

Medium Shot Gestures

Vincente Minnelli and *Some Came Running*

By [JOE MCELHANEY](#)

Joe McElhaney discusses long take staging in Vincente Minnelli's Some Came Running. He focuses on acting and gesture performed by the two stars of the film, Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin.

About twenty minutes into *Some Came Running* (1958) there is a sequence which encapsulates much of the appeal and interest of the film. This is the first sequence set in Smitty's Bar which culminates with the initial meeting of Dave Hirsh (Frank Sinatra) and Bama Dillert (Dean Martin). There are no major dramatic fireworks here in this classic of fifties melodrama. The sequence is deliberately underplayed, its visual style largely unobtrusive. In a frequently cited passage from his autobiography the film's director, Vincente Minnelli, writes that he took his visual cue for *Some Came Running* from "the inside of a juke box...garishly lit in primary colors" (Minnelli: 325). This description might lead one to expect something on the order of a CinemaScope and color version of Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*, a film released earlier the same year. But if one comes to *Some Came Running* with the expectation of a full-blown exercise in Hollywood baroque, disappointments will inevitably arise. The only sequence which fully lives up to Minnelli's juke box analogy is the penultimate one, the violent fairground sequence that culminates with the wounding of Dave and the murder of his new bride, Ginny (Shirley MacLaine). If one were to make a case for *Some Came Running* as a major work that sequence would be the obvious place to begin.

However, I would prefer to step back from all of the lights and commotion of the fairground sequence and emphasize something else. Minnelli's reputation has often been that of a flamboyant metteur en scene, largely for his melodramatic set pieces and for his handling of elaborate musical numbers. But I believe that an equally strong case should be made for him as a major director for his staging of intimate scenes. This aspect of Minnelli's talent has not been entirely overlooked in the past. It is crucial to Barry Boys's essay on *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (1963), published in *Movie No. 10*. James Naremore also discusses Minnelli's skill in this regard in *The Films of Vincente Minnelli*. But such an approach is also in danger of being forgotten or regarded as being, at best, a minor talent. Case in point: In a 1998 interview, Jacques Rivette makes the astounding declaration that Minnelli neglects the actor, citing *Some Came Running* as a film in which we find "three great actors" who are "working in a void, with no one watching them or listening to them from behind the camera" (Bonnaud). I must say that this runs contrary to any experience I have had in viewing the performances in Minnelli and I am certainly not alone in thinking that Martin gives the best performance of his career in *Some Came Running*. Whether Minnelli was simply fortunate in having so many gifted actors who were able to work around his own limitations or whether his method of directing with them was more complicated than has been assumed is a difficult issue to address within the scale of this paper (although my inclinations, as should be clear here, are with the latter). Rivette's attitude towards Minnelli (which is by no means an isolated one) is based on a fundamental misunderstanding.

Discretion and Restraint

If Minnelli's work has consistently been misunderstood it may be that certain aspects of it point towards a certain type of behavioral, actor-based American cinema as epitomized by the work of someone like



George Cukor. Some of Cukor's color and CinemaScope films of the 1950s, such as *A Star is Born* (1954) and *Les Girls* (1957) suggest a connection to the chic theatricality of some of Minnelli. But however visually detailed and beautiful these Cukor films are, he stages and frames his action in such a way that it is the actors who finally assume the primary focus of interest. Testimony from Cukor's actors confirms his attention to the most minute details of their performances. A number of actors who worked with Minnelli, on the other hand, have maintained that he devoted more attention to décor than he did to their performances. This attention to the visual which overwhelms the actor suggests a relationship to a cinema of the baroque—that of Welles, Max Ophuls, Josef von Sternberg—in which the actor, however central, is often absorbed into an ornate and strongly authorial visual style. But while an occasional sequence in Minnelli might allow for this kind of connection, his films never fully give themselves over to this impulse. Whatever visual vocabulary he may share with these three filmmakers, when measured against them Minnelli's own long takes and camera movements seem modest (in comparison with the first two filmmakers), his use of costuming and décor less extreme and fetishistic (in comparison with the two latter), his approach to matters of light, editing and sound not nearly as audacious (in comparison with all three of them). In the same passage from his autobiography in which Minnelli draws upon his well-known juke box analogy he also writes of his need to "temper" his enthusiasm when shooting *Some Came Running*, stressing the importance of "discretion" and "restraint" with material of this nature: "Part of the lore of the theater is to leave the audience wanting more, and this also holds true in films. Though you can do anything in films, you'd better not try." (Minnelli: 325-26) To contemporary sensibilities, this statement suggests a carefully manicured and well-behaved classicism, one which occasionally takes a stroll into the dark alleys of forbidden cinemas but only to quickly scramble back out to more respectable spaces. But this finally does not do justice to *Some Came Running* nor to Minnelli's particular talent, both of which are in need of careful attention.

Formally, the Smitty's sequence is a very simple one: nine shots derived from six camera set-ups in a sequence running for four minutes. Camera movement here is slight from this master of camera movement and the use of color here is likewise understated from this master of color, consisting primarily of grays, blues, and browns. The "garishly lit primary colors" of the neon signs outside of Smitty's are muted here by daylight. One problem that arises in writing about this sequence, though, is that traditional shot-by-shot close analysis, however much it might produce important results for such figures as Hitchcock, Lang and Eisenstein, produces limited results for Minnelli. Indeed, for a director notorious for his fanatical attention to décor at the expense of the actor, what is often revealing about Minnelli's films is how uninteresting the individual shots are in freeze frame. What finally gives Minnelli's images their significance is how the actors are brought into these frames, how the actors move, speak, and gesture as part of a process of unfolding motion and dynamic interaction. It is not so much the shot that interests Minnelli as the frame.

Distant Views

The opening shot of the Smitty's sequence is filmed outside of the bar in a single take lasting for just over a minute. As the camera does a slight crane down from the Smitty's sign, we see three teenage boys at the far right of the frame flipping coins. This is quickly followed by the emergence of Jane Barclay (Connie Gilchrist) from the front door of Smitty's. Jane acknowledges a man who emerges from the right and center of the frame and briefly speaks to him before she notices Dave emerging from the left front of the frame heading towards the entrance to Smitty's. She calls out to him, dismissing the other man with a friendly wave of her hand. The bulk of this shot is centered upon the exchange between Jane and Dave (fig.1). Their conversation here (as with so much of the dialogue throughout the rest of the sequence) revolves around childhood, adolescence and the family, the latter a subject which the film views with a great deal of ambivalence, firmly anchoring it within the tradition of the small-town family melodrama. But I would like to bypass these issues of content (which are certainly not irrelevant) and instead draw attention to the relationship between the camera and the actors. Even allowing for the limitations of early CinemaScope lenses for filming close-ups, Minnelli's camera seems unusually distanced from his two actors. It does not move in for a closer shot of them as they converse, which would have been an entirely logical way of handling this reunion, nor is there a cut into closer shot/reverse shots for the



Fig.1.

conversation, another viable option. Instead, the camera stays in a medium long shot for the entire conversation until they each go their separate ways, Dave into the bar and Jane off screen right and center when the camera slightly tracks back. Why does Minnelli handle the sequence in this way?

Keeping the camera at this distance allows several things to take place. First, the three boys at the far right of the frame are constantly visible in the shot while other extras will walk in front of and behind Dave and Jane as they speak. Since both Dave and Jane remain in one spot in the center of the frame for most of this shot, the extras walking in front and in back of them provide a sense of movement within the frame. This attention to keeping the frame as alive as possible through minute attention to even the most minor of players suggests another link with the more extreme images of Welles, Sternberg and Ophuls. But where someone like Ophuls will use the extra in a more disruptive manner to the point where the extras actively compete with the leading players, Minnelli uses his extras as a kind of subtle extension of or counterpoint to the foreground action. Minnelli's refusal to more conventionally move his camera closer to Dave and Jane also allows Sinatra and Gilchrist to use most of their bodies as they speak. During this exchange, Sinatra mainly keeps his hands in his pockets (gesturing only to scratch his nose at Jane's mention of Dave's brother) while Gilchrist constantly gestures in a broad fashion, touching Sinatra, putting her hands to her face in an embarrassed gesture, shrugging her shoulders and using both hands to hold on to her shopping bag. As this transpires, the boys flipping coins at the far right of the frame assume a type of gestural counterpoint. Near the end of the sequence, another young boy (somewhat older than the other three) stealthily moves from around the outside right corner of the bar, passing through the three boys and then ducks into the front door. His gestures are based around the nervous smoking and eventual extinguishing of his cigarette just before entering the bar, setting up a contrast between the still somewhat juvenile behavior of the coin flipping from the younger boys with that of the smoking from the older one (fig.2). Dave follows him into the bar before first turning around and glancing at his watch. Everything in this shot is based on a subtle interplay of gesture and movement, framed within an extended medium long shot and modest camera moves which act as a type of theatrical frame.

While not citing Minnelli's work, David Bordwell has drawn attention to the general decline in this type of complex ensemble staging in contemporary cinema (especially American). We are now living in a period of "intensified continuity," dominated by rapid cutting, free-ranging camera movements, and extensive use of close-ups. The nature of how performances are filmed, edited, and ultimately experienced has shifted: The face becomes the ultimate bearer of meaning, with gesture and bodily movements increasingly restricted through the alternation of "stand and deliver" scenes (in which the actors are confined to largely fixed positions) with "walk and talk" scenes (in which a moving camera rapidly follows actors as they "spit out exposition on the fly") (Bordwell: 25). While Bordwell does not note this, the shift in terms of how actors are filmed that he is describing has been part of an ongoing process over the last three decades, first sketched out by Manny Farber in his 1966 essay "The Decline of the Actor." *Some Came Running*, then, may be seen as a late example of this earlier cinema of relative gestural freedom. In comparison with contemporary approaches, Minnelli's handling of the actor in *Some Came Running* feels as though it has lumbered in from another era, pointing not only to the changes that have taken place over the last 45 years but also to how little influence this approach towards staging action has had on contemporary cinema.

Theatrical Spaces

Minnelli's methods very much relate to a certain way of perceiving space and movement that have strong ties to traditional forms of theatrical staging, especially in Minnelli's case that of the musical stage from which his entire pre-cinematic background derives: Action is not only carefully staged in Minnelli but often seems choreographed in the most literal sense of the word, with the blocking of action conceived in terms of viewing entire bodies moving within a prescribed space. It is this particular way of understanding space as a type of theatrical frame into which fluid action is placed that has gradually declined over the last few decades (unless it is being cited in a self-conscious and sometimes archaic manner, as in some of the theatrical films of Alain Resnais or



Fig.2.

Manoel de Oliveira). Even when contemporary directors come from the stage and adapt plays, they are more likely now to create films which frantically display contemporary fashions in cinematic technique, covering up as strongly as possible any relationship to theater, Nicholas Hytner's film version of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1995) a primary case in point. Even a device like the long take in Minnelli has a different function from the long takes of contemporary cinema which so often seem to follow in a line of descent from the approach of figures like Welles or Ophüls. Minnelli's use of the extended take has only a slight relationship to the modernist idea of duration, of the weight of time upon a particular shot or sequence. While Welles may be a more dynamic and brilliant filmmaker than Minnelli, even the simplest of his long takes (such as the famous kitchen scene in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942)) never gets away from the overwhelming concept of bravura. The length of a take like the one outside of Smitty's, on the other hand, has more to do with allowing for a careful and nuanced observation of behavior and movement to take place within an ensemble-like space.

Duel and Duet

In some ways the shot outside of Smitty's also anticipates the centerpiece of the sequence, which begins with the seventh shot as Bama steps up to the corner of the bar from his booth in the back and introduces himself to Dave, welcoming him to "Smitty's Cocktail Hour" (fig.3). Instead of standing Sinatra now sits, his (and Martin's) performance entirely determined by expressivity from the waist up. Minnelli's lack of interest in the "purity" of the long take as a discrete unit à la Welles is obvious here since the camera set-up for the shot is essentially a leftover from the third one when the young (underage) boy who entered the bar at the beginning of the sequence unsuccessfully attempts to talk Dave into buying a pint of whiskey for him (fig.4). (Minnelli repeats camera set-ups at the end of the sequence as well when Dave exits the bar in the same camera position from which the teenage boy exited earlier, a type of economy as old as D.W. Griffith.) The only element that marks this seventh shot off from the earlier one is that the camera slightly tracks forward and reframes as Bama sits down, the shot self-consciously composed for CinemaScope: The horizontality of the bar itself contrasting with the verticality of Dave and Bama, the black counter jukebox in front of and between them contrasted with the full-size jukebox in the background (a potted plant on top), a bottle of whiskey in the left foreground in front of Dave contrasted with the pasted bottles on the wall behind them, and the dark brown columns to the booths in the background – all of these show Minnelli's attention to detail. At the same time, this composition seems sufficiently loose to allow Sinatra and Martin to interact with one another and for the spectator to observe them with a minimum of distraction. Rather than following a contemporary stand-and-deliver approach, Minnelli's camera quietly settles down for the duration of this interchange. Martin and Sinatra are framed so that they just miss directly facing the camera but the sense of a proscenium arch for containing the two performers is strong. The interchange does not take up much screen time (one minute and 45 seconds) but the pacing is relaxed, appropriate for a film set in a small town in which, as Bama says here, nothing moves quickly except for gossip.

As in the first shot of the sequence, Sinatra's playing is marked by a paucity of gesture in contrast to Martin. But where a gifted character actress like Gilchrist works on a broad, emphatic scale, Martin's performance is one of relaxed casualness. While Sinatra seems to speak the lines directly as written, Martin repeatedly punctuates his line readings with hesitations and illustrates them with half-finished gestures (such as reaching for the ashtray in front of him as though to bring it forward but then only slightly adjusts it), giving an impression of spontaneity and improvisation. Sinatra's greatness as a popular singer far eclipses Martin's but Martin is a much more inventive screen performer, a fact which Sinatra implicitly acknowledges here by essentially giving the scene to Martin and not even bothering to compete. Martin looks at Sinatra almost non-stop while Sinatra mainly attempts to avoid direct eye contact. Near the end of the scene, Martin even seems to parody Sinatra's gesture of forcefully putting his glass down on the bar by immediately copying the gesture. If this scene may be thought of as a both a duet and a duel between two brilliant performers, it is Martin who ultimately wins, the final shot of the sequence belonging to him after Sinatra exits the frame. (The camera also comes closer to Martin in this scene than it does to anyone else when, in the sixth shot, he turns and responds to something that Dave says to Smitty in what might loosely be defined as a medium shot but



Fig.3.



Fig.4.

one which also doubles as a type of close-up due to Minnelli's framing of Martin's face within the horizontal and vertical contours of the booth.) Martin's physical stature and style of dress also allow him to more fully dominate the space, his gray jacket, tie and pale pink shirt contrasted with the light brown of Dave's army uniform which seems to shrink Sinatra and which Sinatra accentuates by slightly pulling his body inward, presumably as a defensive measure against Martin. Both men are wearing hats, Dave's that of an Army uniform cap, Bama's a gray cowboy hat which far eclipses Dave's hat in stature. This icon of the Western genre, slightly urbanized for the film, allows for *Some Came Running* to be seen as a kind of Midwestern Western, complete with town saloon, the hooker with a heart of gold who is finally shot (Ginny), the prim schoolteacher (Martha Hyer's Gwen French) and our two male protagonists meeting at a bar, much of this playing like a bitter version of *My Darling Clementine* (1946). Bama's hat will continue to play a central role throughout the film since he refuses to take it off, even indoors, until the moving final shot when he performs his last gesture by removing it in memory of Ginny at her burial.

Even before Bama is directly introduced, our first glimpse of him comes in the sequence's second shot, a panning movement across the interior space of the saloon as Dave enters. This movement not only plays a role as a conventional establishing shot it also initially presents Bama as a hat, a costume rather than a body, tucked away in the rear of the frame (fig.5). This idea of the body being literally engulfed by décor is one which recurs in Minnelli and Bama could almost be missed here on a first viewing. But Minnelli's composition also guides the viewer's eye to this back area of the shot, as the blue jeans on the boy trying to buy liquor off of Smitty at the right of the frame lead the spectator's eye to a matching blue line at the top of a poster on the back wall which, along with the white light hanging from the ceiling just above, leads the eye to the gray of Bama's hat. If actors sometimes complained that they felt as though they were little more than items of décor for Minnelli, what a shot like this one demonstrates is that these actors were not entirely wrong: Actor *are* often décor for Minnelli but only insofar as this décor will begin to move and assume a relationship to the body.



Fig.5.

Frank and Dean, Dave and Bama

So far I repeatedly alternated between describing these two men by their character names and describing them in terms of their real life professional names. The sense that we are not simply watching the characters of Dave and Bama interact here but also Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra is crucial to the experience of the scene. Manny Farber once argued that the most interesting screen performances are determined not so much by the moments when an actor fully inhabits a character as when we find "suggestive material that circles the edge of a role: quirks of physiognomy, private thoughts of the actor about himself, misalliances where the body isn't delineating the role, but is running on a tangent to it" (Farber, *Hip Acting*: 155). Martin and Sinatra seem to be both inside and outside of their roles here and part of the pleasure in observing this interplay is in detecting what seems to be an obvious delight that these two mythological Rat Pack beings have in relation to one another. When Martin asks Sinatra, "You play any cards, Mr. Hirsh?" it is difficult to tell if the slight smile that passes across Sinatra's face as he says, "Some, why?" is supposed to be Dave's smile or Sinatra's barely suppressed amusement at Martin's inventiveness. Minnelli's direction to the two men was that they should play the scene as though they were two ex-prostitutes, now wealthy and married to film producers, who meet one another at a party in Beverly Hills and instinctively know about the other's background. (Minnelli: 1) This gives

the actors a fictional subtext to work with but it also allows for acting to become a form of private amusement between two musical entertainers finding different ways to bend roles to fit their own public personalities, of turning work into play.

In Conclusion

The pleasures to be had by Minnelli's slightly distanced framing, keeping the two men in a medium two-shot and never emphasizing a facial expression or gesture through a cut or camera movement, are not those of observing the action from a safe, ironic distance so fashionable in contemporary American cinema. One could loosely relate Minnelli's approach to Bazinian notions of realism via the long take and the supposed freedom of the spectator to observe multiple points of action within a single frame (although too many other elements of the film would complicate or contradict this). It may be best to see Minnelli as a filmmaker who presupposes a spectator capable of looking at images that are rich, detailed and often theatrical in terms of composition and staging of action. These detailed images are simultaneously there to be noticed but just as immediately to be absorbed back into action and movement, giving both his actors and the spectator frames within which they can create. If it has become increasingly difficult for American narrative filmmakers to make this kind of cinema and for spectators to respond to and understand it, it may be that it is not Minnelli but our own visual culture which is "working in a void" with no one carefully listening or watching, either behind the camera or in front of the image itself.

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