

Desirée J. Garcia

“What’s Happened to Chorus Girls?”: Domesticity and the Postwar Backstage Musical

ABSTRACT

This article examines an unidentified cycle of popular films in the postwar era: the domestic-themed backstage musical. These films have since received relatively little scholarly attention. Musicals such as *Mother Wore Tights* (Walter Lang, 1947) reflected contemporary social tensions about the endurance of marriage and the relationship between mothers and children by incorporating themes of divorce, suicide, and miscarriage into the otherwise entertainment-oriented genre. In particular, I focus on how the backstage setting itself became domesticized with increasing narrative emphasis placed on the private space of the dressing room.

“Bonnie Tells About ‘the Babes’—But They’re All Her Own,” reported the *New York Mirror Magazine* in December of 1957 (see Figure 1). The article shows an image of a crowded backstage dressing room, at the center of which sits a chorus girl and chorus boy holding small children on their laps. Other chorus members huddle around them and coo at the young girl and baby boy. “Why is it,” Bonnie Evans wondered during a backstage interview, “that people are just as surprised to hear that a chorus girl is married and has children as they would be about a two-headed calf?” The story details how Evans and her husband, Mario Lamm, incorporated their children into their work lives at every turn. They took their two-year-old to *Li’l Abner* (Gene De

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Figure 1. Chorus girl Bonnie Evans sits in her dressing room with husband Mario Lamm, their two children, and fellow chorus members of *L'il Abner* (St. James Theater, 1957). *New York Mirror Magazine*, December 1957 (Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts).

Paul, Johnny Mercer, Norman Panama, and Melvin Frank, 1956) rehearsals “in a basket,” and Evans performed onstage while pregnant with her second child until two months before her delivery date. “My doctor didn’t mind my continuing to dance,” she explained, “but the producers did, because I play the part of a little girl named ‘Scarlet’ in the show, and of course, it wouldn’t do to have a little girl look like she was with child.” While she proved that she could manage being a chorus girl and a mother, her goal was to get “out of the chorus” in five or six years. “If I can’t make it by then,” she rationalized, “I’ll probably settle down to being just a mother and a housewife.”¹

Bonnie’s story was not unique in newspapers and trade periodicals of the postwar era. Since World War II, numerous editorials about stage life insisted on the difference between the chorus girls of previous generations, notorious for seeking wealth and fame, and those of the postwar present. In a 1953 article titled “What’s Happened to Chorus Girls?” the author describes how the chorus girl observed in her dressing room looks just like “a typical young and pretty housewife at the breakfast table in, say, the second year of marriage,” wearing curlers and cold cream.² And a special “Backstage” spread in the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1952 investigates what chorus girls do “in their intimate backstage quarters.” The article shows a series of women fulfilling maternal duties, such as dancer Cynthia Nystrom, who extends her shapely legs onto the dressing table while she “uses up skeins and skeins of yarn knitting pretty things for Pamela, her 4-year-old daughter.”³ In each of these glimpses backstage, it is the paradox between chorus girl and domesticity that delivers a surprise to the reader. Whereas earlier backstage intrigues promised titillating views of undressed and vulnerable young women, the chorus girls of the postwar moment filled their offstage hours with the productive duties of motherhood. The chorus girl, it seemed, had grown up and settled down.

Forms of popular culture reflected and mediated this cultural shift. Nowhere was the chorus girl’s transformation more apparent than in the dozens of backstage musicals produced by the Hollywood studios in this era. Domesticity replaced sex as a primary theme in a genre known for its provocative interplay between what is seen and what is unseen. Women went from being sex objects, typically shown in their underwear and exposed to the prying eyes of male onlookers and the advances of male intruders, to wives and mothers. They became constructive producers of the household economy rather than career-driven hedonists. No longer single, women in postwar backstage musicals had to balance their professional, marital, and maternal identities, which was a central plotline and narrative conflict in *Mother Wore Tights* (Walter Lang, 1947), *The Barkleys of Broadway* (Charles Walters, 1949), *When My Baby Smiles at Me* (Walter Lang, 1948), *My Blue Heaven* (Henry Koster, 1950), *Everything I Have Is Yours* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1952), and *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor, 1954), among others.

1 Gabriel Prevor, “A New Slant on the Chorus ‘Line,’” *New York Mirror*, December 29, 1957.

2 Carol Taylor, “What’s Happened to Chorus Girls?,” Chorus Girl Collection, Performing Arts Branch, New York Public Library.

3 “Backstage with Chorus Girls,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 26, 1952.

In most postwar examples of the genre, the protagonist couple is already or soon-to-be married, constructing a temporal bridge to films made in the past. Whereas 1930s backstage musicals were structured according to the imperative of heterosexual coupling, musicals of the late 1940s and 1950s were more concerned with processes of uncoupling; they effectively unravel the happy endings that had provided narrative closure in earlier films. A case in point is *The Barkleys of Broadway*, the vehicle that reunited stars Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers on the screen after the duo had professionally separated for roughly a decade. The film opens with a musical number that could have constituted the finale in any of their earlier productions. The couple dances together onstage as the opening credits appear, showcasing their romantic union. They are married, sharing the stage and a dressing room, but the number is only the beginning of the narrative arc, which follows the fate of that marriage. Marital discord and separation threaten their romantic union, causing them to occupy different dressing rooms until they are able to compromise and return to one another at the very end.

These are not themes that we typically associate with the backstage musical as a genre. And indeed, in the postwar era, separation, divorce, adultery, mental illness, suicide, child abandonment and negligence, and illegal adoption take the place of the conventional boy-meets-girl romance.⁴ Here, I analyze this cycle of backstage musicals, which have largely fallen by the wayside in genre scholarship. Most studies of the backstage musical focus on studio output of the 1930s, including Warner Bros. musicals such as *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933) and *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933) and the Astaire/Rogers vehicles at RKO.⁵ The critical attention that some backstage musicals of the 1950s have received, most notably *Singin' in the Rain* (Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen, 1952) and *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli, 1953), is largely due to the parodic qualities of the films in question; both engage in formal and narrative explorations of self-reflexivity regarding the making of entertainment, and of musicals in particular.⁶ Taking a larger view of the genre's evolution in the postwar period reveals these latter examples to be the exception rather than the rule. The majority of backstage musicals from 1947 to 1968 feature stories about married couples and their children. For example, the popular cycle of Betty Grable and Dan Dailey films (*Mother Wore Tights*, *When My Baby Smiles at Me*, and *My Blue Heaven*) place these family dynamics at the forefront. The transformation of Grable's star persona, from pin-up girl to wife and mother, is indicative of the shift in the genre in this historical moment.⁷

4 Studies of the backstage musical genre include Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Steven Cohan, *Hollywood Musicals* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 99–102; and Sean Griffin, "The Gang's All Here: Generic versus Racial Integration in the 1940s Musical," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 1 (Autumn 2002): 21–45.

5 See Martin Rubin, *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and Lucy Fischer, "City of Women: Busby Berkeley, Architecture, and Urban Space," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 4 (Summer 2010): 111–130, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2010.0008>.

6 Feuer, *Hollywood Musical*.

7 For an analysis of the cultural and political function of Betty Grable's pin-up celeb-

The marital and filial dimensions of the postwar backstage musical become readily apparent when focusing on the most domestic space of the genre, the dressing room. The matrimonial dressing room appears as a shared space for husband-and-wife stage teams to express their true desires and anxieties (e.g., *Everything I Have Is Yours*). Postwar dressing rooms are frequently the site where the wife's pregnant state is revealed and reckoned with, as in *Mother Wore Tights*. And in familial dressing rooms, a variation on the matrimonial dressing room, in which stage couples share the space with their children, the family unit must struggle to stay together despite the pressures endemic to working parents and adolescent children (e.g., *There's No Business Like Show Business* [Walter Lang, 1954] and *The Seven Little Foys* [Melville Shavelson, 1955]).

The emphasis on intimacy and private relations between wives and husbands, or mothers and children, renders the backstage musical of the postwar period a hybridized genre, overlapping with the themes, narratives, and aesthetic concerns of melodrama.⁸ As Michael G. Garber has pointed out, melodrama provided an alternate mode in the "sad clown" musicals of the 1930s that positioned family as an "ideal state" and incorporated "extremes of emotion" and "improbable events."⁹ But it is not until the postwar era that the emphasis on married women's subjectivity and domestic space overwhelm the backstage musical, a subgenre that had historically featured stories about working single women in the city.¹⁰ In tandem with domestic melodramas of the postwar period, the backstage musical of the 1940s and 1950s engages with the notion that conventional gender roles have come under social strain. In the tensions between wives and husbands and mothers and children, the female characters, in particular, grapple with the struggle between what is expected of them and their own personal desires.

Highlighting women's choices, expressed both narratively and aesthetically in these films, coincides with the domestic orientation of space (homes and dressing rooms) where these concerns are given their most overt expression. Foregrounding the dressing room illuminates how space can destabilize generic categories, much like how Merrill Schleier, Paula J. Massood, and Pamela Robertson Wojcik have demonstrated with their analyses of cinematic skyscrapers, cities, and apartments, respectively.¹¹ Critical and persistent dress-

rity, see Robert B. Westbrook, "'I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl That Married Harry James': American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II," *American Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (December 1990): 587–614.

8 For a more general discussion of hybridity in Hollywood genres, see Janet Staiger, "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History," *Film Criticism* 22, no. 1 (1997): 5–20.

9 Michael G. Garber, "Tragicomedy, Melodrama, and Genre in Early Sound Films: The Case of Two 'Sad Clown' Musicals," *CINEJ Cinema Journal* 5, no. 2 (2016): 54–86, <https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2016.135>.

10 See Fischer, "City of Women."

11 In his discussion of generic hybridity, David Neumeyer foregrounds music as the formal element that blurs generic distinctions. See David Neumeyer, "Merging Genres in the 1940s: The Musical and the Dramatic Feature Film," *American Music* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 122–132, 123, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3592971>; Merrill Schleier, *Skyscraper Cinema: Architecture and Gender in American Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Paula J. Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); and Pamela Robertson Wojcik, *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

ing room scenes in the postwar musical reveal the backstage space as one that is liminal for the characters, a portal through which wives and mothers enter and exit public and private spaces, but it is also a space that materializes the liminality of generic categories themselves. From the dressing room, wives and mothers can access the home, the domain of domestic melodrama, and the stage, a critical space for making meaning in the musical. Backstage musicals maintain their generic specificity, however, with the ultimate upholding of entertainment, insisting that despite everything, the show must go on. Whereas dressing rooms in domestic melodramas (such as Douglas Sirk's *All I Desire* [1953] and *Imitation of Life* [1959]) serve the function of directing the woman away from the stage and toward the home, dressing rooms in postwar musicals must do the work of reconciling both spaces in women's lives.

The musicals that I analyze here reveal a preoccupation with the private performances of gender and identity being enacted backstage. Dressing tables and mirrors are central for the ways that they allow for moments of introspection, narratively reckoning with the choices of the main character. Formally, such scenes constrain the frame according to the shape of the mirror itself and direct the viewer's focus to a juxtaposition of the act of looking (at one's reflection) and being looked at (by one's reflection, other characters, and the film viewer), thereby rendering woman both object and subject. In highlighting the tension between these two identities, the mirror shot formally expresses the contradictory messages in the backstage musicals of this era that simultaneously exalt women on the stage for their talent and successful careers all the while cautioning them to devote themselves to their husbands and children.

Hybridity and contradiction allow the musical not only to align itself with the concerns of contemporary melodramas but also to distance itself from them. As with melodrama, the postwar backstage musical typically culminates in a happy ending. But these happy endings do not resolve the social tensions that have surfaced over the course of the musicals' narratives. Starkly lacking the ironic valences of Sirk's final scenes, postwar musicals return their characters, albeit abruptly, to a utopic state of (marital) integration and their viewers to the state of being entertained, two fundamental functions of the musical.¹² This is necessary if, as Jane Feuer has established, the genre is to incorporate and maintain "the myth of entertainment into its aesthetic discourse."¹³ Nevertheless, it is precisely their simultaneous acknowledgment and extenuated exploration of social problems that render these musicals distinct within the evolution of the genre.

After a brief discussion of the historical representation of stage wives and mothers and the cultural evolution of dressing rooms, I will center my analysis on Hollywood's backstage musicals in which wives and mothers constitute a primary focus. While the majority of these examples are from the postwar era, I find it useful to examine critical earlier examples—namely, *Applause*

12 For a detailed analysis of Douglas Sirk's *All I Desire* (1953) and the relationship between home space and gender, see Lucy Fischer, "Sirk and the Figure of the Actress: 'All I Desire,'" *Film Criticism* 23, no. 2/3 (Winter/Spring 1999): 136–149.

13 Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in *Hollywood Musicals, The Film Reader*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: Routledge, 2002), 38.

(Rouben Mamoulian, 1929), for the way that it complicates and extends the possibilities for discussions of gender expectations within mainstream Hollywood. This article is structured according to two identities in particular: mothers, including the cultural figures “stage mothers” and “spectral mothers,” and wives, along with their broken husbands, a common postwar phenomenon in the backstage musical. Such musicals reflect social tensions about the endurance of marriage and the relationship between mothers and children by integrating themes of divorce, suicide, and miscarriage into the otherwise entertainment-oriented backstage musical genre. In particular, I focus on how the backstage itself became domesticized with increasing narrative emphasis placed on the private space of the dressing room.

ACTRESSES, DRESSING ROOMS, AND THE STAGE

Although dressing rooms first appeared in Greek theatrical performances in the early fifth century CE, it was not until the introduction of women to the seventeenth-century English stage that these spaces took on secretive and transgressive qualities.¹⁴ Those with privileged access, such as wealthy male audience members who paid for the advantage of visiting actresses in their “tiring rooms” before, during, and after performances, also claimed access to women’s bodies as sites of erotic display. The actresses themselves struggled with at once maintaining their professional identities and serving at the pleasure of influential male intruders. Prominent accounts of tiring room visitations, like those in Samuel Pepys’s memoirs, described sexual rendezvous with actresses and illuminated the extent to which such women were dissemblers who used the tools of the tiring room (makeup, wigs, costumes) to deceive and lure men. The association between actresses and prostitution, developed by Pepys and others, was one that at once devalued women of the stage and justified the penetration of their most private spaces in the theater.¹⁵

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the representation of the actress and her dressing room underwent a transformation. Prompted by the increasing number of female stars such as Sarah Siddons and Fanny Kemble who lived much of their personal lives in the public eye, attitudes about actresses began to shift from disreputable to respectable and even aspirational. This moment coincided with the “age of the domestic woman” in England and in Europe in which the notion of being a mother was portrayed as “natural, ideal, and joyful.”¹⁶ Eighteenth-century stage actresses lived their lives as mothers overtly, bringing their children to work, embracing breastfeeding, and performing while noticeably pregnant. They became “nurturing rather than desiring” bodies; in other words, they were productive mothers rather than consuming and objectified women.¹⁷

14 Tita Chico, *Designing Women: The Dressing Room in Eighteenth-Century English Literature and Culture* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005).

15 See Marvin A. Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Rosamond Gilder, *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theatre* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1931); and Chico, *Designing Women*.

16 Laura Engel and Elaine M. McGirr, eds., *Stage Mothers: Women, Work, and the Theater, 1660–1830* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2014), 19.

17 Helen E. M. Brooks, “‘The Divided Heart of the Actress’: Late Eighteenth-Century

A corresponding shift occurred in the representation of the late-eighteenth-century dressing room. As the space most associated with actresses' intimate activities, the dressing room was domesticated, becoming a standard feature of middle- and upper-middle-class architecture. And in sentimental novels of the period, these spaces transformed from being places of "sexual excess, theatrical dissembling and feminine agency" that necessitated "containment and censure" of the women within to being extensions of women's nurturing roles as wives and mothers.¹⁸ The confluence of theatrical domesticity and the dressing room can be seen most directly in the portrait *Queen Charlotte with Her Two Eldest Sons* (1765) by Johan Joseph Zoffany, in which the Queen sits at her dressing table flanked by the two young princes wearing theatrical costumes. Her own reflection in the mirror stresses the constructed nature of the image in which the monarch simultaneously plays the roles of ruler, woman, and mother. As Tita Chico explains, the domestic dressing room went from being an accusatory to a celebratory space in the eighteenth century wherein women still enacted a form of agency but from within the parameters of their maternal identities.¹⁹

Scholars have debated the extent to which actresses were able to shed the suggestion of sexual promiscuity despite the domestic turn. Laura Engel and Elaine M. McGirr argue that by the end of the eighteenth century, "acting became a legitimate even aspirational profession."²⁰ Additionally, Helen E. M. Brooks states that the emphasis on private virtue among the public women of the stage was so well established that the profession was able to break free from its associations with prostitution by the early nineteenth century.²¹ We know from Tracy C. Davis's work, however, that the "actress" was a regular character in Victorian pornography throughout the nineteenth century.²² The "forbidden zones" of the backstage realm, especially the dressing room, continued to sexually stimulate male viewers while those materials associated with the dressing room (mirrors, flowers, vanity tables, cushions) appearing behind see-through draperies "were common objects carrying erotic weight."²³

These dueling images of actresses and the spaces most closely associated with them continued well into twentieth-century popular fiction and film. Women who enjoyed public identities as chorus girls, showgirls, and stars were sites of fascination and fear, celebration and censure. Much like the cultural transformation that occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth

Actresses and the "Cult of Maternity," in Engel and McGirr, *Stage Mothers*, 20; Marilyn Francus, "The Lady Vanishes: The Rise of the Spectral Mother," in *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination: Missing, Presumed Dead*, ed. Berit Åström (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 31; and Kristina Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth-Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 89–90.

18 Chico, *Designing Women*, 31.

19 Chico, 31.

20 Engel and McGirr, *Stage Mothers*, 7.

21 Helen E. M. Brooks, *Actresses, Gender, and the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Playing Women* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 4.

22 Tracy C. Davis, "The Actress in Victorian Pornography," *Theatre Journal* 41, no. 3 (October 1989): 313, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3208182>.

23 Davis, 313.

centuries, a similar one takes place in the narrative and the formal language of American cinema from the early twentieth century into the postwar era. Throughout this period, the cultural script focused on the extent to which women's public life on the stage was conducive or destructive to their roles as wives and mothers. Taken collectively, these films suggest that the potential conflict between women's private and public identities has been of perpetual concern to American audiences and that the social directives that the films propose as solutions are insufficient given that the film narrative must repeat itself again and again.

MOTHERS AND CHILDREN

The term *stage mother* conjures up the image of an overbearing figure who satisfies her own frustrated ambitions for a career by forcing her children to sing, dance, and act in her place. Mama Rose is perhaps the most infamous of these types. She is the stage mother in the musical *Gypsy* (Jule Styne, Stephen Sondheim, and Arthur Laurents, 1959), loosely based on Gypsy Rose Lee's actual mother and first played by Ethel Merman in the original stage production and Rosalind Russell in the 1962 film (Mervyn LeRoy). While *Gypsy* provides us with an extreme version, the stage mother who is overly present could be found in other films and real-life examples as well, notably in films such as *Stage Mother* (Charles Brabin, 1933), *Beginner's Luck* (Gus Meins, 1935), and *The Hard Way* (Vincent Sherman, 1943) and in the publicized relationship between child star Shirley Temple and her mother, Gertrude.²⁴

But as we have seen, the long history of the relationship between mothers and the stage extends back centuries. In the eighteenth century, the notion of the stage mother coalesced around the popularity of actresses whose public lives were marked by their identities as mothers, regardless of the extent to which actresses integrated children into their work on the stage. As Brooks argues, the stage mother arose in public consciousness along with the "cult of womanhood," an ideology that stressed women's innate abilities to be good mothers and to enjoy mothering. Society promoted "an unobtainable ideal of the 'good mother,'" she writes, that was not at all reflective of women's lived experiences.²⁵ The desire to uphold the maternal ideal in part explains the appearance of what Marilyn Francus has called the "spectral mother," or the dead, absent, or missing mother that populates Western literary history.²⁶ The spectral mother has been particularly associated with stage mothers precisely because of the nature of the work, which requires travel away from home, daytime rehearsals and evening performances, and other disruptions to domestic life. But the spectral mother can be idealized because she is absent. As Francus writes, "Spectral narratives reaffirm maternal goodness without the sloppy immediacy of dealing with mothers."²⁷ Though this is typi-

24 I include *The Hard Way* as an example, even though it focuses on the relationship between two sisters. The older, played by Ida Lupino, functions as a surrogate mother to the younger (Joan Leslie) after their parents have died. She believes that the only way for them to have a good life is to push her sister into a stage career, no matter the cost to those around them.

25 Engel and McGirr, *Stage Mothers*, 11.

26 Francus, "Lady Vanishes," 27.

27 Francus, 27.

cally the case, as in the idealization of the dead, spectral mother in *The Seven Little Foys*, the genre also exploits the trope of the performer-mother who abandons or resents her children (e.g., *The Goose Woman* [Clarence Brown, 1925] and *The Merry Monahans* [Charles Lamont, 1944]).

Stage mothers can be good or bad, but most often, as we see in melodramas such as *All I Desire* and *Imitation of Life* and in the backstage musicals *Applause*, *Dance Girl Dance* (Frank R. Strayer, 1933), and *Mother Wore Tights*, the stage mother is a sympathetic figure, caught between the desire for a career and the bonds of motherhood. To be sure, cinematic representations of stage mothers and spectral mothers uphold and perpetuate ideals of feminine domesticity, but in exploring the difficulties of reconciling women's public and private lives, these films also expose the fissures present in the notion of maternal perfection.

The dressing room provides the requisite spatial interiority, away from the public activities of stage work, for the experiences and contemplation of motherhood to take place. Both the stage mother and the spectral mother make appearances in the Hollywood backstage musical, albeit with more frequency in the late 1940s and 1950s. While the majority of my analysis will focus on the postwar examples, I begin with an examination of *Applause*, a pre-Code film adaptation of a popular novel by Beth Brown.²⁸ The film makes literal the connections between birth, motherhood, and the domestic orientation of the dressing room space. Released in 1929, the film conveys how society's enduring concerns about mothers on the stage manifested in the earliest of musicals. It was unique for its time, given that the majority of backstage musicals produced in the 1930s focused primarily on the activities of single girls in show business. For these reasons, *Applause* serves as a useful point of comparison and a harbinger for the direction the genre would take nearly two decades later.

In the film, Helen Morgan plays Kitty Darling, the burlesque queen, who has a child outside of marriage. Kitty tries to protect her daughter, April (Joan Peers), by sending her off to a convent only to be pressured later by her seedy boyfriend (Jack Cameron) to bring the girl home and put her in show business. As a pre-Code feature, the film presents a bleak and squalid view of burlesque. The press heralded the film for its use of a mobile camera along with early sound technology but also criticized it for its "sordid" storyline with "character work too disturbing" and "dialog too pungent," as reported by the *Exhibitors Herald World*.²⁹ Kitty cohabitates with two different men in the film, neither of whom are her daughter's father. The second, Hitch (Fuller Mellish Jr.), makes repeated attempts to seduce April. And through April's subjectivity, we learn of how precarious and pathetic her mother's existence truly is.

During April's time at the convent, she longs for her mother and builds an idealized image of her that shatters when the two are reunited. April's return reconstitutes Kitty as a stage mother. She is affectionate and attentive

28 Beth Brown, *Applause* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928).

29 "PFL 'Applause' Gets Varied Reception; Is Lauded by Lay Press," *Exhibitors Herald World*, October 12, 1929, 15.

to her daughter but exposes her own faults as a promiscuous, gullible, and powerless woman. Unable to reconcile her profession with her responsibilities to April, Kitty performs the ultimate act of the spectral mother by committing suicide, thereby assuming the role of the self-sacrificing mother and freeing April to live the life she chooses.

The dressing room is critical to these identity shifts. Director Rouben Mamoulian frames *Applause* with two pivotal dressing room scenes: the first, in which Kitty gives birth to April, and the last, in which Kitty takes her own life. In both sequences, the dressing room appears as a quiet space apart from the hurly-burly of backstage life. It is in this quasi-domestic realm of the theater that the actress meets motherhood and the public self collides with the private one. Mamoulian achieves this narrative integration formally through the location of the dressing room as an in-between space that bridges the world outside and the stage within but also through symbolic imagery of birth and performance.

The first dressing room scene begins soon after the opening of the film. Kitty has finished her performance and fainted in the wings. Fellow performers carry her to the dressing room and summon a doctor, who sheepishly emerges from one of the theater boxes where he has been rendezvousing with a woman. He alone enters Kitty's dressing room while the performers wait anxiously outside. He delivers the news that Kitty has had a baby, and one by one, the motley crew of burlesque dancers, minstrels, and clowns file in to view the spectacle. They surround the chaise longue on which she rests next to the newborn, for whom a makeshift bed has been made in a suitcase. This remarkable sequence begins with an overhead shot in which the audience sees Kitty and April encircled by the admirers and then a reverse, extreme low-angle shot of the astonished faces of the performers, looking downward at mother and daughter (see Figure 2). The scene ends with a medium close-up of Kitty, who appears bathed in light with drops of sweat and mascara-tinged tears on her face.

This sequence in *Applause* is both a performance of birth and a performance of motherhood. Author Beth Brown conceived of the dressing room in these terms, drawing metaphorical connections between the dressing room's furnishings and the experience of being in labor: "Pain was her make-up now, agony her costume, the couch her stage."³⁰ Although Kitty had just completed a song and dance number onstage, the real performance happens in her dressing room, the backstage space that prepares her for the ultimate role of mother. Mamoulian reinforces the notion of performance by providing Kitty with an audience, the performers who anxiously wait outside the dressing room door for the "show" to start and then solemnly enter to watch it unfold. E. Ann Kaplan describes the sequence as akin to a funeral procession.³¹ It is indeed a solemn sequence, but I would argue that this first dressing room scene is more hopeful than morbid. The light that bathes Kitty suggests that she has assumed an exalted state. Mamoulian foregrounds

30 Brown, *Applause*, 29.

31 E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 145.



Figure 2. Kitty Darling (Helen Morgan) gives birth in her dressing room in *Applause* (Paramount Pictures, 1929).

the shape of a circle with both of these shots, evoking the biology of birth in which the enclosed womb and the birth canal function as secure, life-giving spaces. It is clear, especially in the low-angle shot, that the director intended the scene to capture the birth of both mother and daughter. The point of view, that looks up into the circle of faces, could be either the baby's, Kitty's, or both. In this scene, both baby and Kitty have been given new life.

Despite Kitty's best efforts, however, she cannot effectively manage the role of stage mother and deems it best to make herself absent so that April can find happiness. A second critical scene takes place in Kitty's dressing room, this time for the purpose of giving a different kind of performance, that of the self-sacrificing mother. Mamoulian frames this scene similarly to the earlier one, with Kitty lying on her chaise longue, facing screen right, with April to her left (see Figure 3). It ends with an overhead, medium shot of Kitty's face, again marred by sweat and tears, as she dies. Her new role as a spectral mother frames the final shot in which April embraces her fiancé while Kitty benevolently looks down on them from a life-sized burlesque poster on the wall behind them.

Applause represents two poles of dressing room representation that predominate in the backstage musical through the 1930s and into the postwar era. As already stated, the film's emphasis on the struggles of being both a mother and a performer foreshadow the genre's preoccupation with domestic concerns. But the partial states of dress that Kitty and April display in dress-



Figure 3. Kitty Darling (Helen Morgan) dies in her dressing room in *Applause* (Paramount Pictures, 1929).

ing room scenes, often with a menacing Hitch looking on, demonstrate how makers of the genre used the space to foreground acts of erotic looking, both inside and outside of the diegesis. Voyeurism would continue to be a regular function of dressing room sequences in the Warner Bros. vehicles of the early 1930s; the scene in Mervyn LeRoy's *Gold Diggers of 1933*, in which chorines pull back their costumes from the extreme foreground of the frame to reveal that we are peeping in on their dressing room, is a case in point. Later in the decade, dressing rooms harbor moments of (single) female solidarity and competition to show by what means women further their careers on the stage. These, too, offer moments of voyeuristic intrigue and intimacy. In *Dance, Girl, Dance* (Dorothy Arzner, 1940), the audience watches Judy O'Brien (Maureen O'Hara) pat Bubbles' (Lucille Ball) bare skin with powder, while in *Ziegfeld Girl* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1941), viewers observe Sheila (Lana Turner) destroy herself with alcohol. During the war years, dressing rooms continue as sites of erotic titillation, such as the one in *Coney Island* (Walter Lang, 1943), in which performer Kate Farley (Betty Grable) suffers from an unwanted and forceful male intruder. Nevertheless, the emphasis on heterosexual coupling that persists in these musicals allows the female body to be simultaneously desired and desiring.

Responding to societal concerns about marriage and motherhood, later musicals returned the mothering body to the dressing room. In particular, musical film plots in the postwar era repeatedly engage the question

of what constitutes a good mother and the extent to which women with careers can live up to the motherly ideal. As Elaine Tyler May has argued, Americans embraced a domestic ideology as a bulwark against both internal and external dangers to the status quo, such as communism and threats to national security. "In pursuit of the 'good life,'" men and women in the 1950s "adhered to traditional gender roles and prized marital stability; few of them divorced."³² The low divorce rate does not necessarily point to happy marriages, May notes. Many couples believed so firmly in nuclear home life that they "stayed together through sheer determination."³³

The image of the ideal housewife and mother that emerged in this period, and that gave rise to its backlash in the form of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), was largely one-dimensional; she was a woman who sacrificed her own personal fulfillment for that of her husband and children. But the ideal does not account for women's actual experiences in the 1950s, particularly those wives and mothers who nevertheless found ways to satisfy their ambition. Lisa McGirr has shown how suburban women became politically active on the local level, influencing city and state politics on matters of safety and education.³⁴ While these activities fell within the parameters of women's moral guardianship of the home, other women ventured well outside of it and were celebrated in the popular press for doing so. Joanne Meyerowitz's survey of women's magazines from 1948–1958 reveals a "postwar cultural puzzle" in which the literature applauded both domestic and nondomestic activities for women. In these magazines, she argues, "domestic ideals coexisted in ongoing tension with an ethos of individual achievement that celebrated nondomestic activity, individual striving, public service, and public success."³⁵ So while a powerful domestic ideology held sway in the postwar period, in the realm of popular culture, the messages about women's place were marked by ambiguity rather than consensus.

What Meyerowitz found to be true in women's magazines is also quite pertinent to the backstage musicals of this era. In many ways, the films *Mother Wore Tights*, *When My Baby Smiles at Me*, *My Blue Heaven*, and *Everything I Have Is Yours* are part of that "postwar cultural puzzle" that she identifies. These four films, which I focus on in the remainder of this article, are in keeping with the family melodramas of the period, in which heterosexual marriages and nuclear families are ultimately upheld. But as Jackie Byars has argued, "the narrative contortions necessary to produce the deus-ex-machina endings expose contradictions rather than resolve them."³⁶ Like the family melodrama, backstage musicals are deeply contradictory, exposing the fissures

32 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 10.

33 May, 186.

34 Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

35 Joanne Meyerowitz, "Competing Images of Women in Postwar Mass Culture," in *Major Problems in American Women's History*, 2nd ed., ed. Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1996), 422.

36 Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 148.

in social norms and expectations even while affirming them. Remarkably, they treat the symptoms of social upheaval—separation, divorce, adultery—overtly, suggesting that there is conflict in the ways that women and men view their roles as wives and husbands, mothers and fathers. With few exceptions, these films fulfill the narrative conventions of the genre to produce the simultaneity of a happy, reintegrated couple and a happy ending, but in the process, they acknowledge the fears and insecurities underneath the postwar ideal of home and family.

The contradictions of the backstage musical are best expressed in the dressing room sequences. A paradoxical space that is both public and private, the dressing room is a signifier of women's work outside of the home and a quasi-domestic space. In the genre, it functions as a space for a "temporary, modified domesticity," as Robert Davidson has argued about the hotel room.³⁷ There are signals of women's career success, such as bouquets of flowers and congratulatory telegrams, along with the tools of her trade (makeup, costumes), but the signs of temporary inhabitation, most notably the open trunks covered with stickers from a life of perpetual travel, make this space representative of home and work at once. By placing the woman in the dressing room, the genre allows for ideas about women's domesticity and women's ambition to coexist and collide.

Frequently in the postwar era, the dressing room is where women become mothers, effectively forcing the actress and the mother into one body. As in *Applause*, the dressing room is both a pregnant space and a space for pregnancy. It is where the narrative goes to discover and announce impending motherhood. And it is a place where, in its sequestered interiority, the contemplation of a new life can occur. This new life is, of course, the baby to be born. But it is also, and perhaps more importantly, the woman performer's new role as a mother that is given narrative and aesthetic expression.

In all four films, the dressing room is the place where the characters learn of their pregnancy. In *Mother Wore Tights*, Myrtle (Betty Grable) informs her husband and performing partner Frank (Dan Dailey) of her "act of God" while he sits at the dressing table removing his makeup (see Figure 4). The duo has been successful and are headed to Broadway when Myrtle declares that she wants to live with her grandmother in order to raise the child. Frank objects, desiring her to stay with him, but she insists, arguing, "I'm going to quit for good. I want my baby to have a home and a mother to take care of him." She implores him, "From now on, please just let me be the mama." The couple's intimacy is pronounced by the enclosed dressing room, which allows them to express their emotions surrounding the birth of a child and what it will mean to the act. They are shorn of their costumes and makeup, wearing only dressing gowns, and surrounded by trunks, stockings hanging out to dry, and peeling wallpaper on the walls. As Myrtle insists, the stage is no place to raise a baby. The film unites her two identities, using a superimposition to merge the newborn baby's face with a medium shot of the embracing couple in the dressing room.

37 Robert A. Davidson, *The Hotel: Occupied Space* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 7.



Figure 4. While undressing after the show, Myrtle (Betty Grable) tells Frank (Dan Dailey) that she is pregnant in *Mother Wore Tights* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1947).

Yet Myrtle quickly learns that she cannot remain with her children (eventually two daughters) and still be a good wife to her husband who needs her on the road. “A wife’s place is with her husband, first, last, and always,” her grandmother tells her. Myrtle leaves the two children to be raised by the elderly woman and goes back on the stage, becoming a spectral mother who only sees her children on holiday breaks. As one reviewer of the film put it, Myrtle soon realizes “the problems created by a mother who wears tights.”³⁸ While the film is careful to show how both children and mother miss each other, it also assuages any moments of personal regret with efforts at family reunification (such as the Christmas scene) and motherly devotion. When Myrtle decides to send her children to boarding school, because “this is what they need,” the scene is immediately followed by one of Myrtle in a backstage dressing room, preparing a dress pattern for one of her daughters (Figure 5). Again, she is merging the roles of actress and mother. The film alters between moments of familial reunion, in which Myrtle appears to successfully be wife, mother, and performer, and those of familial separation, in which she still manages to serve the needs of her children. Myrtle easily enters into and out of these roles, confirming the viability of successful stage mothering.

The film’s promotion and exhibition amplified the connections between stage performers and mothers. It opened domestically on Mother’s Day, and

38 Virginia Wilson, “Mother Wore Tights,” *Modern Screen*, October 1947.



Figure 5. Myrtle (Betty Grable) spends the time between acts in her dressing room where she sews dresses for her daughters in *Mother Wore Tights* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1947).

posters declared that this was a “different kind” of musical. Local promotional efforts included mothers in their strategy by holding special screenings for them. In one particularly effective effort, praised by the editors of *Boxoffice* magazine, a local exhibitor in Chicago arranged for a group of mothers to wear tights and parade across the stage before the film.³⁹ Placing mothers on display, likening them to women who have made careers as performers, echoed the themes of the film and extended them outward into contemporary women’s lives.

In another film starring Grable and Dailey as a husband-and-wife team, it is the struggle to become a mother that forms the narrative conflict. *My Blue Heaven* follows Kitty and Jack Moran, television variety performers who desire nothing more than to have a baby. A series of tragic mishaps foil their efforts. Kitty is pregnant but loses the baby in a car crash. The doctor tells her she will never get pregnant again. They attempt to adopt a baby, but when their fellow performers throw a raucous party, it dissuades the adoption agent from allowing the deal to go through. A friend arranges for the illegal adoption of a baby girl, the child of an unwed mother and an absentee father. Despite the sordidness of the transaction, Jack and Kitty take the baby only to have it “stolen” later by the biological father. Each of these losses takes its toll on Kitty, who ultimately gives up her dream of becoming a mother. Miracu-

39 “Mother Wore Tights,” *Boxoffice*, September 13, 1947.

lously, however, the final scene restores all three babies to her; she learns that she is pregnant once more, the “stolen” baby is returned, and the adoption agent changes her mind about Kitty and Jack’s parental aptitude.

Again, the dressing room appears as pregnant space in *My Blue Heaven*. Kitty learns of or reveals each new baby’s existence in her shared dressing room with Jack. It is a modern, bright, and clean space, a sign of the optimism and viability of the new medium of television. It is also a stable space. The Morans commute between their New York apartment and their dressing room as extensions of each other. In keeping with the nature of television work, the Morans are able to stay put. They are not subject to living a life on the road. There are no signs of “modified domesticity” in their television station dressing room. The typical trunks and admonishing signs from theater management on the walls are absent. Instead, there are only plush furnishings, framed prints on the wall, and the family dog nestled on the couch (Figure 6). The usual suspects that make for complications between being a stage performer and a mother have been removed. Along with the aid of her Black maid, Selma (Louise Beavers), at home—whose employ produces and foregrounds the couple’s white, middle-class prosperity—motherhood and career seem perfectly balanced, if not for biological complications and the difficulties posed by both legal and illegal adoptions. She desires, and is fully capable of being, a stage actress and a mother, if only fate would allow her to.

Kitty becomes a mother in her dressing room in a series of false starts. Soon after she learns of her pregnancy, she and Jack share a moment of marital bliss, planning for the future as mother and father. After miscarrying, she is in the room again when she learns that she can adopt a baby. But she hovers around the room when the chance of an illegal adoption becomes clear. For this scene, she stands within the doorframe separating her dressing room from the backstage space (see Figure 7). In a split-screen composition, Kitty stands with arms folded, framed by her dressing room door on the left side of the screen while her friend makes the call to determine the baby’s fate on the right. The seediness of this adoption prevents the feelings of elation that characterized the previous scenes inside the dressing room’s blessed space.

Despite the film’s darker moments for parents and children, happiness returns in the end. Kitty becomes pregnant once again, and she receives both adopted babies. The reunion of mother and children takes place in the Morans’ dressing room, reinforcing that space as one that is safe for mothers and children despite its association with women’s professional ambitions.

WIVES AND HUSBANDS

Just as *Mother Wore Tights* and *My Blue Heaven* demonstrate an optimistic view of stage mothering, albeit with significant narrative meanderings along the way, other backstage musicals of the period suggest that stage ambitions and a happy domestic life cannot coincide. While stage mothers receive a great deal of attention in the postwar musical, so, too, do stage wives and their husbands. Here, the conflict arises from the separation of the couple as they perform on the road (*When My Baby Smiles at Me*; *Kiss Me Kate* [George Sidney, 1953]; *Love Me or Leave Me* [Charles Vidor, 1955]), competing careers (*Barkleys of Broadway*; *Meet Me After the Show* [Richard Sale, 1951]; *Somebody*



Figure 6. Kitty (Betty Grable) and Jack (Dan Dailey) meet the adoption agents in their plush television studio dressing room in *My Blue Heaven* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1950).



Figure 7. Kitty (Betty Grable) stands in the doorway of her dressing room as she learns of the opportunity to illegally adopt a child in *My Blue Heaven* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1950).

Loves Me [Irving Brecher, 1952]; *Everything I Have Is Yours*; *Kiss Me Kate*; *A Star Is Born* [1954]), and expectations regarding the wife's role in marriage and at home (*Somebody Loves Me*; *Everything I Have Is Yours*; *Give a Girl a Break* [Stanley Donen, 1953]).

For the release of *When My Baby Smiles at Me*, starring Grable, and *Everything I Have Is Yours*, starring Marge Champion and Gower Champion, popular press accounts focused on the domestic lives of the films' respective stars. In such reports, Grable's marriage to bandleader Harry James and the Champions' partnership on the stage and in real life serve as examples of how to make a marriage work, themes that the backstage musical increasingly explored in the 1940s and 1950s. Unlike the boy-meets-girl narratives of earlier films in the genre, the postwar musical is most concerned with what happens after the wedding. Such narratives foreground the shared dressing room as a blissful marital abode that disintegrates and disappears as the couple heads for divorce.

The success of *Mother Wore Tights* solidified the domestication of Grable's star persona. She went on to play wives and mothers well into the 1950s. Whereas *Mother Wore Tights* painted a rosy picture of motherhood and marriage while living a life on the road, Grable's follow-up film, *When My Baby Smiles at Me*, portrayed the same partnership with noticeably less marital happiness. Again paired with Dailey, Grable plays Bonny, burlesque performer and wife to the talented, but flawed, comedian Skid Johnson. In their shared dressing room below the stage, Grable performs the functions of a dutiful wife in what is a quasi-domicilic space (see Figure 8). She waits for and worries about her husband's arrival to their home in the theater. When he does appear, she fawns over him, handing him his costumes and helping him to get dressed for his work. She makes him coffee and takes care to keep it at the temperature he prefers while he performs onstage. And she discusses not her own but her husband's professional prospects with the stage manager (a scene later echoed in the 1954 version of *A Star Is Born*). While she is also a performer, it is Skid's career that matters most in this relationship.

The couple's dynamics in *When My Baby Smiles at Me* reflect postwar concerns about the fragility of marriage as a function of masculinity in crisis. As David A. Gerber has shown, advice manuals and popular films such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946) advocated for women to take an active role in the reintegration of men returning from war.⁴⁰ In order to thwart the potential of social unrest, women were advised to be patient with their husbands and to assist them with the process of resuming their role as head of household, a position that women had occupied in their absence. Professional and popular cultural texts urged women to stand by their husbands and to subsume their own needs and desires to the preservation of marital (and social) happiness.⁴¹

Grable's performance in this role belies her cultural power as the most popular star at Twentieth Century-Fox in the late 1940s. Backstage musicals

40 David A. Gerber, "Heroes and Misfits: The Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in 'The Best Years of Our Lives,'" *American Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (December 1994): 545–574, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713383>.

41 Gerber.



Figure 8. The matrimonial dressing room in *When My Baby Smiles at Me* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1948).

such as *When My Baby Smiles at Me* allay whatever fears arise from the existence of economically independent female stars and the desire to reestablish social stability through an adherence to traditional gender norms. The year before, Grable's personal life was the subject of a story in *Modern Screen* magazine titled "Can Stars Stay Married?" The piece asked Grable to respond to the claims made by Clifford R. Adams, director of the Woman's Home Companion Marriage Clinic, that careers in Hollywood and marriage do not mix. In the study, Adams identified one danger in particular: "[F]inancially independent wives [who], knowing that remarriage is easy, wanting careers of their own and jealous of their husbands, become quickly dissatisfied." To this Grable, who by this time had been married to Harry James for three years, responded that "marriage is easy." She emphasized that she would quit the business if Harry wanted her to: "She's never been one of those do-and-die-for-a-career gals."⁴²

In her postwar films, Grable's characters invariably do what is best for their marriages, putting their duties as wives over careers. Rather conveniently, the narrative of *Mother Wore Tights* defines the good wife as the one who performs with her husband, not without him. And similarly, *When My Baby Smiles at Me* simultaneously reestablishes the performing duo and the

42 "Can Stars Stay Married?," *Modern Screen*, March 1947, 38. Despite her pronouncements to the contrary, Grable divorced James in 1965.

married couple in order to provide a happy ending. But such happiness does not come without cost. Wanting what is best for her husband's career, she insists that he take a starring role in a Broadway production. Even though it means the separation of the married couple, they both feel that the opportunity is too good to pass up. His departure ruptures the sanctity of their matrimonial dressing room, and they begin to drift apart. Notably, Skid's new dressing room in the Broadway theater becomes the site of his ambition, when the producers offer him additional roles to play, and his downfall, at the hands of a predatory chorus girl. She intrudes upon his private space and insinuates herself into his affections, closing the door behind her in order to steal a kiss. Adding to Skid's troubles is his drinking problem, which, away from Bonny's care, spins out of control. Bonny learns of his drunken affair in the gossip column of a trade paper as she goes backstage after a number. Resigned to divorce him, she turns from her backstage friends and walks away from the camera, enters her dressing room, and shuts the door behind her. The film does not give us access to Bonny's dressing room in this moment, signaling the change in her identity as she goes from a happily married wife to a sad, single woman. The dressing room scenes have been open, accessible, and frequent up to this point in the film. By contrast, this moment excludes the audience from Bonny's innermost thoughts, marking a break in the narrative and signaling that one identity is giving way to another.

Subsequent dressing room scenes solidify the breakdown of the formerly matrimonial space. In one scene, a man abruptly serves Skid divorce papers as the comedian sits alone at his dressing room table, followed by a close-up shot that reveals Skid's emotional distress. And in another, Bonny welcomes an admiring fan into her dressing room where he reveals that he wants to marry her, effectively replacing Skid as Bonny's domestic companion.

The film's exploration of Skid's downward spiral suggests the extent to which the genre could not deny contemporary fears about marital separation and divorce. With increasing frequency over the course of the 1950s, these fears manifested on the bodies of fragile male characters who, abandoned or diminished by their wives, crumble and break. In this way, the genre's preoccupation with male fragility that Kelly Kessler has identified in the musicals of the 1970s has its beginnings in an earlier historical moment.⁴³ We see the broken husband early in the genre's history in *The Hard Way*: husband and performer Albert Runkel (Jack Carson) commits suicide in his dressing room while listening to a recording of his more successful wife. The cautionary tale of men who will do harm to themselves or to their marriage as a result of their wives' professional triumphs gets repeated in *Somebody Loves Me* (cruelty, divorce); all four versions of *A Star Is Born* (suicide); *Love Me or Leave Me* (attempted murder, jail); and in the Barbra Streisand musicals about vaudeville and film star Fanny Brice: *Funny Girl* (William Wyler, 1968; gambling, prison) and *Funny Lady* (Herbert Ross, 1975; adultery).⁴⁴ Inceas-

43 Kelly Kessler, *Destabilizing the Hollywood Musical: Music, Masculinity and Mayhem* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

44 For an analysis of Barbra Streisand's musical films, see Pamela Robertson Wojcik, "The Streisand Musical," in *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: BFI, 2010).

ingly through the decades, the films insist that though tragic, marital bliss cannot be sustained, thereby challenging the genre's emphasis on coupling at all costs.

When My Baby Smiles at Me pushes the theme of the broken man to its limits. As a result of the divorce, Skid drinks more heavily and ultimately admits himself into a mental hospital. Restricted to a bed, in a ward surrounded by other broken men, Skid has hit rock bottom. His stage manager finds him there and persuades him to revive his entertainment career. But Skid goes on a bender just before the performance, and Bonny must literally hold him up and feed him lines and dance steps in order for him to make it through. In the end, she confirms that her place is with him first and foremost. He musters through the performance and happily winks at the audience as he points to Bonny, proudly declaring, "My wife!"

As Bonny's experience shows, the postwar backstage musical revealed women's discontentment in marriage. But where Bonny divorces Skid because of adultery and alcoholism, other backstage wives rebel against their husbands' control. In one of two films in which they received star billing, *Everything I Have Is Yours*, Marge and Gower Champion play husband-and-wife dancing team Pamela and Chuck Hubbard, who must break up the act when they realize they are about to have a baby. This news comes on opening night when, in a scene similar to those in *Applause* and *My Blue Heaven*, Pamela faints in the wings after the performance and is carried to her dressing room where a doctor examines her. Reclining on her chaise longue as Chuck anxiously enters, she informs him that they are about to have a "B-A-B-Y" and that she will have to leave the show.

Unlike in *My Blue Heaven*, children and stage ambitions do not mix in the narrative logic of this film. Instead, Pamela raises the baby in their house in the country while Chuck commutes between their idyllic home and Broadway. Troubles arise, however, when upon their daughter's first birthday, Pamela declares she wants to return to the stage. Chuck argues, "Young Pam is your career now," insisting that her roles as wife and mother come first. Pamela continues to rehearse secretly and eventually tells Chuck that she is leaving him in order to take the lead in a new show. The couple breaks up, sharing the duties of caring for their daughter while maintaining careers. Their friend and producer must lie about Pamela's health in order to urge Chuck to rush to her side while she is on tour. The two reunite in her hotel room, dancing while their daughter claps happily. No mention is made of the original cause for divorce, and no admission of wrongdoing comes from either of them. The ending communicates that the couple will reunite, but the terms on which that reunification will happen remain open to interpretation.

The matrimonial dressing room is a space that at once upholds and acknowledges the limits of a couple who shares everything. As the film's title and the eponymous song suggest, "everything I have is yours" is a statement of marital equity, but as the narrative demonstrates, it is the woman who must ultimately sacrifice in this relationship. In the first dressing room scene, the couple eagerly anticipate their opening night on Broadway. Unaware of her pregnancy, Pamela feels out of sorts as she sits limply at her dressing



Figure 9. In a “complex mirror shot,” the reflection of husband and wife fills the entire frame in *Everything I Have Is Yours* (MGM, 1952).

table. Chuck leans over her, and the two gaze at each other through the vanity mirror as Pamela complains of her symptoms. As he is habitually inclined to do, Chuck responds to her concerns by immediately complaining about his own maladies. She responds with a stern look, communicating her displeasure at his reaction. As she has made clear in an earlier scene, “everything I have is yours, that’s our song all right, because everything I have you get.”

The dressing room scene formally communicates the couple’s power dynamic. The mirror’s frame spatially holds the couple together, but the shot also communicates their distance (see Figure 9). They receive each other’s gaze not directly but indirectly, through the mediated reflection of the mirror. In the next shot, their reflected selves take up the entire frame, removing their physical bodies from the shot in the process. The scene moves from a standard, over-the-shoulder medium shot, of the couple at the vanity table, to a “complex mirror shot,” in which the reflection no longer has a material referent. As Julian Hanich argues, such shots are generative for the film viewer precisely because they can create an unsettling experience of disembodiment in the frame.⁴⁵ Complex mirror shots open up a space for questioning reality as a result. As Gilles Deleuze has observed, mirror images suggest an altered

45 Julian Hanich, “Reflecting on Reflections: Cinema’s Complex Mirror Shots,” in *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, ed. Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 131.

state of being more generally. The mirror image (or crystal image) is a space where “the actual image and the virtual image coexist and crystallize; they enter into a circuit which brings us constantly back from one to the other, they form one and the same ‘scene’ where the characters belong to the real and yet play a role.”⁴⁶

In dressing room scenes like the one described above, the mirror plays an important part in the genre’s interrogation of marital relationships and the balance of power. The mirror shot foregrounds the virtual image of the characters, a construction of their actual selves, and in doing so, it highlights the act of role-playing in marriage. As Lucy Fischer has argued, to be a woman has historically necessitated the act of role-playing, particularly in service to men’s needs and desires.⁴⁷ In *Everything I Have Is Yours*, the woman is both an actress by trade and an actress for her husband. Mirror shots such as these reveal the wife’s discomfort with the role she must play in the relationship as she is doubly contained by the mirror’s frame and her husband’s control. The circuit of looking relations between the reflected gaze and the actual gaze holds the wife’s real self and her framed self in constant tension, producing a “double movement of liberation and capture.”⁴⁸ In this way, the dressing room scene is a foreshadowing of the fate of their marriage in which Pamela refuses capture by the roles of wife and mother and instead forces her husband to acknowledge her professional ambitions.

Advertisements and editorials offered readers glimpses of the Champions’ offscreen life as an answer to the question posed by *Everything I Have Is Yours*: How does a married woman pursue a career? The answer, the Champions and the film suggest, is to merge one’s married and professional selves. Marge Champion said as much in an interview with the *Daily News Los Angeles*, one of many she gave to the press on the secret of marital bliss: “It’s simple. . . . When a husband and wife work together, there is no problem.”⁴⁹ The press used dressing room shots interchangeably with photographs of the couple’s home in order to celebrate the ways that this particular screen couple makes marriage work onstage and off (Figure 10). A feature spread in *Filmland* titled “Picnic in the Dressing Room” shows the couple resting from filming while sharing a meal in their joint dressing room. In their cozy and quasi-domestic space complete with ruffled curtains, Marge pours Gower coffee while they eat sandwiches and read newspapers.⁵⁰ With headlines such as “A Winning Team: The Champions (Marge and Gower) Keep Step in Movies, Musicals, Marriage”; “Love around the Clock”; and “How to Avoid That Married Look,” trade papers drew direct connections between marital bliss

46 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (1989; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 68.

47 Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Counter-shot: Film Tradition and Women’s Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 64.

48 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 68.

49 Charles Denton, “Here’s Champion Solution to Old Problem,” *Daily News Los Angeles*, November 3, 1952, box 19, Marge Champion Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

50 “Picnic in the Dressing Room,” *Filmland* (1954), box 19, Marge Champion Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.



Figure 10. Marge Champion and Gower Champion pose for a publicity shot inside their MGM dressing room on the first day of shooting *Everything I Have Is Yours* (MGM, 1952).

and couples who work together on a day-to-day basis.⁵¹ In one image, Marge Champion smiles at the placard on her MGM dressing room door that reads “Mrs. Champion.” On the back of the original photograph, which was in Marge Champion’s personal possession, the actress wrote, “Moving into new

51 “A Winning Team: The Champions (Marge and Gower) Keep Step in Movies, Musicals, Marriage,” *New York World-Telegram*, October 1953; “Love around the Clock,” *Motion Picture*, April 1953; and “How to Avoid That Married Look,” *Screenland*, September 1953, box 19, Marge Champion Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

star dressing room on set of ‘Everything I Have Is Yours.’” Underlined for special emphasis, she added, “Mrs. instead of Miss.”⁵² The photograph holds the star dressing room and Champion’s married identity in balance, belying any internal friction within the couple’s relationship. As *Everything I Have Is Yours* explores for the majority of its screen time, such negotiations proved difficult to sustain over time.

While the possibility for women to share in their husband’s careers—and vice versa—was not a reality for most, the Champions’ offscreen persona as a happily married and working couple, and their film that highlighted the perils and pleasures of such an arrangement, opened up a space for addressing society’s concerns about working women and the fate of the nuclear family. In *Everything I Have Is Yours*, star personas and the film’s narrative suggested that, though it might take some negotiation, working women could have it all. In hindsight, however, we see that the fissures that the film explored along the way to a happy ending were more realistic than not. In interviews, Marge did occasionally admit that negotiations had to be made as a dual-career, married couple: “I insisted that if I was to give up my stage name, I should have top billing.”⁵³ Yet even with her priority billing, her career took a backseat to domestic duties. She quit the profession to be a full-time mother just as Gower transitioned from being part of a dancing duo to a director on Broadway. She eventually divorced Gower in 1973, resumed dancing as a teacher at the Mafundi Institute at the Watts Happening Cultural Center in Los Angeles, and directed the feminist, two-woman play *Women and Other People* (1978).⁵⁴

At the end of *Gypsy*, Mama Rose (Rosalind Russell) and Gypsy Rose Lee (Natalie Wood) walk offstage together, arm in arm. As a musical about mother and daughter relationships and the world of burlesque, the film has obvious parallels to *Applause*. But its insistence that stage mothers and daughters can resolve their conflicts reveals its distance from the tragic outcome that marks the earlier film. Like the postwar musicals that came before it, *Gypsy* uses the dressing room to mediate conflict, between mothers and daughters and between stage ambitions and family relations. Its insistence that the stage and motherhood can coexist demonstrates the film’s relationship to the postwar cycle of backstage musicals examined here. Significantly, it also signals the end of that cycle. In subsequent decades, the anxieties and fissures explored in backstage musicals do not get reconciled, even awkwardly, in a happy ending. All musical versions of the *A Star Is Born* film franchise (the 1954 version being the earliest demonstration of this shift), *Funny Girl*, *Funny Lady*, *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie, 1972), and *Cabaret* (Bob Fosse, 1972) reveal how the relationships that are a function of being a wife and mother cannot be sustained alongside a career on the stage.

52 Publicity photograph, March 5, 1952, box 24, Marge Champion Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

53 Denton, “Here’s Champion Solution,” 1952.

54 Details about Marge Champion’s later career, including her role in the production of the feminist play *Women and Other People*, can be found in the Marge Champion Collection at the Library of Congress.

In the postwar backstage musical, the dressing room is a generative space for understanding cultural anxieties and tracing the elasticity of the genre as it responded to them. The genre's semantics shift to the concerns that arise after marriage at precisely the moment when domestic ideology reached its height, turning erstwhile pin-up girl Grable into a wife and mother and upholding real-life examples of husband-and-wife stage teams such as the Champions as the ideal image of marital bliss. Accordingly, the dressing room shifts from being associated with sexual transgressions, female dissembling, and voyeuristic pleasure to one that celebrates women as virtuous, domestic figures. The dressing room becomes a productive space, literally—in the scenes in which babies are born and announced—and figuratively, in the ways that it engenders new identities for women who must balance careers and private lives. While films such as *Mother Wore Tights*, *My Blue Heaven*, *When My Baby Smiles at Me*, and *Everything I Have Is Yours* return children to mothers and wives to husbands in the end, they nevertheless signal the salient tensions that surround these relationships. Understood historically, the backstage musicals of the postwar era reveal a shift that would become transformative for the genre. And they signal the extent to which the woman's place and women's identities have been a concern of the backstage narrative for decades of musical film production.

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