

February 4, 2020 (XL:2) Lloyd Bacon: **42ND STREET** (1933, 89m)
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Spelling and Style—use of italics, quotation marks or nothing at all for titles, e.g.—follows the form of the sources.*



DIRECTOR Lloyd Bacon
WRITING Rian James and James Seymour wrote the screenplay with contributions from Whitney Bolton, based on a novel by Bradford Ropes.
PRODUCER Darryl F. Zanuck
CINEMATOGRAPHY Sol Polito
EDITING Thomas Pratt and Frank Ware
DANCE ENSEMBLE DESIGN Busby Berkeley

The film was nominated for Best Picture and Best Sound at the 1934 Academy Awards. In 1998, the National Film Preservation Board entered the film into the National Film Registry.

CAST

Warner Baxter...Julian Marsh
Bebe Daniels...Dorothy Brock
George Brent...Pat Denning
Ruby Keeler...Peggy Sawyer
Guy Kibbee...Abner Dillon
Una Merkel...Lorraine Fleming
Ginger Rogers...Ann Lowell
Ned Sparks...Thomas Barry
Dick Powell...Billy Lawler
Allen Jenkins...Mac Elroy
Edward J. Nugent...Terry
Robert McWade...Jones
George E. Stone...Andy Lee

LLOYD BACON (December 4, 1889, San Jose, California – November 15, 1955, Burbank, California) was an American screen, stage and vaudeville actor and film director. As a director he made films in virtually all genres, including westerns, musicals, comedies, gangster films, and crime dramas. He helped give Warner Bros. its reputation for gritty, fast-paced "torn from the headlines" action films in the 1930s. He has 130 director credits, some of which are *The Speeder* (1922), *The Educator* (1922), *Don't Fail* (1924), *Private Izzy Murphy* (1926), *Brass*



Knuckles (1927), *She Couldn't Say No* (1930), *A Notorious Affair* (1930), *Moby Dick* (1930), *Gold Dust Gertie* (1931), *Manhattan Parade* (1931), *Fireman, Save My Child* (1932), *42nd Street* (1933), *Mary Stevens, M.D.* (1933), *Footlight Parade* (1933), *Devil Dogs of the Air* (1935), *Gold Diggers of 1937* (1936), *San Quentin* (1937), *Espionage Agent* (1939), *Knute Rockne All American* (1940), *Action, the North Atlantic* (1943), *The Sullivans* (1944), *You Were Meant for Me* (1948), *Give My Regards to Broadway* (1948), *It Happens Every Spring* (1949), *The Good Humor Man* (1950), *Kill the Umpire* (1950), *Call Me Mister* (1951), *The Great Sioux Uprising* (1953), *Walking My Baby Back Home* (1953), *The French Line* (1953), and *She Couldn't Say No* (1954). He also acted, 74 films, the last of which was *Broadway Gondolier* (1935) and the first of which was *His Taking Ways* (1914). As an actor, he is best known for supporting Charlie Chaplin in such films as 1915's *The Tramp* and *The Champion* and 1917's *Easy Street*.

RIAN JAMES (October 3, 1899, Eagle Pass, Texas – April 26, 1953, Newport Beach, California) wrote the

screenplay, story or original dialogue for 42 titles, some of which were *Love Is a Racket* (1932), *Lawyer Man* (1932), *Parachute Jumper* (1933), *42nd Street, 1933* (1933), *Private Detective 62* (1933), *Mary Stevens, M.D.* (1933), *The Big Shakedown* (1934), *The White Parade* (1934), *Redheads on Parade* (1935), *To Beat the Band* (1935), *Submarine Patrol* (1938), *The Gorilla* (1939), *Turnabout* (1940), *Broadway Limited* (1941), *This Time for Keeps* (1942), *Not a Ladies' Man* (1942), *Parachute Nurse* (1942), *The Fortress* (1947), and *Whispering City* (1947).

JAMES SEYMOUR (April 23, 1895, Boston, Massachusetts – January 29, 1976, London, England) wrote the story or script for 25 films, among them *Lucky, Love* (1929), *Acquitted* (1929), *What a Widow!* (1930), *Lawyer Man!* (1932), *42nd Street!* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933!* (1933), *Footlight Parade!* (1933), *We'll Meet Again!* (1943), *The Saint Meets the Tiger* (1943), *Meet Me at Dawn* (1947), and *The Ghosts of Berkeley Square* (1947).

BRADFORD ROPES (January 1, 1905 – November 21, 1966) was a novelist and screenwriter whose work includes the novel *42nd Street* that was adapted for the 1933 film of the same name. His next novel, *Stage Mother* in 1933 was also adapted to film. He also wrote many Western stories as well as screenplays for Abbott and Costello.

SOL POLITO (November 12, 1892, Palermo, Sicily, Italy – May 23, 1960, Hollywood, California) was cinematographer for 168 films, some of which were *Rip Van Winkle* (1914), *M'Liss* (1915), *The Butterfly* (1915), *The Sins of Society* (1915), *Fruits of Desire* (1916), *Should a Woman Tell?* (1919), *The Bad Man* (1923), *The Bad Lands* (1925), *Satan Town* (1926), *Seven Footprints to Satan* (1929), *No, No, Nanette* (1930), *The Girl of the Golden West* (1930), *Madonna of the Streets* (1930), *The Hot Heiress* (1931), *Woman Hungry* (1931), *Union Depot* (1932), *Three on a Match* (1932), *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), *42nd Street* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *Dames* (1934), *Madame Du Barry* (1934), *The Woman, Red* (1935), *'G' Men* (1935), *Caliente* (1935), *The Petrified Forest* (1936), *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Gold Diggers, Paris* (1938), *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), *Dodge City* (1939), *Virginia City* (1940), *The Sea Hawk* (1940), *Santa Fe Trail* (1940), *Sergeant York* (1941), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *This Is the Army* (1943), *The Adventures of Mark Twain* (1944), *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944), *The Corn Is Green* (1945), *Rhapsody, Blue* (1945), *Cloak and Dagger* (1946), *The Voice of the Turtle* (1947), *Wrong Number* (1948), *Sorry* (1948), and *Anna Lucasta* (1949).

BUSBY BERKELEY

(William Berkeley Enos, 29 November 1895, Los Angeles—14 March 1976, Palm Springs, California) was arguably the greatest choreographer in film.

Berkeley is recognized as 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 1935* (not to mention *Gold Diggers of 1937*)” (Keir). 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* (1933), 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 *Whoopee!* (1930), *Girl Crazy* (1932), *Footlight Parade* (1933), *Roman Scandals* (1933), *Stars Over Broadway* (1935), *Gold Diggers in Paris* (1938), *Lady Be Good* (1941), *The Gang’s All Here* (1943), *Girl Crazy* (1943), *Call Me Mister* (1951), *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952), *Rose Marie* (1954), and *Billy Rose’s Jumbo* (1962). He was also director of 22 films, among them *They Made Me a Criminal* (1939), *Babes in Arms* (1939), *For Me and My Gal* (Gene Kelly’s first film) (1942), and *Take Me Out to*



the Ball Game (1949). 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.

WARNER BAXTER

(March 29, 1889, Columbus, Ohio – May 7, 1951, Beverly Hills, California) won a Best Actor Oscar, in 1928, for *Old Arizona*. He was in 108 films, some of which were *The Girl, His Room* (1922), *Alimony* (1924), *The Female* (1924), *The Air Mail* (1925), *Miss Brewster's Millions* (1926), *The Great Gatsby* (1926), *Ramona* (1928), *Old Arizona* (1928), *Behind That Curtain* (1929), *Doctors' Wives* (1931), *Daddy Long Legs* (1931), *The Squaw Man* (1931), *The Cisco Kid* (1931), *6 Hours to Live* (1932), *42nd Street* (1933), *Broadway Bill*, *1933 Penthouse* (1934), *The Prisoner of Shark Island* (1936), *White Hunter* (1936), *Slave Ship* (1937), *Kidnapped* (1938), *Return of the Cisco Kid* (1939), *Crime Doctor* (1943), *Crime Doctor's Strangest Case* (1943), *The Crime Doctor's Courage* (1945), *Crime Doctor's Warning* (1945), *Crime Doctor's Man Hunt* (1946), *Crime Doctor's Gamble* (1947), *The Crime Doctor's Diary* (1949), *Prison Warden* (1949), and *State Penitentiary* (1950).



BEBE DANIELS (January 14, 1901, Dallas, Texas – March 16, 1971, London, England) appeared in 232 films and TV series, among them *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1910), *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1910), *Bride and Gloom* (1918), *I'm on My Way* (1919), *Male and Female* (1919), *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920), *The Exciters* (1923), *Miss Brewster's Millions* (1926), *Volcano* (1926), *A Kiss, a Taxi* (1927), *The Fifty-Fifty Girl* (1928), *Rio Rita* (1929), *The Maltese Falcon* (1931), *Honor of the Family* (1931), *42nd Street* (1933), *Counsellor at Law* (1933), *Registered Nurse* (1934), *Music Is Magic* (1935), *Treachery on the High Seas* (1936), and *Life With the Lyons* (1955-1960). And here are all the short films she appeared in in 1916, which was typical for her, those years: *Lonesome Luke Leans to the Literary* (1916), *Luke Lugs Luggage* (1916), *Lonesome Luke Lolls, Luxury* (1916), *Luke, the Candy Cut-Up* (1916), *Luke Foils the Villain* (1916), *Luke and the Rural Roughnecks* (1916), *Luke Pipes the Pippins* (1916), *The Flirt* (1916), *Lonesome Luke, Circus King* (1916), *Luke's Double* (1916), *Them Was the*

Happy Days! (1916), *Luke and the Bomb Throwers* (1916), *Luke's Late Lunchers* (1916), *Luke Laughs Last* (1916), *Luke's Fatal Flivver* (1916), *Luke's Society Mixup* (1916), *Luke's Washful Waiting* (1916), *Luke Rides Roughshod* (1916), *Luke, Crystal Gazer* (1916), *Luke's Lost Lamb* (1916), *Luke Does the Midway* (1916), *Luke Joins the Navy* (1916), *Luke and the Mermaids* (1916), *Luke's Speedy Club Life* (1916), *Luke and the BangTails* (1916), *Luke, the Chauffeur* (1916), *Luke's Preparedness Preparations* (1916), *Luke, the Gladiator* (1916), *Luke, Patient Provider* (1916), *Luke's Newsie Knockout* (1916), *Luke's Movie Muddle* (1916), *Luke, Rank Impersonator* (1916), *Luke's Fireworks Fizzle* (1916), *Luke Locates the Loot* (1916), *Luke's Shattered Sleep* (1916),

GEORGE BRENT (March 15, 1899, Shannonbridge, Offaly, Ireland – May 26, 1979, Solana Beach, California) appeared in 104 films and TV series, among them *The Iron Horse* (1924), *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1931), *1932 So Big!* (1932), *42nd Street* (1933), *Baby Face* (1933), *Female* (1933), *Desirable* (1934), *Special Agent* (1935), *Submarine D-1* (1937), *Dark Victory* (1939), *The Rains Came* (1939), *The Fighting 69th* (1940), *The Man Who Talked Too Much* (1940), *South of Suez* (1940), *In This Our Life* (1942), *The Affairs of Susan* (1945), *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), *Temptation* (1946), *Slave Girl* (1947), *FBI Girl* (1951), *Man Bait* (1952), *Tangier Incident* (1953), *Mexican Manhunt* (1953), *The Revlon Mirror Theater* (1953), *Science Fiction Theatre* (1955), *Celebrity Playhouse* (1956), *Rawhide* (1959), and *Born Again* (1978).

RUBY KEELER (August 25, 1910, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada – February 28, 1993, Rancho Mirage, California) was in only 15 films, some of which were *42nd Street* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *Footlight Parade* (1933), *Dames* (1934), *Flirtation Walk* (1934), *Go Into Your Dance* (1935), *Ready, Willing and Able* (1937), and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1964). She had a long career on Broadway and was, from 1928 through 1940, married to singer Al Jolson.

GUY KIBBEE (March 6, 1882, El Paso, Texas – May 24, 1956, East Islip, Long Island, New York) appeared in 113 films, some of which were *Stolen Heaven* (1931), *City Streets* (1931), *Laughing Sinners* (1931), *Union Depot* (1932), *So Big!* (1932), *The Mouthpiece* (1932), *Rain* (1932), *The Conquerors* (1932), *42nd Street* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *Footlight Parade* (1933), *Dames* (1934), *Babbitt* (1934), *Captain Blood* (1935), *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1936), *Three Men on a Horse* (1936), *Three Comrades* (1938), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Our Town* (1940), *Chad Hanna* (1940), *Scattergood Baines* (1941), *Scattergood Pulls the Strings* (1941), *It Started*

with *Eve* (1941), *Scattergood Meets Broadway* (1941), *Design for Scandal* (1941), *Scattergood Rides High* (1942), *Girl Crazy* (1943), *The Horn Blows at Midnight* (1945), *Gentleman Joe Palooka* (1946), *Fort Apache* (1948), and *3 Godfathers* (1948).

UNA MERKEL (December 10, 1903, Covington, Kentucky, USA – January 2, 1986, Los Angeles, California) was in 114 films and TV series, some of which were *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), *The Eyes of the World* (1930), *The Maltese Falcon* (1931), *Wicked* (1931), *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), *Whistling, the Dark* (1933), *42nd Street* (1933), *Reunion, Vienna* (1933), *Bulldog Drummond Strikes Back* (1934), *The Merry Widow* (1934), *Broadway Melody of 1936* (1935), *Speed* (1936), *Don't Tell the Wife* (1937), *Saratoga* (1937), *Four Girls, White* (1939), *Destry Rides Again* (1939), *The Bank Dick* (1940), *My Blue Heaven* (1950), *With a Song, My Heart* (1952), *The Merry Widow* (1952), *Four Star Playhouse* (1952), *The Kettles, the Ozarks* (1956), *Bundle of Joy* (1956), *Playhouse 90* (1957), *Climax!* (1957), *The United States Steel Hour* (1958), *The Mating Game* (1959), *Summer and Smoke* (1961), and *Burke's Law* (1963-1965).

GINGER ROGERS (July 16, 1911, Independence, Missouri – April 25, 1995, Rancho Mirage, California) won a Best Actress Oscar, 1940 for *Kitty Foyle: The Natural History of a Woman*. She appeared, 89 other films and TV series, some of which were *A Day of a Man of Affairs* (1929), *Queen High* (1930), *The Tenderfoot* (1932), *Broadway Bad* (1933), *42nd Street* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *Sitting Pretty* (1933), *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), *Upperworld* (1934), *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Roberta* (1935), *Top Hat* (1935), *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939), *Kitty Foyle: The Natural History of a Woman* (1940), *Tom Dick and Harry* (1941), *Roxie Hart* (1942), *The Major and the Minor* (1942), *I'll Be Seeing You* (1944), *It Had to Be You* (1947), *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949), *Storm Warning* (1951), *Forever Female* (1954), *Black Widow* (1954), *Zane Grey Theater* (1960), *The Confession* (1964), *The Red Skelton Hour* (1963-4), *Harlow* (1965), and *Hotel* (1987).

NED SPARKS

(November 19, 1883, Guelph, Ontario, Canada – April 3, 1957, Victorville, California) appeared in 86 films, some of which *The Little Miss Brown* (1915), *Nothing But the Truth* (1920), *Seven Keys to Baldpate* (1925), *Alias the Deacon*



(1927), *Alias the Lone Wolf* (1927), *On to Reno* (1928), *Iron Man* (1931), *Corsair* (1931), *42nd Street* (1933), *Secrets* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *Alice, Wonderland* (1933), *Sing and Like It* (1934), *Imitation of Life* (1934), *Sweet Adeline* (1934), *George White's 1935 Scandals* (1935), *One, a Million* (1936), *The Star Maker* (1939), *For Beauty's Sake* (1941), and *Magic Town* (1947).

DICK POWELL (November 14, 1904, Mountain View, Arkansas – January 2, 1963, West Los Angeles, California) appeared in 69 films and TV series, some of which were *Blessed Event* (1932), *Too Busy to Work* (1932), *42nd Street* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *Footlight Parade* (1933), *Dames* (1934), *Gold Diggers of 1935* (1935), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), *The Singing Marine* (1937), *Cowboy from Brooklyn* (1938), *True to Life* (1943), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *Johnny O'Clock* (1947), *To the Ends of the Earth* (1948), *The Reformer and the Redhead* (1950), *Cry Danger* (1951), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), *Climax!* (1954), *Four Star Playhouse* (1952-1956), *Zane Grey Theater* (1957-1961), *The Law and Mr. Jones* (1961), and *The Dick Powell Theatre* (1962).

Lloyd Bacon (from IMDb)

As one of the work horses in Warner Brothers stable of 1930s directors, Lloyd Bacon's career isn't comparatively loaded with classic films as many of his more famous contemporaries. What few he had his hand in (*42nd Street* 1933, and *Footlight Parade* 1933) are so overshadowed by the dazzling surrealistic choreography of Busby Berkeley to the extent that casual film buffs today often forget they were directed by him. While his resume lacks the drama of failed productions and tales of an unbridled ego, he consistently enriched the studio's coffers, directing a handful of their biggest hits of the late 1920s and 30s. Lloyd Bacon's career amounts to that of a competent—at times brilliant—director who did the best with the material handed to him in assembly line fashion. Lloyd Bacon was born in San Jose, California on January 16, 1890 into a theatrical family (his father was Frank Bacon, a playwright and legitimate actor). His parents enlisted all the Bacon children onto the stage. Despite having a strong interest in law as a student at Santa Clara College, Lloyd opted for an acting career after appearing in a student production of "The Passion Play." In 1911 he joined David Belasco's Los Angeles Stock Company (with fellow actor Lewis Stone), touring the country and gaining good notices in a Broadway run of the hit, "Cinderella Man" and gaining further experience during a



season of vaudeville. Lloyd switched gears in 1915 and took a stab at silent Hollywood, playing the heavy in 'Gilbert M. 'Broncho Billy' Anderson' shorts and pulling duty as a stunt double. With America's entry into WWI in 1917, Lloyd enlisted in the Navy and was assigned to the Photo Department. This began a lifelong admiration for the service and might explain the Navy being a favorite reoccurring theme in many of his films. After the Armistice, Lloyd moved from Mutual (Charles Chaplin's studio at the time) to Triangle as a comedy actor. It was at this point that he got his first taste of directing -- Bacon had let everyone at the studio know he had an interest in helming a picture and when the director of a now forgotten Lloyd Hamilton comedy short fell ill, he was given his chance. Constantly moving, Bacon joined tightwad producer Mack Sennett as a gag writer, who, sensing a bargain, happily accommodated Lloyd's desire to become a full time director by early 1921. The Sennett studio was already in an irreversible decline during Bacon's tenure there but it allowed the novice director to gain a wealth of experience. He apprenticed for Sennett until joining Warner Brothers in 1925, an association that would last a remarkable 18 years and begin when the working man's studio was building a strong stable of contract directors that included Michael Curtiz, Alan Crosland, John G. Adolphi and Mervyn LeRoy. Although Lloyd never became known for a particular style other than a well-placed close up, his ability to bring an entertaining film in on time and within budget earned him such enormous respect from five Warner Brothers that he was soon handed control over important projects, including *The Singing Fool* (1928), an Al Jolson follow up to *The Jazz Singer* (1927) which grossed an unheard of (for Warner's at least) \$4,000,000 in domestic receipts alone — the studio's #1 hit for 1928. Bacon was rewarded by becoming the highest paid director on the studio's payroll, earning over \$200,000.00 a year throughout the Depression. He was called upon to direct their big budget production of *Moby Dick* (1930) which gained good notices, but it's a version that's barely remembered today. The 1930s saw Bacon assigned to the assembly line; aside from the 'Busby Berkeley' choreographed films, he directed many of James Cagney's crowd pleasing 2-week wonders, including *Picture Snatcher* (1933), and *The Irish in Us* (1935), occasionally being afforded more time and money on productions such as, *Here Comes the Navy* (1934), and *Devil Dogs of the Air* (1935). He also directed Cagney's return effort, miscast in the frenetic *Boy Meets Girl* (1938) after the actor's ill-advised move to Grand National while engaging in a legal war with Jack L. Warner. This was one of Cagney's least critically popular Warner Brothers films of 1930s, but a smash hit for the studio. During his years at Warner's, Bacon gained a reputation as a clothes horse, the dapper director, arriving on the set dressed to the nines, wearing

expensive hats, that he would toss around the set when expressing his dissatisfaction (he ruined a lot of hats) at an actor's performance or missed cue. Bacon continued to grind out profitable films for the studio until moving to 20th Century Fox from 1944-49 (a logical move, since the recently discharged Darryl F. Zanuck knew Bacon from his early days at Warner's), then bounced between Columbia,



Fox, Universal and the chaotically-ran RKO in 1954. Lloyd worked virtually until his death from a cerebral hemorrhage at age 65.

“42nd Street” Magill’s American Film Guide. V.2. Salem Press, Englewood Hills, N.J., 1980. Entry by Julia Johnson.

In 1933, Warner Bros. released three important musicals which revitalized the moribund film musical and renewed its popularity with the moviegoing public. The films are notable for their vitality, their originality in presenting musical numbers on film, and the emergence of a major new talent in the world of the film musical—Busby Berkeley. The first of these, *42nd Street*, is the quintessential backstage musical. The familiar story of putting on a play, with the star breaking her ankle at the last minute and the young unknown stepping in to save the show, has been done many times, but seldom with such zest and verve.

Under Lloyd Bacon’s skillful direction that catches all the bustle and excitement of the backstage atmosphere, a group of engaging performers made their niche in film history secure— Ginger Rogers as a shrewd chorus girl; Warner Baxter as the tyrannical director of the show; Bebe Daniels as the unhappy star who breaks her ankle just before opening night, giving Ruby Keeler (in her screen debut) her big chance; and the baby-faced, mellow-voiced Dick Powell, whose screen presence seemed tailored to fit Warner Bros. musicals. But the biggest star, and possibly the most talented, was Busby Berkeley, the man behind the cameras who conceived, staged, and directed the musical numbers.

Berkeley's main contribution to the film musical was the staging of dances especially for the camera, using all the cinematic resources at his command. He is famous for the moving camera (which roved through, around, under, and over his dancers rather than remaining fixed in one position), and is particularly known for the overhead shot in which the camera peers down at the dancers as they form everchanging patterns. Using dancers as elements in an abstract design to create his effects rather than as individuals who perform dance routines is one of his trademarks....

The musical numbers in *42nd Street* are not as opulent or dazzling as those in later Berkeley films, but their comparative restraint and their vitality more than compensate for that.

The film musical was never quite the same after *42nd Street*. It confirmed the emergence of a major new talent—Busby Berkeley—and the emergence of the musical as a new art form. It was one of the top-grossing films of the year and is credited with rescuing Warner Bros. from bankruptcy.



42nd Street. Edited with an introduction by Rocco Fumento. Published for the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research by The University of Wisconsin Press. Madison, Wisconsin, 1980. Tino Balio, General Editor

Rocco Fumento: “Introduction From Bastards and Bitches to Heroes and Heroines”

If the movie version of *42nd Street* had been as frank and as gritty as the novel, it would have been a genuine first for American Musicals. The novel is too busy and certainly some of the subplots...could have been omitted. Yet a daring, but honest, movie based on the novel could have been made back in those days, before Mae West awakened the censors with her second film, *She Done Him Wrong*, and with such lines as “Are you packin’ a rod or are you just glad to see me?”...

Official censorship first came to Hollywood in 1922, after a series of scandals that made the headlines and brought the film business to the attention of the U.S. Congress. To avoid federal censorship, the film industry decided to be its own watchdog. As its white knight and master, the industry chose Will H. Hays to be president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, which came to be known as the Hays Office. Hays seemed the perfect choice. He was a Presbyterian elder, he was postmaster general of the United States, he had been President Harding’s campaign manager, and he was a non-smoker, a teetotaler, and a conservative small-town boy from the conservative state of Indiana. The Hays Office’s first list of thou-shalt-nots was published in 1927; in 1930 the list was recast into what came to be known as the Production Code. But the Hays Office did little to enforce its Code until, in 1934, it was forced to do so by a public outcry, spearheaded by the newly formed Catholic Legion of Decency, against excessive violence and sex in films. Joseph Breen, a Catholic layman, was hired by the Hays Office to be the stern enforcer of the Code.

But there was no Breen when *42nd Street* was made and released. In such films as *Red Dust*, *A Free Soul*, *Rain*, *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*, Hollywood did not shy away from either sex or violence. Like the prostitute with the heart of Gold, *42nd Street* is tough on the outside and soft on the inside. It is a good film that could have been better if Warners had dared to stick more closely to Bradford Ropes’s novel.

Not that the Ropes novel is a great novel. It is, in fact, a bad one. The characters are either stereotypes (Dorothy Brock, the aging bitchy Broadway star) or caricatures (Mrs. Blair, the stridently ambitious backstage mother) or merely flat....

The novel comes alive only in the hard-as-nails, off-color, often amusing wisecracks....None of these wisecracks is in the film. Just one such line from the novel is recognizable in the film. A gossipy, homosexual chorus boy says, “Sophie only said no once an’ then she didn’t understand what the man asked her.” In the film, Andy Lee offers a more compact and cutting version: “She only said no once, and then she didn’t hear the question!”...Hollywood’s major concern is not whether a book is good or bad, but whether it can be made into a money-making movie....

The question becomes, Why not make a movie of *42nd Street*? Its title alone would bring in all those starry-eyed youngsters who dreamed of going to New York and to Forty-second Street, perhaps the most glamorous street in the world to starry-eyed youngsters back in 1933. Its multiple-plot story offered variety and the opportunity to use an all-star cast; its backstage setting offered excitement and pretty chorus girls; and if the characters were too tough and the wisecracks too rough, Warners’ scriptwriters could

soften the toughness and smooth the roughness and still retain enough of both to please the customers without offending them....

A musical hailed as the first talkie (*The Jazz Singer*) rescued Warner Brothers from bankruptcy in 1927 and, in the midst of the Great Depression, another musical (*42nd Street*) did the same. So said the sentimental myth-makers of Hollywood. Before *The Jazz Singer*, Warners already had a pair of star money-makers in their two handsome profiles John Barrymore and Rin-Tin-Tin. In those pre-talkie days, however, Warners was still a small



Hollywood studio and its future was far from bright. It had neither a national distribution system nor access to a steady supply of money to permit the company to grow. How was it possible for this studio to compete with the Big Three, Famous Players-Lasky (later Paramount), Loew's (later MGM), and First National?

It was a man named Waddill Catchings, the head of the investment division of the great Wall Street firm of Goldman Sachs, who helped put Warners into the big leagues. Through New York's National Bank of Commerce, Catchings set up a \$3 million revolving credit fund. Then he went to the Colony Tryst Company of Boston and to four other banks. Through them, Catchings provided Warners with a permanent method of financing future productions. Meanwhile, Warners acquired the Vitagraph Corporation with its nearly fifty exchanges throughout the world, plus two studios, a processing lab, and a film library. With a \$4 million debenture issue, Warners established a worldwide distribution system, acquired ten theaters, and was well on its way to competing with the majors. Its final expansionary move led to the coming of sound.

Contrary to popular belief, it was not really *The Jazz Singer* that broke the sound barrier. There had been experimentations with sound almost since film making began. But no studio, with the exception of Warners and Fox, was particularly interested in bringing sound to the screen. Numerous people were working on sound systems, but Warners formed an alliance with Western Electric, and out of this alliance the Vitaphone Corporation emerged. Vitaphone, through contracts with the Victor Talking Machine Company, with the Metropolitan Opera

Company, and with individual vaudeville stars, soon had enough talent for the making of short subjects. At about the same time Vitaphone engaged the New York Philharmonic to record background music for the big-budgeted John

Barrymore film, *Don Juan*. On August 6, 1926, eight "Vitaphone Preludes" and *Don Juan* opened at the Warner theater in New York. In the following year, on October 6, *The Jazz Singer*, a part-talkie, opened at the same theater and Warners was on its way to the top of the American film industry. The public's love affair with sound ushered in a boom period for the entire motion picture industry. Between 1928 and 1929 profits from all the studios jumped considerably. But

Warners made the biggest leap, with its profits soaring from \$2 million to over \$4 million. It was time for consolidation. And Warner Brothers, with its early gamble on sound paying off so handsomely, led the way. First it acquired the Stanley Company, which owned a chain of three hundred theaters along the East Coast and a one-third interest in First National. Then it bought out First National's remaining stockholders. In 1925, Warners' assets were a little over \$5 million; in 1930 they were valued at \$230 million. In only five years Warners had become one of the biggest and most profitable companies in the entire film industry.

By 1933 the Depression had cut moviegoing attendance in half (from 110 million between 1927 and 1930 to 60 million in 1930) and Warners was seriously in debt. Like the other majors, Warners had overextended itself, mainly by having acquired those three hundred theaters. It was impossible for the studio to meet its long-term indebtedness. But the Depression wolf was at every studio's door except MGM's, which was under the protection of Leo the Lion and such formidable box-office stars as Dressler, Beery, Harlow, Gable, Crawford, and Shearer. Warners managed to pacify the wolf, barely, with the films of that tough guy trio of little giants, Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, and Paul Muni, with such fluke box-office hits as the William Powell-Kay Francis sudser *One Way Passage*, and with the tight-budgeted comedies of loose-mouthed comedian Joe E. Brown. And if the prestige films of Ruth Chatterton and George Arliss erased not one penny of Warners' huge debt, that was the price the studio paid in order to give it some class. They were

Warners' answer to MGM's Garbo and Paramount's Dietrich.

Though *42nd Street* was not Warner Brothers' salvation, it was, like Columbia's *It Happened One Night* (1934), a surprise smash hit, a big money-maker, a sleeper that practically no one expected would be a front-runner, a movie that would serve as a model for dozens of subsequent films including Ken Russell's *The Boy Friend* (which tried to satirize it but ended as an exercise in tedium). When *42nd Street* came along, musicals were supposed to be dead. The public had had enough of posturing heroes and prissy heroines, of cramped, smothered-by-sets stagings, of witless dialogue and the preposterous plots of *Dixiana*, *The Vagabond King*, *The Desert Song*, and *Her Majesty, Love*. The only really popular musicals of 1931-32 were *The Big Broadcast*, featuring a large cast of radio stars including Bing Crosby and Kate Smith; the Eddie Cantor vehicles for Samuel Goldwyn, *Palmy Days* and *The Kid from Spain* (both with dances staged by Busby Berkeley); and the intimate, witty, sophisticated boudoir musicals of Ernst Lubistch (*The Smiling Lieutenant* and *One Hour with You*) and Rouben Mamoulian (*Love Me Tonight*).

John Kobal makes a great deal of sense when he credits much of *42nd Street's* appeal to the lowly chorus girl; "Once a demure non-participant she now becomes a predatory calculator, deceptively soft in garters and silk. Her crude, gutsy, and very funny line of repartee made her eminently capable of coping with the wolves and sugar-daddies, swapping fast lines, outsmarting the Babbitts and generally casting a caustic look at the world around her. No lost lamb she, quite aware that the best way of keeping the wolf from the door was to coax him inside, where she could fleece him in comfort. Her redeeming virtue (though she was really too much fun to need one) was her tendency to see that the sugar daddies' money went toward financing the show, which would in turn give employment to the entire company of chorines." This is hindsight, however; critics of the day contented themselves mainly with heaping praise (in bad prose) upon Bacon, Berkeley, the performers, and the production in general. After its sneak preview early in the year, *Variety Bulletin* (January 13, 1933) hailed the movie: "as the prelude to a possible cycle of musicals, Warners has given the other studios something to shoot at in *42nd Street*. As received by the preview audiences, it is evident the public is not fed up on musicals if there is a logical reason for tunes and dance routines being inserted in the story. In *42nd Street* there's a legitimate reason for everything. It's a back stage play, but one of the best that has hit the screen...."



Judith Mackrell: "A kaleidoscope of legs: Busby Berkeley's flamboyant dance fantasies" (*The Guardian*, 2017)

In hit movies like *42nd Street*, Berkeley liberated dance from the stage and placed it in a purely cinematic dimension with dizzyingly inventive routines. A new [West End](#) production of *42nd Street* opens this month and its mix of high glamour and romantic nostalgia may prove a fitting escapist fantasy for our uncertain times. In 1933, the original movie was designed to beguile and distract a suffering US. President Roosevelt's programmes for rebooting the economy had yet to take effect, and the movie's audience was desperate for the temporary relief of big-budget effects, big-name stars and the 200 "gorgeous girls" that the trailer promised.

42nd Street proved more popular than the Warner Brothers studio bosses had dared imagine but credit was given less to director Lloyd Bacon than to Busby Berkeley, the actor and self-trained choreographer in charge of its musical numbers. Warner Brothers were taking something of a punt on Berkeley, who had no formal dance training and whose first experience of choreography had been organising marching drills during the first world war. But Berkeley had displayed some talent for working with chorus lines on Broadway, and spent two years with the Samuel Goldwyn studio, choreographing a number of low-budget musicals.

During that period he'd begun playing with new ways to put dance on screen. *42nd Street* gave him the budget and freedom to let those ideas fly. When we look at a number such as *Young and Healthy* today, its structural devices may seem tame but at the time they embodied a bold new attempt to liberate dance from the physical conventions of the stage, and place it in a purely cinematic dimension.

By constructing the choreography around a trio of hydraulically operated platforms, Berkeley transformed the spatial possibilities of his choreography. He could move his dancers between different levels, without the need for

complex lifts or partnerwork (0.24); he could create effective shifts in pattern and speed with only minimal physical activity (0.40). Even more radical were the visual possibilities created by his agile camera, which ranged from this tracking closeup of the dancers' legs (1.23), abstracting them to a V-shaped tunnel of stockings and flesh, to the dizzying overhead shots that turned the chorus line into a kaleidoscope of art deco patterns.

Berkeley's overhead shot became his signature device (it was significant perhaps that he'd been an aerial observer with the US air corps); and he made even more dramatic use of it during [the second half of the movie's title number](#), which dramatised the "naughty, gawdy, bawdy, sporty" life of 42nd Street. Berkeley starts out by choreographing vivid vignettes of individual characters: a juggling street vendor, a fighting couple, a drunk, a barber, a cocktail waiter. But as these individuals are re-absorbed into the ensemble, and as the crowd then morphs into a street of dancing buildings, the camera soars higher and higher, until the scene is abstracted into a dreaming cityscape.

The box-office success of 42nd Street propelled Berkeley to the top of his profession. He choreographed six more musicals during the next two years and his ideas grew exponentially – and expensively – more flamboyant. The [By a Waterfall](#) number in *Footlight Parade* (1933) featured giant water tanks in which its chorus could float though a riot of [pin-wheeling, molecular patterns](#). In [Gold Diggers of 1933](#) and [Dames](#), Berkeley elaborated his dance numbers with an ever more inventive panoply of costumes, props and multi-level platforms.

Berkeley helped make the 1930s a golden age for the Hollywood musical and the above compilation of clips illustrates just how brilliantly his imagination was suited to the silver screen. During that decade, Berkeley had a major rival in Fred Astaire, who was working for RKO, and even a basic comparison of the two men's choreography reveals the limits of Berkeley's style. Step for step, his vocabulary rarely deviates from a series of rudimentary leg kicks, shuffles and taps and a few simple, decorative movements of the arms. Lacking the musical phrasing, the grace notes, the full-bodied impetus of Astaire's dancing, Berkeley's choreography is memorable principally for the spectacle he was able to create out of large numbers of bodies moving in [unison](#).

Berkeley also became increasingly dependent on the interventions of the camera, for tracking closeups, witty angles and bird's-eye views that added texture and

substance to his choreography. Astaire once quipped of his own film performances, "either the camera dances or I do", and while most of his own on-screen dancing could work just as well on the stage, Berkeley's numbers would have palled rapidly without their cinematic box of tricks.

If Astaire focused on the pure dancing body, and Berkeley on special effects, the other crucial difference between the two lay in their handling of sex. Back in 1930, a strict code of censorship had been laid out for Hollywood and Astaire's musicals, although swooningly glamorous, were chastely compliant. Berkeley's early productions for Warner Bros, however, came with a strong subtext of erotic titillation. In 42nd Street's Young and



Healthy, the lingering pace of the camera as it travels between the women's legs has the intensity of a voyeur's gaze. More blatant still is the way the camera hovers over the dancers' torsos in the [By a Waterfall routine](#) from *Footlight Parade*, revelling in the illusion of naked flesh created by the women's clinging costumes.

Berkeley offered his female actors and dancers up to the camera with a mathematical exactness that could border on ruthlessness. One of his signature tricks was to zoom, in rapid succession, over the faces of the chorus line, but far from individualising the women it simply confirmed their conformity to type (usually blond and china-doll cute). As a device it was no more humanising than Berkeley's favoured shots of disembodied legs, busts, feet or arms.

Of course we look at old movies now with politically correct hindsight, but some among his original audience would have been made a little queasy by the sexual innuendo of [Pettin' in the Park](#), a choreographed guide book to the rules of seduction that featured in *Gold Diggers of 1933*. Berkeley introduces a small boy (Billy Barty) into his cast – dressed up as a rollerskating baby and leading a chorus of policeman a frantic dance; then chasing a football up the skirt of a beautiful woman, who lies on the grass with her stockings and suspenders in full view; and finally leering suggestively to camera as he lifts up a window blind to reveal a chorus of women in visible states of undress.

Berkeley always claimed there was nothing to read into his dances beyond his own ambition to make each better than the last. He resisted attempts to interpret his mass ensembles as an embodiment of Roosevelt's New Deal collective spirit; he shrugged off comparisons between his precision-tooled chorus lines and the monumental street parades beloved of Mussolini, Hitler

and Stalin. However, one of the most powerful numbers he ever directed – Remember My Forgotten Man – was also the most political, as Berkeley drew on his wartime experiences to choreograph the heroism and suffering of his fellow veterans. In movement terms it could hardly have been more basic – little more than a marching column of men that Berkeley filmed against a succession of ironic backdrops; a cheering, patriotic crowd, a rain-soaked battlefield, a postwar soup kitchen and a dole queue. But towards the end of the sequence (around 5.40) he deployed all his cinematic knowhow to orchestrate an image that potently evoked the despair and the exaltation of the soldiers' sacrifice: as lines of men tramp wearily across the screen they simultaneously look like victims of a military war machine and figures enshrined in a stained glass window.

Berkeley's brand of high-gloss musical gradually fell out of fashion and by the end of the 1930s he moved into straight directing. In the early 1970s, a revival of interest in the music, art and fashions of the 1930s restored movies such as *42nd Street* to popularity. Berkeley's influence is still felt in a whole range of choreographic creations. In Disney's cartoon version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the [Be Our Guest](#) sequence pays a joyously overt homage, with its lines of [dancing crockery and ditzzy kaleidoscopic formations](#). The epic [ensemble numbers in Riverdance](#) are no less indebted to the choreographer in their machine-drilled, percussive unison. And the pure camp spectacle of synchronised swimming would surely have become a far lesser thing without the inspiration of Berkeley's aquatically high-kicking chorus girls.

BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS SPRING 2020, SERIES 40

- Feb 11 Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* 1943
 Feb 18 Billy Wilder *Sunset Boulevard* 1950
 Feb 25 Henri-Georges Clouzot *Wages of Fear* 1953
 Mar 3 Lucino Visconti, *The Leopard* 1963
 Mar 10 Masaki Kobayashi *Kwaidan* 1965
 Mar 24 John Schlesinger *Midnight Cowboy* 1969
 Mar 31 Alan Pakula *Klute* 1971
 Apr 7 Robert Altman *McCabe and Mrs Miller* 1971
 Apr 14 Martin Scorsese *King of Comedy* 1983
 Apr 21 Wim Wenders *Land of Plenty* 2004
 Apr 28 Wes Anderson *Isle of Dogs* 2018
 May 5 Pedro Almodóvar *Pain and Glory* 2019

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