



Minnelli, Vincente (1913-1986)

by Tina Gianoulis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Dapper Vincente Minnelli was one of Hollywood's greatest directors, renowned for his skilled use of color and light and his precise attention to detail. He achieved recognition not only for the new life he injected into movie musicals such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) and *Gigi* (1958), but also for emotionally complex comedies such as *Father of the Bride* (1950) and lushly conceived melodramas such as *Lust for Life* (1956).

Minnelli's campy vision and lavish productions were well suited to the 1940s and 1950s, but his style did not long survive the end of Hollywood's structured studio system. Although he continued to make films into the 1970s (such as *A Matter of Time*, with his daughter Liza Minnelli in 1976), his later films did not gain the popularity or acclaim of his earlier work.

Minnelli was born on February 28, 1903 in Delaware, Ohio into a family of traveling entertainers. Although his early years were spent on the road learning show business, he settled in Chicago at age sixteen.

He took a job as a window decorator for Marshall Field's department store, where he began to develop his sense of design. He soon took his new knowledge back to the theater where he worked as an assistant photographer, costume designer, and set decorator. His originality and sharp eye for the details of design soon took him to the Broadway stage, where he was a successful costume and set designer.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer producer Arthur Freed discovered Minnelli on Broadway and brought him back to work his magic designing dance numbers for musicals at MGM. He worked on several films, including *Strike up the Band* (1940) and *Babes on Broadway* (1941) with Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney, before he was given the directorship of an all-Black musical called *Cabin in the Sky* (1943). The stylish and inventive *Cabin in the Sky* was a success, and the window dresser from Chicago was now a Hollywood director.

Minnelli's next film, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, was a tour de force and a milestone in American filmmaking. Not only was it a textured look at turn-of-the-century Americana that spoke poignantly to a country in the midst of World War II, but it was also a showcase for Minnelli's flamboyant camera techniques and powerful use of color.

Meet Me in St. Louis was child star Judy Garland's first adult film. It led to the star's marriage to her director.

Although he married four times, Minnelli was widely known to be gay. However, in the deeply closeted world of 1950s Hollywood, he kept his sexual orientation quite private, though his gay sensibility is visible in many of his films.

In his 1956 film version of Robert Anderson's exploration of masculinity and homophobia, *Tea and Sympathy*, Minnelli worked around the restrictions of the Motion Picture Association of America's production code to recreate the play's ambiguities without ever using the word *homosexual*.

In the little-noticed *Goodbye Charlie* (1964), Minnelli exploits the lighter side of gender confusion with a frothy comedy about a murdered womanizer who returns to earth in the body of a woman.

With the advent of harsh realism in the movies in the 1960s and 1970s, Minnelli's dream sequences and fanciful use of color came to seem old-fashioned and out of date. He wrote his memoirs in 1974 and retired after the failure of *A Matter of Time* in 1976.

He died in Beverly Hills on July 26, 1986.

In 1999, Liza Minnelli premiered a tribute to her father called *Minnelli on Minnelli* in which she performed many of the best known and most beloved songs from his musicals, some of which had been made famous by her mother, Judy Garland, interspersed with loving reminiscences.

Bibliography

Gerstner, David. "Queer Modernism: The Cinematic Aesthetics of Vincente Minnelli." www.eiu.edu/~modernity/gerst--html.

_____. "The Production and Display of the Closet: Making Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy*." *Film Quarterly* 50.3 (Spring 1997):13-27.

Harvey, Stephen. *Directed by Vincente Minnelli*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989.

Minnelli, Vincente, with Hector Arce. *I Remember It Well*. Hollywood, Calif.: Samuel French Trade, 1990.

Naremore, James. *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.