

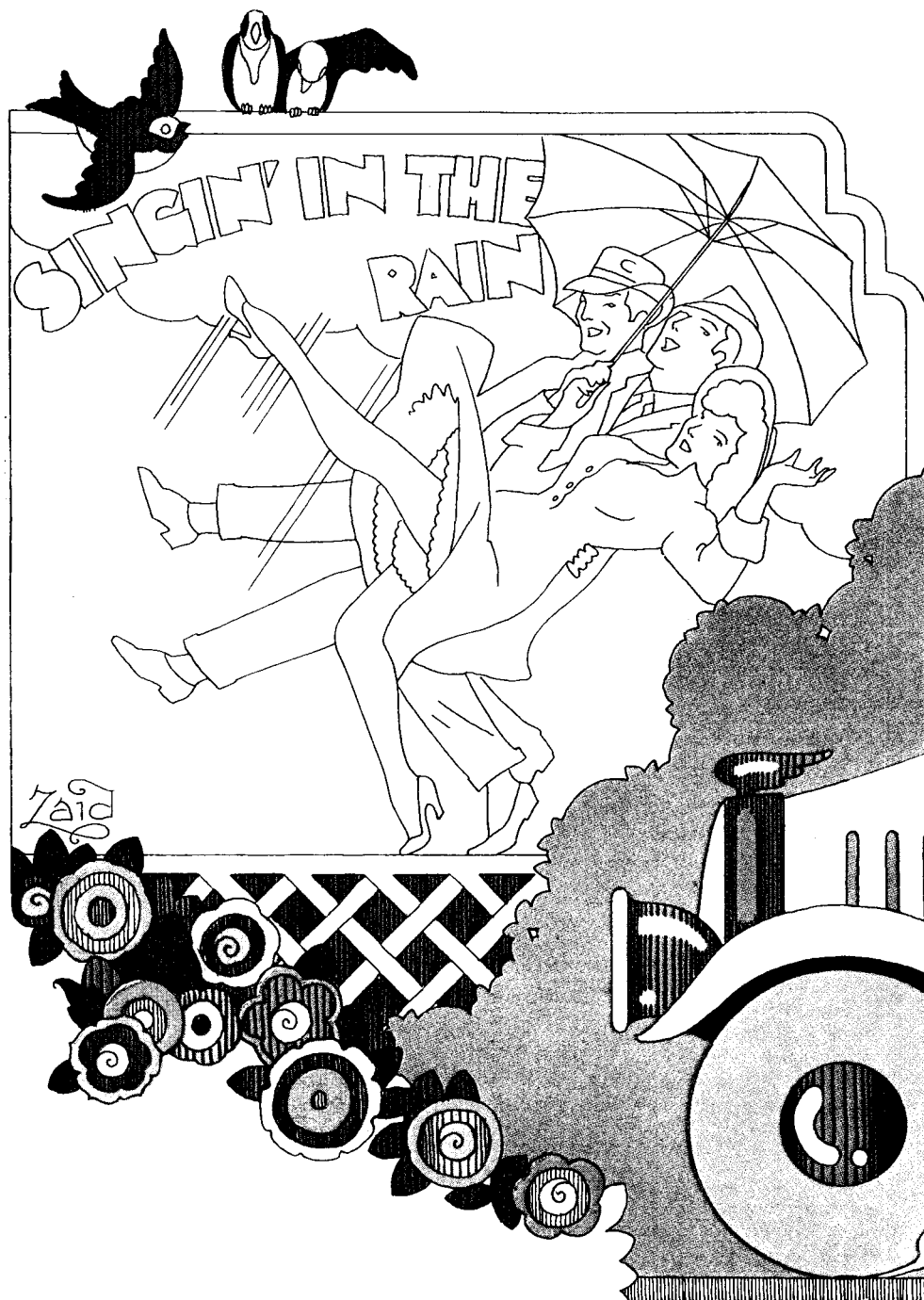
# HOW THE KIDS MADE MOVIE MUSICAL HISTORY

Betty Comden and Adolph Green reminisce about the creation of "Singin' in the Rain."

Since it was first presented to the public in 1951 *Singin' in the Rain* has acquired the reputation of being a film classic, famed for its precision and professionalism. Pauline Kael has written of it: "This exuberant and malicious satire of Hollywood in the late Twenties is perhaps the most enjoyable of all movie musicals—just about the best Hollywood musical of all time." The film has made the all-time top-ten lists in a startling number of publications throughout the world, and it is studied in schools and revived on television and in art-film theaters.

In the following article script writers Betty Comden and Adolph Green recall the hilarious, slapdash way in which the movie was put together. Their recollections will serve as a preface to the scenario that Viking Press is publishing this summer as a part of their MGM Library of Filmscripts series.

All we knew about our assignment when we arrived in Hollywood in late May 1950 was that we were to write an original story and screenplay, as well as the lyrics, for a new musical picture. We had rushed out there in answer to an urgent "there's-not-a-moment-to-lose" crisis command from MGM, only to find every studio shut down and the whole place deserted. It looked very much the way Hollywood does right now on an average business day. Actually, all that had happened then was that everyone had taken off for a six-day Decoration Day weekend, leaving us to grind our teeth to the eyeballs in frustration and run up epic telephone



bills calling our loved ones back East.

At the time, we were pioneers in bicoastal living, continuing to write for the theater in New York, our home, and going out West periodically to do a movie. By then we had written several pictures, the latest of which was the adaptation of our own first Broadway show, *On the Town*. It had also been the first directorial assignment for Gene Kelly and for Stanley Donen.

We always worked in what was known as the "Freed Unit." This was presided over by producer Arthur Freed from his three-room office suite in the imposing Thalberg, or Administration, Building, affectionately called the "Iron Lung." Our office was a simple "monastic" cell down the hall that, because of our transiency, we never

tried to make even remotely livable. The Freed Unit was something quite special in Hollywood, with conditions that permitted us to function somewhat the way we would in doing a show in New York. The writer was not treated as part of an assembly line in the old Hollywood tradition that placed him at the bottom of the social structure. Writers were considered "the authors" unless disastrously proved otherwise and were usually included in discussions of all aspects of production. Arthur also had a gift for importing or taking chances on people of the theater, allowing them to develop into movie-makers with a free-swinging spirit. Vincente Minnelli, Gene Kelly, Stanley Donen, Alan Jay Lerner, Oliver Smith, Michael Kidd, and the two of us. Down

From the "Introduction" by Betty Comden and Adolph Green that appears in *Singin' in the Rain* (MGM Library of Filmscripts Series). Copyright © 1972 by The Viking Press, Inc. All rights reserved.



through the years and up until today, Arthur Freed has always referred to us as "the kids," sometimes warmly, as in "Hiya, kids" or "I'd like you to meet 'the kids,'" or sometimes impatiently (at a story conference) as in "For Christ-sake's, kids, no one will believe that!" Assisting in all departments as musical supervisor, script shepherd, arranger, associate producer, general coordinator of production—sometimes one or all of these—was Roger Edens, invaluable and devoted to Freed, whose lapels we often clutched and drenched with tears in moments of despair. In the late Forties and early Fifties the musicals emerging from this group had a kind of style and taste, a filmish verve and inventiveness that gave them the individual stamp of the Freed Unit, and a number

of them survive not as "camp" or sociological curiosa but as films to be enjoyed, admired, and even wondered at—expressions of a form that has all but vanished.

When everyone returned from his interminable holiday that June of 1950, we were summoned, unslept and nervous, to a meeting in Arthur's office where we finally were to discover why we had been rushed out there. Sun-drenched and relaxed after his rest, surrounded by orchids from his vast greenhouses, Arthur greeted us warmly, inquired after families and friends, quoted the grosses of *South Pacific* from *Variety*, read us letters from Gian-Carlo Menotti and Irving Berlin, and, after some further discussion of the state of the theater in New York,

and phone calls to his brother Hugo at the orchid ranch and to Oscar Levant on Stage 27, he said, "C'mon, kids, let's have some lunch." Arthur was trying not to tell us something. Somewhere around four that afternoon, after some prodding from us, he let it be known with a proud but shy chuckle that we had been assigned to write an original story and screenplay using songs from the extensive catalogue of lyricist Arthur Freed (the same) and composer Nacio Herb Brown (how many people can there be named "Nacio Herb Brown"?). Whatever came out of our creative hoppers, or out of two hopping mad creators, was to be called *Singin' in the Rain*. We gulped a gulp that could be heard round the world, and then there followed a long silence during which the orchids around us seemed to grow into a man-eating variety. Finally, we said, "But, Arthur, what about our new contract? It says, with all names spelled out, that Comden and Green are to write the lyrics unless the score is by 1) Irving Berlin, 2) Cole Porter, 3) Rodgers and Hammerstein." Arthur said, "Kids, I never heard of any such clause. Now, about *Singin' in the Rain*..." Bolstered by our knowledge of that magical clause, we sneered imperiously, skulked out of the office, and went on strike. After two war-torn weeks during which we repeatedly accused Arthur of reneging on an official document, some flutter of the gut told us to read our contract. With the help of our new agent, Irving Lazar, using his bifocals as a Geiger counter to unearth the magical phrase, we learned there was no such thing. It was the Emperor's new clause, a total fabrication of our former agent. "Kids," said Irving, "anyone can write lyrics for your picture—Berlin, Porter, R. and H., Freed, Karloff, Lugosi, Johnny Weissmuller—you name it. My suggestion is you write *Singin' in the Rain* at the top of a page, followed by 'Fade-in' and don't stop until you come to 'That's all, folks.'"

So we began working on *Singin' in the Rain* like rats trapped in a burning barn. And let it be known for the record that Freed was very sweet and tolerant with us rats—didn't chase us with a broom or anything.

Later that very day we met with Roger Freed's assistant around his piano in the Freed office and surveyed the sprawling stacks of Freed-Brown songs in sheet-music form, ranging all the way from "Should I?" to "Would You?" The late sun was just hitting the sign outside Smith and Salisbury Mortuary next door, and we felt like walking over and lying down. Riffing through the songs, as Roger played and sang them in his southern colonel's whiskey baritone, several possible



stories suggested themselves. For instance, "The Wedding of the Painted Doll" could well have inspired a story about a painted doll who got married.

But as Roger kept playing and we hummed along, we began in spite of ourselves to get excited. Many of them were famous songs, standards, bristling with vitality and part of the nation's collective unconscious—"Broadway Melody," "Broadway Rhythm," "You Are My Lucky Star," "Fit as a Fiddle," "You Were Meant for Me," and the title song itself, an irresistible ode to optimism that no one can possibly sing without acting out the line "There's a smile on my face." We knew one thing about the story. There would have to be some scene where there would be rain, and the leading man (Howard Keel? Van Johnson? Fred Astaire? Gene Kelly?) would be singing in it. Many of these songs had been written by Freed and Brown for the earliest musical pictures made between 1929 and 1931, during the painful transition from silence to sound, and it occurred to us that rather than try to use them in a sophisticated, contemporary story, or a Gay Nineties extravaganza, we should let them bloom at their happiest in something that took place in the very period in which they had been written. With this decision made, we began to feel the ground beneath our feet at last. We both knew the period intimately and were amateur authorities on silent films and early talkies, long before Cinema I and II were taught in every kindergarten.

The studio grapevine reached us that Howard Keel had been penciled in for the lead, and we made a few dispirited stabs at a yarn about a minor Western actor in silents who makes it big with the advent of sound as a singing cowboy. But our thoughts kept coming back to the dramatic upheavals of that period when great careers were wrecked because the public's image of a favorite would be instantly destroyed by a voice that did not match the fabled face. We remembered particularly the downfall of John Gilbert, the reigning king of the silent screen in 1928, whose career was finished by one talking picture in which, with his director's encouragement, he improvised his own love scene; it consisted of the phrase "I love you" repeated many times with growing intensity, exactly as he had done it the year before in front of the silent camera. The audience screamed with laughter. We decided our leading character should be just such a star. The trick, of course, was to make the stuff of tragedy like this fit into a light-hearted satirical comedy that featured fifteen or twenty Freed-Brown songs. Our silent star would have to survive his downfall and make good as a musical star, and to give *that* story point



What the script didn't say was, "Here Gene Kelly does perhaps the outstanding solo number of his career."

a faint air of credibility, we had better establish our hero as someone who had had a song-and-dance vaudeville background before he entered pictures. Such a character felt more to us like Gene Kelly than Howard Keel.

Gene was one of our oldest friends from New York, as was Stanley Donen. We had first met Gene when we were in a revue at the Westport Country Playhouse one summer, he hoofing it up alone, the two of us performing as part of a satirical act called The Revuers. Later, when we had reached the dizzy heights of the Rainbow Room, Gene, still an unknown, was suddenly announced by the MC there as doing a tryout appearance for one show. Not long after, our paths crossed again, when he, now the newly acclaimed Broadway star of *Pal Joey*, came down to the Village Vanguard to see his old pals, The Revuers, who had followed their heady climb to the sixty-fifth floor of the RCA Building by plummeting swiftly back down to the Vanguard cellar where they had started. Later, a big

movie star in Hollywood, Gene was to feed us often and watch us perform tirelessly in his living room, writing having replaced performing in our careers, but not in our hearts and throats.

After Gene and Stanley's success as the directing team of *On the Town*, what we none too secretly hoped was to reunite the four of us with Gene again as star. But Gene was now, deservedly, at that happy moment when everyone wanted him for everything, and had he expressed the desire to film Kafka's *Metamorphosis* featuring the Million-Legged Cockroach Ballet, the studio would have considered it a smart commercial move and gone all the way with him. It was impossible for us to approach him, because he was deeply involved, head and feet, starring in and choreographing *An American in Paris*, which was shooting on the lot under Vincente Minnelli's direction. We kept seeing him all the time socially, but he let us know, in a friendly way, that he was going to pick his next ven-

ture very carefully and would rather not know what we were up to so he could judge our script impartially.

In the meantime we spent an agonizing month trying to get a grip on ourselves and our screenplay. We finally had what seemed to be three possible opening sequences of a picture: a big silent movie premiere in New York; a magazine interview with the star in Hollywood telling a phony life story; a sequence from the silent movie being premiered in New York, the star meeting the girl in New York, losing her, and going back to Hollywood. After staring for hours at a time at this seemingly insoluble mess in which the story never seemed to get started, we would wander down to the set where *An American in Paris* was shooting and feel even more wretched in the face of this assured, inevitably successful reality rolling along with its thundering playbacks, swinging cranes, and jubilant actors, and its little Paris street so achingly authentic that Arthur Freed could sit in the sidewalk café and quip to no one in particular, "I can sit here and feel homesick for Hollywood."

Our depression deepened as our story refused to move, and our feeling that we were involved in something ghoulish rather than comic was reinforced by the atmosphere of the place in which we were living. It was a miniature "Sunset Boulevard" house, once owned by silent star Marie Prevost, which we had taken with mixed laughter and shudders, because the price was right. The place screamed, in its tattered elegance, of high times in the Twenties, with its glory suddenly extinguished. There was no body floating in the swimming pool, but tons of soggy leaves filled the deeper-than-wide concrete oblong gloomily hidden from the sun at all times of the day; torn strips of faded awning flapped mournfully against the terrace windows; and inside the living room, furnished mainly with peeling gilt and needle-point pieces and an urn containing God knows whose ashes, was the crowning touch—an inlaid concert-grand player piano, its piano roll stuck from there to eternity somewhere in the middle of "Fascinatin' Rhythm." It was in this very room, one late afternoon, that we decided to kick the nightmarish grip of doom that had settled over us and do something realistic: We would give MGM back the money they had paid us thus far, tell them we had failed, and go home.

A couple of hours later we were jumping up and down with glee, like Gene, Donald, and Debbie in the "Good Mornin'" song and dance in the movie *Singin' in the Rain* itself. My [Betty's] husband, Steve, had just arrived from New York and, knowing us rather well, was not too surprised to find us

slumped in our familiar Dostoevskian attitudes. At some point we grabbed him and read him our goulash of openings, to illustrate the hopelessness of the situation. Much to our amazement, Steve, a reticent chuckler, was roaring throughout and asked, offhandedly, why, instead of abandoning the project, didn't we use *all* the openings. This led to the "Eureka!" moment of realizing that maybe it could work if the action never went to New York, but all took place in Hollywood: the premiere, the interview in front of the theater before the stars go in, the shots of the silent movie itself, the backstage scene, the star's escape from his fans, and his meeting the girl on Hollywood Boulevard, instead of Fifth Avenue. It seems pitifully obvious now, bordering on the moronic, but at the time we felt like Champollion deciphering the Rosetta Stone. From here on the gates were open, and the writing of the screenplay gushed in a relatively exuberant flow. We tapped the roots of our memories and experiences without editing ourselves when our ideas got wild, satirical, and extravagantly nonsensical. To our surprise, not only did Roger seem delighted with it all, but Arthur, to whom we read each section as we completed it, gave his happy approval.

At Arthur's suggestion, Gene, who by then had finished shooting *An American in Paris*, was given a script to read. We geared ourselves for a friendly refusal. Instead, he and Stanley Donen, who had also read it, came rushing over to us in the commissary the next day bursting with enthusiasm and filled with ideas that they imparted to us over our usual lunch of L. B. Mayer matzo ball soup and surrealistic song parodies. We started meeting with them instantly for final changes and rewrites, going over the script shot by shot. In addition to their outstanding skill in integrating all the elements of a musical film, our old friendship with them and their knowledge of our work from our early performing days made it easy for them to use many ideas and visual details that might have seemed irrelevant or a mystery to anyone else.

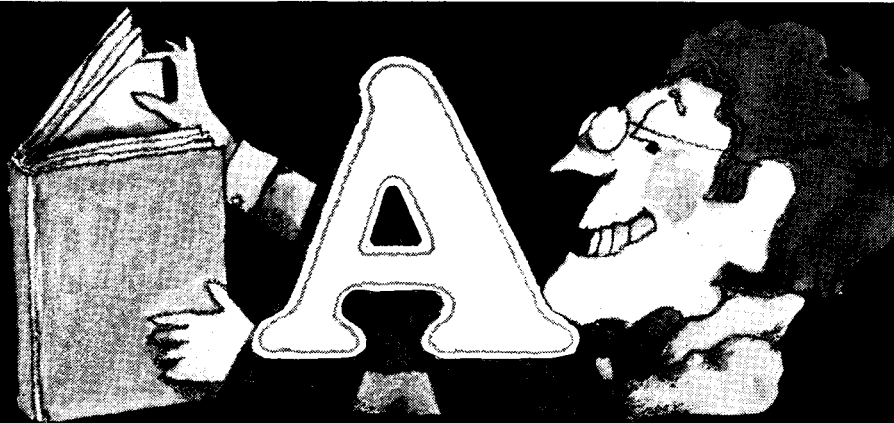
The success of the film and its continued life over the years have much to do with our four-way mental radar, Gene and Stanley's brilliant execution, and their sure professionalism while they maintained an air of effortless, carefree spontaneity. One of the two directors gave a great performance. Just as we knew from the start, there was a scene where there was rain, and a leading man was singin' in it. What we hadn't written into the script was "here Gene Kelly does perhaps the outstanding solo number of his career." Today, ironically enough, this exuberant, joyous expression of love of life is achieving a new kind of identity

through Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, where it's so chillingly used as an *cappella* song and dance of mindless violence.

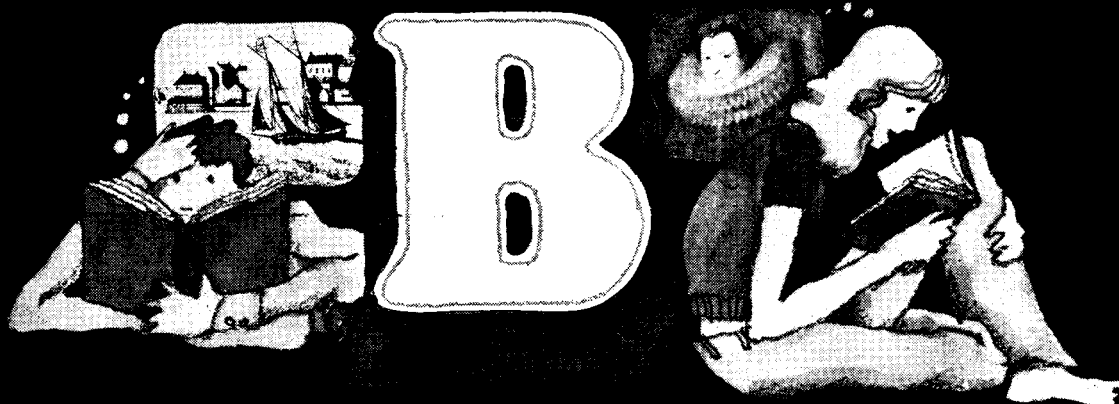
We went back to New York, leaving behind a lyric composed of tongue twisters starting with "Moses supposes his toes-es are roses," which Roger Edens put to music, making it the one non-Freed-Brown contribution to the score. We also learned as the shooting date approached that "The Wedding of the Painted Doll," which we had painfully wedged into the script as a cheering-up number for Donald O'Connor, had been replaced by a new song by Arthur and Mr. Brown, "Make 'Em Laugh." For this number, Gene and Stanley took every bit of zany gymnastic clowning and surrealistic vaudeville Donald had saved up in his body and worked them into an insane classic unlike any other before or since.

Some months later, while out of town in Philadelphia and enduring the life-and-death throes of a revue we were involved with, we got a call from Gene and Stanley that seemed by that time to be coming from another galaxy. We had written a protracted love scene with a song-and-dance medley for Gene and Debbie Reynolds that involved touring many different sets all over the studio lot, but our directors wanted to change all that to a romantic love scene inside an empty sound stage where Gene would sing one song only and do a romantic dance with Debbie. Could we run it up and mail it right out, please? We wrenched our minds away from the great Bert Lahr just two blocks away at the Shubert Theatre despondently being hilarious in the 95-degree July Philadelphia heat and time-machined ourselves back into *Singin' in the Rain* long enough to fill the order. It worked. So did the picture.

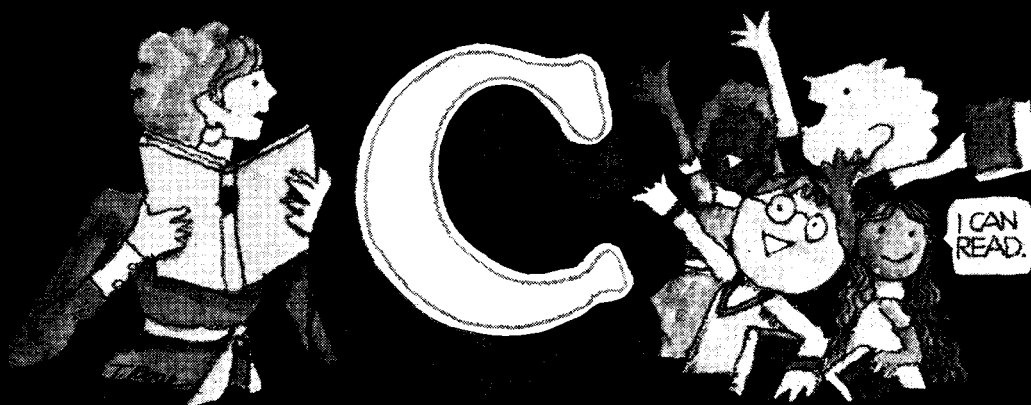
A few years ago we were in Paris with my [Betty's] husband, Steve, and my [Adolph's] wife, Phyllis, at a party and were rendered breathless and awe-struck by the news that François Truffaut was right across the room from us. Suddenly, a small, lithe figure came sliding across at us like a hockey player zooming over the ice. It was Truffaut himself, and he was breathless and awe-struck at meeting the authors of *Chantons sous la Pluie*. In total disbelief we heard him say, through his interpreter, that he had seen the film many times, knew every frame of it, felt it was a classic, said that he and Alain Resnais, among others, went to see it regularly at a little theater called the Pagode, where it was even at the moment in the middle of a several-month run. This is a scene we never could have dreamed of that day at MGM when we went on strike, because we did not want to write anything to be called *Singin' in the Rain*. □



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# Computer Printout on the Earth's Ecosystem

## I. Global Doom

by LESTER R. BROWN

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### THE LIMITS TO GROWTH: A Report for The Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind

by Donella H. Meadows,  
Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers,  
and William W. Behrens III

Potomac, 205 pp., \$6.50;  
paperback, \$2.75

**T**his important work is a response to a crucial question: What will happen if current economic and demographic trends continue? Beginning with Malthus, many men have examined the issue of exponential growth in a finite system; none, however, have done so in such an empirical and systematic fashion as have the authors of *The Limits to Growth*.

The seventeen-member Massachusetts Institute of Technology team that undertook this project used the systems dynamics method of computer modeling—a method devised by MIT Professor Jay W. Forrester that enabled the study group to consider the complex of global activities and trends as an interlocking system. The project's basic model focuses on the complex interrelationships over time between five principal variables: population, food supply, natural resources, industrial production, and pollution.

The first of the team's various probes into the future, however, employs the so-called standard world model. This model simply predicates the future on current trends, assuming "no major change in the physical, economic, or social relationships that have historically governed the development of the world system." Using as a historical base the trends from 1900 to 1970, the five principal variables are projected

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Lester R. Brown, a Senior Fellow at the Overseas Development Council, is the author of *World Without Borders*, which will be published this fall.

into the future. Both population and industrial capacity continue to expand, generating a growing demand for natural resources. As natural resources diminish, forcing the use of marginal reserves, prices go up, leaving less money for reinvestment in future growth. Eventually new investment falls below depreciation and the industrial base collapses, causing the collapse of the service industries and agriculture. Shortly thereafter the still soaring population drops precipitously from lack of food and health services.

Variations of this model include one that doubles the assumed reserves of natural resources, another that posits cheap and abundant nuclear energy, a third that assumes a slowed population growth, and so forth. Each ends in catastrophe within a century through overpollution, food scarcity, or resource depletion.

The principal conclusion of the study is that "if the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next 100 years. The most probable result will be a rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industry capacity."

Let us briefly look at each of the two points in this conclusion. First, how real are the various limits to growth? We can gain insights into the next several decades by examining recent history. From 1950 to 1970 the gross world product (GWP) increased from something like \$1.25-trillion to nearly \$3-trillion. In 1950 there were relatively few signs of environmental stress. It was not until the late Sixties that the environmental crisis became a matter of widespread concern. By 1970 the press throughout the world was daily reporting new signs of environmental deterioration.

This historically recent explosive



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