

# **Report of 19 May 2016 Meeting Royal Society Southern Highlands Branch**

**Speaker:** Dr Kathleen Riley, D.Phil.

**Topic:** The Science of Spontaneity: Fred Astaire as Consummate Craftsman

Despite the cold, wet and windy weather conditions of the Southern Highlands on the evening of the lecture, Dr Kathleen Riley attracted an enthusiastic audience of 48 hardy souls for this most unusual lecture. Many in the audience were listeners of ABC Illawarra local radio where they had been introduced to Dr Kathleen Riley in a pre-lecture interview broadcast over a wide-ranging area in locations mainly south of Sydney.

Kathleen Riley is a former British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in Classics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. She is now a freelance writer, theatre historian and critic. She is the author of *Nigel Hawthorn on Stage* (University of Hertfordshire press, 2004), as well as, among others, *The Astaires: Fred and Adele* (Oxford University Press, 2012), the latter having been optioned recently for a British film feature. She was also Script Consultant on the critically acclaimed stage production *My Perfect Mind* which had its London premiere at the Young Vic in 2013 and then toured to Barcelona and New York. Riley's current projects include a monograph exploring the ancient Greek concept of *Nostos* (homecoming) and an edited volume of essays on Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity.

It is a wonderful feature of Royal Society lectures held at the Southern Highlands Branch that the audience members do not form a predictable group from one lecture to the next. Different subject areas presented for discussion definitely attract attendances especially interested in the particular topic to be presented. The wide Southern Highlands drawing area therefore provides fertile ground for the realization of the aims and objectives of the Royal Society, where the discussion fields of the sciences, the arts, philosophy and literature can readily provide intellectual enrichment and entertainment to the community. Such was clearly the case for Kathleen Riley's enriching and much welcomed and appreciated lecture.

This fascinating lecture focused in detail on the science behind Fred Astaire's apparent effortless and his ability to make something that was technically complex and endlessly rehearsed seem easy and spontaneous. The sheer joyfulness of his dancing was one of the products of a combination of dogged perfectionism, talented musicianship and an almost indescribable imagination. He created extraordinary visual images that will live in the minds of his admirers for years to come. What an innovative piece of research by Dr Kathleen Riley who dared to analyse in the cold light of day the scientific aspects of Fred Astaire's magic.

**Anne Wood**

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