

- New York
- Washington DC



## *Castle Walk - A Delight*

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by Alix Cohen

It's been quite some time since I had the pleasure of watching the "birth" of a really good musical. This is one. That book, music and lyrics all originate with Milton Granger is further happy surprise, not because one artist is multifaceted but because the three aspects are almost equally successful. The premise is intriguing, its story appealingly played out in both past and present (1939), characters are emotionally engaging. Our heroine, professional ballroom dancer, Irene Castle, is as texturally written as the protagonist of a straight play, something rare in musicals. One grows attached to her.

Music, much of it necessarily dancey, emulates the period, yet never sounds either anachronistic or merely a means to an end. To have utilized out of copyright tunes would've

been easy. To have written melodies only with choreography in mind would've been pragmatic. (Arrangements also have flair.) Lyrics speak to moment and character. Research is clear in both lyrics and the excellent libretto; specifics add color and credibility. There are songs as varied as the swaying "She Dances Like an Angel," the darkly comic "Pills," a cry for help in light of Irene's interference as RKO makes a film about her life with Vernon (I wonder whether prescribed tranquilizers were prevalent then) and Irene's frustrated, vocally mercurial anthem, "Everything Matters." "The Oscar," a funny, aspirational number performed by Ginger Rogers, could be more biting. Granger is decidedly not a one-trick pony.



**Lynne Wintersteller, Stephanie Rothenberg and Bret Shuford**

For those of you who haven't seen the film around which this story unspools, Vernon Castle was a British comic actor, singer, dancer. American Irene Foote sang and danced in amateur theatricals. They met and married in the early 1900s, became small featured players and, when a show closed abruptly in Paris, were hired by Café de Paris for a ballroom dance revue. Performing ragtime numbers such as The Turkey Trot and Grizzly Bear the couple captured public imagination. They returned to the U.S. a roaring success, appearing in vaudeville, films, and on Broadway. Vernon and Irene were trend setters in social dance – Fox Trot, Castle Walk, Hesitation Waltz, Tango, popularized African American music via dance, and were imitated in all things fashionable.

The Castles wrote a bestselling instructional book, opened a dancing school, a nightclub and a restaurant. In 1939, 21 years after Vernon, having survived WWI, died in an aircraft training

exercise in Texas, *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* was released by RKO Pictures. It starred Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Irene Castle acted as advisor on the film. The show opens as she arrives at the studio from her home in Chicago having red penciled a script on the train ride.

Middle aged Irene (Lynne Wintersteller) is naively determined to keep the movie true to her experience with Vernon. She knows it will define their legacy. Navigating through Hollywood's glitzed-up visuals and hyper-dramatized ideals, Irene has to contend with director, H. C. Potter (James Clow), who, in turn, must pacify others. (Potter's diplomatic skills are worthy of Yalta.) Irene's upper middle class family home in New Rochelle morphs into "something out of Tobacco Road" in hopes of eliciting rags-to-riches empathy. The modest Café de Paris becomes "a club the size of the Titanic," and Irene's bobbed hair "all the rage at court," changes into Ginger Roger's (Lauren Sprague) elaborate curls.

Not only was our heroine against the casting, but Ginger, considering herself an *actress*, didn't want to do another musical comedy. (This was the last in her fulfillment of an RKO contract.) Potter, of course, promises his star's enthusiasm and seriousness, to which Irene responds "If you cast a French poodle as Rin TinTin, I'm sure he'd take it seriously too." More importantly, the role of Irene's old family friend and lifetime advice-giver, Walter Ash (Wayne W. Pretlow), was given to Walter Brennan instead of a black actor reflecting accuracy. "Someday Negroes and whites will be friends on the screen, but not today," the director tells her.



**Vernon and Irene Castle, the Film Poster**

Fluently moving between Potter's office, scenes on set, and Irene's brought-to-life memories of the way it *really* was, we're treated to the company of young Irene (Stephanie Rothenberg) and Vernon (Bret Shuford). In fact, one comes away with a great deal of the Castles' story unaware how much information is being imparted. As written and played it's charming. The piece is filled with dance, yet the art never supplants or overrides the story.

Director and Choreographer Richard Stafford manages actors with nuance and dancers with a light touch. Period and named dances are well represented, the stage effectively composed. Past and present merge seamlessly. Irene's reactions are credible – these are memories, not ghosts – adding a layer rather than distracting. Stafford has the sense not to have her lifted by chorus boys. Her meddling is manifest with spirit, pathos, and humor. The young couple is never saccharine.

Lynne Wintersteller makes Irene's every move and thought seem completely natural. A graceful stage presence, the thespian demonstrates steps and takes a brief turn herself, wisely not trying to look like a girl in her twenties. She has a beautiful voice, rich in feeling, skilled with phrasing. The attractive Wintersteller brings dignity and warmth to this stage. She resonates.

James Clow (H. C. Potter) imbues his character with palpable, sometimes teeth-clenched patience. In the actor's capable hands, Potter remains on the better side of the cusp of being one dimensional. Comic timing is showcased in his deadpan delivery of "Pills." And the man can sing.

Stephanie Rothenberg's Young Irene is adorable- sweet and fresh, as if encountering things for the first time. She dances with the precise, yet unhurried style of the times, offers lovely vocals, and brings poised vulnerability to sentimental moments.

Bret Shuford is dashing as the ardent optimist, Vernon, despite a shaky British accent. The actor is breezy, nimble and increasingly believable. Wayne W. Pretlow infuses Walter with heart, wisdom and humor. He makes his character endearing.

Costume Designer Loren Shaw has created wonderful period clothes from the teens to 1939. Each of her payers is distinctive, properly attired and flattered. When the company dances, mode variation and color are harmonious. I found the use of modern street clothes at the start completely dissonant, however.

Take note of Castle Walk. With any luck, it will be mounted again for a longer run. When it does, don't miss this thoroughly enjoyable and worthy piece.

*Castle Walk*

*Book, Music & Lyrics by Milton Granger*

*From a concept by Richard Stafford*

*Additional Material by Jere Lee Hodgkin*

*Directed and Choreographed by Richard Stafford*

*The New York Musical Theatre Festival at PTC Performance Space 550 West 42nd Street*

*The Band: Joseph Mohan-Piano, Barbara Merjan-Drums, Saadi Zain-Bass*