The Buffalo Film Seminars

Conversations about great films with Diane Christian and Bruce Jackson

(The online version of this handout has hot urls.)

National Film Registry, 2003

Directed by Mervyn LeRoy
Numbers created and directed by Busby Berkeley
Writing by Erwin S. Gelsey & James Seymour, David Boehm & Ben Markson (dialogue), Avery Hopwood (based on a play by)
Produced by Robert Lord, Jack L. Warner, Raymond Griffith (uncredited)
Cinematography Sol Polito
Film Editing George Amy
Art Direction Anton Grot
Costume Design Orry-Kelly

Warren William...J. Lawrence Bradford
Joan Blondell...Carol King
Aline MacMahon...Trixie Lorraine
Ruby Keeler...Polly Parker
Dick Powell...Brad Roberts
Guy Kibbee...Faneul H. Peabody
Ned Sparks...Barney Hopkins
Ginger Rogers...Fay Fortune
Billy Bart...The Baby
Etta Moten...soloist in “Remember My Forgotten Man”

Mervyn LeRoy (b. October 15, 1900 in San Francisco, CA—d. 13 September 1987, Beverly Hills, CA) quit school at 13 to become a newsboy. “I saw life in the raw on the streets of San Francisco,” he said. “I met the cops and the whores and the reporters and the bartenders and the Chinese and the fishermen and the shopkeepers. . . . When it came time for me to make motion pictures, I made movies that were real, because I knew first-hand how real people behaved.” His first film was No Place to Go in 1927; his last was as uncredited director of John Wayne’s hyperbolic The Green Berets 1968. Le Roy’s career in show business began in vaudeville, then his movie-mogul cousin Jesse Lasky hired him at Famous Player-Lasky, where he worked in wardrobe, then as a film tinter, and then as an actor in minor roles. He wrangled a directing job at another studio and made profitable simple entertainments until Little Caesar (1930), which invented the ’30s gangster genre and made him a major director. Some of the other 65 films he directed were Mary, Mary (1963), Gypsy (1962), The FBI Story (1959), No Time for Sergeants (1958), The Bad Seed (1956), Mister Roberts (1955), Rose Marie (1954), Million Dollar Mermaid (1952), Quo Vadis? (1951), Any Number Can Play (1949), Little Women (1949), The House I Live In (1945), Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo (1944), Madame Curie (1943), They Won’t Forget (1937) [a great social issue film, also notable for the first sweatered film appearance by his discovery Judy Turner, whose name he changed to Lana], I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932), and Two Seconds (1931). He produced 28 films, one of which was The Wizard of Oz (1939) hence the inscription on his tombstone in the Garden of Honor in Glendale’s Forest Lawn Cemetery: “Over the Rainbow.” In addition to Judy/Lana Turner, he is credited with discovering Clark Gable, Loretta Young, and Robert Mitchum.

Busby Berkeley (b. William Berkeley Enos, November 29, 1895 in Los Angeles, CA—d. March 14, 1976, Palm Springs, CA) was arguably the greatest choreographer in film. He invented the camera as a character in the dance. Scott M. Keir wrote in the 1997-1998 Edinburgh University Film Society program, “Berkeley was a choreographer who did not just choreograph the dancing, but also the cameras and the audiences, in a host of grand, outlandish musicals. His sweeping, novel style was his hallmark, with the fine set pieces in Gold Diggers of 1933 a fine example. . . .Busby always experimented with unusual
camera angles and editing to liven up the proceedings. The films tried to go one better than the stage musicals by going one bigger, with huge set pieces and opulent surroundings. This was where many who arrived in Hollywood seeking stardom found their dream. The set pieces of many a Berkeley musical would call for a cast of hundreds of dancing girls in a kaleidoscopic, coordinated extravaganza. Gold Diggers of 1933 has some of the most outlandish of these, as does one of the later remakes, Gold Diggers of 1935 (not to mention Gold Diggers of 1937).” Before Berkeley, the choreographer or dance director would design the dances and train the dancers, then the film’s director would control the actual filming. Berkeley talked producer Sam Goldwyn into letting him direct the entire dance sequences. Not only did he bring his own genius to the dances but he changed the way they were filmed—using only one camera (which meant the shots became part of the choreography rather than merely a documentation of it) and doing close-ups of the dancers.

“Well, we’ve got all the beautiful girls in the picture, why not let the public see them?” he said. Darryl Zanuck at Warner Brothers tried to go one better than the stage musicals by going one up on the Technicolor films, using only one camera (which meant the dances but he changed the way they were filmed). The films he brought his own genius to the staging certainly contributed. In the Bette Davis picture, Now Voyager (1942), Polito emphasized soft focus in close-ups of star in which the world of the rich is offered as exquisitely textured, the realm for the setting of the purest romantic fantasy. In the action genre, especially for The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938), Polito imparts an effective glow to a Technicolor film, a medium then rather difficult to handle well. Working with the studio’s new tank and fog machines in the similar project The Sea Hawk (1940), Polito was able to inflect this tale of maritime adventure with the appropriate atmospherics, a misty, often smoky look pervades the action. Polito's other black-and-white work for Curtiz is exemplary, particularly in The Charge of the Light Brigade (1936) where his clear images and unusual setups perfectly complement the director's fascination with exciting action. He was cinematographer on more than 160 films, beginning with Rip Van Winkle (1914) and ending with The Plunderers (1960). Some of his other films were Anna Lucasta (1949), Sorry, Wrong Number (1948), Cloak and Dagger (1946), A Stolen Life (1946), Rhapsody in Blue (1945), Arsenic and Old Lace (1944), This Is the Army (1943), Now, Voyager (1942), Sergeant York (1941), The Sea Wolf (1941), Santa Fe Trail (1940), Virginia City (1940), Angels with Dirty Faces (1938), The Charge of the Light Brigade (1936), The Petrified Forest (1936), The Woman in Red (1935), ‘G’ Men (1935), 42nd Street (1933), I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang (1932), No, No, Nanette (1930), The Girl of the Golden West (1923) and Fruits of Desire (1916).

SOL POLITO (b. November 12, 1892, Palermo, Sicily, Italy—May 23, 1960, Hollywood, CA)

Like most of the technicians who created collectively, if unselfconsciously, what is now known as the “classic Hollywood style,” Polito received little formal training in his craft, but instead learned the intricacies of cinematography on the job, first as an assistant during a three-year apprenticeship and then as head cameraman. The studio system in general suited Polito's temperament and work ethic; it is no accident that he thrived in the rather authoritarian setting of Warner Brothers, where studio head Jack Warner was notorious for demanding efficiency, competence, and fiscal responsibility. As a studio technician, Polito found it necessary to work on a wide variety of projects in the different genres, most particularly the crime melodrama—gritty, hard-hitting pictures often based on events taken directly from yesterday’s headlines. For these films, Polito and the other chief cinematographer at WB, Tony Gaudio, devised an unglamorized look, not softened by flattering lighting effects, that made much use of the chiaroscuro contrasts between dark and light that were a heritage of German Expressionism. His style is the ancestor of the film noir cinematography that emerged to popularity in the late forties, an evolution based to some degree on technical advances (e.g., faster film stock and deep focus techniques) and a more thoroughgoing interest in realism promoted by wartime filmmaking and postwar developments abroad.

Polito's work for the classic Warner's crime melodrama I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, however, bears comparison with that later style in its outstanding, expressive effects—most memorably, an overall somberness to which director Mervyn LeRoy's effective staging certainly

WARREN WILLIAM (b. Warren William Krech on December 2, 1895, Aitkin, MN—d. September 24, 1948, Hollywood, CA) was, according to Leonard Maltin, “Often called ‘the poor man’s John Barrymore.’ This slender, striking, sharp-featured leading man was most successful playing unmitigated cads, but also made his mark when he became the first actor ever to play the hallowed film and television criminal attorney Perry Mason in
the Case of the Howling Dog (1934). Born to a newspaper publisher, he served in WWI and took up acting upon his return from service, studying at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. He played in stock and made a few films on the East Coast, appearing opposite serial queen Pearl White in Plunder (1923), billed under his real name. As Warren William, he was signed by Warner Bros. in 1931. He initially played supporting roles in the likes of Expensive Women and Under Eighteen (both 1931), but quickly graduated to leading-man status in a series of sharp-witted, often rowdy pre-Production Code vehicles. He brought style and authority to Beauty and the Boss, The Mouthpiece, The Dark Horse, The Match King, Three on a Match (all 1932), Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933), Employees Entrance, The Mind Reader, Goodbye Again, Bedside, Upperworld and Dr. Monica (all 1934). On loan to other studios, he made a perfect Dave the Dude for Frank Capra in the Damon Runyon story Lady for a Day (1933), a sympathetic leading man for Claudette Colbert in Imitation of Life and an effective Julius Caesar in Cleopatra (both 1934). His last film appearance was a supporting role in The Private Affairs of Bel Ami (1947). The actor was also an amateur inventor and held the patent for the first lawn vacuum, a device which became commonplace with landscapers decades after his death.

**GINGER ROGERS** (b. Virginia Katherine McMath on July 16 1911, Independence, MS—d. April 25, 1995, Rancho Mirage, CA) was given the name “Ginger” by her little cousin who couldn't pronounce “Virginia” correctly. The actress worked in vaudeville from 14 to 17, rising to fame by winning Charleston contests night after night across the country. At 15, Miss Rogers became the champion Charleston dancer in Texas. Then, for three years, her mother chaperoned her through four vaudeville acts a day throughout the South and Midwest (her mother continued being Roger's manager until her death in 1977). At 19, she made her first feature film, Young Man of Manhattan (1930) uttering a memorable instruction: “Cigarette me, big boy.” In her third musical film, 42nd Street (1933) she was a risqué, wisecracking chorine, Anytime Annie. Her big break came when she teamed up with Fred Astaire in Flying Down to Rio (1933). Their rollicking introduction of a dance called the Carioca stole the show from its nominal stars, Dolores Del Rio and Gene Raymond. Over the next six years they were teamed in eight more movies and introduced a glittering array of now-standard songs and dances, among them “Night and Day” and “The Continental” from The Gay Divorcee (1934); “Cheek to Cheek” from Top Hat (1935); “Let's Face the Music and Dance” from Follow the Fleet (1936); “Never Gonna Dance” from Swing Time (1936) and “They All Laughed” from Shall We Dance (1937). Under Astaire’s painstaking coaching, Miss Rogers’ dancing became more fluid with each film, and the consensus was that none of his later partnerships generated the electricity they did. Years later, she wrote about their partnership, emphasizing that Astaire was no Svengali. By the time they joined forces in Flying Down to Rio, she pointed out, she had made 20 films, he only one. Of the partnership, she said: “We had fun, and it shows. True, we were never bosom buddies off the screen; we were different people with different interests. We were a couple only on film.” Was offered the part of Hildy Johnson in His Girl Friday (1940), but she turned it down. Rosalind Russell was cast instead. She also turned down Donna Reed’s role in It’s a Wonderful Life (1946). During the last years of her life, she retired in Oregon and bought a ranch in the Medford area because she liked the climate. She donated money to the community and funded the Craterian Ginger Rogers Theater in downtown Medford, which was named after her. Always the outdoor sporty type, she was a near-champion tennis player, a topline shot and loved going fishing.

**JOAN BLONDELL** (b. Rose Joan Blondell on August 30, 1906 in New York, NY—d. December 25, 1979, Santa Monica, CA) was usually cast as the wisecracking working girl who was the lead’s best friend. Born into vaudeville, Blondell first hit the stage at 3 years old. By 18 she was contracted to WB, where she was quickly typecast as a gun moll in such classic gangster films such as Blonde Crazy and The Public Enemy (both in 1931). From 1930 to 1938 the actress made almost 50 films, and starred with James Cagney and Dick Powell, each seven times. After the war, Blondell starred in more series films such as A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1945) and her award nominated role in The Blue Veil (1951). In 1957, Joan would again appear on the screen as a drunk in Lizzie (1957) and as mature companion to Jayne Mansfield in Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter? (1957). She appeared in many television shows during the ’50s and ’60s and was a regular on The Real McCoys during the 1963 season as Winifred. In 2017, Kathy Bates plays Blondell’s character in Feud (2017), about the rift between Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, Blondell is played by Kathy Bates. She appeared in more than 100 films, beginning with Office Wife (1930) and ending with The Woman Inside (1981), released two years after her death. Some of her other films were The Champ (1979), The Cincinnati Kid (1965), Desk Set (1957), Cry Havoc (1943), I Want a Divorce (1940), Bullets or Ballots (1936), Three on a Match (1932), and Sinner’s Holiday (1930). She wrote a novel about her vaudeville years, Center Door Fancy (1972). In the book she recounts that in 1927, while closing the library she worked at, she was raped by a police officer. He told her he would kill her if she told anyone. She kept her silence for decades, until finally telling her grown daughter

June Allyson and Joan Blondell. Some of his film roles were directed by Blake Edwards, who would later become a famous many episodes of “The Zane Grey Theater,” and starred in two production and directing. He hosted and occasionally acted in his Starting in the late 1950s, other noir thrillers such as an adaptation of the novel Farewell, My Lovely — an adaptation of the novel Farewell, My Lovely (1940)—earned him critical acclaim. Critics were quick to praise his performances in other noir thrillers such as Cornered (1945) and Pitfall (1948). Starting in the late 1950s, Powell focused his career on television production and directing. He hosted and occasionally acted in his own series, “The Dick Powell Show” (1961-1963), appeared in many episodes of “The Zane Grey Theater,” and starred in two radio series, “Richard Diamond, Private Detective” (written and directed by Blake Edwards, who would later become a famous film director) and “Rogue’s Way.” He was married to actresses June Allyson and Joan Blondell. Some of his film roles were Cry Danger (1951), Right Cross (1950), The Reformer and the Redhead (1950), To the Ends of the Earth (1948), Johnny O’Clock (1947), In the Navy (1941), I Want a Divorce (1940), Hollywood Hotel (1938), Stage Struck (1936), Gold Diggers of 1937 (1936), Colleen (1936), Gold Diggers of 1935 (1935) and A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1935).

NED SPARKS (November 19, 1883 in Guelph, Ontario, Canada – April 3, 1957 in Victorville, California) Sparks left home at age 16 and attempted to work as a gold prospector on the Klondike Gold Rush. After running out of money, he won a spot as a singer on a traveling musical company’s tour. At age 19, he returned to Canada and briefly attended a Toronto seminary. After leaving the seminary, he worked for the railroad and worked in theater in Toronto. In 1907, he left Toronto for New York City to try his hand in the Broadway theatre, where he appeared in his first show in 1912. While working on Broadway, Sparks developed his trademark deadpan expression while portraying the role of a desk clerk in the play Little Miss Brown. His success on the stage soon caught the attention of MGM’s Louis B. Mayer who signed Sparks to a six picture deal. Sparks began appearing in numerous silent films before finally making his "talkie" debut in the 1928 film The Big Noise.

In the 1930s, Sparks became known for portraying dour-faced, sarcastic, cigar-chomping characters. He became so associated with the type that, in 1936, The New York Times reported that Sparks had his face insured for USD$100,000 with Lloyd’s of London. The market agreed to pay the sum to any photographer who could capture Sparks smiling (Sparks later admitted that the story was a publicity stunt and he was only insured for $10,000) Sparks was also caricatured in cartoons including the Jack-in-the-Box character in the Disney short Broken Toys (1935), and the jester in Mother Goose Goes Hollywood (1938), a hermit crab in both Tex Avery’s Fresh Fish (1939) and Bob Clampett’s Goofy Groceries (1941), a chicken in Bob Clampett’s Slap Happy Pappy (1940), Friz Freleng’s Warner Bros., cartoon Malibu Beach Party (1940), and Tex Avery’s Hollywood Steps Out (1940). Sparks also voiced the cartoon characters Heckle and Jeckle from 1947 to 1951. Sparks appeared in ten stage productions on Broadway and over 80 films. He retired from films in 1947, saying that everyone should retire at 65. [Wikipedia]

GUY KIBBEE (March 6, 1882 in El Paso, Texas – May 24, 1956 in East Islip, Long Island, New York) has 114 acting credits. “Kibbee...began his entertainment career on Mississippi riverboats. He became an actor in traveling stock companies. In 1930, he made his debut on Broadway in the play, Torch Song, which won acclaim in New York and attracted the interest of Hollywood. Shortly afterwards, Kibbee moved to California after being signed by Paramount Pictures. Later, he became part of Warner Bros. stock company, contract actors who cycled through different productions in supporting roles. Kibbee's specialty was daft and jovial characters, and he is perhaps best remembered for the films 42nd Street (1933), Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933), Captain Blood (1935), and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939), though he also played the expat inn owner in Joan Crawford's Rain (1932). One of his few starring performances during this period was in the title role of Rabbit (1934), a much altered and compressed version of Sinclair

DICK POWELL (b. November 14, 1904 in Mountain View, AK—d. January 2, 1963 in Los Angeles, CA) starred in many of Warner Bros. most renowned musical productions, including 42nd Street (1933), Footlight Parade (1933) and Dames (1935). Powell's transition to film noir roles in the 1940s revamped his career and established him as a multifaceted actor, especially adept at playing tough heroes. His portrayal of private detective Philip Marlowe in the thriller Murder, My Sweet (1944)—an adaptation of the novel Farewell, My Lovely (1940)—earned him critical acclaim. Critics were quick to praise his performances in other noir thrillers such as Cornered (1945) and Pitfall (1948). Starting in the late 1950s, Powell focused his career on television production and directing. He hosted and occasionally acted in his own series, “The Dick Powell Show” (1961-1963), appeared in many episodes of “The Zane Grey Theater,” and starred in two radio series, “Richard Diamond, Private Detective” (written and directed by Blake Edwards, who would later become a famous film director) and “Rogue’s Way.” He was married to actresses June Allyson and Joan Blondell. Some of his film roles were Cry

LeRoy—GOLD Diggers of 1933—4
Lewis’ novel. He is also remembered for his performance as Mr. Webb, editor of the Grover’s Corners, New Hampshire newspaper, and father of Emily Webb, played by Martha Scott, in the film version of the classic Thornton Wilder play Our Town.” [Wikipedia]

BILLY BARTY (October 25, 1924, Millsboro, Pennsylvania – December 23, 2000, Glendale, California) appeared in 177 film and TV series, “Barty co-starred with Mickey Rooney in the Mickey McGuire shorts, a comedy series of the 1920s and 1930s based on the Toonerville Folks comics. Small for his age even then, Barty would impersonate very young children alongside brawny authority figures or wild animals, making these threats seem even larger by comparison. In the 1933 film Gold Diggers of 1933, a nine-year-old Barty appeared as a baby who escapes from his stroller. He also appeared as The Child in the 1933 film Footlight Parade. He is briefly seen in the 1935 film Bride of Frankenstein, in an uncredited role as a baby in one of Dr. Pretorius’ experiments, although his close-ups were cut out of the picture. Much of Barty’s film work consisted of bit parts and gag roles. He appeared in Fireman Save My Child (with Spike Jones), and also appeared in two Elvis Presley films. He had one scene in Roustabout and co-starred without dialogue in Harum Scarum.” [Wikipedia]

ORRY-KELLY (December 31, 1897 in Kiama, New South Wales, Australia – February 27, 1964 in Hollywood, California) won three Academy Awards for Costume Design: 1951 (An American in Paris), 1957 (Les Girls), and 1959 (Some Like It Hot). He was costume designer for almost 300 films; “After moving to Hollywood in 1932, Orry-Kelly was hired by Warner Bros. as their chief costume designer and he remained there until 1944. Later, his designs were also seen in films at Universal, RKO, 20th Century Fox, and MGM studios. He won three Academy Awards for Best Costume Design (for An American in Paris, Cole Porter's Les Girls, and Some Like It Hot) and was nominated for a fourth (for Gypsy). Orry-Kelly worked on many films now considered classics, including 42nd Street, The Maltese Falcon, Casablanca, Arsenic and Old Lace, Harvey, Oklahoma!, Auntie Mame, and Some Like It Hot. He designed for all the great actresses of the day, including Bette Davis, Kay Francis, Olivia de Havilland, Katharine Hepburn, Dolores del Río, Ava Gardner, Ann Sheridan, Barbara Stanwyck, and Merle Oberon. Orry-Kelly was known for his ability to "design for distraction" to compensate for difficult figure shapes. He also had the job of creating clothes for the cross-dressing characters played by Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in Some Like It Hot. His skill is shown by the fact that while Some Like It Hot was in production, Curtis and Lemmon would go into the ladies' room after eating lunch without being spotted as men. He wrote that when he finished draping Dolores del Río in white jersey, “she became a Greek goddess ... she was incredibly beautiful”. The elegant clothes he designed for Bergman's character in Casablanca have been described as "pitch perfect". In addition to designing, Kelly wrote a column, "Hollywood Fashion Parade", for the International News Service, owned by William Randolph Hearst, during the years of World War II. Kelly's memoirs, entitled Women I've Undressed were discovered in the care of a relative, as a result of publicity surrounding Gillian Armstrong's 2015 documentary on Kelly. Women He's Undressed The memoir was published for the first time in 2015. [Wikipedia]


American director and producer, LeRoy was born in San Francisco, the only child of Harry LeRoy and the former Edna Armer. His father owned the Fair, a small department store in the city. Both parents came from Jewish families that, as LeRoy says in his autobiography, “had been in San Francisco for a couple of generations” and had become “assimilated to the point of complete absorption.”

LeRoy had two older cousins, Jesse and Blanche Lasky, who were vaudevillians, a circumstance that “helped kindle my interest in show business.” His mother was also devoted to vaudeville and the theatre, though only as a spectator. Thanks to her contacts, LeRoy made his stage debut at six months, carried on at the Alcazar Theatre as the papoose in The Squaw Man. …
When LeRoy was five, his mother went off with the man who subsequently became her second husband, Percy Temple. They moved no further than Oakland, where LeRoy and his father frequently visited them, but the event was the first trauma of the boy’s childhood. The second followed within a year—the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. It ruined LeRoy’s father, destroying both the family home and Harry LeRoy’s beloved store. He subsequently found work as a salesman, but “he was a beaten man.”

LeRoy never went hungry, but he wanted more than bare subsistence and, at the age of twelve or thirteen, quit school to become a newsboy. “I saw life in the raw in the streets of San Francisco,” he says. I met the cops and the whores and the reporters and the bartenders and the Chinese and the fishermen and the shopkeepers….When it came time for me to make motion pictures, I made movies that were real, because I knew firsthand how real people behaved.” “Newsboys had to battle it out for choice corners” and LeRoy, who was small but wiry, fought his way from a corner in Oakland to the two pitches he most desired, “the lucrative corner at the St. Francis Hotel in the morning, and the exciting corner in front of the Alcazar Theatre in the evening.”

When he was fourteen, hawking his papers outside the Alcazar, the actor Theodore Roberts noticed him and gave him a one-line role in a pay called Barbara Fritchie. After that, he says, “The stage bug had bitten and the itch would never leave me.” He began to compete in amateur talent contests as “the Singing Newsboy,” before long promoting himself to “Mervyn LeRoy, the Boy Tenor of the Generation.” According to some accounts, he appeared around this time as a child actor in one or more of Bronco Billy Anderson’s films.

In 1916, LeRoy met another would-be vaudevillian, Clyde Cooper, and teamed up with him as “LeRoy and Cooper, Two Kids and a Piano.” After a while they were signed by one of the vaudeville circuits and toured all over the country with growing success. LeRoy says: “I learned show business from the bottom up. I learned the value of dialogue, the value of music, the value of timing. After three years the act broke up. Stranded in New York and penniless LeRoy swallowed his pride and went to see his cousin Jesse Lasky, who had quit vaudeville and risen to power and wealth as one of the first movie moguls, chief of Famous Players-Lasky. Jesse gave him his train fare to Los Angeles and a note to the studio.

LeRoy arrived in Hollywood in 1919 (not in 1923 as for some reason he states in his autobiography). He found that he had a menial job in the wardrobe department at $12.50 a week. Whenever he could, he would “visit the stages and watch them make movies,” soon deciding that “the director seemed to be at the center of the artistic universe” there.

Tired of the smell of mothballs, LeRoy talked himself into a job in the lab as a film tinter, at the same time trading on his extraordinarily youthful appearance to secure juvenile roles in two or three forgotten movies. One day, William DeMille was directing a movie that called for the effect of moonlight shining on water. No one knew how to achieve this, but that night LeRoy stayed late at the lab and rigged the shot with a black box full of distilled water and a spotlight. This coup brought LeRoy a back-breaking job as assistant cameraman. Responsible for loading the camera and pulling focus. That advance was short-lived, ending when LeRoy ruined the first footage he handled.

Deciding that his movie career was finished, he returned to vaudeville. Within a year he was back in Hollywood, intent on a new career as an actor. LeRoy played a ghost in Alfred E. Green’s The Ghost Breaker (1922), a crooked jockey in Arthur Rosson and Johnny Hines’ Little Johnny Jones (1923), a bellboy in Lloyd Ingraham’s Going Up (1923), and three or four other small roles in 1923-1924. He was evidently only moderately talented as an actor, but had impressed Alfred E. Green with his gifts as a gagman during the filming of The Ghost Breaker. In 1924, when Green offered him a job as gagwriter, he moved behind the camera “with no regrets.”

LeRoy worked with Green and others as a “comedy constructor” on a series of films…. The majority of these pictures starred Colleen Moore, who became a close friend. It was through her influence at First National that LeRoy secured his first directorial assignment, No Place To Go (1928), starring Mary Astor as a banker’s daughter who sails to the South Seas in search of romance and finds more than she bargained for.

No Place To Go was adapted from a Saturday Evening Post story that LeRoy had found himself. In his first film he initiated a number of policies that he was to follow throughout his career—wide and constant reading in search of stories with “heart”; insistence that the script be complete before shooting began (by no means as general a policy as might be supposed); and the equally thorough advance—out of camera angles. Shot in five weeks at a cost of about $70,000, No Place To Go made a modest profit—another useful precedent. LeRoy claimed that “all my pictures—and I made seventy-five of them—have been money-makers.”

His second film, Harold Teen (1928), certainly was. Based on Carl Ed’s popular comic strip, and starring Arthur Lake and Alice white, it apparently grossed a million dollars. By the end of 1928, LeRoy was making a thousand dollars a week. LeRoy’s most important contribution to the burgeoning gangster genre was Little Caesar (1930)….LeRoy had to fight for permission to film Burnett’s rawly realistic novel, the Warners’ front office then being of the opinion that Depression audiences wanted only light relief….Richard Watts Jr. called Little Caesar “the truest, most ambitious and most distinguished” of the contemporary rash of gangster movies, “pushing into the background the usual romantic conventions of theme and concentrating on characterization rather than on plot.” Dwight
Macdonald went so far as to call it “the most successful talkie that has yet been made in this country.” ...Forty years later Peter Waymark found it “still as fast and abrasive as when it was made.” Though there was a good deal of criticism of the film’s callousness and violence, it was an overwhelming box-office success.

LeRoy made six films in 1931….The most notable of the year’s output was Five Star Final, a tough newspaper story….I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang (1932) broke box-office records and shared an Oscar as best picture with Forty Second Street…..

After a couple of minor pieces came the “ebullient and witty” Gold Diggers of 1933, generally regarded as one of the classic film musicals of the 1930s. The “gold diggers” are Ruby Keeler, Ginger Rogers, Joan Blondell, and Aline MacMahon—showgirls looking for work. Ned Sparks plays a producer looking for an “angel,” and Dick Powell is the playboy songsmith who writes, subsidizes, and stars in the show that makes all their dreams come true. The movie features some of Busby Berkeley’s most spectacular production numbers, including the stunning opening with Ginger Rogers garbed in gold dollars and the Depression-conscious finale, “My Forgotten Man.”……

A musical comedy, Happiness Ahead (1934) was followed by Oil for the Lamps of China (1935) from the novel by Alice Tisdale Hobart. The book deals with the activities of a ruthless American oil company in China, centering on an executive (Pat O’Brien) whose devotion to the company costs him the love of his wife and the life of his child. The novel’s indictment of the methods and morals of big business is considerably softened in Laird Doyle’s screenplay, but the picture has nevertheless been much admired for the quality of its direction and acting and for Tony Gaudio’s photography. John Baxter calls it “one of the few films of the Thirties to deal exclusively with the problems of work,” and “a brave attempt to generalise about the conflict between individuality and social allegiance.”……

One of the finest movies of LeRoy’s career followed in 1937, They Won’t Forget, adapted by Robert Rossen and Aben Kandel from a novel by Ward Greene. Claude Rains plays an unscrupulous Southern district attorney ambitious for the governorship who sees his chance when a coed is found murdered. (The coed, in a tight sweater, is Lana Turner, one of LeRoy’s discoveries.)…The poisonous claustrophobia and demoralizing heat of small-town Southern life are powerfully conveyed in a film that Frank S. Nugent called “a brilliant sociological drama and a trenchant film editorial against intolerance and hatred.”……

LeRoy also acted as producer of James Whale’s The Great Garrick in 1937 and the following year he directed his last film for Warners, a comedy called Fools for Scandal. After that he moved to MGM, succeeding Irving Thalberg as supervisor of production at the phenomenal salary of $6,000 a week. He produced four films, including the hugely successful The Wizard of Oz (1939), but found himself increasingly frustrated in the role of executive. In the end, MGM gave way and let him return to directing. At the MGM “glamor factory,” LeRoy became a very different kind of filmmaker from the socially conscious realist he had been at Warners…. LeRoy had been finding life at MGM increasingly difficult after the enthronement of Dore Shary, and in 1955 he returned to Warners.…

Raymond Rohauer suggests that LeRoy’s “range and diversity have seldom been equaled by any other producer-director,” but the same could be said about the unevenness of his work. His worst films, as John Baxter remarks, are “impossible to watch.” But, working for Warners in the 1930s, he made eight or nine movies that fully justify Peter Waymark’s description of him as “one of the great Hollywood craftsmen,” and John Baxter’s claim that he was, at his best, “an artist of ideas.”……


During the most abyssmal days of the early thirties, as economic paralysis spread, snuffing out a shop here, a bank there, a factory somewhere else, movie attendance still averaged an astonishing sixty to seventy-five millions persons each week. Although this was a considerable comedown from the one hundred and ten million moviegoers of 1930 (when sound was still a great novelty), it remained a powerful testimonial to the sway movies held over the national imagination. For, as the number of unemployed moved towards fifteen million, and millions more became partially employed, it was evident that the total of sixty million, even including repeats, included a great many people who could scarcely afford to be there. In those painful days, the marquee’s of America’s Broadway’s and Main Street attracted the dispossessed farmers, the failed bankers and all the sellers who had no buyers.

Americans needed their movies. Moving pictures had come to play too important a role in their lives to be considered just another luxury item. Immediately after the stock market had crashed, motion picture executives began stating that people would part with a great deal before they stopped going to the movies. Harry Warner of Warner Brothers thought that films were “as necessary as any other daily commodities,” and E.W. Hammons of Educational Films felt financial hardship would not hurt the industry: people “can always afford the price of a seat…” And as the crisis deepened in 1932, Walter Gifford, the head of President Hoover’s Organization on Unemployment Relief, advocated the distribution of free movie tickets to the
poor. According to Gifford, President of American Telephone and Telegraph, the movies were a necessity to be ranked just behind food and clothing.…. 

Sixty millions persons did not escape into a void each week; escapism is hardly a useful concept. People do not escape into something they cannot relate to. The movies were meaningful because they depicted things lost or things desired. What is “fantastic” in fantasy is an extension of something real. To Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., American film in the thirties had “a vital connection with American emotions—more, I think, than it ever had before…. The movies were near the operative center of the nation’s consciousness.”...

We’re in the money,
We’re in the money.
We’ve got a lot of what
It takes to get along.
We never see a headline
About a breadline
Today.
Ginger Rogers sings this in Gold Diggers of 1933, as dozens of girls sing along, holding silver currency, giant coins, swaying and serpentining. This is a rehearsal for a new show, but the show never sees opening night because the bank closes it for nonpayment. Just when the girls are singing about never seeing a headline about a breadline, the sheriff walks in and tells everybody to get out of the theatre.

Then producer Ned Sparks gets the idea to put on a show about the Depression. Ruby Keeler and Aline MacMahon and Joan Blondell, hungry chorines all, give him the idea—and songs will be by the “poor” boy (actually a Boston blueblood with a yen for Broadway) who lives down the hall from the girls. They can hear him playing through the window and think he’s great. He’s Dick Powell!…. 

Of course they [the musicals] were escapist—a nation could drown its sorrows in legs and glitter, and plumes and teeth and sweet harmonizing. But the three musicals that made the most money…all had Depression motifs. Warner Baxter is broke in 42nd Street, everybody is broke in Gold Diggers of 1933 and star producer Jimmy Cagney is on the skids (“Breadline I hear you calling”) in Footlight Parade.…. 

The backstage musicals, in all their lavishness, were still related to facts of life in 1933. Their pointless successors were found to be a bore.…. 

“No medium has contributed more greatly than the film to the maintenance of the national morale during a period featured by revolution, riot and political turmoil in other countries. It has been the mission of the screen, without ignoring the serious social problems of the day, to reflect aspiration, optimism, and kindly humor in its entertainment.”

Will Hays, 1934

“We were against revolution. Therefore, we waged war against those conditions which make revolutions—against those resentments and inequalities which bred them. In America in 1933 the people did not attempt to remedy wrongs by overthrowing their institutions. Americans were made to realize that wrongs could and would be set right within their institutions.”

Franklin Roosevelt, 1936

The movies made a central contribution toward educating Americans in the fact that wrongs could be set right within their existing institutions. They did so not by haunting the screen with bogeyman Reds but, as Hays noted, by reflecting aspiration and achievement. They showed that individual initiative still bred success, that the federal government was a benevolent watchman, that we were a classless, melting pot nation.

From 1930 to 1933, it is fairly easy to trace the subject matter and preoccupations of American film and chalk it all up to depression, despair, and anomie. Gangsters, prostitutes, con men, sleazy back-room politicos, lawless lawyers: a dreary parade of characters peoples the movies, bred by a cynical, burnt-out culture. And there is that side to it: filmgoers were undeniably attracted to outlaws, observed a paralyzed law slumbering and bumbling, saw a dynamism in dishonest lawyers, and rejoiced at the Marx Brothers war against sanity. But there is another side of this attraction to the lawless and freakish. (literally freakish. Tod Browning’s 1932 MGM film, Freaks, had a cast made up of pin-heads, human torsos, midgets, and dwarfs, like nothing ever in the movies. And what more stunted a year than 1932 for such a film.)

And that other side seems more compelling and helpful for an understanding of how the decade progressed. In the gang films and musicals, Hollywood coaxed an old success model back to life, creating special worlds in which it could function. The gangster worlds and the backstage world of Warner’s big three musicals of 1933 were, in effect, success preserves. From triggerman to Boss of the North Side, from back row of the chorus to the opening night lead, from office boy to chairman of the board: it was the same dynamic at work. The avalanche of gangster films in 1931 and 1932 and the immense success of Warner’s musicals demonstrate the pulling power of that dead model during the worst years of financial hardship. So the gang cycle emerges as less despairing and lawless than willfully optimistic: the nation going to the bottom of the social barrel before finding a credible vehicle for its success dreams.


The climactic Busby Berkeley number of Gold Diggers of 1933 combines two major ideas involved in early 1930s political revisionism: the spirit of the Great Crusade—the high ideals that were aroused by the First World War and later betrayed, first by the materialism of the 1920s, then by the catastrophe of the Crash, the New Deal equation between the emergency of the war
and the emergency of the Depression, resulting in a call for a
revival of wartime spirit and collectivism.

Both ideas converged in an ugly event of the early
Depression: the Bonus March of Summer, 1932. An “army” of
15,000 disillusioned, unemployed veterans—complete with
uniforms, military discipline, and parades—squatted in
Washington, D.C., to demand money and/or jobs. They and their
families were finally routed by police, cavalry, and tear gas—one of
the most controversial actions of the Hoover administration.

The “Remember My Forgotten Man” number is
remarkable both for its explicit reference to the still-warm Bonus
Marchers issue and for its wholehearted sympathy for their
case, as attested by the unforgettable withering gaze that saucered-
eyed Joan Blondell fixes on a surly cop as he collars a sleeping
bum who is wearing a medal beneath his ragged coat. But what is
most remarkable (and most Berkeleysque) about the number is
its expansion of the political message to a sexual level.

The number is based on an equation
between economics and
sex, a confluence of social
and psychological factors.
For working men in the
Depression, the loss of
their jobs or the decrease in
their earning power
represents a form of
impotence. …

“Remember My
Forgotten Man” is the
simplest and most straight-
forward of Berkeley’s big
numbers in the classic
Warner Bros. musicals. Its
directness is a consequence
of its political commitment.
Its points are punched across for maximum impact, most
forcefully by the jarring blackout that drive home the number’s
themtic connection more viscerally and vigorously than even a
direct cut might do. “Remember My Forgotten Man” is one of
Hollywood’s most hard-hitting political statements of the
1930s—much more so than the treatment of similar material in
Warner Bros.’ Heroes for Sale (also 1933).

Rob Nixon: “Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933)” (Turner Classic
Movies: http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/3463/Gold-Diggers-
of-1933/articles.html)

The vogue for musicals that hit the screen on the advent of sound
had passed by the early 1930s. For the most part stagey and
derivative, these productions became less and less interesting to
the public, who were turning more to realistic dramas, such as
the hard-hitting urban social commentaries Warner Brothers was
known for. As the decade went on, however, most of the major
studios, Warners among them, reasoned that a nation wearied by
the Depression was ready for more glamorous, frivolous, flashy
entertainment, and with technological advances in sound and
camera allowing for greater fluidity and creativity for musical
numbers, they started taking chances again on musical comedies.
As it had done in many other areas (not least the development of
the talking picture), Warner Brothers took the lead, creating a
new trend-and having a huge smash-with 42nd Street (1933). The
success of that picture convinced the studio to put its money,
energy, and best talents into more of the same.

Gold Diggers of 1933 followed just a few months later
and proved to have even more of what the public enjoyed in the
earlier picture. Based on a Broadway comedy that had been
filmed by the studio twice before, this version strayed much
farther from the original to include not only the lavish musical
numbers that were quickly becoming a Warners trademark
(thanks to one talent in particular) but also both the snappy, fast-
talking appeal of its big-city stories and the element of social
commentary the studio was known for. While most musical and
comedy entertainment turned out by Hollywood at the time
sought to take audiences’ minds off the Depression, here was a
musical that was specifically about the country’s economic hard
times. The comedic center of the film was still the efforts of a
group of showgirls to thwart the scheme of a stuffy society
man to break up a romance, and one of the best-known
numbers had nothing to do with the financial crisis.

"Pettin’ in the Park" pushed the
limits of censorship with an
eroticism unprecedented for the
genre, featuring virtual nudity,
one very naughty and
voyeuristic "baby," and the
efforts of the leading man to
use a can opener to extricate
his sweetheart from her metal
chastity suit. But the frivolous
story was steeped in a conflict
between haves and have-nots,
centered on a plot about the
struggle to keep Broadway alive during hard times, and
bracketed by two production numbers that took the Depression as
their central motif.

The film opens with a chorus of scantily coin-clad
chorines warbling "We’re in the money," as if all were at last
well in the land, brutally interrupted by law enforcement officers
come to collect the producer's outstanding debts by confiscating
the scenery and ripping the costumes right off the cast. The
movie concludes with the most downbeat ending of any musical
before, say, West Side Story (1961). Inspired by the recent
disastrous Bonus March, in which downtrodden veterans of
World War I were brutally rebuffed in their attempt to claim their
government pensions (arguably the first and certainly largest
Occupy movement in American history), the final number
showcases prostitutes and widows, soldiers and drunkards,
exhorting the world to "Remember My Forgotten Man." Darkly
expressionistic and pessimistic, it brings the curtain down on the
movie without so much as a single funny quip or romantic clinch
to relieve the gloom. Audiences had never seen anything like it,
and it helped make the picture a box office smash.

Although the film is directed by Mervyn LeRoy, one of the
most successful producer-directors of the studio era, this is
usually thought of as a Busby Berkeley picture, thanks to the
unmistakable style brought to musical numbers he created and
But first we have to start with the film’s opening number, one of World War I, you’ve experienced the highs and lows of the outstretched hands begging for mercy towards the forgotten men experience and the psychological effects. To make this movie about the Depression, Mervyn LeRoy and Busby Berkeley, take measured high society glitz intersects with the real world. The film’s structure itself is built into the film’s structure itself. It floats between fantasy and reality, but never finds a solid line between both— even on stage, the Depression creeps in, while, after a big theatrical success, even on stage, the Depression creeps in, while, after a big theatrical success, the juxtaposition between the chorus girls and the real world. This will figure heavily into the first act of the picture.

Let’s take a look at a chunk of the lyrics really quick:

We’re in the money, we’re in the money.
We’ve got a lot of what it takes to get along!
We’re in the money, the skies are sunny…
Old man Depression, you are through, you’ve done us wrong!

We never see a headline, ’bout a breadline today…
And when we see the landlord,
We can look that guy right in the eye!

What’s interesting about the number isn’t that it isn’t about traditional American greed for riches and , but it’s not about greed or desire— it’s about dignity. Being able to look your landlord right in the eye isn’t about having the ability to be on the same level as your creditors, but being able to walk and make your way into the world. This will figure heavily into the first act of the picture.

As she emerges from the giant phallic Scrooge McDuck vault in an outfit made from cardboard coins, Linda thought, “Gee, I’ve finally made it!”

While these lyrics are being belted out with maximum gusto, a bevvy of scantily clad chorus girls (with Ginger Rogers in the lead) model their coin-based attire, including a fashion show that gives a libertarian fetishist wank material for a year.

The second verse of the song does something interesting in that it switches up the lyrics with a reprise in Pig Latin. Besides the discongruity of hearing Ginger Rogers say what sounds like ‘anime’ to modern ears, this serves a purpose. The first is to take the lyrics and contort them beyond recognition—taking the ode to capitalist wealth and a yearn for decent dignity through materialist riches and making it into childish gibberish, perhaps acknowledging how little that possibly does matter. At the same time as the Pig Latin verses, we’re treated to an extreme close-up of Rogers’ face, almost rendering it grotesque (I mean, it’s still Ginger Rogers’ face, but still). It becomes omnipresent, briefly taking the audience into a completely different type of surrealism.

The musical number ends not with a finale, but with a crash as the sheriff department raids the show. That leads to another theme of the movie, that audiences could certainly latch on to at the time: hard work getting deferred right when it seems to be paying off. The juxtaposition between the chorus girls singing the virtues of financial security as the show is closed by its creditors isn’t lost as we’re quickly introduced to our droll leads— chorus girls Carol (Joan Blondell), Polly (Ruby Keeler) and comic player Trixie (Aline MacMahon). They’re also roommates, and we follow them back to their tenement after a brief insert showing us just how many theaters are are open on Broadway— none.
We’re quickly apprised of the personalities. Carol is direct and passionate. Polly is romantic but reserved. And Trixie is that special kind of woman who is wry and devious in a dangerous mix. They’ve all seen the tops of society, but with no show on and no work, Trixie is stealing milk from the window sill of their neighbors. They don’t even have a full set of clothes to dress up in when it’s rumored that producer Barney (Ned Sparks) will finally get a show off the ground again; they have to steal an outfit from Fay (Rogers) requisitioned from her job at the druggists.

Carol is sent in the duds to go see if Barney is on the level, and she calls back to the girls. In an interesting reversal, when we cut to her on her end of the phone, she’s choking up. Initially, the audience will leap to thinking that the rumor was just that. But, instead, Carol is literally so excited about the possibility of work, she’s almost in tears. She brings Barney home, where he announces he has the theater set and, with the girls, has the cast, too. After hearing Polly’s romantic partner, Brad (Dick Powell), playing the piano across the alleyway, Barney has the music, too. Now all he needs is the money.

Everyone is instantly defeated, but Brad offers to put up $15,000 for the show. No one understands how a songwriter in the tenements could get the money–Trixie thinks he’s a bank robber on the lam–but he comes through. He even performs in the show over his own objections when he discovers that it’ll go under without him. And the show within the movie kicks off with one of the craziest, sexiest things you may ever catch on the silver screen.

(You can read the rest of this excellent essay online at http://pre-code.com/gold-diggers-of-1933-1933-review-with-joan-blondell-warren-william-ruby-keeler-dick-powell-guy-kibbee-and-aline-macmahon/)