Discussion Questions for Women in Film--Cleveland Gathering, Wednesday, December 11, 2013:

Focal Film: *Funny Girl* (1968; U.S.; Screenplay by Isobel Lennart, based on the Broadway musical with score by Bob Merrill (lyrics) and Jule Styne (music); Cinematography by Harry Stradling, Sr. (DP for many musicals, including *Guys and Dolls* (1955) and *My Fair Lady* (1964)); Directed by William Wyler (see question #5 below for films) with musical numbers directed by Herbert Ross)

In *Funny Girl*, the principal characters are:
* Fanny Brice, a real-life Ziegfeld star (played by Barbra Streisand)
* Nicky Arnstein, Brice’s gambler husband (played by Omar Sharif)
* Florenz Ziegfeld, famed Broadway impresario (played by Walter Pidgeon)
The cast of characters also includes Rose Brice, Fanny’s mother (Kay Medford), Georgia James, a fellow Ziegfeld girl (Anne Francis), Eddie Ryan, Fanny’s piano player friend and colleague (Lee Allen), Mrs. Strakosh, a friend of Fanny’s mother’s from the old neighborhood (Mae Questel), and Mr. Kenney, a vaudeville promoter (Frank Faylen).

*Funny Girl* is a “biopic” loosely based on the life and career of American comedienne Fanny Brice, star of stage and screen, with a particular focus on her stormy relationship and marriage with gambler Nicky Arnstein. The film was produced by Brice’s son-in-law, Ray Stark. Barbra Streisand, reprising her Broadway role, shared the 1969 Academy Award for Best Actress with Katharine Hepburn (*The Lion in Winter*).

Fun facts from Wikipedia: In 2006, the American Film Institute ranked the film #16 on its list commemorating AFI’s Greatest Movie Musicals. Previously it had ranked the film #41 in its 2002 list of 100 Years ... 100 Passions, the songs "People" and "Don't Rain on My Parade" at #13 and #46, respectively, in its 2004 list of 100 Years ... 100 Songs, and the line "Hello, gorgeous" at #81 in its 2005 list of 100 Years ... 100 Movie Quotes.

This film is only our second real “genre” film—i.e., one that fits a set of standard characteristics that are recognized and expected by an audience. The movie musical genre has been one of the most popular in American film history, although its star faded rather suddenly and significantly in the 1960s. Historically, two main types of movie musicals have dominated: (a) The backstager, in which all musical numbers are produced “diegetically,” that is, rather realistically within the world of the film (the “diegesis”) and the location is typically the theater or other entertainment venue; and (b) the music-integrated musical, in which there is an “integration of the spoken, musical, danced, and scenic dimensions” of the film (Geoffrey Block) and typically non-diegetic music is employed, with characters singing or dancing to this music of unseen source in virtually any environment (e.g., the prairies of *Oklahoma*, the Manhattan streets of *West Side Story*). The latter, much like an opera, requires a greater degree of suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience. Further, movie musicals tend to emphasize one of two different plot structures: (a) boy meets girl, and (b) “save the old theater.”
1. How well does this film fit the expected profile(s) of the musical genre? Is it a purely “backstage” musical, or does it include “music integration,” requiring greater audience suspension of disbelief? How does this affect your reception of the film?

2. *Funny Girl* has been called “one of the most durable biopics about an entertainer” (Thomas Hischak). It is also considered a star vehicle for Barbra Streisand, even though it was her first film and other actresses were considered for the role both in its Broadway and movie incarnations (e.g., Mary Martin, Shirley MacLaine, Anne Bancroft, Carol Burnett). Perhaps surprisingly, the casting of Streisand in the Broadway version that preceded the film was opposed by producer Ray Stark, son-in-law of the late Fanny Brice. How much of the Fanny Brice we see on screen is Brice, and how much is Streisand, do you think?

3. Those in artistic control of the musical decided to weight the score heavily with new musical numbers featuring Barbra Streisand’s particular skills, but with the insertion of two of Fanny Brice’s signature numbers in the film version: “Second Hand Rose,” and the final number, “My Man.” Does this mixture work well for you?

4. The film has variously been called a “tragic biography” of Fanny Brice (Rick Altman), a star vehicle for Barbra Streisand, one of the last great movie musicals, and a sign of an America that was finally beginning to embrace its ethnic diversity. How do you receive the film?

5. This was the first musical for the film’s director, William Wyler. At age 66, he had directed 69 other films, including such classics as *Dodsworth* (1936), *Jezebel* (1938), *Wuthering Heights* (1939), *The Westerner* (1940), *The Little Foxes* (1941), *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), *The Heiress* (1949), *Roman Holiday* (1953), *The Desperate Hours* (1955), *The Big Country* (1958), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *The Children’s Hour* (1961). He won three Best Director Academy Awards—for *Mrs. Miniver, The Best Years of Our Lives*, and *Ben-Hur*. But because of the wide variety of genres and film types he directed, some film scholars have dismissed Wyler, claiming that he was not a true “auteur,” i.e., a filmmaker who demonstrates a unique and identifiable approach—a kind of personal “stamp” that characterizes his films. Even Wyler himself said, “When directing scripts by Lillian Hellman or Bob Sherwood, Sidney Kingsley or Jessamyn West, I could hardly call myself an auteur” (AFI interview). What do you think of Wyler’s status?

6. Some characteristics attributed to William Wyler’s style as director include: “A reputation for having his way on the set” (AFI interview); camera work that does not draw attention to itself (AFI interview); movies that are “intelligent adaptations of literary works” (Gene Phillips) and “offer psychological maturity and sophisticated treatment of character more typical of literature than movies” (Jan Herman); and a great director of acting performances (his actors won 14 Academy Awards, from a total of 36 nominations, still by far an all-time record, and his films won a total of 38 Oscars, also a record). How do these characteristics contribute to *Funny Girl*?

7. Many of Wyler’s films include significant women’s roles performed by major female stars (e.g., Bette Davis in *Jezebel* (1938) and *The Little Foxes* (1941), Greer Garson in *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), Olivia de Havilland in *The Heiress* (1949), Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday* (1953), and Audrey Hepburn and Shirley...
MacLaine in *The Children's Hour* (1961). Our film was the first movie for Barbra Streisand. Does Wyler’s reputation as an excellent “women’s director” hold true for *Funny Girl* and Streisand?

8. The casting of Omar Sharif, an Egyptian movie star, as Nicky Arnstein was problematic on a couple of fronts—first, because he was an Arab. Shooting of the film followed the 1967 Six-Day War between Israel and Egypt by just weeks, and a production still of Sharif and Streisand kissing was met with hostility in Egypt. Famously, Barbra Streisand responded, “Egypt angry? You should hear what my Aunt Sarah said!” Sharif’s position was vociferously defended by both Wyler and Streisand. What are your thoughts on this case of non-traditional casting?

9. The casting of Sharif was also criticized because he was not a singer. His performance in 1968 joined a growing collection of singing (not dubbed) appearances in musicals by non-singers. Beginning in the 1950s with such appearances as Marlon Brando and Jean Simmons in *Guys and Dolls* (1955), and continuing with increasing frequency in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Lee Marvin and Clint Eastwood in *Paint Your Wagon* (1969); Peter O’Toole and Sophia Loren in *Man of La Mancha* (1972)), this trend toward “star power over musicality” has been credited as a major factor in the demise of the great American movie musical. How do you think Sharif’s musical performance stacks up?

10. The casting of Barbra Streisand demonstrated producer Ray Stark’s rejection of the prevailing wisdom that “movie stars have to replace Broadway stars to make a successful film” (Gabriel Miller). How has this worked over the years, and how did it apply to *Funny Girl*?

11. Barbra Streisand acquired a reputation as “difficult” early in her career. After working with her on *Funny Girl*, William Wyler said, “She’s difficult in the best sense of the word. The same way I’m difficult” (Christopher Anderson). Your thoughts?

12. According to author Gabriel Miller, the Broadway marquee shown at the outset of the film, “Glorifying the American Girl,” could well serve as the movie’s subtitle. What challenges did Fanny Brice and Barbra Streisand share in their parallel quests to succeed as female performers in 20th century mainstream America?

13. Much of the scholarly literature on *Funny Girl* centers on the role of Barbra Streisand in presenting a new portrayal of the American Jewish woman—smart, self-assured, and compelling (Eric Goldman), with a “wiseguy spirit of Jewish Brooklyn” (David Kaufman), although through a cultural Jewish portrayal devoid of religion (Felicia Herman). Streisand’s performance in this film is seen by some as a “watershed. . . the first time in decades that a Jew appeared on-screen with unapologetically Jewish features, an unchanged Jewish name, and unmistakably ‘Jewish’ mannerisms” (Felicia Herman). What are your thoughts on Streisand’s “watershed” performance?

14. Streisand’s refusal to change herself (e.g., her name, her nose) to conform to Hollywood standards is noteworthy. Scholar David Kaufman notes that early popular media references to Streisand’s appearance represented a “subtle form of anti-Semitism. . . [a] socially constructed bias against Ashkenazic Jewish features [which] Streisand epitomizes.” Kaufman further contends that Streisand further broke new
ground by forwarding a “recognizable Jewish persona,” sometimes called “kooky.” Has this been an advantage or disadvantage for Streisand in the long run, do you think?

15. Feminist interpretations of the Brice character have taken two tacks: (a) A view that Brice prevails in the end, through sheer dint of talent and perseverance (i.e., she “wins”), and (b) Brice ultimately succumbs to the male standard—while she succeeds in the man’s world of show business, she fails as a woman in her goal to get the guy...and in fact reverts to female dependence in the final number, “My Man,” which includes the lyric, “Whatever my man is, I am his, forever more.” Which of these interpretations do you endorse?

16. The final musical number, “My Man,” was recorded “live,” a highly unusual practice for any musical. The norm is for musical numbers to be pre-recorded, and then lip-synched on set. The live performance by Streisand was aided by the presence of Omar Sharif; further, they reportedly reprised their farewell scene just before the performance, mirroring the breakup of their love affair in real life. Do you find this final sequence to have a particular power because of these factors?

17. Consider other production techniques in this film—although Wyler was known for unobtrusive camera work, this film features some stunning photography, notably in the “Don’t Rain on My Parade” sequence. First, it should be noted that all musical numbers, including this, were directed by choreographer Herbert Ross. Nevertheless, Wyler retained ultimate control, and said that he wanted to distinguish the movie from the Broadway play by giving “the illusion of movement” (Gabriel Miller). What is your response to Wyler’s use of production techniques in this film?

Discussion questions by Kim Neuendorf, Ph.D.: k.neuendorf@comcast.net
Archive of Women in Film discussion questions: http://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/womeninfilm

v. 11/23/13