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◀ “Men like Fred Astaire, with his top hat and elegance,” says dancer Paula Abdul of her late friend (in 1944). “But women love Gene Kelly. He’s so handsome, so sexy and so self-assured.”



▶ Kelly said he wanted his famed dance in *Singin' in the Rain* to make audiences “feel the way they would if they were in love. A fella in love goes crazy.”

# NO FALSE MOVES

Grace in action, Gene Kelly was an American classic in Paris or Pittsburgh

**T**HE STAGE WAS JUST AN OLD CEMENT tennis court with a missing net. The performers were a father and his young daughter roller-skating on a sunny afternoon in Beverly Hills in the '50s. As the girl made steady, tight circles around the court, her father crossed and recrossed her path, swooping, gliding, waltzing, tangoing and shimmying with seamless ease. All the while, he sported a winsome crooked grin.

Watching Gene Kelly that day “was an incredible sight,” recalls stage and film writer Betty Comden, who, with her partner Adolph Green, had worked with Kelly on 1949's *On the Town* and '52's *Singin' in the Rain* and had invited the star and his daughter Kerry to use the improvised rink on the grounds of

their rented bungalow. “Adolph and I just looked at each other and said, ‘We have to get this into a movie.’”

And so they did. Inspired by the sight, Comden and Green inserted a skating number into 1955's *It's Always Fair Weather*, a movie in which Kelly starred. “The words ‘poetry in motion’ are a cliché,” Comden says today, “but that day Gene was fantastic.”

Simple things like roller skates and rain puddles brought out the best in Gene Kelly, a self-described “working-class stiff” from Pittsburgh who died in his sleep at his Beverly Hills home on Feb. 2 at age 83, debilitated by a recent series of strokes. In turn, he imparted a sense of grace to the ordinary stuff of life: The raucous joy of a sailor on shore leave in 1945's *Anchors Aweigh*, in

which he cavorted with Frank Sinatra. Trash-can lids that could become tap shoes in *It's Always Fair Weather*. The ridiculous bliss of a guy in love in *Singin' in the Rain*. To complement his impeccable hoofing, Kelly had a singing voice that was wobbly, weak—and strangely effective. “His appeal was his simplicity. He wasn't the elite, he didn't play a gentleman,” says Leslie Caron, 64, who starred with Kelly in his Oscar-winning *An American in Paris* (1951). “Gene was the everyday man.”

He came by that naturally. The third of five children—three sons and two daughters—born to Patrick J. Kelly, a salesman for a gramophone company, and his wife, Harriet, a housewife and sometime actress in a local stock company, Kelly had his education interrupt-

NEAL PETERS COLLECTION



◀ "My mother sent me and my brother to dancing school in those Buster Brown collars," Kelly (at age 5 in a sailor suit) once recalled. "We had a minimum of three fights a week walking between our house and the school."

ed by the Depression while a freshman at Penn State. He dropped out in 1930 and took any job he could to help his family get by. He pumped gas, dug ditches. When he had saved enough, he studied journalism at the University of Pittsburgh while living at home.

To help make ends meet, Kelly, who began dancing at age 8 and was a leading light in college musicals, offered classmates 50-cents-an-hour dance instruction in the family basement. The lessons proved so popular that, after he graduated in 1933, he opened the loftily named Gene Kelly Studios of the Dance

in a rented hall. These found a thriving trade among schoolchildren. "We were making good money," Kelly once recalled. "A lot of this was due to Shirley Temple—every mother thought her kid could be better."

Kelly certainly felt confident about his own abilities. At 26, he headed for Broadway, but with no mooncalf awe. "I wasn't worried about getting a job," Kelly once recalled. "The other dancers

▶ "He once said he hoped most that he had made people happy," said daughter Kerry (in 1944) the day Kelly died.



EVERETT COLLECTION



◀ Kelly's first wife, Betsy Blair, was a chorine in a revue at New York City's Diamond Horseshoe when they met in 1940.



▶ Jeanne, Kelly's second wife (with son Timothy in 1962), was once wed to *Singin' in the Rain* codirector Stanley Donen.

weren't that good." He quickly won a chorus part in *Leave It to Me*, with Mary Martin, and by 1940 he was starring in the musical *Pal Joey* and catching the eye of Hollywood.

In 1941 he arrived in Los Angeles, under contract to MGM and newly married to actress Betsy Blair, whom he had met while both worked in a Manhattan club. (Their daughter Kerry, now an Ann Arbor, Mich., psychotherapist, was born a year later.) For a time, MGM—famed for its big, splashy musicals—didn't know what to make of him. Fred Astaire's nimble footwork and tuxedo-clad elegance had set a standard for male dancers, but Kelly bounded through numbers in huge, athletic strides, performing in polo shirts, khakis and white socks, whose dazzle drew the eye to his fancy footwork. As he told *The New York Times* in 1980, "As a Depression-era kid who went to school in some very bad times, I didn't want to move or dance like a rich man."

Kelly made his screen debut in 1942's *For Me and My Gal*, opposite Judy Garland. MGM also tried him out in two 1943 wartime dramas, *Pilot Number Five* and *The Cross of Lorraine*. But his breakthrough didn't come until he was loaned to Columbia for the 1944 musical *Cover Girl*, with Rita Hayworth. For the film, Kelly conceived a tricky routine—dancing with a double-exposed image of himself to symbolize a character battling his alter ego. "He was able to build a character through things that came out in dancing," recalls Comden. "He became a tremendous creative force."



▲ An ex-scriptwriter, Kelly's third wife, Patricia, was helping him with his autobiography, left unfinished at his death.

Eventually he won control over his projects. He choreographed, as well as starred in, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* (1949), *On the Town* and *An American in Paris*—in the latter, performing a 17-minute ballet that won him a special Oscar in 1952. That year he was also signed as codirector, with Stanley Donen, of an original backstage musical, *Singin' in the Rain*.

"Gene threw himself into it," Adolph Green recalls. "He was playing a spoiled movie star, and he played it to the hilt." As Kelly recalled for PEOPLE in 1992, the hardest part of the stroll through the rain wasn't the dancing—"I just danced in the water," he said. "Any good dancer could do that"—it was that he had a bad cold that day and spent every break trying to warm himself outside in the sun.

*Singin' in the Rain*, Kelly's most



▲ Kelly's children (from left, Bridget, Timothy and Kerry, with their father in 1982) "taught him you don't need to live life at full speed," says Ann Miller.

highly regarded film, was also, ironically, his last truly great musical. After the box-office failure of *Brigadoon* in 1954, Kelly enjoyed only minor successes with *It's Always Fair Weather* and 1957's *Les Girls*. That year he divorced his wife, Betsy, and as the decade turned, he was married again, to dancer Jeanne Coyne. Kelly began to concentrate on choreography and directing—fields, he told PEOPLE, that were his true loves. "Doing the dancing," he said, "that's work. Creating it is a joy."

He directed Jackie Gleason in the tearjerker *Gigot* in 1962 and Barbra Streisand in *Hello, Dolly!* in 1969. His



◀ Kelly (left) flexed his dramatic muscles in '60's *Inherit the Wind* (with Donna Anderson, Dick York and Spencer Tracy).



▶ "That Gershwin music spoke to me," Kelly said of his inspiration for '51's *An American in Paris*.



◀ Kelly tried to get Mickey Mouse for *Anchors Aweigh* before he settled on Tom and Jerry.

▼ "It was the dream of a dancer's life to work with Gene," says Cyd Charisse (in *Brigadoon*).

career was put on hold for a time when, in 1973, Jeanne died of leukemia, and he devoted himself to their children, Timothy, now 33 and a film director, and Bridget, who is 31 and a costume designer. After that, he appeared as a narrator of 1974's *That's Entertainment!* and its two sequels; in the 1980 bomb *Xanadu*, he did a soft-shoe routine with Olivia Newton-John.

In recent years, trouble visited Kelly often. His Beverly Hills home was gutted in 1984 when a Christmas tree caught fire. (Kelly was dragged from the burning house by his son.) And by the time he narrated the third *That's Entertainment!* in 1994, age had overtaken him. "He could hardly see,

he had this bad back," recalls dancer and longtime friend Ann Miller. "It was just so heartbreaking." In July of 1994, Kelly had his first major stroke. Another followed last year. Kelly died with his third wife, writer Patricia Ward, 37, whom he had married in 1990, at his side. "Hollywood lost one of its great, great creators," says dancer Cyd Charisse, 72, who performed with Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain* and *Brigadoon*.

Many would agree. But Gene Kelly saw himself differently—as a simple man doing a few simple things well. Speaking of *Singin' in the Rain*, he told PEOPLE, "the picture was done with joy, and it brings joy. That's what I always tried to do."

• GREGORY CERIO

• ANTHONY DUGNAN-CABRERA in *New York City* and DANELLE MORTON, LYNDA WRIGHT and TOM CUNNEIF in *Los Angeles*



HOWARD FRANK ARCHIVES



EVERETT COLLECTION

▲ Teaching Sinatra to dance, said Kelly (right, in *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*), made "the myth of Frank's terpsichorean ability."



"I never wanted to dance in a 'polished' film," said Kelly (in 1981). "And I didn't."