



**THE**

*Nick Zegarac's*

*Hollywood*

**ART**

*Busby Berkeley*

**REDEFINING THE MASTER BUILDER  
OF THE AMERICAN MOVIE MUSICAL  
AT WARNER BROTHERS**



# Genius at Work

*"Berkeley had a great sense of humor, but he worked us to the bone. It was even worse for his girls. I don't think they had any time off."*

— Joan Blondell

The term 'genius' gets bandied about so much these days that it is in danger of losing its original meaning. In its raw form, 'genius' is ascribed to someone of exceptional intellect or creativity. But rarely does a genius possess strengths in both areas. Depending on one's point of view, geniuses come from all walks of life, impacting the world in virtually all of its multifaceted endeavors. In art it is sometimes difficult to label a genius as such – particularly if the abilities in question appear so extraordinary that they register in the public consciousness as avante garde or perhaps even ahead of their time. That generally doesn't win a lot of points with the Hollywood critics.

It can sometimes miss its mark with the paying public too; particularly in the realm of film where credit is divided along the components of the creative assembly line. And in Hollywood at least, today's genius is often tomorrow's has-been; a precarious seesaw of instability balanced on the public's insatiable need to see something new – something different – something 'entertaining' all of the time. One of the hallmarks of true creative genius is staying power. What is quite fashionable today may fall out of favor tomorrow. But if it is truly imbued with that spark of...well...genius, then, it isn't likely to be forgotten or entirely set aside. It may be lampooned or even mocked. It most certainly will be copied, though arguably never duplicated. But in the end it will be revisited, not simply for nostalgia's sake, but for an innate fascination and sheer joy that, once seen, can never be forgotten.

Movie lovers have labeled this intangible as 'magic'. But there really is no word to quantify what the images of Busby Berkeley have given to us over the generations. From 1930 to 1962 Berkeley dazzled with his confounding geometric kaleidoscopes. During his own time Berkeley saw his reputation spectacularly rise, and almost as spectacularly fall, only to be resurrected again in the late 1970s just before his death. By then he had garnered new fans and a newfound respect from students studying his work across America. More recently, homages to Berkeley have appeared in everything from commercials for Daisy sour cream, The Gap and Old Navy to Disney's Beauty and The Beast (1991). In fact, his efforts are so easily identifiable at a glance that anyone even attempting to emulate his artistry has been forced to reference it as having a Berkeley-esque quality. Even the *American Thesaurus of Slang* has identified his name as synonymous with 'any elaborate dance number.'

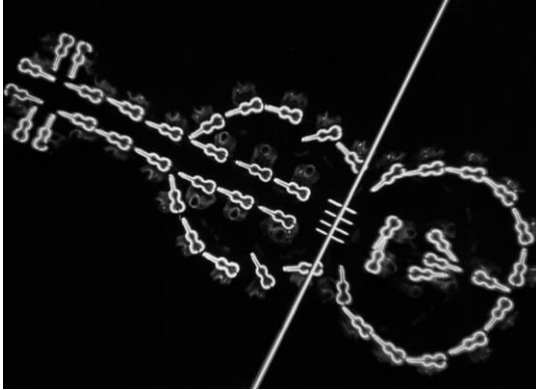
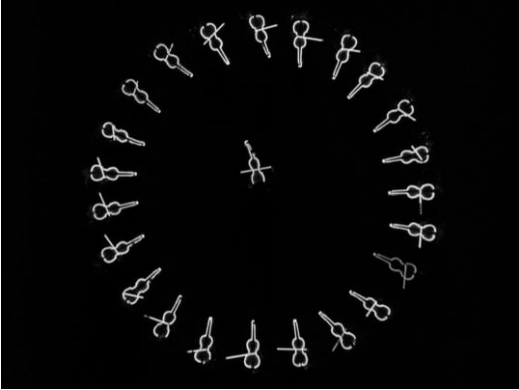
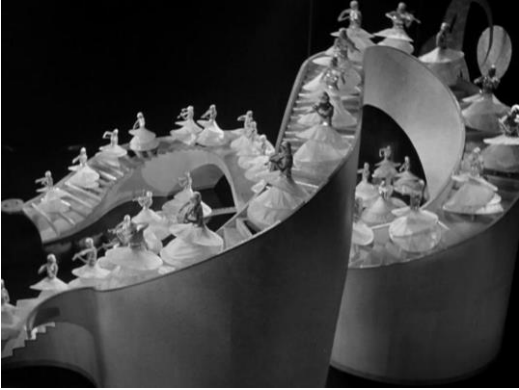


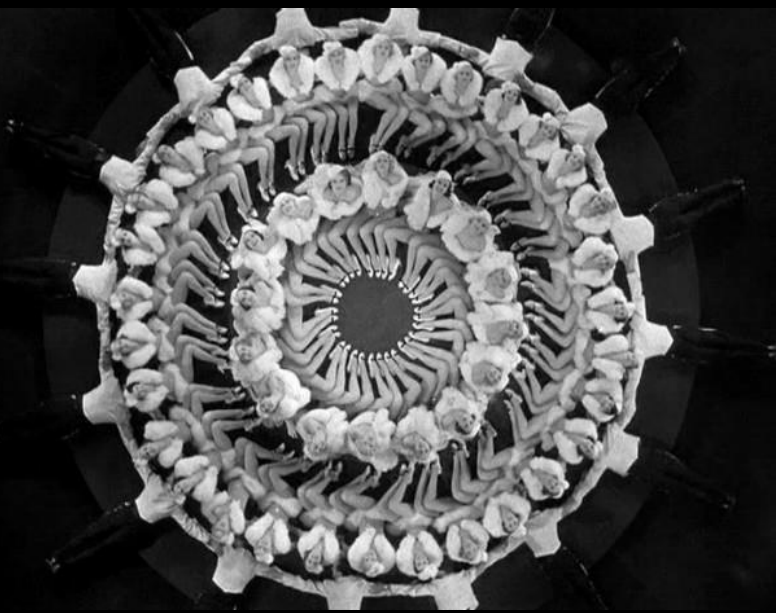
Cover: Berkeley posed for this publicity still for **Gold Diggers of 1933**, a compendium of super-imposed shots of the bridgework that accompanies the 'Remember My Forgotten Man' number from the film. Previous page (left): Joan Blondell, Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler joyously preen for this publicity still from **Dames** (1934). Behind the scenes exhaustion was more the order of the day. Berkeley worked harder on *Dames* than arguably he ever had before. "He really put us through the ringer!" Blondell would later admit. (Previous right): A smiling Berkeley proudly poses with a sampling of his female chorines in between takes on the Warner backlot during the filming of *Dames*. Berkeley had a lot to grin over. He was king of his domain and Warner afforded him every opportunity to exercise his creative genius. But in only a few short years, their attitude would change. (This page, left): After moving to MGM Berkeley was given the rather plum role of tailoring a series of four movie musicals featuring two of the studio's biggest stars; Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. Here, Buzz puts Rooney through the steps during a rehearsal for the 'Yankee Doodle Boy' dream sequence from **Babes on Broadway** (1941). (Right): Berkeley is intense as he observes Dick Powell running through a scene from *Gold Diggers of 1935*, the first complete movie he directed over at Warner Bros. Once asked to describe the Berkeley's style, Powell glibly replied, "He usually works in sweats...and sweats!"

Not bad for an uneducated, brash New Yorker whose stint as a drill sergeant in the army during WWI would become that spark of inspiration for his second career – that of a much sought after Broadway and Hollywood choreographer. Berkeley's approach to dance had very little to do with the dancer as artiste. It had everything to do with the utilization of a dancer's entire body, often as a mere speck amongst many; a cog in a great wheel, performing perfunctory movements that some have argued required more athleticism than terpsichorean finesse. Over the years there have been those who have argued Berkeley had absolutely no talent at all, just a great penchant for the absurdity of making machineries out of the human form; his camera doing most of the work, his maneuvering minions just that – never achieving a level of individuality on those endlessly rotating platforms and rising staircases to nowhere.

But Busby Berkeley never professed himself to be a great choreographer. He had even less interest in extolling the virtues of a dancer's fluidity and form. No, that wasn't the point at all – except, perhaps in *Lullaby of Broadway* from **Gold Diggers of 1935**. Here, Berkeley allowed his dancers to be more than chess pieces infinitely moved around his gigantic erector set. In a routine that can still stop the show, Berkeley gave us a tragi-love story within a song and an astoundingly precise tap dance that as yet has never failed to bring down the house.

But a musical number by Busby Berkeley is really all about Berkeley's fascination with form rather than content. His numbers are big – gargantuan, in fact – and mind-bogglingly intricate. One marvels, for example, at the endless rows of billowy hula-hooped skirts and neon-tubing employed during the staging of *The Shadow Waltz* from **Gold Diggers of 1933**; the way sixty young women clutching their art deco Stradivariuses suddenly come together to form one monumentally massive violin before dissolving into an fluttery army, endlessly mirrored against impossibly pristine poured-glass and mirror floors. Other





(Previous page): anatomy of the perfect escapism. It is virtually impossible to fully appreciate Berkeley's talents in still frame enlargements. Part of the magic he wrought can only be treasured in motion. But *The Shadow Waltz* from **Gold Diggers of 1933** is perhaps the most perfect musical number ever executed on celluloid. Most definitely it remains one with which Berkeley's own iconography is forever associated. The dancers endured being repeatedly shocked by the battery packs hidden beneath their skirts that powered their neon lit violins, and the moment was interrupted by a sizeable earthquake. But nothing could prevent Berkeley from getting his vision up on the screen. *The Shadow Waltz* exemplifies Berkeley's way of getting 'into' a musical sequence; starting off with a great Harry Warren/Al Dubin song sung by Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell, cleverly moving in on one dancer, then two, then a whole army doing exactly the same thing. *The Shadow Waltz* is photographed from every conceivable angle, from straight on, above and even below, all in service to Berkeley's dream-like visions of surrealism.

(This page, left): Berkeley's chorine gaze upward at his overhead camera for 'Young and Healthy' from **42<sup>nd</sup> Street** (1932); Berkeley's first kaleidoscopic vision in the movies. The Berkeley style for such overhead shots really never advanced beyond this initial effort, the chorine merely dressed in more flamboyant costumes of contrasting B&W. (Right): Ruby Keeler strikes a pose atop a stairway to nowhere for the grand finale to **42<sup>nd</sup> Street**. Behind each of the cardboard skyscrapers to her left and right is a chorine.

studios, most notably, MGM – and occasionally Paramount, tried to mimic the Berkeley style. In fact, MGM quickly snatched up Berkeley's contract after Warner dropped him from their roster in 1940. But MGM's glamour and attention to stars never entirely blended with Berkeley's vision of the dancer as 'extra' and in retrospect his contributions at MGM pale by direct comparison. Worse, Berkeley had a penchant for inspiring wrath among MGM's roster of enviable talent. Whether it was Berkeley's increasing alcoholism that led to these rows or simply a clash of wills and artistic temperament remains open for discussion.

Judy Garland, as example, began as an ardent supporter of Berkeley's talent, but wound up despising his fanaticism for 'energy' - always *more* energy – on the set of **Girl Crazy** (1943); their fourth collaborative effort in the popular Mickey Rooney/Garland musicals that effectively led to Berkeley being replaced as director by Norman Taurog on the picture. Garland's own chronic addiction to pills might have played a part in their mutual frustrations. In fact, Garland suffered a 'nervous breakdown' while shooting the penultimate '*I Got Rhythm*' dude ranch finale. But Berkeley darn near killed Esther Williams during the staging of his grand water-skiing finale in **Easy to Love** (1953) when he became so engrossed in 'getting the shot' that his speed boat narrowly missed Williams' water ski by mere inches, which would have sent her plummeting into the boat's wildly spinning outboard head first. "*Buz always used to get his best ideas in the bathtub,*" Williams later explained, "*...in a tub at two a.m. with a stiff drink in one hand and a telephone in the other...and he'd wake you up out of a dead sleep to say, 'hey, I've got an idea' at which point you just had to rub your eyes and use a pillow to prop yourself up and listen, because most of what he came up with was damn good.*"

Today, Busby Berkeley is primarily known, beloved, occasionally reviled, but mostly revered for those ten short years he spent on the Warner back lot, blazing a trail of artistry that at the time may have seemed nothing better than rank military precision run amuck in the glamor of gay old Hollywood. He's been earmarked in the annals of Hollywood history for two trends; the aforementioned geometric placement of his dancers and for his equally famed and oft copied overhead crane



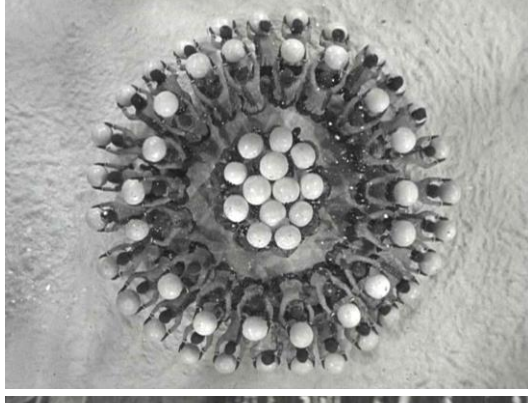


(Previous page: **Gold Diggers of 1933** is such an embarrassment of riches one scarcely knows where to begin. *Remember My Forgotten Man* concludes the film on such an epic and sustained bittersweet note of social commentary that it begs a further analysis of Berkeley's structure. Top row: Joan Blondell as a street walker implores the audience to never forget the men who valiantly fought for the freedom America enjoys, but who have since fallen on hard times after the war. In the upper right: the life cycle of a forgotten man begins – first, as a war hero, gallantly marching in a hometown parade and flanked by adoring crowds tossing ticker-tape in their midst. Second row: the mood turns sullen, then rancid as the ravages of combat exact their pound of flesh from the noble, the heroic and the disillusioned. Third row: Berkeley's last act for the song is bleak and unforgiving; the soldiers homecoming to unemployment, hardship and breadlines. The women reach out to their husbands, brothers and lovers, and in the penultimate finale Blondell is seen, arms outstretched, against bridgework showcasing the new recruits, the current crop of forgotten men brought to their knees in the foreground – the cycle beginning anew for the next generation.

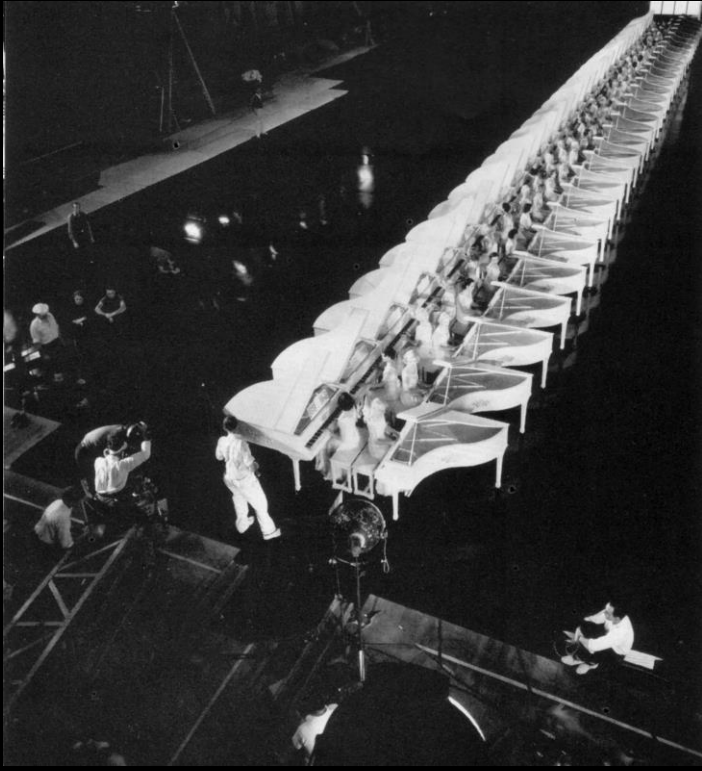
*Remember My Forgotten Man* is a number so true to the Depression era that one is immediately startled by Berkeley's unapologetic indictment of the socio-political structure that has allowed such a travesty to endure. Warner Bros. was a studio in support of President Franklin Roosevelt's policies, and yet the number is very much a scathing critique of his administration's inability to salvage the nation's want for a more prosperous time. Fourth row: by almost absurd contrast, **Gold Diggers of 1933** begins with a buoyant – if thoroughly fraudulent – anthem to prosperity; *'We're in The Money'* – sung by a sassy Ginger Rogers. Berkeley's chorines are decked out in gold coins and lame, their opulent surroundings complimented by the great Warren/Dubin melody. *"Gone are my blues, and gone are my tears. I've got good news to shout in your ears. The silver dollar has come back to the fold. With silver you can turn your dreams to gold!"* In the final edit Rogers also sings the chorus in a sort of fractured, backward Pig-Latin before the number is interrupted by bill collectors come to close down the rehearsals for lack of funds.

(This page, left): Ruby Keeler listens intently to Buzz, up on his crane as he prepares a run through for *'I Only Have Eyes For You'* the sublime love ballad from **Dames** (1934). Right: a publicity still of Ginger Rogers in her gold coin costume from **Gold Diggers of 1933**. Rogers first appeared in **42<sup>nd</sup> Street**. Her brassy platinum blonde quickly caught both Berkeley and the studio's attention. But it was no use. Her loan out to RKO for an impromptu bit part and teaming with Fred Astaire for 1933's **Flying Down To Rio** made Rogers an overnight sensation elsewhere. She would spend the rest of the 1930s at RKO in 8 films that forever cemented her popularity as one half of the greatest dance pair ever to appear in the history of movies.

shot. *"Buz would take his viewfinder high up on a platform in the rafters and be concentrating so hard on getting the angle just right he'd have to be tied with a rope around his waist, because a couple a times he almost fell off,"* Mickey Rooney explained. *"Everything was in service to that shot,"* Ruby Keeler concurred, *"Buz would say 'stand here' and I'd stand there. He's say, 'do this' and I'd do it. He wanted things just right for the camera and that's all that mattered. How you looked in relation to the shot...but I adored that man. He was truly gifted."*







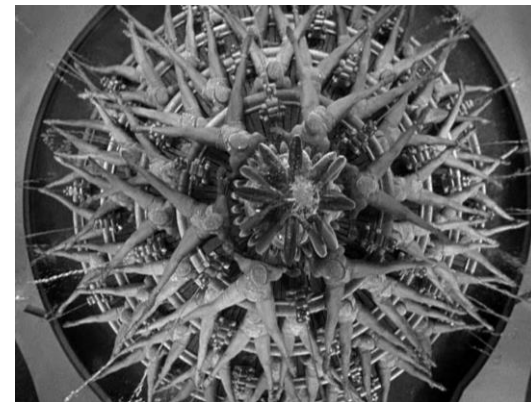
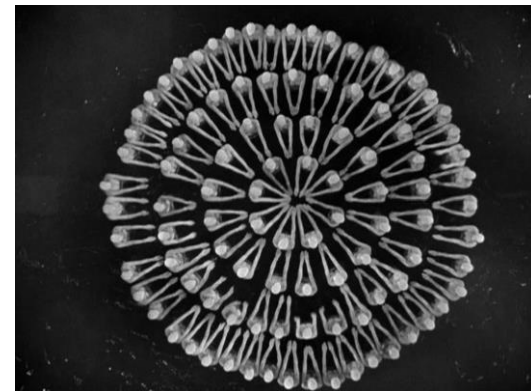
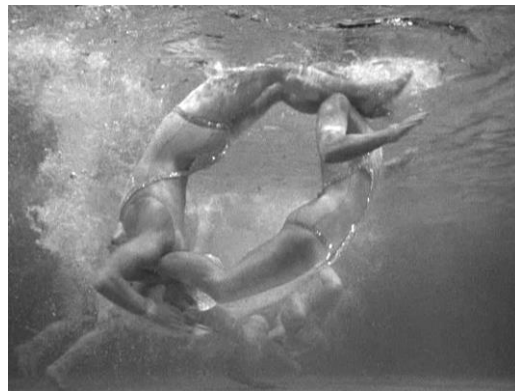
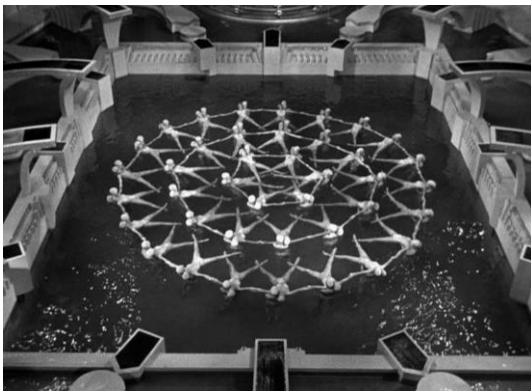
(Previous page): **Gold Diggers of 1933's** most titillating production number in undeniably '*Pettin' in the Park*' – a glamorous affair set in an art deco landscape. The action begins in late fall, the patrons depicted as young and old, black and white, each struck by Cupid's arrow. One of the most startling depictions – at least for its time – is the inclusion of the non-Caucasian couple also enjoying their autumn romance. In an era when blacks were primarily represented on the screen as slaves, maids, butlers and chauffeurs, Berkeley places this couple on par with their white counterparts, merely relishing the pleasures of their artificial surroundings. *Pettin' in the Park* is also notable for Billy Barty – the midget playing an inquisitive baby who enjoys pea-shooting the lusty adults to distraction, then crawling between the legs of the adult women engaging in a wintery snowball fight during the transitional second section. Berkeley cannot resist showcasing one of his trademark overhead kaleidoscopic shots herein.

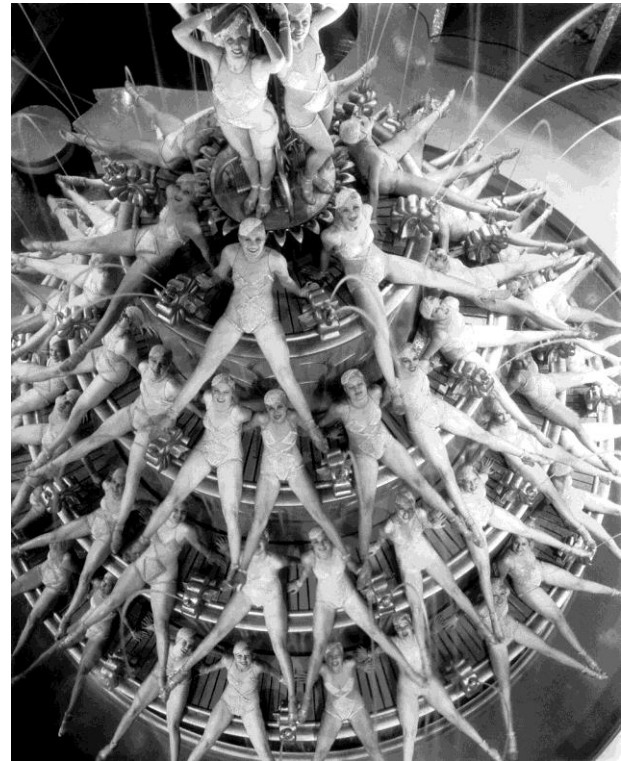
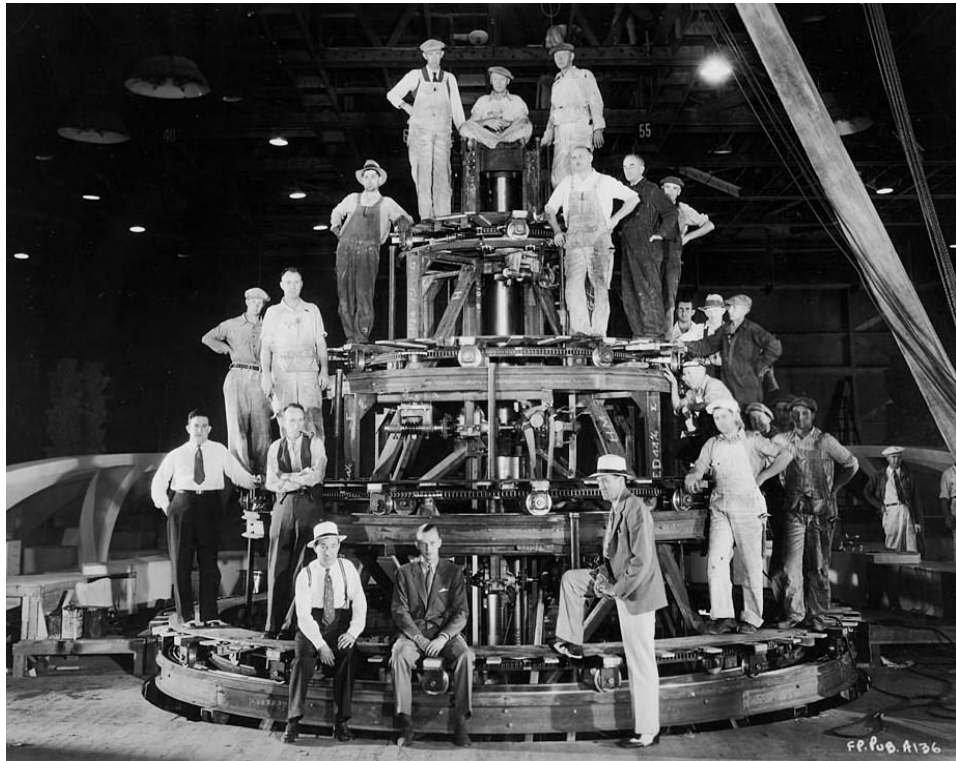
The effect this time around however is brief and largely forgettable, the oversized snowballs not particularly conducive to his artistic needs. In the third and final act an impromptu spring shower intrudes on l'amour once again. This time the ladies retreat to a nearby pavilion where they draw a transparent curtain before stripping out of their wet clothes. Barty emerges, this time in a rain slicker, tempting the audience by threatening to reveal the nude forms. The men, including Dick Powell patiently assume that when their lovers return the loving can begin. Unfortunately, the ladies have decided to don corsets made from tin. Powell is at first frustrated by his paramour's new attire; that is until Barty lends him a can opener. The last shot shows Powell turning Ruby Keeler's back to him as he prepares to cut through this bizarre chastity device. *Pettin' in the Park* was considered something of a perversion in its day. The Catholic League of Decency was not impressed, putting pressure on Hollywood's newly instituted Production Code to clamp down on future representations.

(This page, left): Berkeley rehearses his camera for 'The Words Are in My Heart' from **Gold Diggers of 1935**. The rotating baby grand pianos were actually made of hollow and easily moveable plywood, placed on casters, and with a man draped in black beneath each one to conceal him from the camera as they swirled about the glossy poured glass floor. (Right): when Berkeley left Warner Bros. at the end of the 30s he lost a good deal of his autonomy in the trade over at MGM who valued individual star power over Berkeley's analogous army of extras. Here, Berkeley is seated in the foreground with the cast from **Two Weeks With Love** (1950): a standard Jane Powell programmer for which he staged the musical sequences – none of them memorably. Among the memorable faces are Ricardo Montalban (just behind Berkeley's left), Powell and Louis Calhern (to Berkeley's right), and Clinton Sunberg, a 15 year old Debbie Reynolds, and Carlton Carpenter (standing behind Powell). The film is frothy and tune-filled, but it's hardly Berkeley's best work. By 1950 he had become generally bored by his assignments over at MGM.

For a time Berkeley was king at Warner Brothers, given carte blanche to stage his numbers with as much aplomb as the old Warner coffers could supply. In America, people came to see movies made by other directors simply to wait in anticipation of the moment when the drama or comedy took its pause, the orchestra struck up a hummable melody and Berkeley's imagination went to work. But in fact, Berkeley's influence was felt around the world; even including Adolph Hitler's Nazi Germany where it is rumored Der Fuhrer quietly instructed his Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels and state-sanctioned movie maker, Leni Riefenstahl to emulate the Berkeley style when staging his Nuremberg rallies.

Arguably, Berkeley today is even more of a style icon than he ever was during his own time. His artistry has appeared in one knock off after another in movies as diverse as Kate Capshaw's soaring and sequined '*Anything Goes*' at the start of **Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom** (1984), to Miss Piggy's fantasy swim in **The Great Muppet Caper** (1981), and 'the dude's' gutter ball dream sequence from **The Big Lebowski** (1998). Yet, it's an extremely telling testament to Berkeley's own iconography that whenever we see these moments from our contemporary vantage it's Berkeley's name that immediately





(Previous page): One of Berkeley's most lavish and fanciful creations is **By A Waterfall** from **Footlight Parade** (1933) – a spectacular water ballet, arguably, for which there remains no equal. Berkeley had attempted an aquacade in **The Kid From Spain**, but it was really nothing compared to this. Warner Bros. had initially balked at the cost of staging such a spectacle. It is rumored this one number cost nearly one third of **Footlight Parade's** entire budget. Nevertheless, Berkeley had cache at the studio by this time and his vision for the number was green lit. Once again, Berkeley photographs the number from every conceivable angle. We get overhead and underwater shot, the heavily chlorinated water wreaking havoc on the chorines' skin and eyes. The piece de resistance is a rising and rotating human fountain, its jets of water spewing high into the air. (Top left): Workmen and engineers proudly pose atop the elaborate metal mechanism soon to be sheathed in art deco style to support the chorines. The technology that went into building this contraption was considered state-of-the-art then and today remains equally as impressive. During the years of war rationing, the fountain was dismantled, its parts melted down and used on other film projects (Right): The completed structure with its bevy of water-logged beauties joyously smiling for Berkeley's camera.

comes to mind. We rekindle the master in all his glory, perhaps thinking of a Ruby Keeler tapping her way through a faux Broadway in **42<sup>nd</sup> Street**, or conjure to mind the likes of Esther Williams rising from the sea in **Million Dollar Mermaid** (1952). Berkeley's critics would argue that his 'art' was nothing more or better than a garish display of distraction – Berkeley's inability to even remotely reference what was happening elsewhere in the movies' threadbare narratives creating a distinct and jarring juxtaposition between the story and the songs unfolding before our eyes. Busby Berkeley rarely directed the movies in which his numbers appeared. Few geniuses have been so compartmentalized.

His all too brief stints at directing after leaving Warner Brothers never really added up to much beyond the numbers either. No, Berkeley is at his best when excised and/or removed from plot – his confections mesmerizing – even anesthetizing, with broad brush strokes of syncopated illumination. Yet Berkeley's 'magic' would be absolutely nothing at all without the infectious scores of Harry Warren and Al Dubin to reinforce them; hit men who scored toe-tapping gold over and over again. The integration of their music with Berkeley's inspired staging is a marriage of impeccable sights and sounds. But oh, how the fireworks kick off whenever a hundred or so dancers are in the room.

Berkeley once said that in an era of breadlines, depression and war, he tried to help people get away from all their miseries...to turn their minds to something else...if only for an hour. But his artistry has managed to do a lot more along the way. He's provided us with so much inspiration – a template – and yes, even parody that tomorrow's film makers and commercial artists will likely forever remain in his debt. And Berkeley today is arguably more revered than he was during his halcyon decade-long tenure at Warner Brothers. But oh, what grand entertainment he gave us; what a sublime and scintillating treasure trove to adore and admire; sitting there in the darkness with popcorn on our knee, wondering just how in the world he ever thought up those crazy, swirling, whirling, stylish spectacles.



***“Dancing is strenuous work...as strenuous as playing football.” – Busby Berkeley***

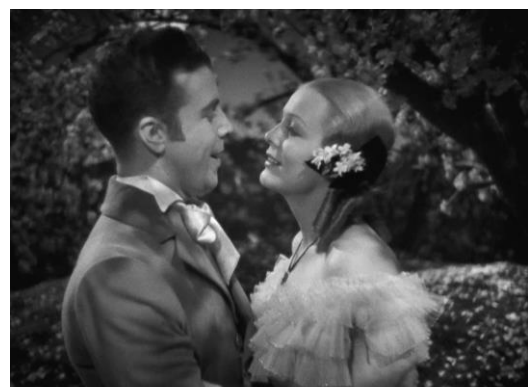
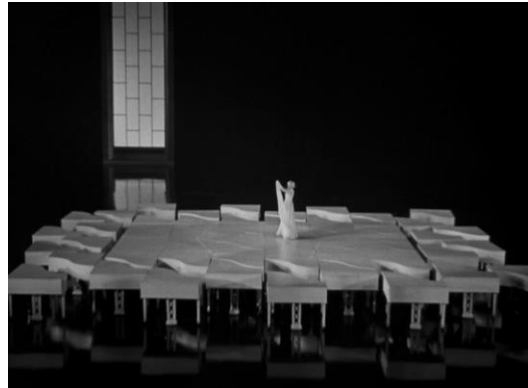
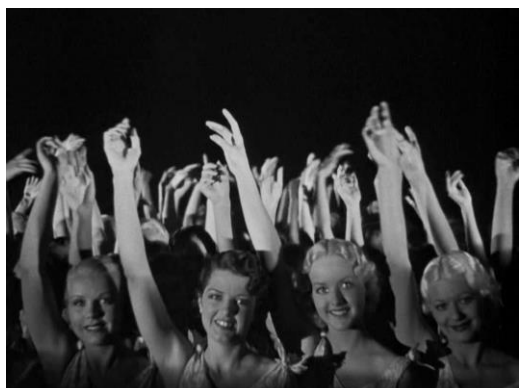
Busby Berkeley: colossal genius or masochistic joke? The debate over America’s premiere architect of the Hollywood musical from the 1930s rages on, fueled primarily by conflicting testimonials from the people who worked for him and by nearly six decades of fraudulent academic debate (most based in Freudian feminism) that has attempted to place Berkeley’s representations of the female form divine somewhere between mere oddity and compromised, fetishized, objectified ‘things’ on the silver screen. There is little to deny Berkeley’s vision. It isn’t about the dancer but rather the art of movement. But the same holds true for the way he handles men in his dance routines, though there are unmistakably less of them than their better halves on display in any Berkeley number.

Berkeley’s ‘use’ of women is in strict service to his construction of conformity - elaborate human kaleidoscopes: vast and complex geometric patterns that unfold as if by some great domino effect to produce an endless ‘exploitation’ of arms and legs all preening and/or kicking in unison. Yet, so too is there much to suggest that as an artist Busby Berkeley was inclined to liberate the chorine from her traditional nameless place among the backdrop and props. No more confined in long shot, Berkeley drew the focus of his camera inward to showcase bouquets of fresh faces blossoming with girlish pride. *“We’ve got all these beautiful girls,”* Berkeley used to say, *“Why not let the public see them?”*

One fact remains irrefutable. Berkeley’s camera work forever freed the art of dance on film from its stage-bound proscenium. The liquidity of his camera gave life – nee, excitement – to dance. In a Berkeley number it’s not only the dancers who twirl. Everything moves like gangbusters and before you know it you’re moving right along with it; head swaying, fingers snapping, toes tapping – humming the infectious melodies as you exit the theater. The essential magic that is Busby Berkeley on film is an exemplar of pure escapism at its most wholesomely playful.

Berkeley’s personal life was another matter entirely. Like so many of the greats from his vintage William Berkeley Enos was born on November 29, 1895 to struggle, hardship and poverty. If anything, he at least had the very modest advantage of being born close to his future vocation - calling Los Angeles his home. Home, however, was something of a relative term for Berkeley. His father Francis was a stage director for the Tim Frawley Repertory Company; his mother, Gertrude, a struggling actress. On the road for most of his childhood, young Will’ became resilient to the prospect of never waking up in the same bed more than twice. At age 12 he was enrolled in the Mohegan Lake Military Academy near Peekskill where he eventually graduated in 1914.

To say that Berkeley’s home life lacked cohesion would be something of an understatement. He was never close to his brother George who was ten years his senior. In his youth he took jobs that bored him mostly, working for a shoe company in





(Previous page): *The Words Are in My Heart*, at least so crooner Dick Powell serenades in **Gold Diggers of 1935**. Berkeley employed 65 hollow plywood baby grand pianos accompanied by 65 chorines, the entire menagerie on casters pushed and pulled along the floor by men cloaked in black velvet to conceal them from the camera. Berkeley's imagery is sound, but his usual flair for storytelling seems a bit lacking. The number begins in a forest, presumably somewhere in the old south. After Powell's brief song the action dissolves to a curio of Powell in the forest situated atop a single white piano inside a southern mansion. Three of Berkeley's chorines sing the chorus of the song again, the camera moving in on the back of the girl playing the piano. When it pulls back we are in an art deco ballroom with elevated floors, the pianos beginning to rotate counter clockwise as we get close ups of the various pianists. Next, the pianos form two lines that sway back and forth like an amoeba. Berkeley had employed a similar effect with swimmers for *By The Waterfall*. The chorines dismount their benches and use their fingers to wave, Berkeley's camera rising above the spectacle to feature one dancer atop her piano as all of the others, minus their performers, rush in to form one gigantic white rectangle. We return to Powell singing his song and then the manor house where the girls retire for the night.

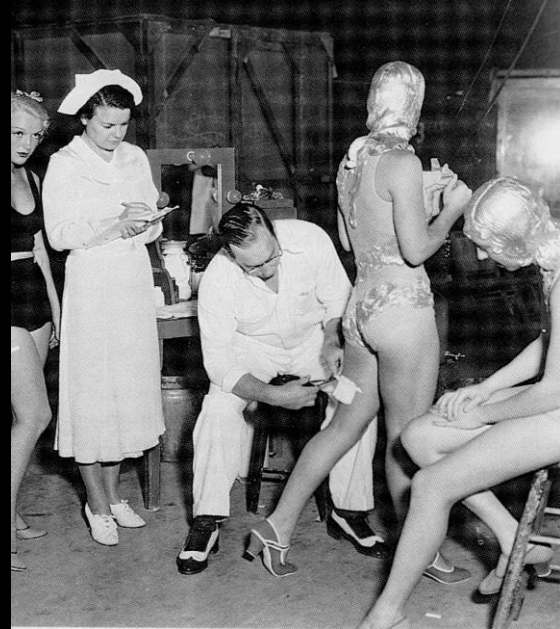
Above: two publicity stills featuring various chorus girls hand-picked by Berkeley for photo shoots. Curiously, there are no ensemble photographs of Berkeley's 65 chosen dancers featured in the same shot. The photograph on the left is clearly taken to promote **Gold Diggers of 1933**, while the one on the right appears to be a promotional snapshot for **42<sup>nd</sup> Street**.

Athol, Massachusetts for three years, playing semi-pro baseball, organizing a dance band and playing local venues merely to pass the time. It was a frustrating, stagnated existence. The death of his father precluded Berkeley from having a normal childhood and, at least in retrospect, seems to have dogged and informed the even greater tragedies endured throughout Berkeley adult life.

A stint as a lieutenant in the US Army artillery, conducting and directing drill routines for parades from 1918-1921 gave Berkeley direction and discipline. It also pointed the way toward his future career. Following in Francis' footsteps, Berkeley became a stage actor and later assistant director for a small troupe of actors. But it wasn't until he was forced into taking over the musical direction of the 'Holka-Polka' that Berkeley was to discover his knack for staging musical numbers. He was unabashedly ashamed of the fact that he knew absolutely nothing about choreography; a stigma he feared would oust him from the theater, and much later, Hollywood. Despite this handicap, Berkeley's innovations quickly garnered the attention of Broadway's top dance directors, as well as reigning impresario Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. who signed Berkeley to stage the production numbers for **A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court**. Eddie Cantor, the much beloved star of Ziegfeld's immortal stage spectacle, **Whoopie!** promoted Berkeley for the film version in 1930; a cause célèbre backed by Ziegfeld himself that brought Berkeley to the attention of Hollywood.

Fame can do strange things to people and in Berkeley's case it only seems to have magnified his own insecurities and self-loathing. In between movie projects he became known about town as a heavy drinker and this infrequently impaired his better judgment. For decades the rumor has persisted that alcohol caused the fatal accident along the Pacific Coast Highway on September 8, 1935. Berkeley was returning home from a party given by William Koenig to celebrate the completion of **In Caliente**. But in fact Berkeley had plowed his roadster into oncoming traffic after suffering a blowout, causing a three car





(Previous) Undeniably the most story-laden and intricate of Berkeley's production numbers, if perhaps any ever devised for film, *Lullaby of Broadway* from **Gold Diggers of 1935** tells the sordid tale of a Broadway party girl who sleeps all day and dances all night. Berkeley's vision is heavily inspired by German expressionism. His depiction of the New York skyline and streets is dark and foreboding, his vision for the lavish multi-tiered penthouse ballroom no less brooding. After the camera zooms in on the disembodied head of singer Wini Shaw, Berkeley indulges us with a bit of montage that shows how Shaw spends her days and nights – luring her present paramour, Dick Powell into paying for her apartment and lifestyle. The tap routine that follows begins with a single couple attired in white inside the Club Casino. But soon the dancers' cloths change to black. The women, in their midriff exposing cat suits are particularly vamp-like; the men appearing more as ushers than suitors.

Shaw sings the song, but it's Dick Powell who interjects the toast that sends the ballroom into its frenzy; "*A table for two, a lady divine, a rhapsody blue, a bottle wine!*" The dancers mob Shaw and Powell who, presumably inebriated, don't really seem to mind. They pursue the couple on the dance floor, separating them and chasing Shaw into the turrets and out onto a narrow balcony. She coyly bars their way, peering through the French doors and kissing Powell through the glass. But the crowd has underestimated their influence. They accidentally push Shaw to her death by forcing open the doors. She plummets off the balcony, the camera sparing us her demise; returning instead to Shaw's apartment where we see her milk bottles uncollected, her cat unfed. Shaw's disembodied head returns to warble the penultimate lines of the song. Apparently when this Broadway baby says 'goodnight' it's for good! The song and the story it tells are macabre but equally as fascinating, the choreography so intense and intricate it remains a spellbinding marvel of planning and execution. The Hollywood musical has never been more prolific or satisfying than this.

(Above left): Berkeley and producer Mervyn LeRoy (to Berkeley's left) study a miniature and oversee construction of the massive set for *The Shadow Waltz* from **Gold Diggers of 1933**. (Middle): various chorines rest and read catch up on daily events in the newspaper in between takes on the set of *Love and War* from **Gold Diggers of 1937**. (Right): A property master attends to a chorine's bathing suit in between takes on the set of *By A Waterfall* from **Footlight Parade**. The amount of time spent in preparation for one of Berkeley's productions numbers now seems unfathomable and only possible in those halcyon days of the studio system when everything that was required to will such opulent spectacles into reality was home grown and readily available.

collision that left three people dead; William von Brieson, his mother and sister-in-law. Having stumbled from the wreckage of his own car, Berkeley was narrowly spared a similar fate when his roadster burst into flames. He was later acquitted of all charges, but not before having to endure two hung jury trials.

The pall of what he had done remained forever present in Berkeley's own mind – arguably, for the rest of his days. By the time he began work on **Varsity Show** (1937) Berkeley's severe bouts of depression were already legendary and threatening his future career prospects at Warner Brother. It was all coming to an end much too fast; the cycle and popularity of Warner's musicals winding down. And the studio had grown tired of increasingly having to do damage control to shore up Berkeley's reputation. Berkeley's self-destructive nature had also dismantled two of his six marriages by then, leaving behind bitter ex's Esther Muir (1929-31) and Merna Kennedy (1934-36) who were bleeding his personal finances dry. Berkeley would marry three more times without any real prospects of everlasting bliss. Perhaps because his relationships with women in general proved so utterly disastrous during this period, Berkeley developed a very close-knit bond with his mother. In fact, Gertrude lived with Berkeley until her death in 1946 – an event that sent Berkeley into his deepest despair yet and even caused him to attempt suicide by taking an overdose and then slitting his wrists.

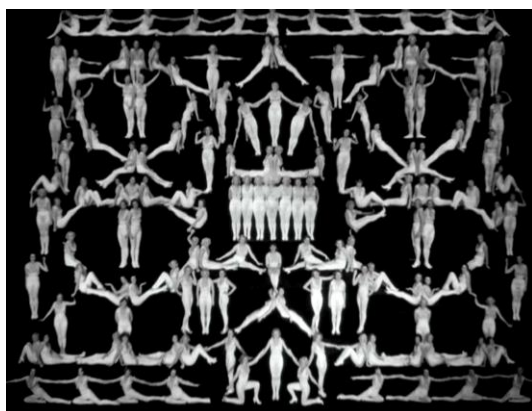
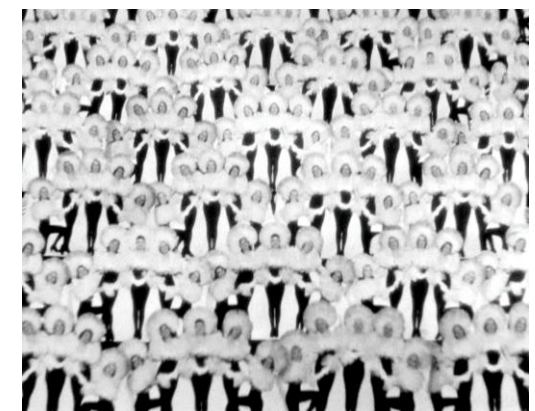
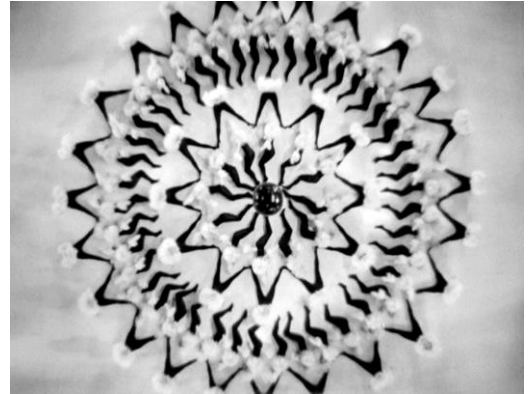
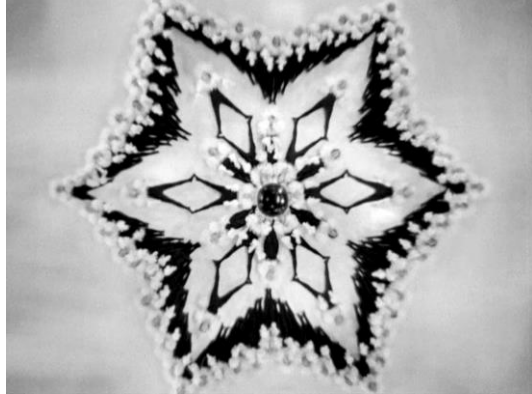
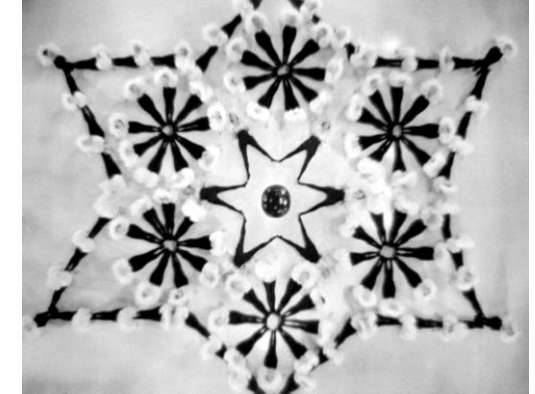
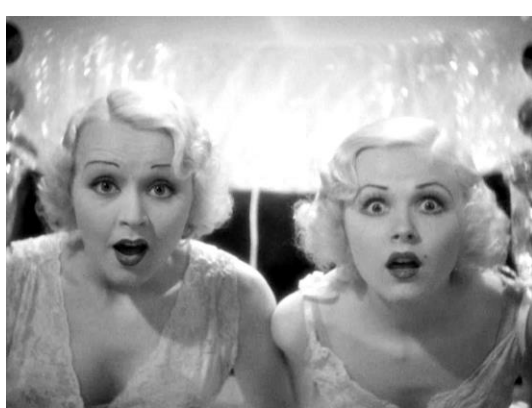




(Above): It wasn't all work. Some of it was publicity. Berkeley clowns around with a bevy of his beauties on the Warner back lot. Curiously, especially given the setting herein, Berkeley wouldn't stage a 'farm' inspired production number until 1941's **Babes on Broadway** over at MGM – the 'Hoe-Down' with Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland. He would revisit that well again for the dude ranch finale in **Girl Crazy** (1943). Right: Joan Blondell couldn't sing a note but no one knew her way better around a comedy scene. Here she is pictured with Guy Kibbee, a contract player who specialized in playing stuffed shirts, silly hams and elderly gents who – when drunk – did the most awfully ridiculous things – like back hit shows while chasing after chorus girls at least twenty-five years too young for them. Kibbee and Blondell liked to play poker between takes. "He was a sweet old guy," Blondell admitted in an interview decades later, "Fatherly or even grandfatherly. Quite unlike the skirt-chaser they made him play."

Of course, in hindsight Busby Berkeley's career in Hollywood had always been precariously perched. As a dance director he was limited to training dancers and staging dances. Only the film's director was allowed to choose camera angles, the execution of the final product further blunted by an editor's decision as to which takes made it into the final cut. Berkeley wanted total control over this process however, and was granted it by Samuel Goldwyn for 1931's **Flying High** – something of a last ditch effort to revitalize the musicals already waning popularity with audiences. Berkeley's numbers were brilliant, but the movie was not a success. Next came **The Kid From Spain** (1932), an Eddy Cantor vehicle in which Berkeley had planned for a grand revolving platform to showcase his chorines. "I don't want them to revolve," Goldwyn reportedly told Berkeley during rehearsals, "Do it the way it is now and if you must revolve them do it at some other studio." Berkeley begrudgingly agreed. He also took Goldwyn's advice to heart, moonlighting over at Warner Brothers. Although **The Kid from Spain** was a solid hit, from that moment on Berkeley quietly vowed to someday have his girls revolve.

Unfortunately for Berkeley, his contract with Goldwyn was up and Goldwyn was playing hardball in offering him a renewal. After Berkeley began scoring one hit after another over at Warner Brothers Goldwyn would attempt – unsuccessfully – to for Berkeley's release – claiming Berkeley still owed him two pictures. In the meantime, Mervyn LeRoy, who was a close personal friend and successful director at Warner Brothers urged Berkeley to stay on in Hollywood, offering to put in a good word for him with production chief Darryl F. Zanuck. Berkeley was reluctant. Musicals had fizzled all too quickly with the dawn of sound. As a genre they were now considered passé. Even before his career had begun it seemed to be over. But Zanuck had an idea for a 'new' kind of musical; the backstage drama with songs – **42<sup>nd</sup> Street** (1933). Zanuck's timing could not have been better. Regrettably, LeRoy, who had been slated to direct the movie, came down with acute tonsillitis and had to withdraw. Zanuck's replacement was Lloyd Bacon, a no-nonsense contract director whose style was not unlike W.S. Van Dyke's over at MGM – namely, that he shot quick and cheaply. It didn't hurt the film, for **42<sup>nd</sup> Street** straddles two genres; the musical and the 'ripped from the headlines' melodrama that had been Warner's bread and butter. The amalgamation of these two styles bode well for the film. More important to Berkeley, he was largely left to his own accord, shooting with a second unit at Warner's Sunset Studios while Bacon made the rest of the movie on six sound stages at First National.





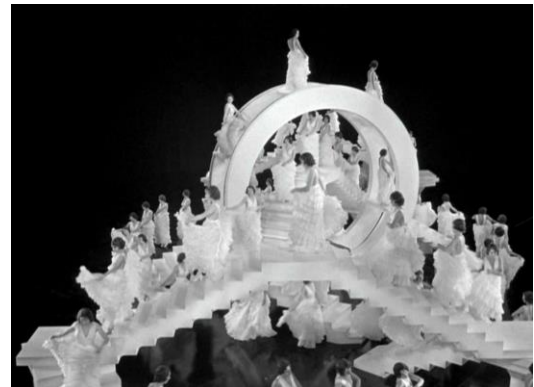
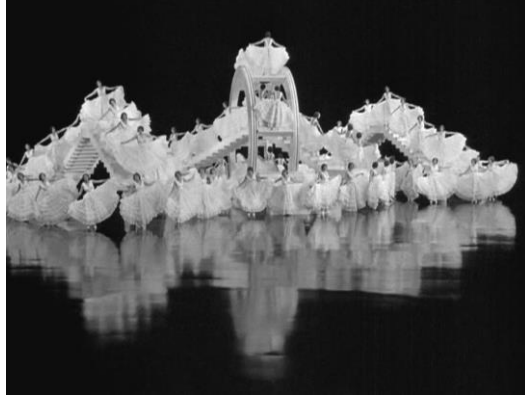
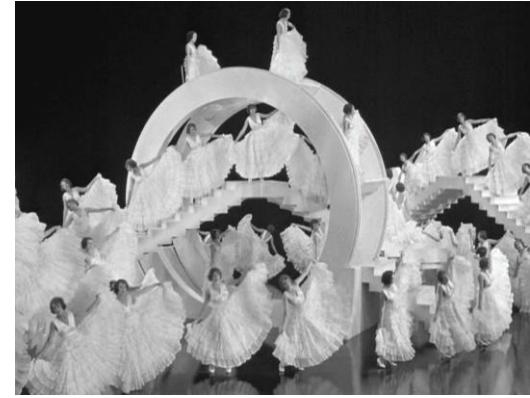
(Previous): a day in the life of a chorus girl...or at least, as depicted by Berkeley from the finale to **Dames** (1934). The number begins inside producer Dick Powell's office with various financial backers attempting to analyze what makes a hit show. Frustrated, Powell finally interrupts with, "*Who writes the words to all those picture shows? No one cares. No one knows. What do you go for, to see a show for...you go to see it for those beautiful dames.*" The sequence leads into just another routine nine to five for an army of chorines who curiously live together in a sort of communal art deco boarding house. Berkeley's camera weaves through a series half-moon shaped beds, bubble baths and vanity tables; the girls arriving at the stage door on time only to be thrown into the rafters of the theater, then fall back on the floor in various geometric patterns. The camera pulls back from a domino-stacked tower of chorines singing the title song, the image frozen before Powell shoves his head through the still frame to chime in the last few lines. The finale is an escapism wink and a nudge to Berkeley's fetishized females; their minds unimportant, their bodies used merely to create more of Berkeley's jigsaw puzzle pieces, endlessly maneuvered into kaleidoscopic patterns.

(This page, left): Dick Powell attempts to comfort an inconsolable Ruby Keeler in **42<sup>nd</sup> Street**. (Right): The boys and girls strut their stuff in this publicity photo taken for the same film.

Berkeley committed three numbers to **42<sup>nd</sup> Street**; the silly/chirpy '*Shuffle Off To Buffalo*', the energetic '*Young and Healthy*' and the grandiose moving tableau to gaudy, bawdy urban excess – the finale '*42<sup>nd</sup> Street*'. Viewed today, only the latter two are memorable, imbued with Berkeley's spark of ingenuity. In hindsight, '*Young and Healthy*' clearly illustrates where Berkeley's future endeavors would reside. Beginning with a crooning serenade from Dick Powell, the number evolves from one beautiful girl (16 year old Toby Wing, looking ravishing in white fox fur and slinky, bare-back gown), then into two, then four, then quite suddenly an army of nearly carbon-copied blonde bombshells, identically attired and flanked by a chorine of male ushers. The brood mounts a spinning dance floor, marching, strutting and even jogging in unison, counterclockwise to the movement of the floor beneath their feet. It's a stunning effect, creating motion within motion, the whole spectacle strangely caught in pace and 'in place', the final shot photographed between dancers' bare legs and finally coming to rest on a close-up of Powell and Wing blissfully smiling into the camera.

For the finale, Berkeley uses his camera to pan over a recreated stage-bound street scene, showcasing the various scamps, tramps and other spurious characters populating his faux New York landscape. Peering into various windows of an apartment complex we see a barber at work, a crap shoot in progress and a foiled rape scene unfold. Ruby Keeler, who would become the other mainstay of Berkeley's tenure at Warner, appears in a straight skirt with oversized buttons and a slit up the leg. The relatively realistic set parts down the middle and Keeler makes her way up a gigantic staircase to nowhere, a small army of male dancers with their backs turned to the camera, all carrying blacked out/life-sized placards as they ascend on either side. Only when the stairs have been completely covered does this troupe turn around, and then, to conceal their identities completely by hiding behind the placards made to resemble towering replicas of the New York skyline.

**42<sup>nd</sup> Street** was a colossal hit. Moreover, it cemented Berkeley's iconography within the musical genre. Berkeley and composers Harry Warren and Al Dubin all received 7 year contracts as a result, and Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler became the reigning musical sweethearts of Berkeley's subsequent excursions into sweet escapism. In November Warner Brothers announced in the trades that they were giving their most valuable player 'time off' to raid the various chorus lines and sign 60 dancers to a long-term contract. Berkeley gave a puff piece interview to the press where he laid out 'the rules' each chorine





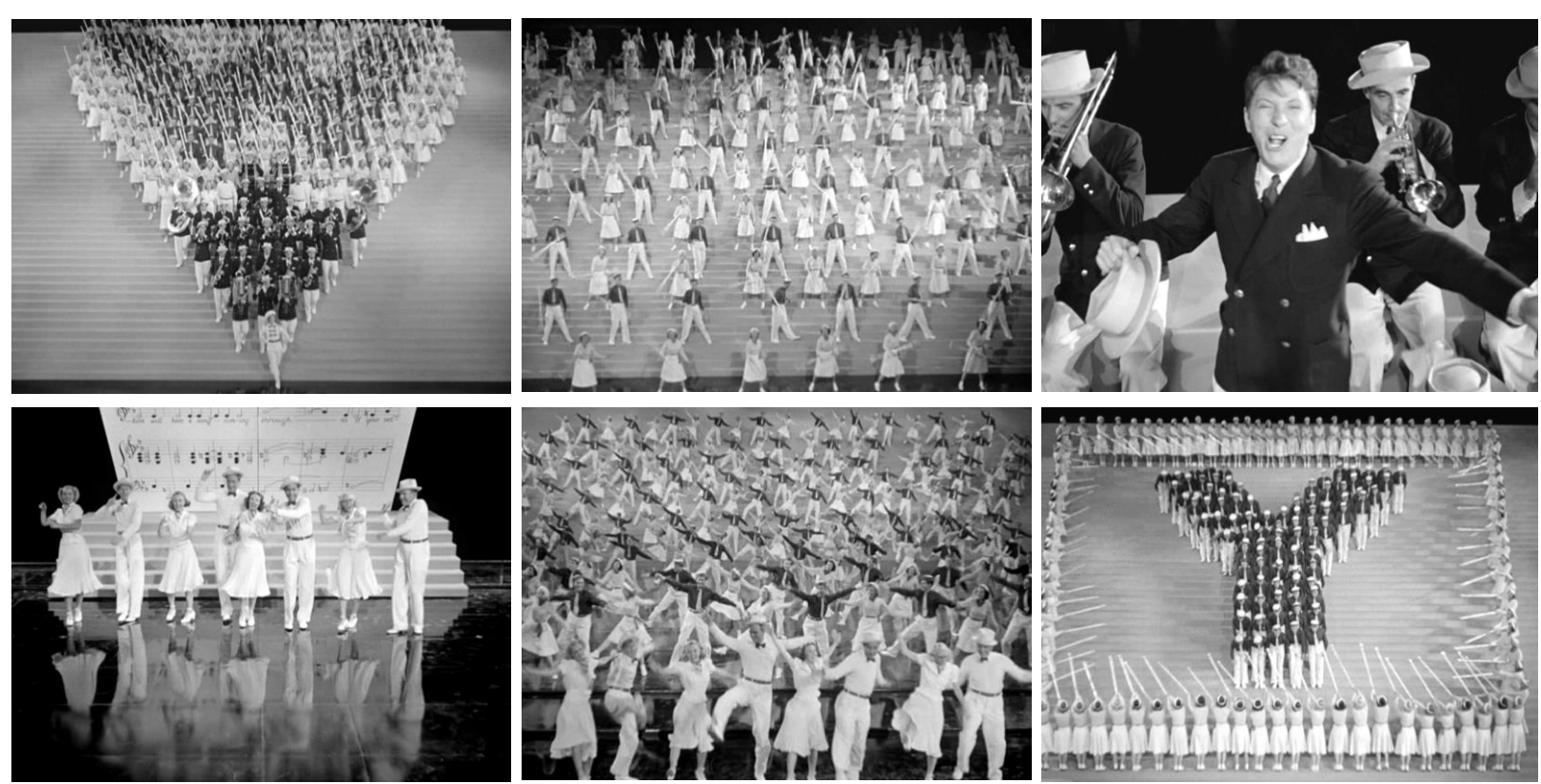
(Previous): In *'I Only Have Eyes For You'* from **Dames** (1934) Berkeley employs Ruby Keeler's cherub-esque features to obsessive effect. Dick Powell and Keeler are first glimpsed along 'a crowded avenue' in which all of the patrons suddenly 'disappear from view'; Powell's daydreams of Keeler overtaking his subconscious so that any girl he sees suddenly reminds him of her. Berkeley introduces his chorines hiding behind a life-size cutout of Keeler's head, only to reveal each as having an uncanny resemblance to Keeler anyway as the shot dissolves into one of Keeler herself atop a great rotating art deco Ferris wheel, the other chorines loosely waving their billowy half-moon skirts back and forth. The number concludes with Keeler in full body framed within a handsome mirror, the number dissolving back to Keeler and Powell, now sound asleep on the subway.

(This page): **Footlight Parade's Shanghai Lil'**, with its blatant depictions of drunkenness, prostitution and drug addiction had the Production Code in an uproar – though not enough to force Warner Bros. to excise the number. James Cagney and Ruby Keeler to a spirited buck and wing atop a bar in a brothel about to be raided by the police before Cagney dons a sailor's uniform and takes to the streets with his concubine. Outside (or rather, inside a large Warner Bros. soundstage), the U.S. military force is in full regalia, proudly doing its maneuvers to a roaring crowd, the soldiers forming the American flag with its center portion turned to reveal President Roosevelt's portrait. The soldiers also form the NRA logo, firing their guns in all directions from its center, but presumably, without killing any of the onlookers.

was expected to follow if she should wish to keep her job. This rather silly roster of edicts included daily regimented outdoor exercise, three square meals a day, at least one consisting of steak or chop and a glass of orange juice, minimum make-up and NO mascara, and, no high heel shoes while rehearsing. Berkeley's \$1,500 weekly salary made him one of the highest paid 'stars' on the Warner back lot, although much of this profit was eaten up by Berkeley's alimony.

For his next feature, **Gold Diggers of 1933**, Berkeley's penchant for extravagance was given exceptionally free reign, and he proved that left to his own accord he could concoct some of the most breathtaking feats of escapism yet seen in the movies. Warren and Dubin kick off the film with one of the true oddities of the Depression era, *'We're In The Money'* - sung by a sassy Ginger Rogers bedecked in a glittering mass of coins. The song suggests an end to hard times, despite the fact that the Depression was at its zenith in 1933. Berkeley employs slow-motion and skewed camera angles; Rogers and her chorines flouncing rather haplessly about the art deco proscenium before being interrupted in their rehearsal by bill collectors.

The number is but a prelude to two of Berkeley's most thrilling concoctions. *'Pettin' In The Park'* features a pint-sized and slightly perverse Billy Barty skulking around a ladies changing room after an impromptu thunderstorm has chased everyone from the art deco park inside. Hidden behind some very transparent drapes, the girls completely undress as Barty leers on. The number is impressive not only for its execution but also for its obvious sidestepping of the newly instituted production code that generally forbade sexual explicitness of any kind on the screen. Yet, Berkeley manages to get up close and personal with his female chorines, shooting from angles that go right up their stocking feet from ankle to inner thigh, and later, by concealing their naked forms behind the flimsiest of translucent curtains.

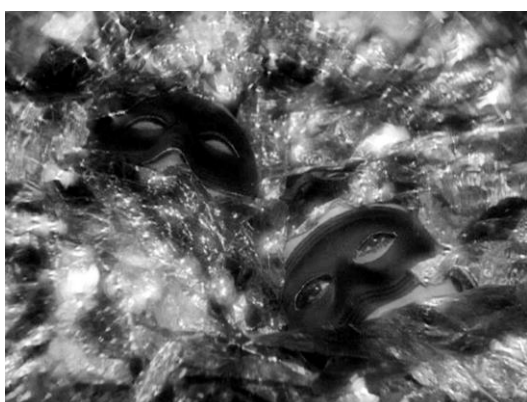
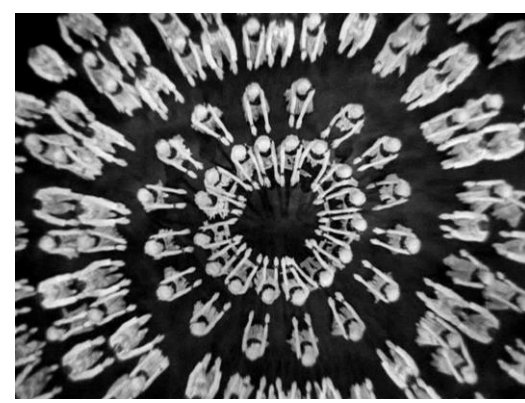
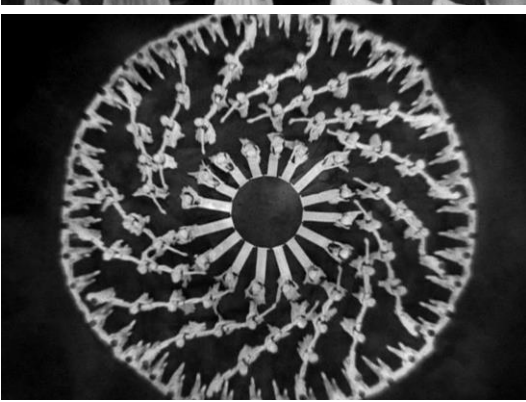
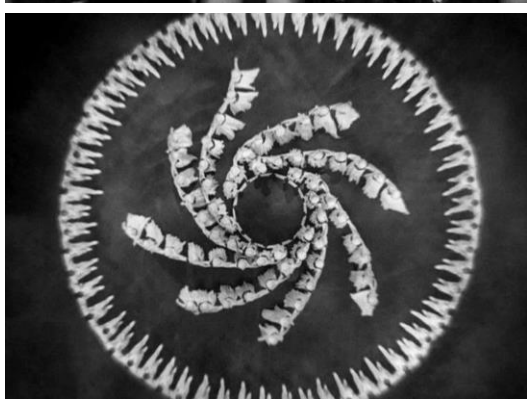


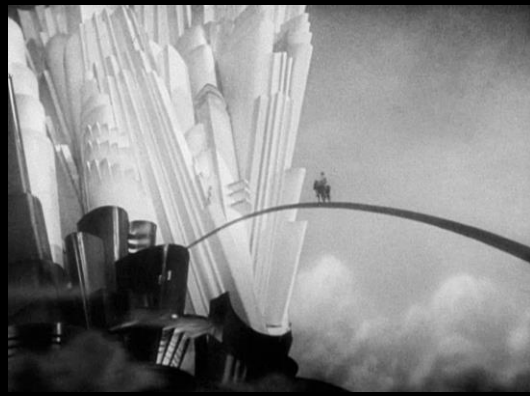
(Above): The finale to **Varsity Show** (1937) provided Berkeley with the opportunity to stage a college pep rally like no other, with cast members Ted Healy, Sterling Holloway, Rosemary and Pricilla Lane never getting lost amid the organized mayhem. The finale is an amalgam of three Richard Whiting songs written expressly for the movie, 'On With The Dance', 'You've Got Something There' and 'Baby, Have You Got Any Castles, Baby?', plus 'Old King Cole' belted out by Louis Prima and accompanied by Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians, interpolated with snippets from the various fight songs belonging to the universities of Michigan, Notre Dame and Yale among others; Berkeley's male and female chorines recreating the letters of each university with human geometric precision. It may not have been Berkeley's most imaginative effort, but it was certainly among his most lavish.

If the number remains slightly risqué, even by today's standards, Berkeley's other memorable contribution '*The Shadow Waltz*' is anything but. The number is one of the undisputed highlights not only in a Berkeley movie but in any Hollywood musical; the chorines redressed in tri-hooped billowy satin white skirts and coddling neon-lit violins. The battery packs hidden under each chorine's skirt frequently shorted while shooting this number, their electric violins sparking and subtly shocking the dancers as they whirled and twirled before the camera in an ever-expanding pattern, while carefully placed atop rising staircases, poured glass and mirror floors or near a limpid pool of still water tinted with black dye to provide a startling reflection. At one point Berkeley kills all the lights on the set, the dancers illuminated only by their neon instruments and rushing together to form one gigantic violin with its neon-lit bow rocking back and forth. There are several other production numbers in **Gold Diggers of 1933**, but none even comes close to rivaling the surreal poeticism in *The Shadow Waltz*.

Midway through shooting this elephantine number the studio was rocked by a 6.4 magnitude earthquake whose epicenter in Long Beach rattled Burbank to its core. The set was plunged into darkness and several of the dancers were injured by falling debris. Berkeley, who was thirty feet up in the rafters at the time the quake hit clung perilously to his rigging while encouraging the frightened extras to remain where they were until the gigantic bay doors could be pried open to allow in the natural light. Thankfully, damage to the set and the studio were minimal – a minor miracle, even if it delayed shooting by a few days so that structural damage could be properly assessed.

When the company did reassemble, Berkeley dove headstrong into the film's penultimate number, *Remember My Forgotten Man*, featuring actress Joan Blondell talking her way with considerable emotion through a great Warren/Dubin song that squarely addresses the unemployed and down-trodden. The song is all social commentary and Berkeley's vision of it, no less so; the foreground cluttered with hungry, panged, expressionless eyes, the backdrop a fascinating bridgework of soldiers proudly marching in a rainbow-like formation overhead as Blondell passionately implores the audience to never forget the men who made sacrifices for their country but now require the nation's compassion to get back on their own feet. At a time when most movies in general, and musicals in particular, all but ignored the nation's woes, choosing instead to divert





(Previous): One of Berkeley's most sublime escapist fantasies, staging a Cinderella-eque masked ball for 'Don't Say Goodnight' from **Wonder Bar** (1934). The film starred second string matinee idol Ricardo Cortez, Delores Del Rio, Dick Powell and Al Jolson and is among the most adult fare Warners produced during this vintage. Certainly, its central themes of adultery, promiscuity and unpunished murder committed in the name of jealousy were startling and went way beyond what the Production Code deemed as acceptable. *Don't Say Goodnight* begins with a waltz between Cortez and Del Rio inside Jolson's fashionable nightclub, serenaded by Dick Powell. Soon, however, this proscenium gives way to Berkeley's fanciful imagination; a ballroom with moveable pillars where masked dancers sway to the lilting strains of the music. One of them (Victoria Vinton) loses her shoe, leaving a star-struck Denis O'Keefe to go in search of the missing apparel. Berkeley's ingenious placement of several towering walls of mirrors creates the illusion of infinity. It's still only 65 dancers we're seeing, multiplied to endless effect and stretching beyond to a never-ending horizon. Berkeley dug a hole in the floor to conceal his camera and cameraman. At the end of the number, O'Keefe discovers Vinton hidden beneath a bower of silver lame leaves in a shimmering forest. Casting her mask to the ground, the masks blow into a pile of leaves to reveal Cortez and Del Rio, who longingly implores "Why can't this night go on forever?"

Regrettably, **Wonder Bar** is also remembered for 'Going To Heaven on A Mule' – Berkeley's grossly prejudicial rendering of an all-black segregated heaven where a poor farmer (played by Al Jolson) is invited to dance all day and eat all the watermelon he wants. The invitation is a ruse, of course, to see if Jolson can resist temptation and be truly worthy of entrance beyond the Milky Way. Jolson, who had trademarked 'black-face' in **The Jazz Singer** (1929) plays this new recruit as a wide-eyed simpleton, amazed to discover that heaven (or at the very least, this suburb of it) is a reconstituted version of Hollywood-Harlem. At one point Jolson makes his way to a nightclub in the sky where he is reunited with his beloved mule and stays to watch as one of the male dancers taps while flanked by oversized wedges of watermelon. With his white chorines heavily pancaked in cork, Berkeley meant *Going To Heaven on A Mule* to be a fanciful exultation of that bygone era in Vaudeville. Instead, his homage became a rather garish misfire, exemplifying the still prevalent acceptableness of racism.

audience's anxieties with escapist fluff and nonsense, Berkeley and the film had brought the Depression-era anxieties to a fevered pitch – boldly, concretely and with artistic flair.

Assessing the film for the Los Angeles Record, critic Relma Morin astutely surmised that "it's a dazzling, eye-paralyzing, ear-tickling creation that makes all other musicals look like a Delancey Street peep show. The star of the picture is a gentleman who does not appear in it. Busby Berkeley, the geometrically-minded lad...has done a perfectly amazing job!"

Warner Brothers too had been most impressed by Berkeley's innovations – less so when the front office discovered he had ordered the studio craftsmen to cut holes in the ceilings of the soundstages to accommodate his ever-increasing need to rise higher and higher into the rafters. Jack Warner was in Europe at the time Berkeley requested these alterations, but upon hearing the news gave a solemn order barring Berkeley from setting foot inside the latest stage being built at the studio for fear he might order holes drilled into its rooftop too.

For Berkeley's next endeavor, **Footlight Parade** (1933) he was given James Cagney as his star. Cagney, who had begun life as a dancer, but had been relegated to playing gangsters in the movies, proved himself every bit up to the challenge of high-



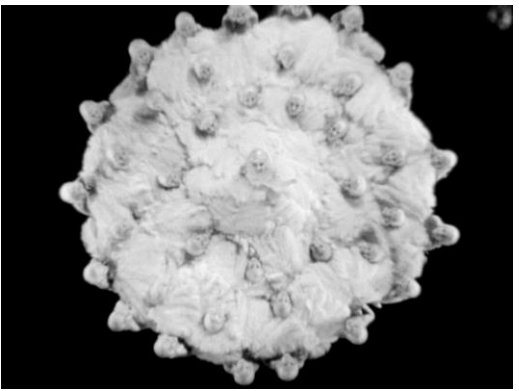
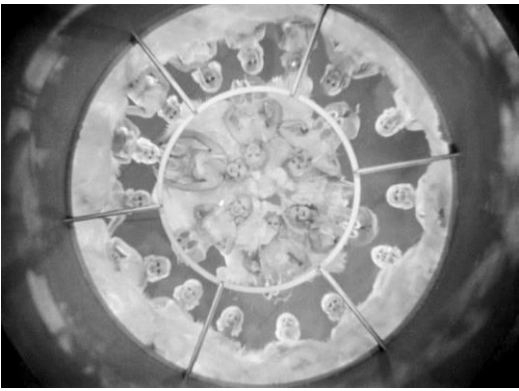
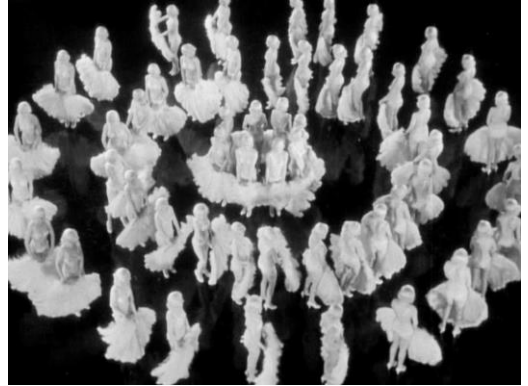


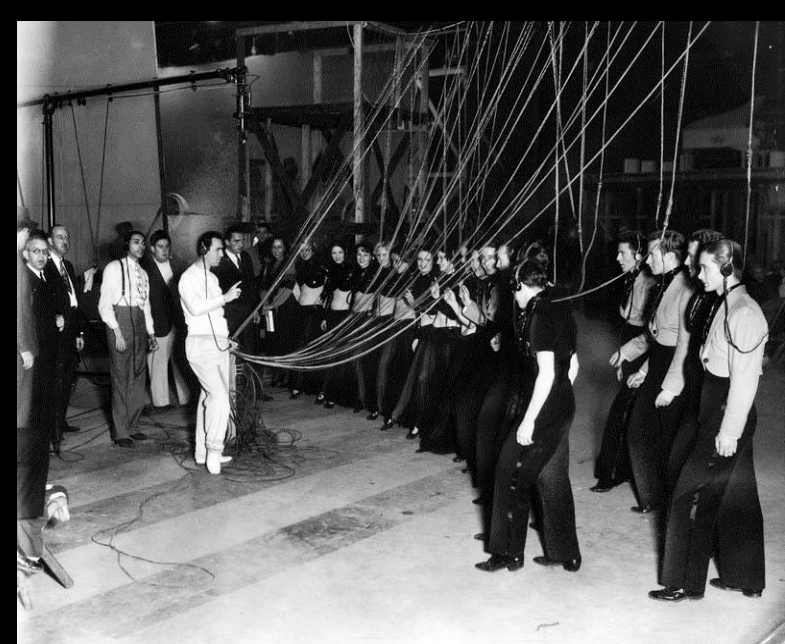
(Above): By the time Berkeley staged *'The Latin Quarter'* in Ray Enright's **Gold Diggers in Paris** (1938) Warner Bros. had already decided that it was time to retire their once popular backstage series. Told he would have to economize, Berkeley proved he could still be creative on a shoestring budget, particularly since his stars were the precious Rosemary Lane and Rudy Vallee, both in very fine voice indeed. And the Harry Warren/Al Dubin score is first rate, even if the film's plot is not. For the finale Lane climbs a ladder into Vallee's attic apartment in France as part of a stage show where he is painting headshots of women that miraculously come to life. We dissolve into a characteristic can-can, shot uncharacteristically by Berkeley with deep shadows and on a severe angle to mask the fact that his request for chorines had also been cut by half. Only thirty are ever featured in a single shot. The number concludes with Vallee and Lane atop an oversized naval cap reprising the movie's other hit song, *'I Wanna Go Back To Bali'*.

stepping. Yet, in hindsight there seems a curious disconnect between this film and Berkeley's two aforementioned efforts, Cagney's presence so formidable that it forced Berkeley to concoct more intimate numbers to showcase his male star. Berkeley, however, could not resist indulging his creative verve on two mammoth set pieces; the first, at least in hindsight, foreshadowing the MGM career of Esther Williams a full eleven years before it would come to pass. *'By A Waterfall'* is perhaps the most lyrical water ballet ever put on film. Undeniably, it remains one of the most intricate and, for its time, was the most expensive production number of Berkeley's career.

The number begins in a faux forest setting; the show within a show stars Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell serenading each other with a few bars of the Harry Warren/Al Dubin melody before Powell falls asleep on the grassy knoll and Keeler disappears behind a rock to disrobe and dive into the gargantuan swimming pool, complete with waterslides and fifty swimmers all bedecked in spangled one-piece bathing suits and matching skull caps. For the next ten minutes, Berkeley repeatedly dazzles with one memorable sequence of dives after the next, the swimmers retreating from the forest into an art deco pool before rising like sprites atop a revolving fountain. Berkeley compounds this mesmerizing spectacle by shooting the fountain of girls from every conceivable angle; his overhead symmetry revealing a fetishistic conglomeration of scissor-kicking legs. At one point Berkeley provides a startling overhead of the pool itself, illuminated from within only, the swimmers in shadow spreading from its center to create a baffling rotation of amoeba-shaped geometric patterns, locking their ankles around each other's necks to perform a cylindrical human chain in perfectly formed concentric circles beneath the water.

The other outstanding moment in the film is *Shanghai Lil'* – a spirited buck and wing performed in a brothel between Keeler (dressed in silks as a Chinese concubine) and Cagney as an American sailor who departs for the streets where a small army of





(Previous): Although early trade announcements suggested that musical numbers for **Fashions of 1934** would be directed by Berkeley, he only contributed one number to the film costarring William Powell and Bette Davis – the exquisite feather fantasy ‘*Spin A Little Web of Dreams*’. Sung by Verree Teasdale, the number tells of a milliner who, having toiled all day in her shop, falls asleep at her work desk, her head coming to rest on a billowy mass of feathers. She dreams of girl-shaped harps, of an art deco staircase lined in fan dancers featuring some of the most skimpy costumes ever worn by Berkeley’s chorines; basically lingerie in a feather motif. The girls preen and dance about, their fans spread to form a feathery tower. Berkeley shoots his chorines through a glass floor for one sequence. In another, they come together in a kaleidoscopic peony, their heads emerging from underneath, before Berkeley takes us beyond the garden to a robust Viking ship made entirely out of girls and feathers, casting off for a golden art deco sunset. The milliner awakens from this surreal fantasy inside her shop, pleasantly refreshed and rejuvenated to begin her work anew with Teasdale reprising the chorus of the song.

(This page, left): Berkeley rehearses the taps using an intricate headset device designed so that the extras can listen to him and the music at the same time without his having to shout over the playback. (Right): **42<sup>nd</sup> Street’s** chorines take a break on the set, showing off their gams for the camera.

marching soldiers form geometric patterns evoking the US military’s might and its heroes. These give way to a series of placards that form a gigantic headshot of President Franklin Roosevelt. In some ways **Footlight Parade** marks a definite period to the first half of Berkeley’s preeminence at the studio, his subsequent efforts becoming variations on formulas already patented and perfected in these three movies. After staging production numbers for the musical short, **Plane Nuts** and feature film, **Roman Scandals**, Berkeley was to have one of his first creative misfires on **Wonder Bar** (1934). ‘*Going to Heaven on a Mule*’ remains a grossly prejudicial representation of the black race – even for its own time – the cliché of the simpleton ‘darkie’ – hapless and leering - exploited ad nauseam.

But **Wonder Bar** also features one of Berkeley’s most heartbreakingly gorgeous dream sequences, ‘*Don’t Say Goodnight*’ – an intimate pas deux between stars Delores Del Rio and Ricardo Cortez that begins in an art deco and silver-leaved forest with an artificial wind loosely tugging at Del Rio’s gown and hair, before dissolving into a sublime white-pillared temple where gargantuan walls of rotating mirrors reflect the sixty dancers on tap, multiplying the procession into an infinite backdrop of intricate kaleidoscopic patterns. The effect is uncanny; the real dancers indistinguishable from their reflected counterparts, the mirrored walls constantly turning to reveal an ever so slightly different angle to the action, thus creation the illusion that hundreds – even thousands – are partaking in the moment. Berkeley worked out the camera angles using miniatures to ensure neither it nor the camera operator would not be seen in any of the reflections. By placing the camera ever so cleverly in just the right position facing one of the white pillars and, with the camera operator lying on his back in a trench dug just below floor level, both remain virtually invisible.

**Wonder Bar** may very well have created the impetus for more stringent reinforcement of the newly instituted Production Code of Ethics, for it tested the boundaries of what was then considered ‘indecent’ behavior; beginning with its references to a boudoir being more like ‘a playground’ and even more suggestive nods to homosexuality and sadomasochism. At the start of the movie a man and woman are seen dancing inside the ultra-chic nightclub presided over by Al Jolson. From the peripheries of the frame an effete gentleman approaches, tapping the woman on the shoulder and inquiring if he might cut



(Above): *Hollywood Hotel* (1937) was a trifle about a singer, played by Dick Powell, desperate to make good. Rosemary Lane played Powell's love interest, and the film also featured Glenda Farrell, Benny Goodman and his orchestra, as well as Ronald Reagan, theater impresario Sid Grauman and gossip columnist Louella Parsons in cameos. Despite some lavish production values, and the fact that Berkeley was allowed to direct the entire movie – not just its musical sequences – the resultant spectacle was very un-Berkeley-esque; more of a standard programmer of the day and bearing none of Berkeley's innovations for telling a story through song.

in. When the women receptively agrees the man takes her partner around the waist and dances off with him instead. Leering at the spectacle, Jolson slyly comments *"Boys will be boys."* **Wonder Bar** also featured a tango between Ricardo Cortez and Delores Del Rio in which he repeatedly assaults her with a bull whip as part of the act. The moment is capped off by Del Rio, whose character is in love with Cortez's man-about-town, but has also discovered his gross infidelities with other women, mortally stabbing him. The crowd in attendance assumes this is part of the act and applauds its daring, even as Cortez slinks off into the wings to die. But Del Rio's scorned murderess is never brought to justice.

Berkeley topped out 1934 with a minor programmer, **Fashions of 1934**, in which he staged a feather and harp spectacle to Warren and Dubin's *Spin A Little Web of Dreams*; then, a towering achievement with **Dames**, featuring three memorable excursions into Berkeley-ana – the whimsical *The Girl at the Ironing Board*, the lyrical *'I Only Have Eyes for You'* and a confounding finale built around the title song. In the first number, Joan Blondell imagines a romance between the various clothing hanging to dry on her laundry line. The number is perhaps a good counter-reference to *'Shuffle Off To Buffalo'* from **42<sup>nd</sup> Street**; occasionally coy and cloying, but notable for its technical prowess and Blondell's way with the lyric. Berkeley, however, is on full display in *'I Only Have Eyes For You'* – the film's love ballad between Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell, rekindling fond memories of their pas deux during *The Shadow Waltz*.

Berkeley reasoned that if the public adored one Ruby Keeler they would go positively gaga over an army of Ruby Keelers; a logic so absurd it proved equally as sound, the floor and platforms suddenly rising in rotating Ferris wheels with each dancer eerily resembling the star, the troupe rushing to her side before flipping their skirts over to form a gigantic placard of Keeler herself; its left eye opening like the trademark gun barrel from the James Bond franchise to reveal Keeler in full form, rising to the surface. Initially budgeted at \$15,000, Berkeley was able to cajole producer Hal B. Wallis into giving him \$40,000 to perfect his vision. Earlier Wallis had denied Berkeley's request for \$50,000 and 250 chorines saying, *"We have been warned"*



(Above): Another studio and another black-face routine. After Berkeley relocated to MGM in 1939 L.B. Mayer assigned him **Babes in Arms** to direct. It was a plum part indeed, and set the standard for three more Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland extravaganzas to follow. The third installment was **Babes on Broadway** (featured above). Berkeley created his most lavish minstrel show yet, with Garland belting out 'Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones', and Mickey Rooney playing an electric rendition of *Swanee* on his banjo. The cast also featured Virginia Weidler, Ray MacDonald, Anne Rooney and Richard Quine enjoying the 'Black Out Over Broadway'. After a spirited rendering of 'Waiting on the Robert E. Lee' the cast sans cork reappears against a backdrop of Broadway entirely formed out of twinkling lights, Rooney and Garland ecstatically leering at each other and the camera. The Garland/Rooney movies represent a highlight for Berkeley at MGM. Regrettably, his tenure would be all downhill from here.

not to have this kind of number and I personally will not approve anything of this kind." Nevertheless, it was proving increasingly a challenge to disagree with Berkeley's logic. It was sound and his pictures were making a lot of money.

For the finale of **Dames**, Berkeley instituted his most lavish series of kaleidoscopic imagery to date; his chorines decked in black tights and flouncy white blouses, one at a time flying into the camera lens with a black ball in their hands, casting their orbs downward into the center of a crowd who seemed to explode on cue into a variety of geometric patterns. Once again, the effect is a reverse shot; the individual girls lowered away from the camera rather than towards it, the film sped up to suggest more of a jet propulsion.

**Gold Diggers of 1935** brought Berkeley back into his own for two spectacular sequences; *The Words Are In My Heart* and the iconic *Lullaby of Broadway* – eleven minutes of titillating taps that tell of the tragedy of a beloved Broadway baby. Better still, Berkeley was assigned to direct the entire film and proved (as though proof were required) that he knew his way around the melodrama and comedy as well as the music. But in the numbers Berkeley is undeniably in his element. *The Words Are in My Heart* features fifty-six sparkling white baby grand pianos, complete with corresponding female pianists in gossamer gowns, fluttering in between the ever-moving set. Berkeley employed a bit of slo-mo trickery for the finale of this number, where the pianos are seen coming together from all corners of the stage to form one gigantic rectangle. Once again, this sequence was actually photographed in reverse; formation of the pianos actually being split apart by a series of invisible tow lines and men cloaked in black, crouching to conceal them from the camera's view, then printed in reverse so that the opposite action appears to be happening instead.

For *The Lullaby of Broadway* Berkeley endeavored to tell a mini-movie within his film; that of a Broadway gadabout played by Wini Shaw who parties all night and sleeps all day. Returning home from another night of carousing, Ms. Shaw falls into a



(Above): Berkeley also directed **Strike Up The Band** (1940) at MGM. (Top left): Garland and Rooney perform the spirited 'La Conga' inside a high school gymnasium to raise money for their Broadway show. The sequence is one of Berkeley's best from his post-Warner career, using his energetic cast of young talent to form human chains. The film ends on a rousing finale incorporating all of the lavishness that MGM in its prime could muster. But by now Berkeley's visions were beginning to appear quaint rather than cutting edge, even borrowing from his own past to pad out his present. Note Garland and Rooney in their park-like setting, more than faintly reminiscent of Berkeley's own 'Pettin' in the Park' from **Gold Diggers of 1933**, albeit sanitized and presented to the public with a fresh-faced wholesomeness in keeping with MGM's sterling reputation for slick and stylish 'quality' product sans sex appeal.

deep sleep; presumably awakening to do the whole process all over again. She meets up with her paramour (Dick Powell) at an implausibly gargantuan, multi-tiered nightclub, the female and male dancers challenging one another in a spirited tap routine that culminates with Ms. Shaw inadvertently being knocked out of the window balcony and plummeting to her death; a rather gruesome finale – particularly for a musical – but still one of the iconic exemplars of tap-dancing precision ever put on film. The expenditure of time and effort Berkeley had given **Gold Diggers of 1935** physically wore him down – that, and his increasing dependency on alcohol to get him through the night.

The studio took little notice of Berkeley's increasingly exhaustion, but did relieve him of directorial duties on **In Caliente** (1935); perhaps the least distinguished of Berkeley's Warner musicals. Berkeley staged 'The Lady In Red' – a tango-esque routine with comedian Edward Everett Horton and a bevy of beauties. Although the film reunited Berkeley with Latin superstar Delores Del Rio on this outing neither seems particularly engaged with the material. The film did respectable business. But its failure to out-gross **Gold Diggers of 1935** signaled to the studio that the cycle's popularity had begun to cool. By 1937's **Varsity Show** Berkeley found his supremacy at Warner Brothers repeatedly challenged. Indeed, in the intervening period he was given a modest programmer to direct, **I Live For Love** before being assigned to stage musical sequences for William Keighley's **Stars Over Broadway** (both in 1935).

Berkeley's absence from the studio had more to do with his near fatal car wreck and incarceration for vehicular manslaughter than any downturn in his popularity with audiences. Berkeley's attorney judiciously rallied support for his client in the court room, but only after two lengthy trials ended in hung juries, and a third had already begun in earnest, were the charges finally dropped. Berkeley was acquitted of any wrong doing. Still, it didn't matter what the courts said. Berkeley's conscience was made to bear the brunt of his own responsibility. He became reclusive and severely depressed.



(Above): The dude ranch finale to **Girl Crazy** (1943) also marked an end to the cycle of Garland/Rooney super spectacles and Berkeley's all too brief autonomy at MGM. The film featured Tommy Dorsey and his band and a cavalcade of George and Ira Gershwin smash tunes including 'I Got Rhythm' and 'Embraceable You'. But its plot was heavily rewritten from the Broadway smash that had inspired it to accommodate the Rooney/Garland formula of 'hey kids, let's put on a show!' Berkeley's alcoholism and Garland's chronic addiction to pills made the atmosphere on set interminable. At one point Garland suffered a 'nervous breakdown' and thereafter refused to return to work unless L.B. Mayer replaced Berkeley as director. Mayer complied. Although Buzz was allowed to finish staging the musical sequences, the film was directed by Norman Taurog.

But then came **Varsity Show**; a lavish affair designed along the lines of **Good News** – a 1927 Broadway smash that had done well as a 1930 movie musical and would be remade again and definitively in 1947 at MGM costarring Peter Lawford and June Allyson. **Varsity Show** had Fred Waring and his glee club Pennsylvanians to recommend it. It also cast Dick Powell in a familiar role. But the studio was dissatisfied with the final edit. At 121 minutes **Varsity Show** ran considerably longer than most Warner movies of its vintage – certainly much longer than any other musical the studio had produced to date. After tepid previews Warner elected to edit the footage down to a scant 98 minutes - shorting Berkeley's lavishly staged finale.

Berkeley was on very familiar ground in **Gold Diggers of 1937**, staging the lavish '*All's Fair In Love And War*' – a rousing march that gave audiences a chance to see what a real military parade might look like staged by the master. Dick Powell and Joan Blondell face off in what can accurately be described as the first 'battle of the sexes' – the boys against the girls, each dressed in their best and prepared to do battle, if only making love weren't more appealing in the end. Berkeley pulled out ever cliché and metaphor he could think of for this spectacular number. Told he would have to cut back on his lavishness, Berkeley ordered only one thing for this gargantuan finale: a shiny black tile floor. After a brief interlude in which the various couples shared white rocking chairs, Berkeley relied almost exclusively on his dancers, decked out in brilliant white on white uniforms and carrying various implements – bugles, bayonets, flags – to charge the screen, marching back and forth and from side to side in a seemingly endless alignment.

By now the formula to a Berkeley musical was not only ensconced – it was predictable. Despite the ever-evolving glamor of his execution of the musical numbers, the plots were so transparent and obvious the box office was beginning to reflect the studio's unwillingness to craft better stories. Berkeley's next effort – **Hollywood Hotel** (1937) was a fluff piece about a



(Above): arguably Berkeley's most creative work post-Warner, and the one that most closely approximated his efforts at his old alma mater, was **The Gang's All Here** (1943), a splashy Technicolor extravaganza in which Berkeley concocted the surreal 'The Lady in the Tutti-Fruiti Hat' featuring Carmen Miranda surrounded by a chorine toting life-size bananas. Scholars have been debating the Freudian symbolism of that choice of fruit ever since. In the penultimate shot from that number Miranda is seen wearing a gargantuan plume of bananas, thanks to a suspended painting that seems to rise forever up into the rafters of the soundstage. In attempting to get this shot Berkeley's camera crane swooped just a little too low, narrowly missing hitting Miranda in the head, the gregarious and outspoken Miranda reportedly screamed "You...you crazy. You crazy, crazy man!"

musician (Dick Powell) who becomes a big sensation in the movies. Stop me if you've heard this one before. But it also featured Ronald Reagan and a cameo appearance from noted gossip columnist, Louella Parsons playing – what else? - herself. Heavily laden with largely forgettable songs – and one true treasure (*Hooray for Hollywood*; an anthem on par with 'That's Entertainment!' and *There's No Business Like Show Business*) - **Hollywood Hotel** is a compendium of musical performances by the likes of Powell, Louis Prima, Francis Langford and Rosemary Lane – all of them ably assisted by Benny Goodman and his orchestra; a review-styled turnip loosely strung together by its threadbare plot, but that regrettably left Berkeley little room to exercise his imagination. Viewed alongside Berkeley's other creative efforts at the studio, **Hollywood Hotel** is really a distant' rather than 'kissing' cousin.

The time had come for a change. Berkeley bid farewell to the Warner musical with Roy Enright's **Gold Diggers in Paris** (1938); by far the most restrained installment in the franchise. If nothing else, the film proved that together with Harry Warren and Al Dubin, Berkeley had not lost his touch to concoct memorable and creative production numbers. The opening credits use stock footage to plump out the movie's opulence, the titles appearing over outtakes from *Spin A Little Web of Dreams* – re-orchestrated with an arrangement of **Gold Diggers in Paris'** penultimate number, *The Latin Quarter*. Forced to economize and curtail his penchant for lavish escapism, Berkeley nevertheless found innovative ways of taking his modest chorines and multiplying their effect through lighting and shadows as they perform a spirited Rockettes routine. **Gold Diggers in Paris** is also blessed by Rudi Vallee's breezy presence and stylish rendering of the aforementioned, as well as the movie's other memorable tune, 'I Want To Go Back to Bali'. This song acts as bookends to the story, first as a nightclub routine sung by Vallee, and later as its splendid finale in which all of the principals partake.

A year later Berkeley said goodbye to Warner Brothers altogether with an unlikely foray, directing the thriller, **They Made Me A Criminal** (1939), followed by a B-thriller made over at MGM, **Fast and Furious**, and then, the first of the Garland/Rooney musical spectacles, **Babes in Arms** that same year. Although Berkeley would continue directing musicals and musical sequences for other directors over at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and MGM until the early 1960s – and even briefly return to Warner for Doris Day's entre into films, **Romance on the High Seas** (1948), by 1940 Busby Berkeley had achieved immortality amongst the stars. He had forged a new format in the staging of musical sequences, one seemingly unbound by the conventions of earthly space and utterly void of extolling the presence of star power. As the 1930s faded into obscurity so too did much of





(Above): Berkeley's last assignment at MGM – and in movies, as it turned out - was staging musical sequences for Charles Walter's screen adaptation of **Billy Rose's Jumbo** (1962), a woefully mismanaged attempt to rekindle the magic of Cecil B. DeMille's **The Greatest Show on Earth** (1952), but regrettably made at a period in the studio's history when cost-cutting was the order of the day. The film co-starred Doris Day and Stephen Boyd as lovers almost torn apart by competing interests. Jimmy Durante was an ebullient 'Pop Wonder' – owner of a traveling menagerie in constant threat of being foreclosed upon by bill collectors. The sentiment was there, but not the budget and the film really was a second-rate finale to Berkeley's work in films. Not the last act anyone expected and certainly not one for which Berkeley remained very proud of.

Berkeley's magic on the screen although his contributions to the four Garland/Rooney movie musicals (**Babes in Arms** 1939, **Babes on Broadway** 1940, **Strike Up The Band** 1941 and **Girl Crazy** 1943) remain highpoints.

Yet the rest of Berkeley's tenure at that studio proved somewhat disappointing. Having successfully aped the Berkeley style themselves for Esther Williams debut, **Bathing Beauty** (1944), the studio assigned Berkeley to two of Williams better efforts, **Million Dollar Mermaid** (1952) and **Easy to Love** (1953); undeniably glossy affairs, but pale ghost flowers compared to Berkeley's imaginative verve on **Footlight Parade's** aquacade sequence. At MGM Berkeley became increasingly morose and occasionally temperamental. His alcoholism ballooned out of control and he quickly discovered, particularly after the ousting of L.B. Mayer in 1950, that his budgetary requests were being limited by Dore Schary and the new regime to keep production costs down. By the time Berkeley agreed to stage the musical sequences for **Billy Rose's Jumbo** (1962) the studio system that had once catered to his whims was a thing of the past. Indeed, in viewing the movie today one can see no spark of originality in its execution; not even a glimmer of Berkeley's imaginative creativeness clinging to the peripheries of the screen.

Arguably, Berkeley's greatest post-Warner achievement was **The Gang's All Here** (1943); a lavish Technicolor showcase for Alice Faye and 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox's Brazilian bombshell, Carmen Miranda. Berkeley's rather phallic homage, done with chorines caressing life-sized bananas in *The Lady In The Tutti-Fruiti Hat* and his climactic *Polka Dot Polka* and futuristic ballet that follows it illustrate the master's touch in glorious Technicolor. And yet the effect, for all its gaudy brilliance, is strangely lacking; the color somehow distracting instead of augmenting Berkeley's divine vision for creating kaleidoscopic magic.

For all intent and purposes Busby Berkeley quietly faded into obscurity after 1962. He truly was a forgotten man. But four years earlier he had fortuitously met and married for the sixth and final time to actress Etta Dunn and at long last the union proved a happy, stable and successful one. For nearly a decade Berkeley's reputation as a visionary remained relatively dormant, until a 1970 New York Gallery of Modern Art retrospective on his career proved something of a resurrection to his stature in the business. Suddenly Busby Berkeley was fashionable all over again. He lent his styling to a cold medicine commercial with a dancing clock and was inspired to return to his Broadway roots, directing an aged Ruby Keeler in the Broadway revival of **No No Nanette** (1970). But by 1973, the years and his prior life-long struggles with alcohol had caught up to him. Three years later Berkeley died of natural causes in Palm Springs, California.



**“All women can be divided into two groups – like houses; furnished and unfurnished. Unfurnished, beauty is mere prettiness without the high order of intelligence which makes for personality behind it.”**

**- Busby Berkeley Sept. 23, 1933**

In the 1940s, Busby Berkeley grew more embittered and disillusioned by his assignments at MGM. After the Garland/Rooney series came to end in 1943 Berkeley tried to get the studio to afford him bigger budgets and more lavish accoutrements. MGM could have so easily afforded it. But L.B. Mayer was circumspect about overspending, particularly when there were ways of doing things more cheaply and still satisfying the public’s taste. With few exceptions Berkeley was relegated as a choreographer, staging musical sequences for other director’s films. His last truly memorable number arguably remains *I’ve Gotta Hear That Beat* – sung by Ann Miller as a specialty in **Small Town Girl** (1953) a forgettable Jane Powell programmer. Berkeley surrounds the leggy Miller with an ‘invisible’ orchestra, the instruments and hands to support them protruding from the floor, the percussionist seen only as a gargantuan shadow projected onto the back wall. Miller races about frenetically tapping out the beats of the Nicholas Brodsky song, Berkeley’s camera rising high overhead to reveal a panacea of tom-tom drums pounding overhead. It’s a glitzy number to be sure, but one removed from the elephantitis Berkeley would have likely preferred, given carte blanche as he had been over at Warner Brothers.

There were other highlights from Berkeley’s tenure at MGM too; most notably the finale from **Broadway Serenade** (1939) with Jeanette MacDonald and his mesmerizing use of pianos and revolving curtains for *Fascinatin’ Rhythm* from **Lady Be Good** (1941) – one of Eleanor Powell’s most memorable dance sequences. But Berkeley’s directorial effort at the studio, **Take Me Out to the Ball Game** (1949), bore none of his trademark flair, perhaps because Berkeley was constantly being challenged by the film’s star, Gene Kelly who insisted on choreographing all of the numbers himself with collaborator, Stanley Donen. True enough, Berkeley’s smoke and trapeze sequence for Esther Williams in **Million Dollar Mermaid** (1952) marked something of a return to form, as did his water-ski finale for **Easy to Love** (1953), but these were mere glimmers of the old



Berkeley magic. If anything they harked back to **Footlight Parade**, substituting Technicolor for the limited resources allotted his creative genius.

Fate and ill-timing conspired to prematurely oust Berkeley from MGM – a move in keeping with the slow demise of the studio system itself and changing audience tastes that effectively brought down the Hollywood musical as a viable screen art form. Burnt out, discarded and sinking deeper into depression and financial debt, Berkeley attempted suicide twice.

But Berkeley's resurrection in the mid-1970s was no less spectacular than his implosion had been a decade earlier and, in the years since his passing, time has been extremely kind to both his reputation and his filmic creations.

Endlessly revived, revered and reviewed, Busby Berkeley defiantly remains an emblematic part of the Hollywood musical. His perfectionism and visionary approach to 'light entertainment' reveals incomparable creative genius; resilient and likely to remain unsurpassed within the annals of movie history any time soon - if ever.

(Above): The master past his prime. Although nominated for the Academy Award 3 times, Berkeley never won. By 1960 he seemed like a relic from a forgotten time. But then began a miraculous renaissance of his reputation, thanks in part to a revival of his films in universities and colleges across America. Suddenly Berkeley was in style again. Arguably, he never went out of fashion, his legacy merely waiting for the modern times to rediscover him.

(Left): Eleanor Powell taps to '*Fascinatin' Rhythm*' a rare Berkeley highlight in the otherwise leaden and forgettable film version of **Lady Be Good** (1941). (Bottom): Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney share a soda as they ponder what the future may bring in **Babes on Broadway** (1941). Perhaps not even they could have deduced how long their own, as well as Busby Berkeley's legends would endure. Great art is very much like great genius. It comes unexpectedly and surprises us all with its innovation and charm. Perhaps as laymen we're ill-equipped, or even not entirely certain what it is that constitutes greatness. But we definitely know it when we see it.

