Won't Forget
Eager
Tokyo,
Homecoming
West Side
Mermaid
1955
Toward the Unknown,
Story
Majority of One
1965

Directed by Mervyn LeRoy
Written by Erwin Gelsey, James Seymour, David Boehm, Ben Markson, & Avery Hopwood (play)
Produced by Robert Lord, Jack L. Warner
Cinematography by Sol Polito
Edited by George Amy
Art Direction by Anton Grot
Costume Design by Orry-Kelly
Makeup by Perc Westmore
Music & lyrics by Al Dubin, Harry Warren
Conducted by Leo F. Forbstein
Arranged by Ray Heindorf
Numbers created and directed by Busby Berkeley

Warren William...Lawrence
Joan Blondell...Carol
Aline MacMahon...Trixie
Ruby Keeler...Polly
Dick Powell...Brad
Guy Kibbee...Peabody
Ned Sparks...Barney
Ginger Rogers...Fay
Billy Barty...Baby in 'Pettin' in the Park' Number
Busby Berkeley...Call Boy
Dennis O'Keefe...Chorus Boy
Jane Wyman...Gold Digger

Awards
2003 National Film Registry


LeRoy—GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933—2


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 Square 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 off 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 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 marquees 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.

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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.


“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
LeRoy—GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933—8

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).

**COMING UP IN THE FALL 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXIII:**

- September 6  **Pygmalion**, Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard (1938)
- September 13  **Beauty and the Beast/La Belle et La Bête**, Jean Cocteau (1946)
- September 20  **The Red Shoes**, Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (1948)
- September 27  **Diary of a Country Priest/Journal d’un curé de campagne**, Robert Bresson (1951)

**October 4**  **Black Orpheus/Orfeu Negro**, Marcel Camus (1959)

**October 11**  **Bonnie and Clyde**, Arthur Penn (1967)

**October 18**  **Marketa Lazarová**, František Vláčil (1967)

**October 25**  **The Last Wave**, Peter Weir (1977)

**November 1**  **True Confessions**, Ulu Grosbard (1981)

**November 8**  **Chunking Express/Chung Hing sam lam**, Wong Kar-Wei (1994)


**November 22**  **Frida**, Julie Taymor (2002)

**November 29**  **Revanche**, Götz Spielmann (2008)

**December 6**  **My Fair Lady**, George Cukor (1964)

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