

# Hermes Pan: Quiet 'Giant' Of Film Dance

At 78, Hermes Pan still carries himself with the grace of an era he helped define. Greeting a visitor at his Beverly Hills home, where the living room is occupied by a French filmmaking crew shooting segments for "It Just Happened . . ." a tv documentary about his contribution to the dance artistry of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, the choreographer's eyes twinkle with bemusement at the fascination his work holds for others in a much-changed time.

He is slender, with patrician features and large ears. His eyes are remarkably like Astaire's — translucent blue, lively and considerate. He is wearing an elegant shirt, ascot, and black-and-white hounds-tooth jacket with his crushed, furry bedroom slippers as he settles himself in a chair beside the pool and recalls his first meeting with Astaire.

"I was an assistant to the dance director, Dave Gould, on RKO's 'Flying Down To Rio' . . . I had never seen (Astaire) dance before, even though he was already the biggest star on Broadway and a sensation in London, and right away, I thought he was fantastic.

"At that time, there was really no dance in pictures — it was all design and camera movement. Dave Gould couldn't dance, but I could, so he said 'Why don't you go up and see if you can be of assistance to Mr. Astaire?' And Fred said to me, 'Oh, good, you're a dancer. I'm stuck for a step here. Can you think of anything?'"

"So I said, 'Why don't you try this?' and I did something for him, and he used it. That was quite elating for me. Every day after that he'd say, 'Where's Pan? I want Pan with me.' They finally gave me a contract as dance director, and I stayed there (for the next seven years) until the team finished."

That collaboration is the focus of "It Just Happened . . ." tv docu being produced by the French Theatre

By AMY DAWES

National de la Dance et de L'Image, Chateaufallon, with the Pan-European Cultural Channel La Sept, and Canal Plus. Directed by Robert Kuperberg, and authorized for broadcast in Europe only, it will be the first film document of the role Pan played in the Astaire/Rogers era and will feature his remembrances and narration of film clips.

The charmed beginning to what became a lifelong friendship with Astaire (who died last June) was based on a symbiotic appreciation of the possibilities of dance.

"We thought so much alike about music and rhythms," Pan told *Daily Variety*. "The minute I saw him dance I said, 'Oh, this is the kind of dancing I love.' He seemed to be able to do everything I felt inside and wanted to do."

Born in Nashville in 1910, Pan went to New York and became a dancer in Broadway choruses. His first show, "Top Speed," featured Ginger Rogers. His Hollywood career took off soon after he settled here in 1935 with "Flying Down To Rio," and his work has encompassed 55 films, including "A Damsel In Distress" (1937) for which he won an Academy Award.

#### Other Favorites

Though the Astaire-Rogers period of the '30s was the most important to him, he also mentions much later films among his favorites — "Cancan" (1960), "My Fair Lady" (1964), "Silk Stockings" (1957), and "Meet Me In Las Vegas" (1956).

For the musical styles of today, he has little affection, declaring, "I don't know what happened to good musicals, good dancing, good songs, good lyrics.

"I blame it all on the Beatles," he says with a laugh, "and on the drug experience, the Janis Joplin-types, the screamers, hard rock, metal rock. That music drives me

out of my mind with its un-understandable, meaningless, repetitive lyrics.

"But I think things will return, eventually, to sanity."

Of today's dancers, he reserves his admiration for Michael Jackson, with whom he recently appeared on a tv talkshow. "He's a wonderful dancer," says Pan.

Inside the house, the film crew is ready to resume lensing in front of the gleaming black upright piano, which is decorated with a Lucite cube containing two dance slippers — one of Astaire's, one of Rogers'. Pan gets his face dusted and his eyebrows combed by a makeup assistant.

#### Gallic Tribute

"Hermes Pan," confides Gerard Paquet, director of TNDI, Chateaufallon in France, "is not well-known in Europe, but to us (at TNDI), he's a giant. When you look at the work he's done, it's incredible."

When last year, the Chateaufallon cultural center Paquet cofounded in 1965 was named the National Theater of Dance & Film by the French minister of culture, Paquet says, "I decided our first film would be on Fred Astaire, whose accomplishment was the greatest we could dream of. But the more we talk with Mr. Pan, the more we want to make the film about his work."

"We want to show artistically how all this was created. It was the beginning of dance in film, because in Busby Berkeley films, it was only the camera that danced."

"What we found out is that they created all this — the elegance and style of the era — in a very quiet, natural and modest way. (Thus, the film's title.)

"They probably didn't realize that they were writing the history of dance in film. Compared to the way things are done today, with so much hype, I think it's a good lesson. They just did it."