

## Love Me Tonight

“Love Me Tonight” (1932) is one of those happy accidents in motion pictures when great stars, a great director, and a legendary musical team come together to form a masterpiece.

The star, Maurice Chevalier, plays a carefree Parisian tailor (named Maurice) who is owed a great sum of money for his work by a viscount, played by Charles Ruggles. Stalling for time, the titled but impoverished viscount moves the tailor into his family chateau and then passes him off as a baron. The captivating Maurice soon charms the entire aristocratic household, except for the haughty Princess Jeanette (Jeanette MacDonald), who remains suspicious of him..but not for long (see the leads in the photo below).

After attaining world fame as a music hall performer in the 1920’s, Chevalier became even more famous as the prototypical movie Frenchman in the early sound era. He came to Hollywood in 1929 and became a star at Paramount Studios with films like “The Love Parade” and “The Merry Widow,” always playing the roguish boulevardier. With his over-the-top

French accent (though he could always be understood), he became one of

Hollywood’s most imitated stars. His early career in America didn’t last long however: in 1935 he left Hollywood when producer Irving Thalberg (of MGM) insisted that he take second billing to an opera singer.

After many years in France, he returned to American movies in the late 1950’s and

appeared in hits like “Gigi” and “Fannie,” among others.



Chevalier’s co-star, Jeanette MacDonald, who plays a lovesick princess, was a Broadway chorus girl who grew into operetta and musical roles. She made her film debut in 1929 in “The Love Parade”—with Chevalier. Her greatest fame came in the mid to late 1930’s with a series of sugary MGM musicals with Nelson Eddy. The two became known as “America’s Sweethearts.” Extremely successful during their heyday, the MacDonald-Eddy musicals seen today can be hard to watch, being so out of phase with current tastes. MacDonald’s warbly singing style fell out of favor by World War II, and she was out of films by the end of the 1940’s.

“Love Me Tonight” is also a splendid showcase for the music and lyrics of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, a prominent musical comedy team from New York that was then little known in Hollywood. They had begun their fabulous collaboration at Columbia University in 1919, and they moved to Hollywood with sound in 1930, when all the studios were aching for

musical talent. Their score is as lively and tuneful as anything they ever wrote, with numbers like “Isn’t It Romantic?,” “Lover,” and “Mimi.” The pair was together until 1942, and Lorenz Hart died the following year.

With Rouben Mamoulian directing “Love Me Tonight,” Rodgers and Hart had their ideal collaborator, a man with a European sensibility whose work emphasized the lyric and rhythmic aspects of filmmaking. Mamoulian was born in Georgia (Russian) of Armenian background. He came to America in the 1920’s, first to direct an opera company and later to work on stage productions. Like Chevalier and MacDonald, he came to Paramount in 1929 to make his first film.

Interviewed in 1970 about “Love Me Tonight,” Mamoulian said that “although the film is a very light, gay musical, you’d see in it most clearly what motivates me, what I like. The whole of ‘Love Me Tonight’ is a poem, from beginning to end. Everything is rhythm, counterpoint, stylization...” This certainly is true of this, one of his best films, where his camera is alive with sensuous movement. And this at a time when sound was still new and the new cameras were large, bulky boxes wrapped in soundproofing.

There are many examples of such movement in “Love Me Tonight.” I will highlight two. There is the opening sequence which captures the rhythm of Paris coming alive in the morning: the ever-traveling camera catches folks awakening, shops opening, people bustling—several minutes without dialogue—all seamlessly leading up to the singing of “The Song of Páree.” Another wonderfully lyrical moment is during the song “Isn’t It Romantic?”: The music literally whirls around Paris and environs, jumping from Maurice’s tailor shop to a cab driver, on to a train, from there to a troop of soldiers, on to a gypsy camp, and finally ending up at the country chateau where the Princess takes up the chorus.

These are, indeed, the moves of a movie master.  
(The film runs 104 minutes and contains nothing objectionable.)