

Guess What I Learned Today?

Today I learned about **Fred Astaire**.

I have discovered that Fred Astaire could dance across a room and make it look as if gravity had temporarily agreed to leave him alone.

This was apparently not an accident.

It was work.

A lot of work.

Fred Astaire was born Frederick Austerlitz in Omaha, Nebraska, in eighteen ninety-nine.

Yes.

Fred Astaire was from Omaha.

At this point, I have stopped being surprised.

If someone eventually informs me that Batman spent his early childhood somewhere near Dodge Street, I will simply add him to the list.

Astaire's father worked for a brewing company in Omaha, and his mother recognized early that Fred and his older sister, Adele, had talent for performing.

The family eventually moved to New York so the children could receive professional training.

Fred was still a little boy.

He and Adele learned dancing, singing, and acting and began performing together professionally.

Before Fred Astaire became Fred Astaire, he was half of a brother-and-sister act.

The two performed in vaudeville and later became successful on Broadway and in London.

They were known as Fred and Adele Astaire.

Which brings up another thing I learned.

Astaire was not actually the family's original last name.

The family name was Austerlitz, but Fred and Adele began using Astaire professionally.

This was probably a wise entertainment decision.

"Fred Astaire" sounds like someone who glides down a staircase wearing a tuxedo.

"Fred Austerlitz" sounds like someone who might be calling to discuss your insurance policy.

Adele eventually retired from performing after she married.

Fred continued on his own.

And then came Hollywood.

Astaire became a movie star during the nineteen thirties and eventually appeared in dozens of films.

He danced with several famous partners, but none became more closely associated with him than Ginger Rogers.

Together, Astaire and Rogers made a series of enormously popular musical films, including Top Hat, Swing Time, and Shall We Dance.

Watching them dance is strange because nothing seems difficult.

They glide.

They turn.

They move perfectly together.

Astaire looks relaxed.

Rogers looks relaxed.

Everybody appears to be having a lovely evening.

Meanwhile, I can trip over a perfectly flat floor.

This does not seem like the same species of activity.

The illusion is that dancing like that simply happened.

It didn't.

Astaire was famous for rehearsing extensively.

He cared about precision and believed dance sequences should be filmed in a way that allowed audiences to actually see the dancers' full bodies and movements instead of hiding everything behind constant camera cuts.

That makes sense.

If you have practiced something until your feet have developed their own intelligence, you probably want people to see them.

Astaire was also known for making incredibly complicated choreography look natural.

That may be his greatest trick.

Not the spins.

Not the taps.

Not dancing with props or moving across elaborate sets.

Making hard things look easy.

I started thinking about that because we see the finished version of almost everything.

We watch the movie.

We hear the song.

We read the book.
We see the athlete compete.
We look at the painting.
We don't usually see all the terrible versions that came first.
We don't see the missed steps.
The forgotten lines.
The bad drafts.
The wrong notes.
The hours when somebody was practicing something that nobody else was watching.
By the time it reaches us, the mistakes have disappeared.
That can create a strange impression.
Talented people just do things.
Writers sit down and write good sentences.
Musicians pick up instruments and play.
Dancers hear music and suddenly become Fred Astaire.
This would be extremely convenient.
It also appears to be false.
Astaire had natural talent, obviously.
But talent was only the beginning.
He trained from childhood.
He rehearsed.
He repeated movements.
He adjusted details.
He worked until the audience no longer saw the work.
There is something almost backwards about that.
The more effort he put into a dance, the less effort we were supposed to notice.
That is probably true of many things done extremely well.
You notice mistakes because they interrupt what you are seeing.
Excellence can become almost invisible.
The sentence sounds obvious.
The dancer looks relaxed.

The athlete makes the shot.

The comedian delivers the joke as though it occurred to him three seconds ago.

Maybe years of work are hiding inside that moment.

Astaire's career lasted for decades.

He performed on stage, in movies, and on television and worked with some of the most famous entertainers of his time.

His style also changed the way dance was presented in movies.

But another part of his story caught my attention.

There is a famous story about an early screen test Astaire supposedly received in Hollywood.

According to the legend, the evaluation basically said he couldn't act, was slightly bald, and could dance a little.

The exact wording and origin of the story have been debated, so it may not have happened exactly the way people repeat it.

But Astaire himself joked about the criticism later.

I almost hope somebody actually wrote it.

Because imagine being the person who looked at Fred Astaire and concluded:

Can dance a little.

That is the professional equivalent of looking at the Grand Canyon and writing, "Decent-sized hole."

It is also a good reminder that somebody else's first impression is not necessarily a prophecy.

People can be wrong about you.

Teachers can be wrong.

Coaches can be wrong.

Critics can be wrong.

Experts can be wrong.

You can even be wrong about yourself.

The only way to find out what you can eventually become is to keep doing the thing long enough to see.

Maybe that connects to the practice too.

If you expect yourself to be wonderful immediately, you will probably quit a lot of things.

Beginnings are awkward.

Your first attempt at something rarely looks like the version that made you want to try it.
The first time you play piano does not sound like a concert.
Your first basketball game does not look like the NBA.
Your first dance does not look like Fred Astaire.
Your first piece of writing probably doesn't look like the book sitting on the shelf.
That's okay.
Maybe it isn't supposed to.
The finished thing is built out of all those unfinished versions.
That is what I learned from Fred Astaire.
Effort and ease are not opposites.
Sometimes ease is what effort eventually looks like.
You practice something so many times that the work disappears inside the result.
Fred Astaire spent decades making audiences believe dancing could be effortless.
But behind every effortless step were years of learning how to take it.
I find that comforting.
It means being bad at something today does not necessarily tell me what I will be capable of tomorrow.
It might just mean I am still practicing.
Although I should probably be realistic about dancing.
There are limits to optimism.
If anyone needs me, I'll be over here writing.