

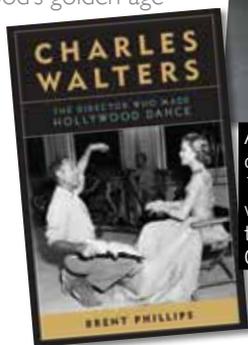
## READY FOR HIS CLOSE-UP

**Marianka Swain** salutes a forgotten maestro of Hollywood's golden age

**L**egendary movie musicals director? You're thinking Vincente Minnelli, Stanley Donen, Gene Kelly – not Charles Walters. But, as Brent Phillips argues cogently in his illuminating new book, that exclusion is simply unjust.

Charles “Chuck” Walters' work has certainly left an indelible impression. There are beloved, hugely influential films on his CV, from *Meet Me in St Louis* to *High Society*, plus Phillips highlights uncredited projects like *Gigi*. It's a peculiarity of history that the man himself should have slipped into obscurity.

Walters, a “born dancer” from Anaheim, California, began as a Broadway hooper, where he



caught the attention of choreographer Robert Alton. Alton offered invaluable mentorship, and the performer eventually moved to the other side of the camera in MGM's “dream factory”. There, he worked with greats like Astaire and Rogers, Judy Garland, Gene Kelly, Doris Day, Debbie Reynolds and Frank Sinatra – reportedly a director loved by actors.

Phillips' diligently researched tome, which draws on letters and oral histories, teases out



Above, rehearsing for the opening sequence of *Torch Song* (1953), in which Walters returned to the screen at Joan Crawford's request

this contradictory figure: the star who ceded the spotlight to others, the self-deprecating man in a cut-throat world, the visionary renowned for generous collaboration. He addresses the charge that Walters was a mere company man, not a true auteur, suggesting that his lack of signature style is a sign of commitment to individual projects.

Reticent Walters did take a courageous stand in living openly as a gay man in a repressive era. “I had to work that much harder and hurdle the ‘evils’

by doing good work,” he observed. Rather than sensationalising such challenges, Phillips offers a moving glimpse into a long battle.

Yet this is not a worthy read, but a pithy, affectionate backstage tour. There are detailed accounts of Walters creating timeless numbers like Garland's “Get Happy” and tactfully handling temperamental stars; Astaire apparently complained endlessly when trying something new “as a defence mechanism”, but it was still an exciting process: “Well, hell, you were working with the best.” Phillips makes a compelling case for that superlative also applying to Walters. ●

*Charles Walters: The Director Who Made Hollywood Dance* by Brent Phillips, published by University Press of Kentucky, £31.95