



I GUESS I'LL HAVE TO CHANGE MY PLAN

Kevin Spence

My favourite 1950s MGM musical, *The Band Waggon* had one of its infrequent outings on TV the other day. It is a film with a somewhat chequered history. Directed by Vincente Minnelli, on the back of his success with *An American in Paris*, it cost quite a bit, and to begin with took a long time to make its money back, despite positive critical reviews. But *The Band Waggon* is unapologetically about theatre.

Watching it again for the umpteenth time, I was astonished to find, however, that its themes and characters suddenly had a contemporary resonance with me in a totally unexpected way. The main themes of *The Band Waggon* are ageing, the clash between populist and 'highbrow' theatre, and the transformative power of love and teamwork.

Fred Astaire plays Tony Hunter – an interesting choice of surname – a man pursuing something or somebody. He arrives in New York by train, with his film career on the skids (unlike the real Astaire), and finding through overheard conversations that he is seen as a bit of a has-been.

Both Astaire and Minnelli were like the century they lived in – all just turning 50. The idea of facing up to the ageing process, its challenges and the changes it forces on each individual are all subtly revealed in Astaire's characterisation.

The first image we see on screen at the start of the film is Astaire's iconic top hat and cane which it turns out are part of an auction of Hunter's memorabilia, which nobody seems to want to buy. He has been lured to New York by two old chums, played by Oscar Levant and Nanette Fabray, to try to revive his career through theatre, and in a vehicle to be directed by the celebrated Jeffery Cordova - played unexpectedly by the British West End star Jack Buchanan.

Cordova is camp and neurotic, and was loosely based on Jose Ferrer, but could easily be confused with a number of all-powerful actor-managers of the period. Astaire walks out after a few weeks of chaotic rehearsals but is talked back into continuing in a show which has failure written all over it. Astaire develops a cool relationship with his young beautiful co-star, played by Cyd Charisse. She is recruited from the world of ballet and is trying to escape a failing affair with a young choreographer. The show inevitably flops and the first-night party turns from being a wake to a decision by the whole company to turn the show from a highly pretentious turkey to a simple piece of pure entertainment.

Astaire's character realises he is being compelled not just to change the direction of his professional life, but to realise that he needs the support of others to be happy and successful. He decides to sell his art collection to support the new show financially. Needless to say, the new show becomes a smash-hit, Astaire and Charisse fall in love and, most importantly, Tony Hunter is a transformed character.

And here is where my thoughts turn to where we find ourselves now in our current situation as theatre makers – though thwarted by our inability to do what we love by a pandemic, like Tony Hunter we are presented with an opportunity to rethink, refocus and to explore new directions.

When our theatres return to something like normality, as they inevitably will, there will be a temptation to behave like Jeffery Cordova, and throw everything at our opening productions to get our audiences back. Well, it might work, but I suspect, as the company in *The Band Wagon* discover, the audience will be drawn back by a word used too infrequently in theatre these days – 'entertainment'. So, let's not apologise for giving our audiences a good time when we reopen. LTG theatres have the experience and the talent to ensure that all our members and audiences realise just how much they have been missing and that there is nothing to match 'live' theatre!

As the final number in *The Band Wagon* confirms – 'The world is a stage, the stage is a world of entertainment!'