

THE TALLULAH MOMENT

I walk out into the floorshow. The audience surrounds me. I strike a pose in the spotlight. I am wearing a strapless, floor length black satin dress slit up the side. The music starts. I wait for my cue. I start to sing...¹

I propose the scenario I describe above be called the ‘Tallulah Moment’; the moment when the female performer enthralls an audience, projecting her personality, skill and physical presence using the accoutrements of her profession – lighting and costume. This moment is important to me and by using my personal identification with it as part of my investigation, I shall illuminate how a close read of its use in classic Hollywood films can be re-read as a celebration of women within a feminist discourse.

Why Tallulah? The name calls to mind the eponymous ‘*Bugsy Malone*’ (1976) star and the actress, Tallulah Bankhead and through them, it represents excess, opulence, sexuality and joie de vivre – all highly appropriate for my purposes. The word ‘moment’ relates to the photograph, the symbol, the emblem but not exclusively to the static. The Tallulah Moment is a *moment* because I am referring both to the moving image and the frozen symbol. In the classic Hollywood film, narrative flow is interrupted by such ‘moments’ bringing the unfolding of the story to a temporary halt. In this interruption, I find potency – it is credit to the Tallulah Moment that it can be extracted from the film story and stand on its own.

Hollywood has used the Tallulah Moment as a device for generating pleasure in its audience. It functions by giving the female character, who, in the course of the conventional narrative is strait-jacketed into stereotypes and simplistic desires, a platform for the display of her power. Ultimately, the storyline chastises her for that display, but within the Tallulah Moment, the woman is not punished; she is celebrated. Hollywood developed its celebratory spectacle of the female form through studying the Ziegfeld theatrical tradition of opulence. Indeed, Ziegfeld’s Follies provided both a ready supply of attractive young women for the Hollywood talent scouts in the 1920s and storyline fuel that was light on story and heavy on opportunities to theatricalise. Therefore, Hollywood has used the setting of the theatre and the chorus girl, the showgirl, the dancer and the singer frequently since it started to produce films – ‘All singing! All dancing!’².

The 1930s-1950s represent a heyday for both the Musical, and other genres, like Film Noir that employ the Tallulah Moment. Therefore, it is this time period I want to address. A

¹ Imagery taken from ‘*Gilda*’ (1946) Columbia Pictures, directed by Charles Vidor starring Rita Hayworth.

² Taken from the promotional advertising posters for the 1929 film ‘*Broadway Melody*’, the first musical film featuring sound; ‘All talking All singing All dancing’.

musical ‘interruption’ in these films may take on a number of different forms, and a film may include a variety of them. The Tallulah Moment *proper* features a single female singing and/or dancing, alone. A variation on this is a partnered dance where the woman has a male counterpart. The dance nevertheless allows the woman to shine, supported by the man. Fred Astaire does not outshine Ginger Rogers when they dance together.

The naughty Ziegfeld flapper/dancer of the Twenties became good-girl virginal figure³ during the Hayes Code era (from 1930 to 1968), where inference was everything. The partnered musical number within a Musical film⁴ functioned as a metaphor, representing the complexity of sexual relationships. Through gesture and dance moves, the back and forth of a love affair is embodied. During the dance sequence it is as though the two dancers go on date, have their first kiss, have an argument, reconcile and have sex. The dance stands in for the work of the relationship and through it we can understand their affection to one another that is not shown explicitly during the film. It is through reading the dance as more than a dance that we can understand why the characters become so attached, having seemingly only just met.

There is a complex craft in constructing the Tallulah Moment. It is created through a song (usually with lyrics but not necessarily), elaborate set, direction, camera angles and cuts. For example, in the titular dance of the film ‘*Cover Girl*’ (1944) the Tallulah Moment is introduced with a montage of magazine covers before Rita Hayworth descends down an elaborate smoke-filled set and removes a long gold coat to present herself in a gold flowing gown. She continues running down to meet a troop of men dressed alike as photographers who dance with her in turn, lift her up and support her swoons. The scene concludes as Hayworth runs up the path she descended on with the men running after her and glitter falling from the sky. All of these effects are deployed within the overall construct of the film as well as the studio system’s crafting of the actress as a personality in publicity campaigns and advertising. However, the story lines of these films repress strong female voices or personalities – something I perceive as I look back on films that reflect a different ideology of femininity. Indeed I have to suspend my pangs of sadness as I indulge my black and white film habit. It is so apparent how constrained the women are, which reflects the societal attitudes and limits that women were subject to pre-Second Wave feminism.

But there is release in the Tallulah Moment when the woman explodes with charisma and unapologetically revels in her objectification. The woman owns her body and the gaze within that moment. I recognise within this moment something quite absent in my life and I want that moment. Whilst the Hollywood machinery constructs a moment so pure in its pleasure, overlaying heavy-handed devices to ensure how my gaze is taking in that woman, it is credit to the women who thrive in this moment that they are not a zero point at the centre, but a charismatic being. Whilst I watch these moments, I imagine the performance

³ See Ruby Keeler in ‘*42nd Street*’ (1933), ‘*Gold Diggers of 1933*’ (1933) and ‘*Dames*’ (1934).

⁴ For example the Fred Astaire films; ‘*Swing Time*’ (1936), ‘*Shall We Dance*’ (1937), ‘*You’ll Never Get Rich*’ (1941), ‘*You Were Never Lovelier*’ (1942).

in its barest incarnation – a woman, in a dress, in a spotlight. I imagine my gaze undirected by lingering pans and insinuating cuts.

During the 1930s-1950s time period the Hayes Code opened up possibilities in representing the female body that have effectively been closed down since then. I am identifying the Tallulah Moment as one of these possibilities. What I see happening was actresses with a high standard of technical dance training (and with that a working methodology of how to handle the gaze) were employed to display sexuality. The freedom and fantasy of their use of their body is being used as a way of being sexually provocative without being overt. My insider knowledge of dance training enables me to see that work being done and to feel its effect. It takes skill to project your body as a fantasy space and this is what I am interested in suggesting. When Rita Hayworth performs ‘Put the Blame on Mame’ in ‘*Gilda*’ she owns her body as a fantasy space, and credit to her for that.

After the 1950s the musical lost its appeal as films began to explore more realist themes through increasingly ‘natural’ use of colour and a more liberal attitude from the censors. The resulting films produced after this time period continue to objectify women but lack an attempt to celebrate them. The real is too real for my fantasy identification. Something is lost.

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