Director Mervyn LeRoy
Dance Director Busby Berkeley
Writers David Boehm (dialogue), Erwin S. Gelsey, Avery Hopwood (play), Ben Markson (dialogue), James Seymour
Producer Jack L. Warner
Original music Harry Warren
Cinematographer Sol Polito
Film Editor George Amy
Art Director Anton Grot
Costumes Orry-Kelly
Makeup Perc Westmore
Lyricist Al Dubin

Warren William .... J. Lawrence Bradford
Joan Blondell .... Carol King
Aline MacMahon .... Trixie Lorraine
Ruby Keeler .... Polly Parker
Dick Powell .... Brad Roberts (Robert Treat Bradford)
Guy Kibbee .... Faneul H. Peabody
Ned Sparks .... Barney Hopkins
Ginger Rogers .... Fay Fortune

Mervyn LeRoy (15 October 1900, San Francisco—13 September 1987, Beverly Hills, Alzheimer's disease) 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.” What does that imply about his opinion of the other filmmakers he knew? 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. LeRoy’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 (William Berkeley Enos, 29 November 1895, Los Angeles—14 March 1976, Palm Springs, California) 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, co-ordinated
extravaganza. Gold Diggers of 1933 has some of the most outlandish of these, as does one of the later remakes, Gold Diggers of 1925 (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 closeups 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 hired him to direct the musical segments of 42nd Street 1932, after which his style and position were solidly established and he and his team (composer Harry Warren and lyricist Al Dubin) got a 7-year contract. Some of Berkeley’s other films were Billy Rose’s Jumbo 1962, Rose Marie 1954, Million Dollar Mermaid 1952, Call Me Mister 1951, Girl Crazy 1943, The Gang’s All Here 1943, Lady Be Good 1941, Gold Diggers in Paris 1938, Stars Over Broadway 1935, Roman Scandals 1933, Footlight Parade 1933, Girl Crazy 1932, and Whoopee! 1930. He was also director of 22 films, among them Take Me Out to the Ball Game 1949, For Me and My Gal (Gene Kelly’s first film) 1942, Babes in Arms 1939, and They Made Me a Criminal 1939. The famous neon violin “Shadow Waltz” sequence in Gold Diggers of 1933 had an afterlife: the song was included in the 1970s stage version of 42nd Street on Broadway and the violins themselves are on display in the Warner’s Studio museum. Nicole Armour’s interesting Images article, “The Machine Art of Dziga Vertov and Busby Berkeley,” is on-line at http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue05/features/article, “The Machine Art of Dziga Vertov and Busby Berkeley,” is on-line at http://www.imagesjournal.com/issue05/features/berkeley-vertov.htm.


Warren William (Warren William Krech, 2 December 1895, Aitkin, Minnesota—24 September 1948, Hollywood, multiple myeloma) 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 as Perry Mason and The Lone Wolf. Born to a newspaper publisher, he served in World War I 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.

Ginger Rogers (Virginia Katherine McMath, 16 July 1911, Independence, Missouri—25 April 1995, Rancho Mirage, California, congestive heart failure) worked in vaudeville from 14 to 17, then appeared as a dancer on Broadway in “Top Speed.” She had the first of several bit parts in A Night in Dormitory 1929, then had two important roles in 1933: the monocled Anytime Annie in 42nd Street and the singer of “We’re in the Money” in Gold Diggers of 1933. She is perhaps best known for her three great performances with Fred Astaire in Flying Down to Rio 1933, Roberta and Top Hat 1935, but she was also an excellent dramatic actress, which is why she won an Academy Award for Kitty Foyle 1940. Her autobiography, Ginger: My Story was published in 1991. She once said: “When two people love each other, they don’t look at each other, they look in the same direction.”

Joan Blondell (Rose Joan Blondell, 30 August 1906, New York, New York—25 December 1979, Santa Monica, leukemia) 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, Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter? 1957, Desk Set 1957, A Tree Grows in Brooklyn 1945, Cry Havoc 1943, I Want a Divorce 1940, Bullets or Ballots 1936, Three on a Match 1932, Blonde Crazy 1931, The Public Enemy 1931, and Sinner’s Holiday 1930. Frequently a second lead or an important supporting player, she never became a star, which is perhaps why it was so easy for her to move into a wide variety of television roles from the early 1950s on. She was a regular player on two series, “Here Comes the Brides” and “Banyon,” and she appeared in episodes of “The Love Boat,” “Medical Center,” “The Rookies,” “Love, American Style,” “Family Affair,” “My Three Sons,” “Dr. Kildare,” “Bonanza,” “The Twilight Zone,” “Wagon Train,” “The Virginian,” and “The Untouchables.” She appeared in 10 musicals with Dick Powell, her husband for 10 years. She wrote an novel about her vaudeville years, Center Door Fancey 1972.

Ruby Keeler (Ethel Hilda Keeler, 25 August 1910, Halifax, Nova Scotia—28 February 1993, Rancho Mirage, California, cancer) didn’t sing, dance or act very well, but she was so likeable that she did very well the romantic comedies and musicals of the 1930s in which an ordinary person was interesting enough to be central to the action. She acted in only 15 films, the first of which was an uncredited appearance in Show Girl in Hollywood 1930, the second a justly-famous starring role in 42nd Street (1932), and the last Sweethearts of the Campus 1941. One of her most famous dancing roles was done on giant typewriter keys in Ready, Willing and Able 1937; her favorite of her films was Colleen 1936. She was a Broadway dancer before marrying singer Al Jolson and moving to Hollywood. She divorced Jolson in 1940, married a real estate executive, and was out of show business for almost 30
years. In 1971 she began a run of 861 performances in Busby Berkeley’s No No Nanette on Broadway.

Dick Powell (14 November 1904, Mountain View, Arkansas—2 January 1963, West Los Angeles, cancer) began in 1932 as the juvenile lead in many Warner’s productions, was a star in musical comedies for more than a decade, then moved into tough guy roles with a terrific performance as detective Philip Marlowe in the film version of Raymond Chandler’s Murder, My Sweet 1944. 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, A Midsummer Night's Dream 1935, Dames 1934, Footlight Parade 1933, 42nd Street (1932).

Ned Sparks (19 November 1883, Guelph, Ontario—3 April 1957, Victorville, CA). From IMDb: “Ned Sparks proved himself a top character support whose style would be imitated for decades to come. Although less remembered now, he was an inimitable cinematic player back in 1930s Hollywood. The nasal-toned, deadpan comedian Sparks was born Edward A. Sparkman in Guelph, Canada, and was raised for a time in St. Thomas, Ontario. He attended the University of Toronto and, after a period of soul-searching, decided upon acting. He began, believe it or not, as a honky-tonk balladeer in Dawson Creek, Alaska. In 1907, he went to New York and developed his stone-faced reputation in comic outings. His first film in 1915 did not lead to other offers, particularly during a black-balling incident as a one of the founding members of Actors Equity. In 1922, his movie career headed full steam, but it was the advent of sound with Ned's cynical tones, raspy whines and sour disposition that sparked a comfortable film niche, making close to 100 films in all. Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933), Going Hollywood (1933), the Caterpillar in the all-star Alice in Wonderland (1933), the Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers version of Imitation of Life (1934) were just a few of his more noticeable roles. His cigar-chomping pass became so well-known at Warner Bros., in fact, that Walt Disney's short animated film Broken Toys (1935) had a Jack-in-the-Box character based exclusively on Ned's image. A few years later, when Disney made Mother Goose Goes Hollywood (1938), Ned's caricature played The Jester. In 1939, Tex Avery portrayed him as a hermit crab in Fresh Fish (1939). A radio favorite over the years, he performed alongside Bing Crosby quite frequently. His last disagreeable Hollywood role would be alongside James Stewart in Magic Town (1947). In 1957, he died of an intestinal blockage.


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 gunman 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 working-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 marques 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.

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 people 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.


“Remember My Forgotten Man” Martin Rubin.

The climactic Busby Berkeley number of Gold Diggers of 1933 combines two major ideas involved in early 1930s political revisionism:

1. 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
2. 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 cause, as attested by the unforgettable withering gaze that saucer-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 Berkeleyesque) 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 blackouts that drive home the number’s thematic 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.’s Heroes for Sale (also 1933).

Peter Kemp. “Grit 'n' Glitz”, Senses of Cinema 2003

... in musicals like the Gold Diggers series, the gold diggers usually came in twos and threes, were played by smart, snappy actresses like Joan Blondell... and Aline MacMahon, [and] set out to make their way in a man's world but on their own terms...

This is one of the few genres and occasions where there’s a real feeling of solidarity among women. – Molly Haskell (1)

You had to watch [Busby] Berkeley. He was such an expert technician that a number could get totally lost in images. – Roger Edens (3)

Coming in between Lloyd Bacon's 42nd Street and Footlight Parade, Mervyn LeRoy's Gold Diggers of 1933 is the second in a trio of hugely successful Warner Bros. backstage musicals. Released by the studio within the same (eponymous) year, all three are perceived to be part of a return to box-office form for the reputedly ailing song-and-dance genre, and all three showcase numbers “created and directed” (4) by self-taught army-and-Broadway-trained choreographer, Busby Berkeley. Whilst the celebrated Berkeleyesque vision of multi-populated, kaleidoscopic fantasy-set-pieces links the three movies (along with slangy, street-wise dialogue, and the playfully vivid tunes by Al Dubin and Harry Warren), what distinguishes the narrative of Gold Diggers of 1933, in relation to the two Bacon-helmed works, is the absence of a strong, energetically charged central male protagonist, along the manically driven lines of Warner Baxter’s Julian Marsh or James Cagney’s Chester Kent. Gold Diggers of 1933 does offer, in a featured role, the ineffable Ned Sparks as hyper-motivated Broadway director Barney Hopkins, but the film’s plot-steering leads are the personably played titular showgirls: Ruby Keeler's dewy-eyed Polly Parker, Joan Blondell's bright-eyed Carol King, Aline MacMahon's sharp-eyed Trixie
Lorraine and, in a supporting part, (soon-to-be-Fred-ed) Ginger Rogers' greedy-eyed Fay Fortune.

Like many a Warners non-musical film, *Gold Diggers of 1933* was one of the studio's few popular films to openly address, and indeed directly critique, the contemporaneous Great Depression, the socio-economic national catastrophe that supposedly compelled audiences to seek fleeting doses of solace and escapism at inexpensive picture-houses. Subsequently, the opening credits immediately flow into one of Depression-era cinema's most potent and reassuring icons. The grinning, young and healthy figure of Ginger Rogers is shown onstage, bedecked in a floor-length train of twinkling silver dollars, sporting a circular, shiny-coined crotch-piece, and singing “We're in the Money” (“Old Man Depression, you are through, you done us wrong”). Meanwhile, a bevy of chorines treat us to a fashion-parade of various dollar-disc-bespangled outfits; Ginger breaks into a verse intoned in Pig Latin; and then everyone, holding up huge round pieces of luminous cardboard coinage, performs a kind of corporate Mexican wave of endlessly undulating, boundless, cash flow (“Let's lend it, spend it, send it rolling along!”). When suddenly – Crash! – all is rudely interrupted by officials from the sheriff's office come to confiscate property for the theatre company's unpaid debts (Rrrip! – there goes Ginger's glistening crotch-piece). Having begun somewhere near what theorist Rick Altman might describe as the film musical's transcendent, sung-and-danced “supra-diegetic” realm (5), we're effectively brought back to mundane, diegetic reality and the bracing cynicism of Ginger-as-Fay's summary one-liner, “The Depression, dearie!”

That mood of bracing cynicism continues in the following expository scenes set in the apartment shared by the three principal girls who are forced to sleep in the same bed and to drink breakfast milk pilfered (by the ever-enterprising Trixie) by a perving baby-midget who proceeds to hand tenor Dick Powell a can-opener to prise apart Ruby Keeler's freshly donned metal bathing suit. Another, “The Shadow Waltz” splays out rows determined to terminate both Brad's “sensational career” in showbiz as well as his inappropriately serious interest in “this Polly Parker woman”. One thing misleads to another and soon these two prospective spirits of party-pooping melancholy are being properly (and all-too-willingly) fleeced by a triumphantly gleeful Trixie (“Well. I'm very sorry, Mr. Bradford, but I just couldn't leave the room without a corsage!”) and an increasingly reluctant Carol (who's pretending to be Polly).

What enlivens the plot-section's rather conventional farce situations, loosely based on Avery Hopgood's 1919 play, *The Gold Diggers*, which had already been filmed twice as a silent and early talkie (6), is the cast's spirited delivery, especially MacMahon, who's an Auntie Mame-ish hoot (“Now, let me see, what does 'c.o.d.' mean?”) and Blondell, who brings an appealing sincerity and zest to a standard salt-of-the-earth role (her tearful joy, telephoning the news that she and her chums may've found jobs, is really quite touching, as is her ability to convey genuine romantic chemistry with William, the poor person's John Barrymore). These two talented women constantly pep up the film's story-world, nailing the occasional zinger with real zeal, and fleshing out an actual sisterly rapport, evident even when interacting with the limited histrionic resources of the sweetly ingenuous Ruby Keeler's Polly. Amongst the male characters, Ned Sparks' nasal-voiced Barney is a total delight, declaiming lines like “Listen, he's got it! Just what I want! Don't you hear that wailing, wailing? Men marching, marching! Marching in the rain! Jobs! Jobs! Gee, don't it get ya?” with visionary conviction. Surely much of such conviction, and the movie's overall tone of authenticity and gutsiness is attributable to the narrative's direction by Mervyn LeRoy, a versatile (and erratic) filmmaker, already responsible for such acclaimed, hard-bitten Warners hits as *Little Caesar* (1931), *Five Star Final* (1931) and *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932), with the anti-lynching melodrama, *They Won't Forget* (1937) still to come.

So, in many ways, we can separate story-director LeRoy's contribution to *Gold Diggers of 1933* from dance director Berkeley's legendary and indisputable authorship of the film's quartet of classic, surrealistic musical numbers. All the Berkeley sequences demonstrate this unique auteur's astonishing powers to transform straightforward performative set-ups into abstract micro-worlds of consistently evolving experimental art, shooting and virtually editing in one camera with almost Hitchcockian foresight and precision (7). One of these numbers, “Pettin' in the Park”, adds all sorts of eroticised meaning to the notion of congress in public places, as, amidst a myriad of ingeniously contrived configurations, clearly naked women are revealed undressing, silhouetted behind screens which are then pulled up by a pervy baby-midget who proceeds to hand tenor Dick Powell a can-opener to prise apart Ruby Keeler's freshly donned metal bathing suit. Another, “The Shadow Waltz” splays out rows
of blonde-wigged women in triple-tiered hooped skirts playing violins which are neon-lit in the dark, presenting a panoply of geometric patterns, culminating in the formation of one huge, shapely, self-bowing instrument. Less preoccupied with the usual parameters of singing and dancing, Berkeley explored the tonal registers of space itself, and orchestrated the plastic harmonies of mise en scène's own peculiar dynamic dimensions, moving his self-contained pieces close to opulently staged, non-representational live animation. This arch formalism is often fuelled by a smutty-minded, child-like cheekiness, since, as dance critic Arlene Croce has remarked, “Less primitive taste possibly would not have supported such extremes of invention” (8).

Berkeley's inventive extremism reaches an epic, operatic pitch in the “My Forgotten Man” finale to Gold Diggers of 1933 where Brad Roberts' and Barney Hopkins' narrative dream of devoting a routine to “Men out of a job round the soup kitchen” becomes an Expressionist-noir nightmare-scape of World War I veterans returning home to a Depression-induced continuum of breadlines, homelessness and hand-outs. Starting out as a bluesy lament from Joan Blondell's streetwalker, the song is passed on to a lone black woman in a tenement window, and gradually builds into a percussive march which advances through send-off parades, rainy battlefields, physical injury, and on to the final insult and humiliation of a defeated economy. This whole series of extravagantly squalid tableaux finishes by coming full circle back to Blondell, now the apex of a lumpenly disaffected triangular grouping of crowds of unemployed men and abandoned women, reaching up, arms outstretched, as the lyric insistently proclaims, “Forgetting him, you see,/Means you're forgetting me,/Like my forgotten man”. Without plot wind-up, we cut straight to “The End”, accompanied by pulsating strains of the by now already haunting Dubin-Warren ballad. Although conceived and mounted as something apart from LeRoy's tough and timely story strand (9), this climactic Berkeley number (even more forcefully than the “We're in the Money” intro), ironically supports and undercuts one of the key thematics, inherent in the very title of Gold Diggers of 1933, namely, Surviving the Zeitgeist. The truly unforgettable impact of “My Forgotten Man” (like much of the racy, pacy picture it crowns so memorably) is perhaps most succinctly expressed by its diegetic director Barney Hopkins, himself: “Gee, don't it get ya!!”

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4. The credit officially allocated to Busby Berkeley in the opening titles sequence of Gold Diggers of 1933.


8. Schatz, p. 152: “LeRoy's unit shot on a thirty-day schedule from February 16 through March 23, and Berkeley's from March 6 to April 13”

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