat entranced as a bygone age came back to life and the grey shadows on the screen danced in a lost partnership.

‘They were more than dancers Fred’, she replied. ‘They way they held each other and moved together; they were so much in love. We simply have to capture that in our movie’.

‘We can’t but show our love when we dance, just like them’.

‘It’s our last film at the studio. Don’t hold back on anything’.

He patted her hand reassuringly, ‘I’ll show them true love baby’.

And as he said it his heart lurched, too many wasted opportunities, too many if onlys and yet here she was, still loving him, still wanting to share her life with him. Fighting back against the emotions sweeping over him he repeated, looking into her eyes, ‘True love’.

The picture would be a radical departure from their previous work. Gone were the big white sets
and the modern composers. It was a period piece, a different style of dancing and more drama than comedy. Furthermore the ending, of necessity, was a time of sadness, not the joy of their previous movies together. It wasn’t the way they wanted their partnership at RKO to end but at least there was the consolation of playing a married couple for most of the film with opportunities of showing their mutual love and affection.

Before rehearsals and shooting, however, came preparation and this screening had been part of that. The most challenging aspect was meeting with Irene Castle herself. She obviously thought Fred ideal for the role but seemed to dislike Ginger from the start. Whether she herself lacked Ginger’s beauty and showed a jealous streak or simply thought no one was as good as herself nothing was right for her. Ginger’s hair was too long or the wrong color or style and wardrobe tryouts became a nightmare as she criticised all the costumes even though they had been based as closely as possible on the original ones. After a particularly hairy day Ginger came home to find Fred waiting for her and exploded. ‘My God Fred, the woman’s driving me cuckoo. She might have been a great dancer and loved her husband but she nitpicks at everything I do or say or wear’.

Fred took her in his arms, chuckling as he did so. ‘Now you know just how I felt with Hurricane Hoctor’. ‘Oh no, she’s way worse than her’. ‘I’ll see if we can do something about her’. ‘Try a shotgun’, she answered through tight lips. He laughed to see her worked up this way and she began to see the funny side of it. ‘You know what else – she said I was too short!’ ‘Then we’ll just have to stretch you’, he replied giggling.

By now neither of them could keep a straight face and exasperation turned into laughter and laughter soon turned into hugs and kisses. ‘Well at least she won’t get into our rehearsal studio’, quipped Fred, ‘though we ought to invite her’. ‘You do fella and I’ll……. I’ll…….’ ‘You’ll think of something’, he replied. She thumped his chest and retorted. ‘Withdrawal of certain privileges?’ ‘Oh then she’s coming nowhere near’.

In fact rehearsals followed their usual pattern, time alone or with Pan and Hal Borne and lots of hard work mingled with fun. During the first couple of days the jokes came thick and fast, Hal playing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ as they came into the room, Fred dabbing a handkerchief to his eyes and then wringing out a pool of water and his entry to the commissary with Au Revoir pinned to the back of his sport coat by Ginger. They loved their jokes and although the poignancy of them never left their minds the humor made the rehearsal period the best part of any movie.

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They began by practising some basic steps from the old dances, the one step, fox trot and the dance they loved best, the waltz. Fred had seen the Castles on stage and was anxious to recreate their two most famous dances, the Maxixe and the Castle Walk. Practice would be important, there were many dance sequences planned for the film but little by little they both adapted to the different style of dancing and enjoyed the close holds these entailed. They had, however, mutually decided to leave the Castles’ last waltz until the last possible minute as it would be as special for them as it had been for those other dancers. Hank Potter, the director, had agreed to leave this sequence until as near as possible to the end in the shooting schedule.

With most of the dances blocked they were free to work on a dance that was more like their own style, the audition piece to the tune of Robert E Lee. Fred told her he would use some of the old vaudeville moves he had seen as a boy and assured her it would be the greatest fun. Indeed it was rumbustious joy for both of them, plenty of unsophisticated dancing and a chance to let their hair down before the more formal dances. Fred teased her mercilessly throughout, which she enjoyed.
immensely. He used all the old tricks, the pull into his body and push away, the little side steps, linking arms back to back and his favorite, the step over. He pushed it a bit when during this last move instead of clasping his hands under her arms, he used those big hands of his to hold her breasts. Of course she loved it but mockingly said, ‘I’ll get you for that buster’. The final step he tried was a vaudeville favorite – holding each other with hands behind the neck. Doing it this way gave them the chance of moving at real speed, a positive wow when it came to performance. They practised a few times then really let loose. As they turned faster suddenly Ginger lost her hold and cartwheeled across the room, lying very still on the floor. He rushed to her side.

‘God Gin, are you ok?’

She didn’t respond and he pulled her into his arms, had he hurt her badly?

‘Baby it’s me, I’m sorry, say something please’.

She opened her eyes and with a wink said, ‘Gotcha’.

He rolled his eyes and kissed her with delight.

‘I told you there’d be payback’, she said with a giggle.

All too soon they began shooting. They were using an old theater in downtown L.A. as the setting for the audition sequence and also for the point in the film when Irene sees Vernon in a comedy sketch. For this Ginger was seated with her ‘friends’ including a young actress making her first steps in film. During a pause in rehearsals the young girl said to Ginger, ‘You’re such a great dancer and comedienne. Have you any advice for a newcomer?’

Ginger, always encouraging replied, ‘Find your self a really good choreographer. I only knew a little about dancing before I met Fred in 1930 and now look how far we’ve both come in just a few short years. He’s taught me all I know’.

She looked down at Fred who was rehearsing on the stage below and gave a small sigh.

‘And if you find a good choreographer, marry him’.

And little did she know that the young girl at her side would marry a dancer and they’d be known as Marge and Gower Champion.

Now watching Fred in the Henpecks routine Ginger was doubled up in laughter. He’d been working with Lew Fields to reproduce the sketch but she hadn’t been allowed to sit in.

‘It’ll be a surprise’, said Fred when she badgered him and it certainly was. She knew how much fun he could be when they were together but he really let rip here as if it were the norm for him. And make up had done a great job on him; he was totally grotesque. At the end of the shoot he headed straight for her, as ever anxious about his performance. She beamed at him and took his hands in her own.

‘Fred you were so funny. Where did you hide all that talent?’

‘I thought I’d gone over the top’.

‘You had to, this is vaudeville’.

‘It was ok then’.

She shook her head.

‘Fred if I live to be an old lady with you tottering around with me still, you’ll never think you’re good enough’, she paused, ‘but you’re the whole world to me’.

They finished filming at the theater with the Robert E Lee routine. Ginger had asked her mother to film the dance on her home movie camera and as they waited for the set to be readied they indulged in ribbing each other and pulling faces as her mother filmed them. Ginger even nearly cold cocked Fred as she waved her arms about excitedly. These home movies were her lifeline when he wasn’t around and loved that their horseplay would be recorded forever. Shooting the actual number was a breeze, she couldn’t stop smiling and when Fred cheekily repeated his hold for the step over and clasped his hands over her breasts she almost lost it completely. At the end of the shoot Fred, realising her mother was still filming gave Ginger a quick friendly kiss that she was happy to respond to.

The work in the theater ended with final dialogue scenes and soon with shooting over for the day.
they were at Ginger’s place, cuddling and chewing over the last few days.
‘Thanks Fred for that kiss. It’ll make that particular home movie really special’.
‘Get your ma to come along again and we’ll make more memories’.
She was delighted. He normally didn’t welcome other cameras in the studio so this was a gesture just for her.
‘Well Fred how do you think we’re doing? Are we becoming the Castles?’
‘If Vernon loved Irene as much as I love you he was a very lucky man’.
‘And we’ve still got weeks of being able to be as loving as they were and on screen to boot’.
‘And’, he replied, ‘years and years of that in life’. He paused, taking her hand, ‘No regrets Gin?’
He kissed her tenderly and looking him straight in the eye she replied, ‘No regrets Fred’.

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