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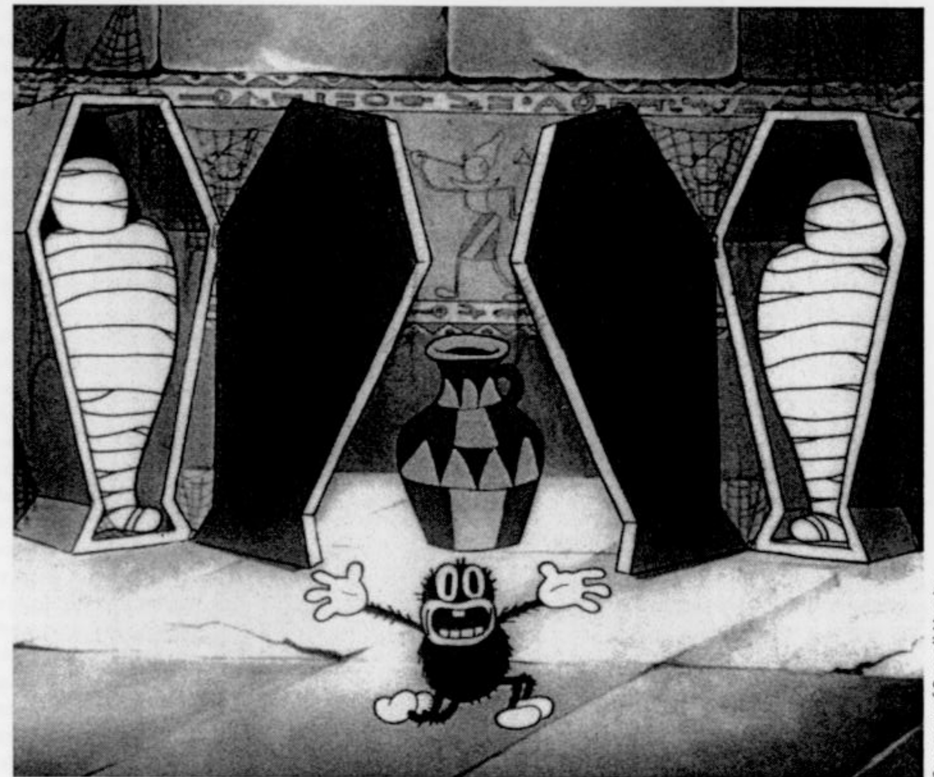

Courtesy of Russell Merritt

SILLY SYMPHONIES

THE SKELETON DANCE
(Directed by Walt Disney, 1929)

HELL'S BELLS
(Directed by Ub Iwerks, 1929)

NIGHT
(Directed by Walt Disney, 1930)

THE CHINA PLATE
(Directed by Wilfred Jackson, 1931)

EGYPTIAN MELODIES
(Directed by Wilfred Jackson, 1931)

THE UGLY DUCKLING
(Directed by Wilfred Jackson, 1931)

FLOWERS AND TREES
(Directed by Burt Gillett, 1932)

MUSIC LAND
(Directed by Wilfred Jackson, 1935)

When Mickey Mouse whistled his way to fame in 1928, Walt Disney achieved the recognition he'd sought since making advertising films in Kansas City seven years earlier. Although *Steamboat Willie* wasn't the first cartoon to use a synchronized soundtrack, it represented a new level of technical sophistication.

While the success of Mickey Mouse was convincing other animation studios to buy sound equipment, Disney's fellow Missourian Carl W. Stalling suggested an idea for a cartoon combining music with action: animation as choreography. Although inventive, the mouse cartoons, apart from the novelty of sound, were virtually indistinguishable from the host of gag-centered shorts featuring circle-and-squiggle characters derived from Felix the Cat, still the world's reigning cartoon star. Blending music with the visual illusion of animation was the next step on Disney's path to success. This new alloy would be called *Silly Symphonies*.

Stalling had been a theater organist at Kansas City's Isis Theater. Like most movie accompanists, Stalling would borrow snatches of popular tunes, classical melodies and folk songs to match the emotional cues of the films he scored daily. When Disney started his first Hollywood operation – the *Alice* live action/animation series – in 1924, Stalling

loaned the aspiring director $275. In 1928, when Disney was struggling to finish *Steamboat Willie* as a talkie, he tapped Stalling to score the film. Disney was excited when Stalling suggested the idea for *The Skeleton Dance* (1929), writing to his brother and business partner Roy: "Carl's idea of the 'Skeleton Dance' for a Musical Novelty has been growing on me."

The grim imagery of *The Skeleton Dance* is rooted in *La Danse Macabre*, a medieval European allegory about the inevitability of death. Dancers and puppeteers appropriated the imagery for performance material. The American Mutoscope Company produced an early film version with a costumed dancer in 1897. Thomas Edison's company filmed a marionette show version the following year. As a child, Stalling was intrigued by an advertisement promising a dancing skeleton puppet for twenty-five cents. Ub Iwerks, who animated the entire *Skeleton Dance* cartoon almost single-handedly, drains the images of any gruesome qualities by making the skeletons more comical than creepy.

The Skeleton Dance is rooted in ***La Danse Macabre****, a medieval European allegory about the inevitability of death.*

The most important innovation in *The Skeleton Dance* is that the musical score and the animated action were planned, designed and executed in unison. Stalling composed the score first, then Iwerks animated the film to match the meter and melody. Stalling was accustomed to playing a theater organ in time with motion pictures; now he was able to make the movies match his music.

For *Steamboat Willie*, harmonica-playing animator Wilfred Jackson developed a mathematical system of animating to a timed rhythm. Disney made marks – a bouncing ball – on a work print of the film to provide a visual representation of the rhythm.

Stalling made the next development assuring precise pacing of animation and music: a metronomic rhythm supplied via headphones to musicians, matching the visual rhythm used by the animators. Called a "click track," this device is still used today in most recording sessions.

The music in *The Skeleton Dance* is built around refrains from *March of the Dwarfs*, composed in 1891 by Norwegian Edvard Grieg. *Hell's Bells* uses bars from Mendelssohn's *Spring Song* (1843) and *Fingal's Cave* (1832), plus Grieg's *In the Hall of the Mountain King* (1876). Stalling continued to use this technique after he left Disney; his pastiche scoring style would be the way many Americans were introduced to classical music: he scored most of the Warner Brothers Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons from 1936 to 1958.

Screenings of *The Skeleton Dance* with first-run features in Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York led to a nationwide distribution deal for Disney with Columbia Pictures. The first Silly Symphony went into general release with a return engagement at New York's Roxy on September 7, 1929.

Disney had already learned some difficult business lessons. Laugh-O-Gram Films, his first animation company, had gone bankrupt in 1923 after one year in Kansas City, prompting his move to Hollywood. The success of the *Alice* comedies, featuring a live-action girl inserted into a cartoon world, led to the creation of his first popular character, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, in 1927. To his regret, Disney learned that Oswald's trademark belonged not to him, but to the films' distributor, who, in 1928, hired away nearly all of Disney's staff animators, with the exception of Iwerks. Intent on remaining independent, Disney and Iwerks created Mickey Mouse, then struggled to find a distributor, finally signing with third-rate Celebrity Productions. This time, Disney made sure he controlled the rights to the character.

Loyal though Iwerks was, working with Disney was never easy. Disney began dividing the functions of cartoon production, and occasionally chastised Iwerks for not delegating tasks to junior staff. In a repeat of Disney's previous business trauma, Celebrity Productions hired Iwerks away when its agreement with Disney was due for renewal in late 1929. Iwerks traded his one-fifth share of the Disney company for $2,920 (that share would be worth nearly $418 million today). Stalling, uncertain of the studio's future and fed up with Disney's increasingly martinet-like leadership style, left at the same time as Iwerks.

The difference this time was that Disney controlled the rights to Mickey Mouse, who had replaced Felix the Cat as the most popular cartoon character in the world. He also had a distribution deal with an increasingly important studio, and the most technically innovative and artistically advanced cartoon series to date: Silly Symphonies.

Disney's practice of dividing the labor of animating films into factory-like assembly lines enabled him to survive the defections of Iwerks and Stalling. He promoted animators who seemed to be competent organizers and leaders to the position of directors, then established constant rotation of creative teams, ensuring a free flow of ideas and preventing the development of close personal alliances among his employees. New composer Frank Churchill generated entirely original music, freeing Disney from the expense of buying rights to popular songs. Creativity flowed from this system, leading to the development of true character animation with *The Ugly Duckling* (1931).

Based on the Hans Christian Andersen fable, *The Ugly Duckling* is the first time a cartoon actually explores character development. Although the drawing style is still simple, the main character suffers the kinds of emotions that will become the core of Disney's later feature films. Rejected by his "family" of chickens, the duckling loathes the reflection he sees in a pond. This is a great narrative leap beyond simplistic schtick such as Minnie Mouse breaking her fall from an airplane by turning her bloomers into a parachute, or Felix the Cat using his breakaway tail as a magic wand.

Disney himself would say of the entertainment empire that bears his name: "It all started with a mouse."

The Silly Symphonies continually broke new ground in animation. *Flowers and Trees* (1932) challenged not only Disney's fellow animators, but all contemporary filmmakers, by making the first successful use of the controversial and expensive three-strip Technicolor process.

The public did not like the muddy hues of films made with two-strip Technicolor. The December 17, 1930 issue of *Variety* used the Warner Brothers production *Golddiggers of Broadway* (1930) as an example of the high costs of two-strip Technicolor: black-and-white release prints of the feature would have cost $63,000; the Technicolor prints totaled $451,000. The public dissatisfaction, combined with the astronomical costs, led studios to abandon Technicolor. In 1930, fourteen feature films were made in Technicolor from start to finish; another twenty contained Technicolor sequences. During 1931, only six features were released in Technicolor.

Technicolor's 1932 answer to this decline was even more expensive. The new three-strip process provided much more accurate color representation, but also demanded more exacting mechanics and processing. It was a desperate move. Technicolor's annual revenue had fallen to $500,000, from a high of $5 million in 1929. Only the Disney studio was willing to experiment with the new process.

Disney, who was the first cartoon producer to compel his staff to take art lessons, added color theory to the curriculum. The Disney-developed color palette became the model that Technicolor would use in designing films for the next four decades. *Flowers and Trees* was met with amazement at its July, 15, 1932 opening at Graumann's Theater in Los Angeles. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences gave a special Oscar to Technicolor for its "color cartoon process," another to Disney himself for the creation of Mickey Mouse, and the first Oscar for a cartoon short to the studio for *Flowers and Trees*. A Disney film would win that category for the next seven years.

The founder of Technicolor, Herbert Kalmus, in an address to the Society of Motion Picture Engineers in 1938, said of Disney's use of Technicolor, "Now I will ask you how much more did it cost Mr. Disney to produce that entertainment in color than it would have in black and white? The answer is, of course, that it could not be done at any cost in black and white."

By the time of the final Silly Symphony, a color remake of *The Ugly Duckling* released in April, 1939, Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) had proven that animation could be used to tell dramatic stories in feature-length fims. During the decade of Silly Symphonies, Disney and his collaborators had transformed animated films into true cinema. Disney himself would say of the entertainment empire that bears his name: "It all started with a mouse." But without the dancing skeletons, demons, spiders, saxophones, cellos, ducklings and other Silly Symphonies denizens, Disney's cartoons – and cartoons in general – might have remained gag-oriented diversions, instead of a genuine art form.

– RICHARD HILDRETH

Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences

CHICAGO (1927)

Accompaniment by the Baker-Mehling Hot Five

CAST: Phyllis Haver (Roxie Hart), Victor Varconi (Amos Hart), Eugene Pallette (Casely), Virginia Bradford (Katie), Clarence Burton (Police Sergeant), Warner Richmond (District Attorney), T. Roy Barnes (Reporter), Sidney D'Albrook (Photographer), Otto Lederer (Amos's partner), May Robson (Matron), Julia Faye (Velma), Robert Edeson (Flynn) DIRECTOR: Frank Urson PRODUCTION: DeMille Pictures/Pathé Exchange SCENARIO: Lenore J. Coffee Based on the play by Maurine Watkins TITLES: John Kraff CINEMATOGRAPHY: Peverell Marley EDITING: Anne Bauchens ART DIRECTION: Mitchell Leisen COSTUMES: Adrian PRINT SOURCE: UCLA Film & Television Archive

An attractive and scantily clad woman with shiny bobbed hair lounges in her apartment, sipping a cocktail while listening to a Victrola recording of *Hula Lou*. It's a typical setting for a modern woman of the 1920s – except, perhaps, for the man lying at her feet, dying of a gunshot wound.

The woman was Mrs. Beulah Annan and the man was her lover, Harry Kohlstedt. She had shot him minutes before and was trying to decide what to do next. Some of the details of Annan's actions just after the murder on April 3, 1924 are true. Others may be embellishments or outright inventions by reporter Maurine Watkins of the Chicago Tribune.

Watkins' description of Annan's motive reads like a dime novel: "...[she] shot because he had terminated their little wine party..." and "His body lay hunched against the wall in her bedroom as she played the record over and over again." Watkins wrote with a darkly humorous sensibility, which newspaper readers relished. Popular response was so strong that her reports of this routine murder case quickly moved from the back pages to the front.

Watkins had also reported on another sensational murder trial, that of Belva Gaertner, who was suspected of killing her lover. On March 12, 1924, Walter Law was found dead, slumped over the steering wheel of Belva's car. "Dancer Faces Jury In Fashion's Latest." Watkins describes the courtroom scene: "Mrs. Gaertner was as demure as any convent girl – yesterday! – with brown eyes dreamily cast downwards...with rouge [that] made her well on the dangerous side of 30." The sharp wit of Watkins' reportage is in the wisecracking urban style of writers such as The New Yorker's Dorothy Parker, and displayed in quotes, supposedly from Gaertner, such as "No sweetheart is worth killing – especially when you've had a flock of them..." or "...gin and guns – either is bad enough, but together they get you in a dickens of a mess, don't they."

Maurine Watkins was one of a wave of reporters in the 1920s who spiced crime stories with lurid and intimate details in order to grab front-page headlines. The trend became so popular that reputable papers felt the need to compete, and adopted the tabloid style of news as entertainment. Such info-tainment took the bite out of tragic news and turned it into gossip, which readers felt little guilt about enjoying.

Watkins later used the sordid details of the Annan and Gaertner murders, along with the snappy dialogue and cynical attitude of her newspaper coverage, in her successful play, *Chicago*. Beulah Annan became Roxie Hart and Belva Gaertner became Velma Kelly. "Why, you may even end in wax works!" Jake, the reporter, says in the play. "Lord, girl, you're getting free publicity a movie queen would die for!"

The time was ripe, in the 1920s, to release a play containing such jaded views of the American judicial system and the manipulation and power of the media. The decade was full of change, trauma, and tension. The Great War had just ended, the influenza pandemic had claimed approximately 675,000 American lives, large numbers of immigrants were pouring into the cities, paved roads enabled greater freedom by automobile, race relations were tense and violent, prohibition instantly created thousands of jobs for criminals who filled the demand for liquor, and gangsters like Al Capone enjoyed celebrity status. Women got the vote and were flaunting their newfound freedom in previously unheard-of ways such as public smoking, venturing out without chaperones, and going to college in record numbers. These changes were met with an increase in misogynistic concerns from the public: that it was dangerous to a woman's health to study for exams while menstruating; and that education would destroy a woman's chances of a happy marriage and motherhood. Rarely before had Americans encountered this much change so quickly, and they had much reason for cynicism and unease.

Chicago the play had its New York premiere in December of 1926, and it first played Chicago in September of 1927. Gaertner herself attended the Chicago premiere and once again was in the papers: "Belva Sees Chicago and Relives Killing." Only three months later on December 23, 1927, the film produced by Cecil B. DeMille premiered, bringing murder with a satiric edge to a wider audience. By that time, Annan had moved to Indiana where, in 1928, she died of either a mental breakdown or tuberculosis, according to different sources.

In the film, Roxie Hart is less a modern woman than a nightmare of what the modern woman could be. Phyllis Haver portrays Roxie with a strong flourish of narcissism and manipulation. She behaves much like a naughty six year-old who takes very little seriously, except how she looks and what she can get. At one point, Roxie shows annoyance with her lover by roughly biting his ear, and returns his anger with a coy smile. In a badly timed ploy to give him a hefty stack of unpaid bills for extravagant clothing, she tells him, "Shut your eyes Daddy – I've got a surprise for you," as she wedges the bills into his hand. When he refuses to pay, her coyness turns to a look

"...gin and guns – either is bad enough, but together they get you in a dickens of a mess, don't they."

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of anger that has no mature control. Haver acted in over 100 films, including *Thunder* (1929), which was Lon Chaney's last silent film. She was best known as a deft comedienne, having honed her skills as a Mack Sennett Bathing Beauty. The character of Roxie takes Haver's acting skills in a comedic direction that was biting and satiric, and less broad.

Julia Faye, who appeared in many DeMille films during her 40-year career, plays Velma Kelly, Roxie's fellow prisoner. From Velma, Roxie could possibly learn about the fleeting nature of fame and manipulation at the hands of the lawyer Billy Flynn, but Roxie is too self-absorbed to see.

Frank Urson directed this satiric tale of sex and murder set in his native Chicago. Urson began his career as a cinematographer in 1917, directing his first film in 1921. He worked on a number of films for Demille. After *Chicago*, Urson made one more film before his untimely death by drowning in 1928.

Victor Varconi, who plays Roxie's put-upon husband, Amos, was a Hungarian immigrant whose real name was Mihaly Varkonyi. Varconi poignantly portrays the suffering man in love with a no-good dame. Amos and Roxie are a textbook example of co-dependency. For all his puppy-dog loyalty, his virtue is shaky. In order to save Roxie and continue their unhealthy relationship, he lets himself become corrupted.

After the trials of Annan and Gaertner, Watkins' dark humor was soon out of style. Cases like that of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two Italian immigrants accused of murder for possibly political reasons; Leopold and Loeb's senseless murder of a young teenager; and the vicious, premeditated murder of Albert Snyder by his wife Ruth and her lover Judd Grey were far too serious to be written about with a light hand. Watkins abandoned journalism to attend George Pierce Baker's playwriting classes at the Yale School of Drama. There she wrote *Chicago*, based on her articles for the Chicago Tribune.

With the success of the play and the movie version of *Chicago*, Watkins was in demand, although her success was short-lived. Her second play, *Revelry*, was not well received, and her next step, a career in Hollywood, was short and uneventful. After her time in California, she moved in with her parents and out of the public eye. Although her play went out of print in 1927, a second film version of *Chicago* was released in 1942 under the title *Roxie Hart*, starring Ginger Rogers. This version considerably softened the character of Roxie by turning her into an opportunist, not a murderess.

Watkins was approached throughout the 1950s and the 1960s for the rights to revive her play on Broadway, which, time and time again, she refused to give. Writer and historian Thomas H. Pauly, who published her play and articles on Annan and Gaertner under the title *Chicago: With the Chicago Tribune Articles That Inspired It by Maurine Watkins*, says that Watkins was burdened by guilt over her contribution to the acquittals of Annan and Gaertner. She also suffered over the way she had hypocritically satirized her own profession, and her own work as a journalist at the Chicago Tribune.

Bob Fosse eventually did secure the rights to the play after Maurine Watkins' death, in 1969. The musical opened on Broadway in 1975, and ran for two years. Like her two star murderesses, Watkins was herself a relative flash in the pan, her fame fleeting. She was unable or unwilling to produce another dramatic story that caught the eye of the public, and so she faded, like them, into obscurity. The kinds of stories that made her famous – killers as celebrities, death as entertainment – have been part and parcel of the media ever since.

– AIMEE PAVY

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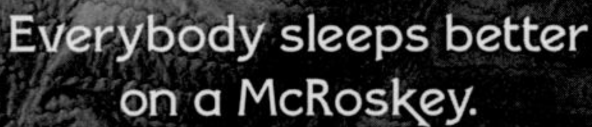

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