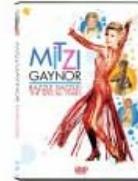


REVIEW

DVD Review: *Mitzi Gaynor: Razzle Dazzle! The Special Years*

Written by [Brandy](#)
Published November 12, 2008



Every once in a while there is a performer for whom all those showbiz superlatives are accurate. Even rarer are performers for whom said superlatives simply do not suffice. *Mitzi Gaynor: Razzle Dazzle! The Special Years* showcases just such a performer. A star of Hollywood's golden age, a professional dancer since her teen years, and one of the most versatile talents film has known, Miss Gaynor simply is a knockout in City Lights/Green Isle's new DVD release.

You want dancing? Miss Gaynor, with her chorus of dancers and co-stars, showcases every type of dance from soft shoe to modern to ballroom. You want gorgeous costumes? Bob Mackie, the undisputed king of the bugle bead, is at peak form here. You want sketch comedy and acting that will tug at your heartstrings? That's here too, a-plenty. And the singing. You want singing too? Miss Gaynor is one of the most gifted singers I have yet heard, and her torch songs will have you picking your jawbone off the floor. Impeccably chosen array of music? Miss Gaynor sings from a catalog ranging from Cole Porter to Ira Gershwin to Stevie Wonder. This DVD, touchingly dedicated to Miss Gaynor's late husband Jack Bean, has it all.

Specifically, this is a retrospective documentary honoring Miss Gaynor's overall career but focusing mostly on eight television specials aired from 1968 to 1978. We hear about Mitzi's beginning as a "gypsy" or chorus dancer. We see her as Nellie Forbush in the film version of *South Pacific*, which she calls "the end-all, be-all" of her career. Various of her friends and colleagues including Bob Mackie, Carl Reiner, former core dancers Alton Ruff and Randy Doney, along with critic Rex Reed and the director/choreographer of the TV specials, Tony Charmoli, bookend the clips providing background, anecdotes and general narration. There are lively stories and quotable quotes from all of them. Two recent actresses who have played Nellie Forbush, Kristen Chenoweth and Kelli O'Hara, pipe up also.

And the clips. The clips are such fun to watch. Aside from clips of *South Pacific* and Miss Gaynor's later Vegas nightclub act, we see sizable clips from eight of her musical variety TV specials. These begin with grand, MGM musical-style production numbers in 1968 with "Mitzi" and wrap up in 1978 with disco-inspired dance in "What's Hot... What's Not." We even see the Charleston and hear old-fashioned blues belting in 1976's "Mitzi... Roarin' in the 20s." The staging is consistently stunning, incorporating bold, primary colors in the set design, echoed in vibrant costumes. The choreography is very

visual and perfectly suited to film, since the choreographer doubled as director. Tony Charmoli certainly gives Busby Berkeley a run for his money with those overhead kaleidoscopic dance numbers and ups the ante with then-unheard of special effects. Those effects hold up even today, though they were created decades before digital post-production existed.

The main event - the clip-filled retrospective - is entertaining and then some with its knockout song and dance numbers, sketch comedy, and wide array of special guests from TV's yesteryear. We see Mitzi's co-stars Bob Hope, Michael Landon, Ken Berry, Jane Withers, Suzanne Pleshette, and others dance and sing with her. Benny Goodman himself plays clarinet accompaniment. We glimpse many more famous, if unexpected, faces: William Shatner, Bob Crane, Tom Bosley, Andy Griffith, and ninety-six more male TV and film stars tap-dance by in a gargantuan dance routine from 1975's "Mitzi... and 100 Guys."

But as if the main feature were not enough to pack into one DVD, the bonus features are equally weighty. There's everything from an anecdote about the Beatles to outtakes from Miss Gaynor's interviews to more musical variety performances. There is even a featurette about Mackie's costumes. First in a list of eight categories, one can watch Miss Gaynor and designer Bob Mackie peruse his sketches, from "they-don't-get-any-more-glamorous-than-that" bugle-beaded evening gowns, to silly "character" costumes recalling his work on the Carol Burnett show. The two reminisce about the shows and costumes. Mr. Mackie's professed favorite design among these was also mine: a midnight blue shimmering gown worn in a showstopping torch number, "Most Beautiful Guy," sung in its entirety in the bonus features section. The dark sky with "twinkling stars" set design and gorgeous gown combine to an almost dreamlike effect as Miss Gaynor's rendition of that classic song hits every note and emotion to powerful perfection.

The eighth category in "Bonus Features" offers eight musical clips, which range widely in style. Along with "Most Beautiful Guy" are seven other song and dance showstoppers including "Let Go," "Limehouse Blues," and "Yankee Doodle Dandy." Some numbers are staged with a co-star, some with a bevy of male chorus beauties, but for me it was the star herself perched on a grand piano pouring her heart out in "Most Beautiful Guy" that delivered the most punch. The way she sings, especially the "I love him *so*" at the end, is technically perfect with astounding emotion. I could not help wondering what Miss Gaynor might have done if allowed to sink her teeth into a role such as Ruth Etting in *Love Me or Leave Me*.

That, plus the various perfect bits of mimicry throughout the DVD (Miss Gaynor sends up Roz Russell, Doris Day, Marlene Dietrich, Rita Hayworth, and Gloria Swanson) and the wistfully sad portrayal of "The Kid" make it clear the cute perky persona in those Hollywood musicals was only one aspect of Miss Gaynor's range. This lady can act. "The Kid" - two clips in entirety are in the bonus features - would hold up alongside anything from *Saturday Night Live* but also tug at the heartstrings. Miss Gaynor says at one point on the DVD that the character sprang from her own lonely childhood. What could she have done with a truly meaty "bad girl" or other dramatic role? Yes, *South Pacific* showed a hint, but I think there were depths that were never allowed to surface.

An actor needs the words and the camera but there's still time. Someone, please, put this lady in front of the camera again.

This dynamite performer who never knew the meaning of "phoning it in" for one second certainly has not slowed down. She has her own website and even a MySpace page. Memoirs are in the works along with a tour of a new one-woman show in 2009. Attend if you can, but regardless, get to a copy of *Mitzi Gaynor: Razzle Dazzle! The Special Years*. This entertainer, whom Bob Mackie refers to as a "vibrant, bubbly, fantastic woman," will not let you down. You will find yourself watching the proceedings transfixed. Now this is entertainment. We all need to smile and laugh more in these hard times. This DVD will have you dancing in your chair, or even around the room, the fun is that contagious. That's how it was in my house and I can't believe we're all that different from most people.

As Carl Reiner put it, watching Miss Gaynor in these song and dance numbers is "one of the most fun things that can happen to you." I personally have only one complaint: I want more! I wish someone would release all the TV specials in their original form. I wouldn't mind seeing the 1967 "Mitzi Gaynor Christmas Show" either (Santa, are you listening?). Until that day, though, this is one truly special DVD showcasing a truly special entertainer. To borrow a line from a old review, "these specials really are." And this DVD proves it.