Gay Encoding and Counter-coding in *The Gay Divorcee*

in order of appearance in the movie

In The Closet: Gay and Lesbian Portrayals in Movies Before the Stonewall Riots (1969)  
Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, University of Illinois, Spring 2014, Connie Hosier and Scott Badman

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Even though Edward Everett Horton is a middle-aged lawyer, he is portrayed as an ineffectual, pampered, rich adolescent throughout the movie -- the essence of the sissy-boy, rich-kid stereotype of the early movie era.

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Fred Astaire: "Don't be discouraged, Egbert. I think you show a distinct tendency to terpsichorean excellence." [Terpsichore is one of the nine muses in Greek mythology. She rules over the dance.]

Edward Everett Horton: "You think so really? You know as a matter of fact my inner soul has always yearned to express itself in the dance. Ummmm."

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Edward Everett Horton: "It must be from my father. He's always called me Pinky, ever since I was a golden haired tot, paddling about the ancestral home in pale pink pajamas." [“Pink" is code for "homosexual". The Nazi's used the Pink Triangle to identify homosexuals not long after this movie was made. "Pink", interestingly enough, is not code for "girl". The "pink for a girl, blue for a boy" custom didn't become widespread until after World War II.]

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Edward Everett Horton: After doing an impromptu whistling duet with the bell boy in the hotel door: "That was very good. Do you have time for an encore?"

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All through the conversation when Fred Astaire tells Edward Everett Horton about wanting to find out Ginger Rodger's identity, Edward Everett Horton is constantly discouraging. He obviously is not interested in Fred Astaire's being enamored with a girl.

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Alice Brady, talking about the Edward Everett Horton character: "Dear Egbert. He was nearly my first husband. He would have been too, but he suddenly left for India on an elephant hunt. I wonder why he preferred to hunt elephants, when he could have married me."

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Alice Brady: "Oh Egbert, are you proposing to me again?"

Edward Everett Horton: "No...no, no"

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After the Kewpie doll that Egbert was playing with suddenly reappears on his hand during their legal conference, Alice Brady says:

"Oh Egbert, I didn't know you liked dolls." [to Ginger Rodgers] "He always had the mother instinct."

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Edward Everett Horton: "Get ready. Hurry, hurry. I'm leaving for the sea shore immediately."

Fred Astaire: "What's the matter. Did another woman propose to you?"

Edward Everett Horton: "Yes, sort of a" (momentarily gesturing a woman's torso with his hands, then stopping himself) "No, no, no, no, no. I have a case."

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During the Let's K-nock K-nees number: Betty Grable totally throws herself at Edward Everett Horton at the beginning of the number, while singing suggestive lyrics about marriage. He acts increasingly flustered and starts to call for Fred Astaire's character for help, but then he decides to join in and dance with Betty Grable. He acts a little flirty with her, until she tries to sit in his lap, when he pushes her back up saying, "Too many people here." His dancing is incompetent and a little effeminate, especially compared with the younger male dancers, who are definitely masculine by '30's standards.

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When walking down the board walk with Fred Astaire, Edward Everett Horton enthusiastically turns his head (and his whole body) as girls walk by. He says to Fred Astaire, "This is a marvelous place. Remind me to come back down here when I want my constitution undermined." (This implies he is straight, although you could take it as saying straight would "undermine his constitution".)

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After Fred Astaire describes Ginger Rodgers in poetic nature metaphors, all the poetry is lost on Edward Everett Horton. He says "She sounds like a series of strange noises to me."

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The conversation between Edward Everett Horton and Eric Blore has the ring of a classic vaudeville or English Music Hall routine. Eric Blore is obviously the more effete of the two, following the stereotype of the effete Brit.

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Erik Rhodes (in Italian accent): "At home, my wife, he do not like me to sing." [The "he" is very clearly pronounced.]

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Erik Rhodes (in Italian accent): "Oh, my sir. Strictly business. My slogan: Your wife is safe with Tonetti. He prefers spaghetti."

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Fred Astaire: "I still don't know what you are doing down here."

Ginger Rodgers: "I'm with my aunt."

Fred Astaire: "Isn't that a coincidence. I'm here with my aunt too. Aunt Egbert" [Edward Everett Horton's character]

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Erik Rhodes has an extended telephone conversation with his wife, including an implication that his "wife" is cheating on him with another man, and that his character has a nine year old son -- a contraindication that he is gay. However, his wife could be cheating on him simply because he is gay.

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Eric Blore's somewhat effeminate walking/dancing during "The Continental".

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Fred Astaire (to Ginger Rodgers): "You know I'd like to have breakfast with you every morning."

Erik Rhodes (mistaking that the comment was made to him): "Yes, thank you."

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Eric Blore: "Excuse me sir, I have an unnatural passion for rocks."

Fred Astaire: "Well, you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

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Eric Blore: "It was Professor Brown that told me that this sea coast around here was an igneous intrusion."

Fred Astaire: "You know, you're somewhat of an igneous intrusion, yourself."

Eric Blore: "Oh, thank you sir."

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Erik Rhodes has absolutely no ability to "look amorous" with Ginger Rodgers, even though he is supposed to be a professional (although Platonic) "co-respondent".

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William Austin [Ginger Rodgers' husband] simply laughs off any possibility that Erik Rhodes could actually be having an affair with Ginger Rodgers, ending with the line: "This object? [derisive laughs] No, I don't believe it. My dear child, he's nothing to you. He has all the earmarks of a hired co-respondent."

Erik Rhodes [clasping Ginger Rodgers in a very chaste embrace, cheek to cheek]: "It is not true. I love she, and she loves me."

William Austin, laughing: "Mimi, you amuse me. I'd never believe it with him. This...[laughs]...this hairdresser."

Erik Rhodes is flustered, but has no comeback.

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Ginger Rodgers: "Am I Mrs. Brown?"

Eric Blore: "No ma'am, you're Mrs. Green."

Fred Astaire: "Well strike me pink."

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Alice Brady: "Egbert and I are going to be married, too."

Edward Everett Horton: "Yes... why darling, what's the matter. We were married last night on the way back from London."

Alice Brady: "Last night, were we? Why, of course, so we were. Darling I had forgotten about it. Isn't it wonderful?"

Were they married or not? Can you get married "on the way back from London", i.e. on a train? Or is Edward Everett Horton just trying to confuse Alice Brady to get out of the situation? They could have been "married off" because the Code required it because they had spent the night together in London. His reaction when Alice Brady mentions a marriage celebration is very deadpan, and definitely not encouraging or enthusiastic. The film does not end with the gay-coded Edward Everett Horton definitely and firmly in a straight marriage, but just plays around with the issue.

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Fred Astaire plays around with masculine gender roles at the very end with the much larger William Austin. This scene shows how short Fred Astaire really was, 5' 9". He pops his mouth at William Austin, a very nonthreatening gesture, but then he says "At last I get a chance to throw somebody out" as he starts pulling up his sleeves and advancing toward William Austin. William Austin circles backwards, but then they are interrupted by Eric Blore's entrance, and the threat is immediately ended and forgotten. A little later Fred Astaire firmly threatens to stop William Austin from leaving, but puts up his folded arms instead of his fists in the traditional boxing position. William Austin just shakes his head and walks by him.

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Edward Everett Horton is completely accepted for what he is by all the other characters in the movie. Eric Blore is put down by Fred Astaire, but he is the hero of the movie because he reveals Ginger Rodger's husbands infidelities. Erik Rhodes is also accepted, although with a more reluctant toleration. He is not overtly criticized or disparaged, even though he plays a character in a dubiously moral profession.