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CLOCKWORK LIZA

Star and Artist:
The Career Achievement of Liza Minnelli

Thank you, Matt!

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Introduction

Los Angeles. It is the night of the second of March 2014. Comedienne Ellen DeGeneres will host the Academy Awards for the second time. Brad Pitt, Meryl Streep, Matthew McConaughey, Cate Blanchett, Tom Hanks, Julia Roberts – the crème de la crème of Hollywood have gathered. Everyone is nominated for something, Streep for the eighteenth time. This provides lot of material that DeGeneres is constantly taking advantage that evening. Streep's record for most nominations, Jennifer Lawrence's stumble from last year, and Bruce Dern's family background serve as her targets during the opening presentation. Nobody is safe from her roasts. Ellen DeGeneres is witty, cynical, self-deprecating, engaging; a spirited woman whose blows don't land below the belt, but can be wonderfully spiteful. But like every comedienne at some point, she too is capable of taking a joke too far and might make someone in the crowd hold their breath. She introduces a few nominated actors and other personalities from the audience.

[...] is here tonight. And I have to say, one of the most amazing Liza Minnelli impersonators I have ever seen in my entire life ... Really, seriously ... Good job, Sir. I mean, this is really...¹

Sitting in the audience: Liza Minnelli herself. How she took the mockery is not clearly decipherable. Eyebrows raised, a flick of the tongue, a stern look in the direction of the hostess. Next to her half-sister Lorna Luft, who laughs heartily, who perhaps wants to encourage Liza to laugh

along, which she does very quickly. Minnelli sits in the third row in the aisle, just behind Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts.

As if this gibe was not enough, something else happens in the course of the evening. Ellen DeGeneres walks comfortably through the corridor and stops at Minnelli's seat. They chat briefly, then take a picture of themselves with DeGeneres' cell phone as if they were old friends. DeGeneres continues walking past Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o to Meryl Streep. Together with Streep, she wants to set another record, the one for most retweeted photo, in addition to Streep's eighteen Oscar nominations. She is referring to the short message service Twitter, which many celebrities use for self-promotion. So, she wants a photo to spread as virally as possible. In the end they take a group picture. Streep holds the cell phone and DeGeneres calls Julia Roberts, Channing Tatum, Bradley Cooper, Jennifer Lawrence, Brad Pitt and Lupita Nyong'o to position themselves in the picture; unsolicited, Kevin Spacey, Angelina Jolie, Lupita Nyong'o's brother Peter and Jared Leto also join in. Almost all of them are actors who were among the leading film stars in 2014. What we don't see at this moment is Liza Minnelli also trying to get into the picture. Channing Tatum covers her with the full extent of his tall body. She still reaches for Julia Roberts' arm wrapped around Tatum to draw attention to herself, but in vain. A single photo with Liza Minnelli will do. But she is not allowed to be in the big Oscar "selfie."²

Minnelli's attempt was also recorded photographically. Eventually all three pictures landed on the web and spread virally on Twitter: Minnelli and DeGeneres, the large group picture, the group from behind with helpless Minnelli. The group photo achieved the actual record.³ It made history as the "most retweeted selfie" and inspired the German *Stern* columnist Meike Winnemuth to write a commentary in which she criticized Hollywood's mania for youth and beauty,

which still lost none of its degrading charm decades after the disintegration of the studio machinery. This is how Hollywood still ticks: Once you have been someone, you no longer belong - you are banished into memory.

In 2014 Minnelli's own Oscar win happened forty-one years ago, her last leading role in a feature film twenty-three years ago. For aging actresses, there are two options in Hollywood. Either you continue to work ceaselessly until old age and show your furrowed face on the screen almost to the point of death. This is how Bette Davis and Katharine Hepburn did it. Or you seal yourself off completely from the outside world and turn into a phantom when you decide that your film career is over. That's how Greta Garbo preferred it. Doris Day imitated her a bit; one rarely heard of her and knew what she looked like, but she absolutely didn't want to hear about a return as a public figure.

Minnelli, who in the meantime has retired or at least entered "part-time retirement", breaks a taboo of the American film industry. She takes the middle road and haunts the media. This also means a social network, namely Facebook, where she irregularly publishes pictures of the past on her official site or makes a statement about current events. She often refers to the day of birth or death or any other important event of a colleague, friend or acquaintance. Then she shows up at the concert of a musician friend of hers, where she is asked to come on stage to sing one of her well-known songs. Some newspapers jump on it and suddenly Liza Minnelli is mentioned for a few days until she is forgotten again. Here a small television appearance, there a small award ceremony, there a dinner with prominent colleagues. Then, silence of the grave. She has become a ghost, which occasionally becomes flesh if it wants to.

But she has never just been a film actress. Liza Minnelli, still very much alive, though no longer a worldwide superstar, represented something that no longer exists

today: Classic American all-round entertainment. As a singer she was so versatile and experimental on stage and in the recording studio that she was able to go on a concert tour with Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr. and at the same time record an electronic pop album with the Pet Shop Boys. She sang pieces by musical author Stephen Sondheim as well as Queens rock anthem *We Are the Champions* when the occasion called for it. She has earned her own status in theater, film, television and music. Many of her projects are not worth mentioning because they have not brought out the essence of the artist. Some, however, are of high artistic quality, which has been partly celebrated, partly misunderstood. Liza Minnelli has been one of the last representatives of an idea of entertainment based on diversity and active contact with the audience: An entertainer had to be able to sing, tap dance, play and joke, all in reference to the tradition of American vaudeville in the 19th and early 20th century. The species of these multimedia entertainers, who turned to jazz and musicals and appeared on theater stages, film, television and radio in equal measure, is almost extinct. It has assimilated and with the death of Frank Sinatra in 1998, it has lost perhaps the last great showman of its kind.

Born March 12, 1946, in Los Angeles, Minnelli actually belongs to a generation that is hardly connected with this old-school entertainment. We find points of comparison in Barbra Streisand and Bette Midler, but these two ladies do not fit easily into this category. Most of the singers and actors born in the 1940s grew up with rock 'n roll, discovered and experienced Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, but simultaneously listened to swing and pop singers like Perry Como and Frank Sinatra, who were commercially extremely successful until the mid-1960s. The British Invasion, Motown, the generation of singer-songwriters, Woodstock - all these movements have long since ceased to stand for the traditional entertainment

industry. Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton shamelessly celebrated an extramarital relationship before staging themselves as a hate and love dream (or nightmare) couple. Anne Bancroft seduced Dustin Hoffman on screen. Explicit sex conquered the cinema. From time to time Minnelli dared to collaborate and try things out because there were hardly any other possibilities for her. She seemed like a product of the past that had strayed into the present and now made the best of it. Because she didn't consistently move with the times, her nevertheless remarkable achievements were often not appreciated. At the same time, she is partly to blame for this, because she has far too often kept to herself and her origins.

How does Liza Minnelli's life's work explain itself? It is impossible for a single author to make a complete, detailed analysis in accordance with all the rules of cultural and media studies. A multi-volume work would be necessary; it would be difficult for the reader. It is important to approach the artist historiographically and to try to understand her work through a scientific approach to a detailed analysis of literature and sources. What are the characteristics of her various projects in film, on television, the theater and concert stage and in the recording studio? What is special about Liza Minnelli? Who is the artist, who is the star Liza Minnelli? Like many other prominent actors and singers, Minnelli has a certain star-concept on which her career is based. In order to sell herself as a unique brand, she took a very specific path. But which path was that and to what extent did it work? The Liza Minnelli of the 2010s is not the Liza Minnelli of the 1970s. There are worlds between these two decades that may not be clear to us at first glance.

There are many printed works about Minnelli: Biographies like Michael Freedland's *Liza with a 'Z'. A biography of Liza Minnelli* (1988) or Wendy Leigh's *Liza. Born a Star* (1993) are extensively devoted to Minnelli's private life, her childhood, youth, marriages, affairs and health problems. Facts about

her artistic work are only fragmentary, sometimes false - in terms of dates, production titles, awards - and incomprehensibly prioritized. However, completely ignoring these two inferior books, which correspond to the level of cheap gossip magazines, would be ill advised, because the authors - certainly unconsciously - make a few theses about the artist and her life's work and try to draw a conclusion at one point or another. A little better is Peter Carrick's *Liza Minnelli* (1993), which already shows journalistic qualities. In addition, the Brit Carrick focuses in some paragraphs on Minnelli's work in the United Kingdom, which gives his biography a distinct profile. But his factual account is also flawed, partly badly researched, and he also puts much more emphasis on Minnelli's private life.

Producer and music journalist Scott Schechter (1961-2009) takes a completely different approach in his *Liza Minnelli Scrapbook*, published in 2004. He meticulously collected all kinds of facts to discuss Minnelli's theatrical stage career, filmography and discography, her work on television and her work as a live singer in detail. Excerpts from reviews round off his collection, which does not deal with Minnelli's private life, purely her professional one. This journalistic fan literature, which pays tribute to the artist, is the only reappraisal of Minnelli's work to date. Well-known non-fiction books and scientific publications centering Liza Minnelli are not yet available. James Leve of the Northern Arizona University gives valuable hints for questioning and explaining Minnelli in his excellent musicological treatise *Kander and Ebb* (2009) about her two probably most important working partners, the composer John Kander and the lyricist Fred Ebb.

Minnelli is first and foremost a performer, i.e. an artist who makes use of the performative: She wants to express something, to represent something, in the sense of imperfection, infinity, incompleteness and transience, so to speak. She celebrates the moment. Her art is based on a

very special presence and her own acting talent. This talent was accompanied by a certain stage persona, as I would like to call it, because Minnelli used all media as a stage and because the stage is conversely a medium. Since she belongs primarily to the "old school" of show business, I avoid the term media as much as possible, because these partly forgotten artists also did not express themselves through it but did so through the stage. Film was synonymous with Hollywood, the "dream factory," musical was synonymous with Broadway. Today, with the Internet as our new leading medium, many of the obligations of the past are questioned and make it difficult to locate Minnelli. Nevertheless, there are some fixed points that are inseparably linked to her persona, her star-concept, all her projects and her career. You, dear readers, are invited to get on the trail of the artist Liza Minnelli.

¹ See "Ellen DeGeneres' 86th Oscars Opening." In: *YouTube.com*. 2014-03-11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUmX6CiMoFk> [2018-01-01].

² See "Ellen DeGeneres takes a Selfie at the Oscars." In: *YouTube.com*. 2014-03-11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsSWj51uGnl> [2018-01-01]; and Wallop, Harry: "Oscars 2014: The most famous 'selfie' in the world (sorry Liza)." In: *The Telegraph*. 2014-03-03. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/os-cars/10674655/Oscars-2014-The-most-famous-selfie-in-the-world-sorry-Liza.html> [2018-01-01].

³ See Winnemuth, Meike: "Wer ist hier frech?" In: *Stern*. 2014-03-14. <http://www.stern.de/panorama/winnemuth-kolumne/stern-kolumne--winne-muth--wer-ist-hier-frech--3399112.html> [2018-01-01].

The stage actress

The theater as the key to a career

This publication attempts to look at Liza Minnelli's different fields of work separately in order to bring out her respective artistic reputations as concretely as possible. To some extent, this does not seem to make much sense, because in Minnelli's case all fields of work - theater, film, television, concert stage and recording studio - influence each other and only in their interaction do they guarantee the artist's overall concept. Nevertheless, it is more effective to disassemble all areas in a similar way to the individual parts of a clock's mechanism in order to understand how they work and how they are interrelated. Again and again, there are overlaps. It is clear that the film *Cabaret* (1972) is the linchpin of her career. The film industry made Minnelli's parents famous. Thanks to her famous parents she had a well-known name from childhood onwards. Experience has shown that a well-known name opens the doors to television for the name bearer. Minnelli's well-known name was used specifically at the beginning of her theatrical stage career. She made her two most important contacts in the theater when she met composer John Kander and lyricist Fred Ebb. Kander and Ebb paved her way to *Cabaret*. Kander's music and Ebb's lyrics helped her to create an accomplished stage persona as an artist, from which half of her unique star-concept was derived - the other half was secured by her biography and name, ~~i.e.~~ the private and public person. As a star, Minnelli was able to try herself out in several projects to explore the nuances of her concept.

This concept would be unthinkable without her theatrical stage work, because in the theater the young up-and-coming actress made herself temporarily independent of her well-known name. Although this name undeniably served marketing purposes, it would not have been effective if the artist behind it had not been convincing. Finally, the audience came to the theater because they wanted to see the artist with the big name in action. If the artist Liza Minnelli had failed at this very place, in her young years, she would never have become the star Liza Minnelli. She would only have remained the daughter of two famous people, possibly a purely private and public person without an artistic reputation of her own.

The theater is therefore the starting point and basis for Liza Minnelli's significant career. First and foremost, she is a performer of musical theater songs. The musical theater, as one of the great art forms originated in the United States with worldwide appeal, and is historically closely tied to New York's Broadway. When we talk about Minnelli as a stage actress, we mean Minnelli the musical theater star and Minnelli the Broadway personality. Due to her family background, her biography, her early creative phase and primarily her repertoire, she represents the heyday, the best years of American musical theater, which as an art form served Hollywood in individual elements and whose songs have been passed on through films.

Liza Minnelli's parents are Judy Garland (1922–1969) and Vincente Minnelli (1903–1986), two personalities undeniably interwoven with the history of musical film and its development in the Hollywood studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. MGM was one of the top studios that lived up to its slogan of having "more stars than there are in heaven." Together with her film partner Mickey Rooney (1920–2014), Garland replaced Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy as the leading MGM musical couple in the early 1940s. By then she had already established herself through several films, most

notably *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Rooney personified contemporary American youth as a force of nature: dynamic, unstoppable, unreachable and unattainable. His collaboration with Garland in teenage comedies and musicals with energetic, youth-oriented backstage plots elevated their mutual star status. During the Second World War, MGM was synonymous with a talent pool that included Garland and director Vincente Minnelli. The two worked together for the first time on *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), an outstanding, high-quality musical film that is considered a prime example of both the MGM style, which had been driven to perfection both technically and aesthetically, and of the musical film genre itself, since its emergence in the late 1920s.¹

Garland's roots lay in American vaudeville, a genre that reached its peak in the 1880s to 1920s and offered a wide range of entertainment including musical numbers, skits, readings, magic tricks, animal tricks, recitations from dramas and operas, and acrobatic performances. Vaudeville had emerged from theatrical variety entertainment and, unlike the latter, it served a mixed-gender audience, disseminated the values of the Progressive Era (social activism and political reforms between 1865 and 1918) and appealed to the rising, growing middle class. At the center of every vaudeville show was a headliner – a star who might later make the leap to Hollywood.² This phenomenon applies to Judy Garland, who was part of a singing trio with her two sisters before being hired by MGM as a teenager to make films and record music. In 1999, the American Film Institute voted Garland eighth on its list of the twenty-five greatest American female screen legends, behind Elizabeth Taylor and before Marlene Dietrich. After the end of her studio contract in 1950, she continued her old vaudeville tradition in concert programs on Broadway and in 1963/64 in her own television show, sometimes in appearing in

clownish costumes and occasionally sending up her MGM image. Although Garland expressed interest in appearing in Broadway musicals she never worked as a theatrical stage actress, and was never involved in conventional book musical theater productions.³

Vincente Minnelli was not a stage actor, but his expertise in theatre was behind the scenes. In New York in the 1930s he worked at Radio City Music Hall as a costume designer, set designer, and artistic director.⁴ His innovative power in musical theater productions secured him the attention of the film industry. International audiences will primarily remember Minnelli as a director of musical films, having become the "virtual father of the modern musical." Between 1943 and 1976 - from *Cabin in the Sky* to *A Matter of Time* - Minnelli was considered one of the most influential filmmakers in Hollywood, although his name may not be as familiar to the general public as Alfred Hitchcock, Cecil B. DeMille or Otto Preminger, who, unlike him, also produced many of their films themselves and used their name for marketing purposes. However, this never shook his reputation as the longest-serving, highest-paid and most prestigious MGM director.^{5 6} Minnelli's return to the theater in 1967 after decades of absence was a flop when he directed the stage musical *Mata Hari*, which covered the last years of the famous dancer's life:

[...] *Mata Hari* was directed [...] by Vincente Minnelli, who had been in Hollywood for so long that he didn't know what a theatre piece even was. The production was lavish but incompetent.⁷

The American musical theater

Liza Minnelli's theatrical work thus represents a contrast to the career achievements of both her parents. For decades

she has been a sought-after stage actress, especially in musicals. In comparison to her musical roles, the percentage of her non-musical theater roles is small, with a total of four productions.

As an art form, the American musical theater has processed historical events, influenced national culture and produced cultural icons, influential composers, and visionary directors and choreographers. The existence of musical theater proves that there are people who want to hear music and lyrics that are applicable to their general emotional world, reflect on them and are conveyed through characters who sing about their joys and disappointments.⁸ Its origins can be found in several genres of the 19th century: In the minstrel shows that caricatured in a racist way the population of African and Caribbean descent; in the operettas of Jacques Offenbach and Johann Strauss; and in burlesque.⁹ The latter term describes American stage shows from about 1840 onwards, which were based mainly on satire and parody. The artists wore lavish, colorful costumes, showed novel performances and striptease. Music and dance numbers were embedded in them. This form was popular until the turn of the 20th century, characterized primarily by an unpretentious humor at the expense of high society.¹⁰

Until the 1970s, the Broadway musical continued to set new standards. Kern and Hammerstein's *Show Boat* (1927) is considered an early example of musical play, in which the songs and dances were for the first time consciously placed in a serious story. In Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943), the songs and dances first served to develop the narrative.¹¹ In the 1940s and 1950s, the importance of dance and choreography increased and allowed experiments that culminated in *West Side Story* in 1957: Now dance told the story and the characters expressed themselves primarily through movement. *The Sound of*

Music (1959) was old-fashioned, but it contained elements that were to define a new form of musical play: The concept musical, in which the linear narrative was less important than the overall message, which was underscored by means that had previously been unusual.¹² In the 1960s, traditional musicals such as *Hello, Dolly!* remained popular, but Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret* was groundbreaking: A master of ceremonies used scenes within the cabaret to comment on the action and political unrest in the world outside. *A Chorus Line* established the plotless musical in the mid-1970s, in which there was no classical plot, but the characters presented their life stories, by foregrounding themselves with musical numbers and monologues.¹³

Broadway

The term Broadway now serves both a commercial enterprise and an art form. Ultimately, it is always decisive whether a show fills the houses - in other words, whether it at least recoups its production costs and, in the ideal case, whether it also generates profits. Although some productions have found critical success, by not finding a large audience they have failed commercially. The careers of producers and composers depended and still depend on the interest of the audience. The most successful musical theater productions have always been those whose creators have found a practicable balance between artistic and commercial demands.¹⁴

From the 1870s onwards, so-called combination companies dominated the very heterogeneous, qualitatively fluctuating and partly unprofessional American theater landscape. Formed from the system of stock companies (repertory theater groups), they were equipped for all possible genres and qualified the previously unbalanced interaction of nationally established, traveling stars with

local ensembles.¹⁵ After the turn of the 20th century, about one third of the combination companies were located in the New York area.¹⁶ Productions that toured from New York were advertised with "direct from New York."¹⁷ At the end of the 19th century, most of the productions in New York were not produced by the company itself, but booked: "[...] it was the booking agents who held the most power [...]."¹⁸ Theater districts became stronger, more dominant and hardened the "Broadway" brand. At the beginning of the 20th century, the two monopolies in this regard, Theatrical Syndicate and Shubert Organization, only produced shows of combination companies that were to be performed even within New York. Both rivalries led to a synergy that gave the New York companies cultural and economic power and made Broadway shows the figurehead from about 1900 onwards.¹⁹ For the next fifty years, this brand ruled commercial theater as a vast, productive national industry.²⁰ For decades, producers used out-of-town try-outs to work on the finer points of a show before it was played on Broadway. It was common to choose cities as far away from New York City as possible, such as Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco and Los Angeles.²¹

From the mid-1960s regional theaters established themselves in several large cities, often in partnership with local universities. They enriched the cultural landscape at that time, regardless of whether they were participating in Broadway tours as venues or not. Soon there was a dynamic transfer: Plays from regional theaters were adapted for Broadway, and Broadway offered its productions to the regional theaters.²² The latter, however, also led to the identity crisis of the regional theater, which in the 1960s and 1970s had participated in the national Broadway tours of musicals such as *Hello, Dolly!*, *Mame*, and *Applause*, and although they were commercially secure, they lost their original, experimental character.²³ In order to escape the

influence of the vehemently spreading Broadway unions, theatrical artists in Manhattan developed off-Broadway in the 1950s (maximum 500 seats per house), followed by off-off-Broadway in the 1960s (99 seats per house). Both initially independent, experimental areas have become increasingly commercialized.²⁴

The beginnings: Summer stock and high school theater

Despite - or maybe because of - her family background and her early artistic education, Liza Minnelli preferred dancing to acting and singing, and as a child she was taught by MGM choreographer Nico Charisse.²⁵ In 1956 she danced onstage at the New York Palace Theatre while her mother sang the song *Swanee* in one of her concerts. In the same year, she was presented to a larger audience on television when, together with actor Bert Lahr, she co-hosted the TV premiere of the film *The Wizard of Oz* as part of the *Ford Star Jubilee* series.²⁶ But it was not until she sat in the audience of *Gypsy* - starring Ethel Merman - in 1959 that she felt the emotional power of theater. A year later she was sure that she "had to" become an actress: The musical *Bye, Bye, Birdie* - starring Dick Van Dyke and Chita Rivera - awakened her desire to sing and dance on a stage. It was theater rather than film that had shaken her so deeply, and she wanted to go to New York City, the theater capital of the United States, and therefore to Broadway.²⁷ Minnelli thus took a decisive step away from the West Coast to the East Coast, to set herself apart from her parents, the two undisputed film greats Judy Garland and Vincente Minnelli.

In 1961 Minnelli attended the High School of Performing Arts in New York.²⁸ Meanwhile, she unsuccessfully auditioned at several theaters in the spring.²⁹ In the summer she spent a vacation with her family in Hyannis

Port, Massachusetts, where she gained her first theatrical stage experience in three summer stock productions of the Cape Cod Melody Top Theatre, which had originally been on Broadway in the 1950s. In the musicals *Wish You Were Here* and *Flower Drum Song*, she painted the stage set and sang in the choir, and in *Take Me Along* she played the small role of Marie Macomber on August 23. These works led to a contract with her first longtime agent Stephanie Philipps.³⁰

All three shows were light-hearted musical comedies, i.e. comedies in which dances and songs were interwoven. Musical comedies, the forerunners of which can be found in American vaudeville, minstrel shows and burlesque, have been written since the 1890s mainly for New York's Broadway and London's West End. They became particularly popular at the beginning of the 20th century and reached their peak in the 1920s with dozens of shows opening annually and featuring songs by such influential composers as Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, George Gershwin and Jerome Kern. Musical comedy became a "typically American" combination of a light-hearted plot with Tin Pan Alley songs and popular dances, often performed by scantily clad dancers. As mentioned previously, the Broadway production *Oklahoma!* (1943) further developed the musical comedy: Here, for the first time, all elements of acting, dance and song were more strongly interwoven so that all occupations were presented as equally important. Today, components of traditional musical comedy can still be found in many contemporary musicals.³¹

Wish You Were Here, which premiered at the Imperial Theatre on June 25, 1952, was about fun and romance at a Jewish summer camp, based on Arthur Kobe's play *Having a Wonderful Time*. It was not a critical success at the time, but became known because pop singer Eddie Fisher recorded and released the title song.³² *Take Me Along* dealt with the family history of a newspaper publisher in Connecticut at

the turn of the century, and the future plans and problems of his children regarding love and marriage. The musical, which premiered at the Shubert Theater on October 22, 1959, was based on Eugene O'Neill's play *Ah, Wilderness!*³³ *Flower Drum Song*, based on C. Y. Lee's book of the same name, drew its inspiration from the clash of two cultures and was one of the more contemporary musicals by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II: A wedding between a Chinese woman and a Chinese man who had already been socialized in America is to be arranged in the Chinese-American immigrant community of San Francisco. The show was not a real hit; on Broadway Gene Kelly's direction was criticized. What remained were a few well-known songs and a short Broadway revival in 2002.³⁴

In the fall of 1961, Minnelli moved to Scarsdale High School in Scarsdale, one of New York City's northern suburbs.³⁵ Like many other American educational institutions for fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds, Scarsdale High School offered and continues to offer a variety of creative activities after the regular curriculum ends.³⁶ As a member of the Scarsdale High School Dramatic Club, Minnelli played the title role in a production of Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett's play *The Diary of Anne Frank* on December 8 and 9. *Scarsdale Inquirer* called her performance "vibrant." A local sponsor organized a European tour for the school troupe of about seven weeks in July and August 1962 with stops in Rome, Athens, Jerusalem and Amsterdam. Creative director of the project in Scarsdale and most likely also in Europe was teacher John Hemmerly.³⁷ Anne Frank remained one of four non-musical stage roles in Minnelli's entire career. It was not long before her professional acting debut. Mainly to learn French, she spent a few months at the Sorbonne in Paris.³⁸ In late 1962 she moved from Scarsdale to Manhattan, in the heart of the world's capital New York City. She began training in acting,

dance and singing at the Herbert Berghof Studio, where she was taught by Herbert Berghof, David Soren Collyer and Uta Hagen, among others.³⁹ Not much is known about this time. On February 3, 1963, Minnelli participated in an evening of recitation of Robert Frost's poems, where she performed *The Generations of Men* together with Irven Rinard and Richard Morse, and the two texts *People Keep Saying* and *The Last Word of a Bluebird* solo.⁴⁰ According to biographer George Mair, critics described this Frost reading as a breathtaking demonstration of Minnelli's articulation and power.⁴¹

Off-Broadway: Best Foot Forward

Best Foot Forward was significant to Minnelli's career in 1963 in two ways. On the one hand, with this professional debut she took a first step out of the shadow of her mother, who had never worked as a stage actress, and out of the shadow of her father, whose cinematic work had long since outstripped his earlier theatrical work. On the other hand, Minnelli was marketed for the first time: She herself took advantage of the opportunity, as did the producer, who deliberately used Minnelli's name - even though she was not the production's lead actress.⁴²

The musical comedy by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane from 1941 is set in a fictional private military high school. As a joke, one of the students invites a famous Hollywood beauty to the prom, whose surprising acceptance causes some uproar. The Broadway premiere was followed by a film adaptation in 1943.⁴³ On February 26, 1963, Minnelli recorded the songs *You Are for Loving* and *What Do You Think I Am?* for Cadence Records - this single sold half a million copies.⁴⁴ Around the same time, she successfully auditioned for the production of *Best Foot Forward* off-Broadway while still in her early years of training. Shortly before her seventeenth birthday, she was cast for the small

supporting role of man-hungry Ethel Hoffinger, for which she was guaranteed a minimum weekly income of \$45. Christopher Walken was also a cast member. *Best Foot Forward* opened on April 2, 1963 at the Stage 73 Theater in Manhattan. Remarkably, the new tune *You Are for Loving* was incorporated into the musical to be Ethel Hoffinger's solo.⁴⁵

The marketing of both Minnelli and the production was facilitated by the fact that Minnelli broke her left ankle during her first dance rehearsal. She told her mother on the phone about her successful casting, whereupon Garland arranged for her to appear on the TV show of Jack Paar, a friend of hers.⁴⁶ On March 15, 1963, *The Jack Paar Show* was broadcast on NBC, announcing an ominous "Armenian new discovery" named Dyju Langard (an anagram of the name Judy Garland), who turned out to be Minnelli with a leg in plaster.⁴⁷ The opening of *Best Foot Forward* was originally scheduled for March 27th, but was postponed for Minnelli's recovery, so the show's press staff, led by PR manager Rex Reed, capitalized on Minnelli's name and growing popularity.⁴⁸ Producer Arthur Whitelaw was not interested in quickly replacing any chorus girl with comparatively few speaking and singing engagements to save the premiere. He had immediately recognized Minnelli's appeal beyond all other aspects of the production: The birth of what we might well call the "Liza Minnelli effect." She was not a renowned actress, and Whitelaw could not foresee how the critics would eventually react to *Best Foot Forward*.⁴⁹ But she had a big, profitable name from birth. So big that it was highlighted on posters and LP covers: "Introducing Liza Minnelli" was clearly written in capital letters, with the names of the other actors listed only half as small below.⁵⁰ The publicity worked and attracted the attention of the trade press. In the end, the production received as much attention as shows usually did in the big houses on

Broadway.⁵¹ For her performance, Minnelli not only received rave reviews, but also her first award. *New York Herald Tribune* described her as "certainly appealing [...] easy and confident and accomplished [...]." As one of the twelve newcomers of the 1962/63 season, Minnelli was honored with a Promising Personality Award by the Theatre World Awards' committee.⁵²

On April 21, 1963, Minnelli advertised the stage musical on television again, on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.⁵³ After taking several short breaks from the production during the summer months due other jobs – to give interviews, appear on television and record songs for Capitol Records – she left the show in early September 1963. About six weeks later, on October 13, the show was cancelled.⁵⁴ Producer Arthur Whitelaw said of Minnelli's participation: "The show was a success. It was selling out. We could have run for two years." The entry of 1940s film star Veronica Lake (in the role of the invited Hollywood star) into the project had not kept ticket sales stable.⁵⁵

On the road: Repertory tours

From January 28 to March 22, 1964, Minnelli toured the states of New York and New Jersey as a member of the *Carnival!* ensemble.⁵⁶ Here she played the leading role of Lily, an orphan who seeks a friend of her father's at a carnival and falls in love there. The basis of the musical comedy, premiered on April 12, 1961 at the Imperial Theater, was material by Helen Deutsch from Paul Gallico's story *The Seven Seals of Clement O'Reilly*, which had already served as a model for the film *Lily* (1953, starring Leslie Caron). In the successful original production, jugglers, acrobats and market criers had enlivened both the stage and the auditorium with an extraordinary choreography.⁵⁷ The rather European-influenced set contributed to a special

atmosphere; some voices count *Carnival!* among the best 1960s musicals, but it is generally not recognized as a classic.⁵⁸

At the Mineola Playhouse on Long Island, Minnelli met the duo John Kander and Fred Ebb personally. Ebb had already seen Minnelli play off-Broadway in 1963 in *Best Foot Forward*.⁵⁹ Lyricist Fred Ebb (1928– 2004) had written for vaudeville and nightclub shows after studying literature, and composer John Kander (* 1927) had begun as chorus master, conductor and arranger on Broadway. The two had met in 1962 and had already worked on a musical entitled *Golden Gate*, which had not been performed due to the lack of a producer.⁶⁰ Both had become known in 1962 as authors of the song *My Coloring Book*, performed by Sandy Stewart on *The Perry Como Television Show*.⁶¹ Ebb and Kander wrote the song *Maybe This Time*, which Minnelli recorded for her first solo album *Liza! Liza!* in June 1964.⁶²

In May 1964, Judy Garland said in an interview in Australia that Minnelli would be the understudy for Barbra Streisand in *Funny Girl*, and that a stage musical would be written for Minnelli. With this statement she merely spread rumors, because neither of the two projects came about in this way.⁶³

On June 1, 1964, the comedy *Time Out for Ginger* opened at the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, Pennsylvania, starring Minnelli in the title role. The setting is the living room of middle-class family Carol, whose father fully supports his daughter's goal of joining their school's football team. The head of the family was played by Chester Morris, known from the movies *Alibi* (1929) and *Hell Behind Bars* (1930).⁶⁴

Her next tour took Minnelli from July to October 1964 through Connecticut (Westport Country Playhouse – July 6), New York (Tappan Zee Playhouse – July 10 to 13) Florida and Ontario, Canada (each September) and again New York

(Mineola Playhouse, Long Island - September and October): She and co-star Elliott Gould played a couple of young lovers in the musical *The Fantasticks*, a well-known show from the off-Broadway scene. Rehearsals were held for two weeks at New York's Sullivan Street Theater.⁶⁵ The simple story with a fairy-tale atmosphere, and almost archetypal, but not clichéd characters, some of whom speak in verse dialogue, is based on Edmond Rostand's drama *Les Romanesques*, with content borrowed from *Romeo and Juliet*.⁶⁶ The two main characters The Girl and The Boy are neighbors who fall in love with each other, but are separated by a wall. Romantic and light, *The Fantasticks* was a very popular show in spite of its artful presentation. The music blows into this construct like a breath of fresh air - one might think that *The Fantasticks* considers itself to be the "first musical ever."⁶⁷ With a run of more than forty years, *The Fantasticks*, which originally had premiered on May 3, 1960, at the Sullivan Street Playhouse, is the longest-running musical off-Broadway. Well-known songs from it include *Soon It's Gonna Rain* and *Try to Remember*, which Minnelli also included in the track list of her first LP record *Liza! Liza!*⁶⁸

Broadway: Flora, the Red Menace

Minnelli's album *Liza!*, released by Capitol Records, peaked at number 116 on the Billboard Top 200 Charts and was positively reviewed by the media.⁶⁹ This success prompted her mother Judy Garland to "sign" Minnelli to their first and only scheduled joint engagement - other joint appearances between 1956 and 1967 were mostly short or spontaneous.⁷⁰ In November 1964 Garland and Minnelli performed two shows at the London Palladium - Minnelli's first appearance in a two-act concert program with orchestral accompaniment in a music hall.⁷¹ After that,

Minnelli, who in the meantime had been in discussion for the then rejected project *Roman Holiday*, auditioned for the title role of the Broadway musical *Flora, the Red Menace* for the fifth time, for which director George Abbott had actually intended pop singer Eydie Gormé.⁷² However, composing-songwriting-team Ebb and Kander, who were responsible for the musical, decided in favor of Minnelli.⁷³ Gormé was ultimately not available. She had lost interest in the project and never appeared at agreed meetings, so Abbott finally left the decision of the cast to Kander and Ebb.⁷⁴ Despite this, Peter Carrick – as the only one of Minnelli's biographers – ascribes a certain weight to the London concerts with regard to Minnelli's future theatrical stage career:

Before coming to London Liza had been trying for the female lead in the forthcoming Broadway production of *Flora, The Red Menace*. On her return to New York she quickly secured the part.⁷⁵

Before the production and parallel to it, Minnelli publicized *Flora* in three television shows and in a public appearance at The World's Fair, New York.⁷⁶

Flora, the Red Menace tells the story of young fashion designer Flora Meszaros, a gauche, young American woman who falls in love with a communist during the Great Depression in the United States in the 1930s. At her boyfriend's insistence, the naive, up-and-coming Flora communitists, only to become disillusioned, leaving both boyfriend and party at the show's end.⁷⁷ He had virtually "swindled" her into the party. The male lead (Bob Dishy) became so unpopular that *Flora* became one of the few musicals with a romantic subplot, where the audience hoped the boy would not get the girl. To make matters worse, Dishy – like most of the actors in the cast – was just a passable singer, unlike Minnelli. *Flora* is considered an

exuberantly idealistic musical that turned non-singers into singers and showed how anyone can become a musical character, precisely because life is a musical. Minnelli more or less played herself. What was the moral of this piece? That the ideal American is an individual who does not participate in any movement – something that was very much at odds with the spirit of the times and the social reality of the 1960s in the face of the civil rights movement, feminist aspirations, and on the eve of the '68 protests.⁷⁸

This stage musical wanted to take a satirical look at communism in America.⁷⁹ Lester Atwell's novel *Love Is Just Around the Corner* served as a model, which was here reworked into a musical comedy.⁸⁰ Although there were many serious musicals at the time, the musical comedy was still standard, and director Abbott belonged to the "old school" so to speak.⁸¹ Abbott (1887–1995) was one of the most important directors and producers on Broadway. From 1933 to 1994, he worked on over 130 productions, significantly influencing the concept and development of musical comedy and calling for a greater involvement of dance. He was known for his claim to total creative control and his radical cuts to speed up the stage action. *Flora* was Abbott's 105th production.⁸² Although taking place in the 1930s, *Flora* had the typical sound of a 1950s musical, which was, according to musicologist James Leve, the lingua franca of musical comedy at the time of its creation in 1964.⁸³

Partly because of the topic, partly because of individual aspects of the production or the libretto penned by George Abbott and Robert Russell *Flora* earned only lukewarm reactions, even the seven out-of-town tryouts in New Haven (Connecticut) and Boston in April 1965. There was praise for Minnelli and the music, but the book was perceived as weak. Sometimes sources even speak of "traumatic out-of-town-tryouts."⁸⁴ According to Kander, Ebb, and producer Harold

Prince, Abbott never understood the show's framework, inflicted damage on it, and limited Minnelli's character choices. Prince, who was still at the beginning of his career, would have liked to change the whole spirit of the musical, but did not feel confident enough to direct it.⁸⁵ Harold Prince (1928–2019) was primarily a producer. He made his directing debut the following year with *Cabaret*. He is regarded for further developing the concept musical and in this sense, he relied primarily on weighty set designs as the basis around which, in his opinion, a show should be conceived.⁸⁶

From May 11 to July 24, 1965, *Flora* was performed 87 times at the Alvin Theater on Broadway, where the reviews were also mixed and it was not granted commercial success.⁸⁷ *Time Magazine*, for example, judged that the mixture of satire and nostalgia had not been successful: The 1930s were not current enough for satirical jibes and gibes, but also not distant enough to bathe in the "fervent forgetfulness" of past things; one half of the audience was too young to notice them and the other half was too old to want to be reminded of them at all costs.⁸⁸ *Flora* was the first stage musical to openly address communism, and producer Harold Prince thought the time was ripe, now that the McCarthy era was a thing of the past.⁸⁹ However, Minnelli's performance was widely praised: For example, for her "captivating presence" (*Time*), and she was titled "most promising youngster" (*The Morning Telegraph*). However, *Newsweek* was quite harsh: They considered it "unpleasant" that "not yet fully trained" Minnelli had been "pushed" into a big Broadway show at the age of nineteen. According to *The New York Times* – which generally praised Minnelli – she could not save the faltering production.⁹⁰ On June 13, 1965, Minnelli won a Tony Award in the category "Best Actress in a Musical" as the youngest actress to date.⁹¹ She has held this record until today, but it only applies to her category.