

## **Dames (1934) Enright**

P Michell, 2021

### Synopsis:

*Multi-millionaire Ezra Ounce wants to start a campaign against 'filthy' forms of entertainment, like Broadway-Shows. He comes to his relatives families and makes them members of his morale-boosting campaign. But Jimmy, another relative is producing a show, starring Ezra's niece Barbara. But he had bad luck with his backer, this person has given him an invalid check. Another of his victims, the show-girl Mabel has the idea of blackmailing Horace, Barbara's father, whom she has met before in a slightly compromising situation to get the money*

*"In an era of breadlines, depression and wars, I tried to help people get away from all the misery...to turn their minds to something else. I wanted to make people happy, if only for an hour." Busby Berkeley*

'Influencers' on the Internet are now part of our culture for better or worse. Arguably one of the major influencers in 1930s Hollywood was Busby Berkeley. A showman he brought a new approach to movies. Freeing the camera and performers. Massed staging. Overt eroticism in visual style coupled with abstraction. At the end there is summary of what he contributed. One of the earliest users of 'playback' – now commonly used in film making. Pre-recording music, etc. In the Fred and Ginger films the tap noises were not live recorded. Learnt from Berkeley.

A direct result of the 'factory system of movie making' the Warner Bros Busby Berkeley numbers have never been equaled in style, movement, abstraction, and music.

Dames is part musical, part early screwball comedy. Particularly with the Hemingway Family.

3 big production numbers - I Only Have Eyes for You; Girl at the Ironing Board; Dames.  
Link to lyrics:

<https://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/d/dames.html>

Despite the overt sexism (duh!) this film has grown in stature since I first researched BB in the 1970s. What is amazing is how quickly Warner Bros could turn these movies out. About every three to four months they could be done! All with fantastic music which became the backbone for the popular Broadway musical – '42<sup>nd</sup> St'.

Dames like its Warner Bros earlier musicals are part of a unique American film genre – 'Putting on a Show / Backstage Musical'. A unique genre that occurred soon after sound films. The dance numbers, with few exceptions, happen on a stage – in front of an audience. Development of musical goes from 'staged' Berkeley numbers (even though they'd never fit on any theatre stage!) / the Astaire & Rogers intimate / culminating with songs that could be sung anywhere and intimately – 'The Trolley Song' (Harry Warren music) from Meet me in St Louis is the natural culmination. Singin' in the Rain of the 1950s is pastiche of all these musical styles. Recently La La Land did this too with the 'cloud' number. Must be remembered that Astaire/Rogers numbers were rarely abstract.

### Production code censorship and subversive nature.

BB numbers are often at the cusp of censorship issues. In addition, the plot is often quite subversive. Underlying morality is that show girls were 'easy' and akin to prostitutes. Men would either be fleeced sexually or financially. Hence 'Gold Digger'. Dames has as its plot device a man against immoral behaviour. Red herring about the handkerchief during the last number. Note the chase over Manhattan for the 'Elixir' which changes from 17% to 74% proof! They're all drinking in the theatre. Of course film ends with everyone behind bars. Have to remember that prohibition went from 1920-1933. Film was released in Aug 1934. The beginning of the final number lyrics:

### CREATIVE PERSONNEL – LOTS.

*Directed by Ray Enright. Musical direction by Busby Berkeley. Starring Dick Powell (as Jimmy Higgins), Ruby Keeler (as Barbara Hemingway), Joan Blondell (as Mabel Anderson), ZaSu Pitts (as Matilda Ounce Hemingway), Guy Kibbee (as Horace Peter Hemingway), and Hugh Herbert (as Ezra Ounce). Music and lyrics by Harry Warren and Al Dubin and others.*

### Busby Berkeley – Dance Director

The last 30 mins of the film is his domain!

In the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s – he was unsurpassed for staging musical numbers.

Began with military parades, then Broadway. Eddie Cantor took him to MGM as his dance director. BB was unhappy the way MGM would allow his to do his numbers. Thus these Cantor musicals look fairly pedestrian and tame. His breakout moment occurred when he did the musical numbers for 42<sup>nd</sup> St (1932). The numbers were all at the end of the film as the studio could cut them out. Warner Bros were almost bankrupt and this film resurrected the studio. Then he did: Footlight Parade, GD of 1933, GD of 1935. By the time of Dames BB had his own unit at WB. Each of his films up to GD 1935 made more money than its predecessor!

BB moved from WB to MGM where he directed the Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney 'Babes' films. Whilst MGM weren't putting up with his demands the numbers in these films are still interesting. In the late 1940s and the 1950s BB was back in the groove directing the Esther Williams films – Million Dollar Mermaid (1951) etc. Often filmed at Caribbean Gardens in Florida. In 'Eassy to Love' directed a sequence with 100 people on water skis, boats and trapeze!

In 'Small Town Girl' (1953) he directed Ann Miller in 'I've Gotta Hear that Beat' where she dances over an orchestra where the instruments poke out. She was his favourite tap dancer. Berkeley directed quite a number of films without dance which were quite good. Including The Made Me A Criminal (1939) with John Garfield. You can spot Garfield in the Shanghai Lil from Footlight Parade (1933) number for a moment.

After that he was forgotten until resurrected by US colleges during the 1960s when students rediscovered his work. Then did talks. Was nominal advisor on the Broadway show – 'No No Nanette' (1973).

At his request his grave only highlights his military career.

### Delmer Daves – scriptwriter. (50 credits)

He wrote scripts for many of Hollywood's best films of the 1930s and 1940s, including [The Petrified Forest](#) (1936), [Love Affair](#) (1939) and [You Were Never Lovelier](#) (1942). Turning director with the classic [Destination Tokyo](#) (1943), Daves often wrote and produced his own pictures. Of the many films he made, the westerns he did were especially close to his heart--as a youth he had spent much time living on reservations with Hopi and Navajo Indians. Directed 30 films including the famous Broken Arrow (1950).

Sol Polito – Principal Cinematographer (167 credits)

With another responsible for the unique WB look in the 1930s and 1940s movies. Dames actually had two other cinematographers – George Barnes (Joan Blondell's husband) and Sidney Hickox

Significant musical contributions from Warren & Dubin.

Warren and Dubin are particularly remembered for writing scores for the films of [Busby Berkeley](#); they worked together on 18 films and 60 songs! The "up-tempo songs are as memorable as Berkeley's choreography, for the same reason: they capture, in a few snazzy notes, the vigorous frivolity of the Jazz Age." The 1980 stage musical [42nd Street](#) showcases their popular songs from these films.

Harry Warren wrote over 800 songs between 1918 and 1981, publishing over 500 of them.

According to [Wilfrid Sheed](#), quoted in *Time Magazine*, "By silent consensus, the king of this army of unknown soldiers, the Hollywood incognitos, was Harry Warren, who had more songs on the Hit Parade than (Irving) Berlin himself and who would win the contest hands down if enough people have heard of him." William Zinsser noted, "The familiarity of Harry Warren's songs is matched by the anonymity of the man... he is the invisible man, his career a prime example of the oblivion that cloaked so many writers who cranked out good songs for bad movies."

Harry Warren: *Out here in Hollywood, a songwriter was always the lowest form of animal life.*

Ray Heindorf – musical arranger. Whilst Leo Forbstein held title until his departure, I've been reliably informed that for the BB musical numbers, and much more, it was Ray Heindorf's work. Worked often with black jazz musicians in his orchestras. Friend with Art Tatum and played together. Wrote – "Some Sunday Morning", "Sugarfoot", "Hollywood Canteen", "I'm in a Jam", "Some Sunny Day", "Pete Kelly's Blues. Scored Danny Kaye TV series and Wonder Man. Other movies included 'Giant' and 'East of Eden, 'The Music Man' (1962). With MGM did 'Hollywood Revue of 1929., Pajama Game, Them. Streetcar Named Desire (with Alex North).

Worked at WB for almost 40 years. WB refused to let him use the title - 'Musical Director'.

Dick Powell – Jimmy (71 credits)

Started out in films a crooner as in BB films at Warners. Later he became crime fighter in noir films – such as 'Murder My Sweet' (1944), 'The Bad and the Beautiful' (1952). Made over 24 films with Warner Bros. Was mainstay of their BB musicals. Mid 1950s moved into television both as producer and Dick Powell Show. Died in 1963, aged 58.

Ruby Keeler – Barbara (20 credits)

Dancer on Broadway, divorced Jolson and retired for 30 years, returned to No Non Nanette in 1971 under BB. Last film in 1941. Will always be remembered as the 'sweet innocent' in these WB films of the 1930s.

Joan Blondell – Mabel (162 credits)

Hard working actress. So good in these type of movies. With blonde hair, big blue eyes and a big smile, Often played wise cracking working girl roles. Starred with James Cagney on Broadway in 'Penny Arcade' (1929) when spotted by Warners. Married to Mike Todd, a gambler, who lost all her money.

Wrote a novel, *Center Door Fancy*, which was a very thinly disguised autobiography in which she portrayed her ex-husbands. Dick Powell was represented as being very stingy. [on her husbands] [George] Barnes provided my first real home, [Dick] Powell was my security man, and [Michael] Todd was my passion. But I loved them all.

Zasu Pitts – Mathilda (223 credits)

She went on to cultivate what was once deemed her negative qualities by making a career out of her unglamorous looks and wallflower tendencies in scores and scores of screwball comedy treasures.

Starred in the famous 'Greed' (1924).

Trivia 1 - Was once said her face "has been on more cutting-room floors than any other actress". She was a famous scene-stealer who often overshadowed the star. Her scenes were usually cut to keep peace on the set.

Trivia 2 - When the comic strip "Thimble Theatre" became the animated series "Popeye", the producers used Zasu's hand-wringing and nervous speech pattern to characterize the on-screen persona of Olive Oyl.

Trivia:

In the "Dames" number, [Dick Powell](#) as a Broadway producer doesn't want to see composer [George Gershwin](#), but when asked by his secretary about seeing Miss Dubin, Miss Warren and Miss Kelly, he lets them enter his office. This is an inside joke, referring to [Al Dubin](#) and [Harry Warren](#), who wrote the music for this film, and [Orry-Kelly](#) (an Australian), who was the costume designer.

The song "I Only Have Eyes for You" from this movie became a very big hit for the "doo-wop" group The Flamingos in 1959.

Box Office: According to Warner Bros., the film earned \$1,057,000 domestically and \$456,000 internationally.

I Only Have Eyes for You number was budgeted for (in US\$) 36 performers and a set costing \$15,000. BB wanted 250 and a \$50,000 set. Hal Wallis, the producer, finally gave in at \$40,000 and the ferris wheel.

Whilst it was only Joan Blondell in the backyard with clothesline – there were 60 people above with wires manipulating the clothes! As she was seven months pregnant was filmed by husband George Barnes.

There were 16 girls under contract to Berkeley and were augmented by call outs. 723 girls turned up and he selected three for one of the GD films. Highly likely Berkeley probably used the 'casting couch'.

Orry-Kelly is credited for costumes, but often Berkeley designed them for his numbers.

The Musical Numbers:

The musical sequences in *Dames* were designed, staged and directed by [Busby Berkeley](#) - the Warner Bros. publicity office invented the phrase "cinematerpsichorean" to describe Berkeley's creations.<sup>[3]</sup> By this time, after the success of [42nd Street](#), [Footlight](#)

[Parade](#) and [Gold Diggers of 1933](#), Berkeley had his own unit at Warners, under his total control as supervised by producer [Hal Wallis](#).<sup>[4]</sup>

- "Dames" - by [Harry Warren](#) (music) and [Al Dubin](#) (lyrics)
- "[I Only Have Eyes for You](#)" - by [Harry Warren](#) (music) and [Al Dubin](#) (lyrics). At one point in this number, sung by Dick Powell to Ruby Keeler, all the girls in the chorus wear Ruby Keeler masks as they move around the stage, but in just about every shot, the *real* Keeler passes by the camera briefly. In 1989, this song won an [ASCAP Award](#) as the "Most Performed Feature Film Standard".<sup>[5]</sup>
- "The Girl at the Ironing Board" - by [Harry Warren](#) (music) and [Al Dubin](#) (lyrics). Joan Blondell was seven months pregnant at the time this number was filmed, and care had to be taken by her husband, cinematographer [George Barnes](#), not to show her condition. Also, at one point in the number, a property man can be seen in the background, hanging up clotheslines.<sup>[4]</sup>
- "When You Were a Smile on Your Mother's Lips and a Twinkle in Your Daddy's Eye" by [Sammy Fain](#) (music) and [Irving Kahal](#) lyrics
- "Try to See It My Way" - by [Allie Wrubel](#) (music) and [Mort Dixon](#) (lyrics)<sup>[6]</sup>

One of the effects of the [Production Code](#) on this film is a musical number that never made it to the screen. Berkeley had planned one featuring Joan Blondell about a fight between a cat and a mouse that ended with Blondell inviting everyone to "*come up and see my pussy sometime*". Producer Hal Wallis removed this number from the script before it even got to the censors of the [Hays Office](#).

Review:

**Kozak's Classic Cinema, 2015**

Erin Elisavet Kozak

Warner Bros. could have called this movie *Gold Diggers of 1934* and its title would have made at least as much sense as the one they settled on. Much like the *Gold Diggers* movies, which I have reviewed previously ([here](#) and [here](#)), *Dames* focuses on characters who scheme to get their hands on an impressive sum of money and the way their lives intertwine with characters who are plotting to raise funds to put on a spectacular musical — all played by the usual Busby Berkeley suspects. The first set of schemers is Matilda and Horace Hemingway, who stand to inherit millions of dollars from wealthy uncle Ezra Ounce if they can prove to him that they lead an upright and moral life. His campaign to purge the United States of its moral turpitude brings him to New York City where Matilda and Horace, who stand to gain so much from Ezra financially, also live. Unfortunately, Ezra develops a horrible case of the hiccups and insists that the only thing that can cure them is a tonic, later revealed to be mostly alcohol, that he has shipped to him in crates from Upstate. Soon Ezra, Matilda, and Horace are downing the stuff in massive quantities.

Uncle Ezra cannot tolerate the theatre and is outraged to learn that Matilda and Horace's daughter Barbara intends to star in her beau Jimmy's new show; Jimmy is Barbara's extremely distant cousin and one of Ezra's many detested prospective heirs. Horace, however, has a hard time reprimanding his daughter or her boyfriend for their theatrical ambitions as he is secretly the primary backer of their endeavour, having become the unfortunate victim of blackmail. The actress Mabel Anderson has caught Horace in a compromising position on board a sleeper train, and she drains him of a considerable sum in

order to finance Jimmy's production. The story therefore hinges on a secret vulnerability that renders the father an inappropriate flag waiver for the cause of moral uprightness. Of course, Uncle Ezra's constant resorting to the alcohol-laden tonic as a hiccup cure does a nice job of destroying many of his ambitions in that direction as well. The *Gold Diggers* movies poke fun at the relationships between the classes; this one also needles at the ethical pretensions of social reformers.

Drunk as skunks, Ezra, Horace, and Matilda attend the opening night of Jimmy's big show. Ostensibly they are there to criticize it, but the performances eventually win them over. Opening night consists of three numbers: "The Girl at the Ironing Board," an extremely silly production in which Mabel dances around with nightshirts that are wired to move like men; "I Only Have Eyes for You," a strange love song from Jimmy to Barbara; and "Dames," which celebrates the showgirl in all her buxom beauty. Each of these numbers is bewildering in its own typically Berkeleyan way.

The "I Only Have Eyes for You" production is especially perplexing. As soon as the overall revue begins, we realize that it is not possible that the theatrical audience in the movie could experience any of the musical numbers as we, the movie viewers, do, given the complexity and improbability of the staging and camera work. Still, it is easy to think that the "Eyes" number has become completely detached from the musical revue and exists outside of the stage production. At the start, we see Ruby Keeler (Barbara) near the curtains off to one side of the stage. Her parents and uncle notice her from their theatre box and register their shame at seeing their daughter as "a painted actress." Then the film cuts to a street scene. It certainly appears that we are outside of the theatre where the performance is taking place, but if one observes carefully, the parting of a curtain over this scene is quick but discernible, indicating that what we are watching, however implausibly, is a part of the stage show. I say "implausibly" because what we see is a fully functioning street with real automotive traffic going by. Keeler appears in front of the theatre dressed in the same ensemble she wore at the side of the stage — she is apparently in costume, but it would be hard to tell if not for the curtain part — and Dick Powell (Jimmy) is cheerily selling tickets at the ticket booth, presumably to the very show that we are watching now. He sings snippets of "I Only Have Eyes for You," and when he sells his last ticket, he joins up with Keeler, and the two of them walk to the subway.

This is especially weird because if we understand that the street scene is part of the show, then the film leads us to believe that there are two stages: the first is the stage inside of the building where Powell has been selling tickets, and the second is the very street that Powell and Keeler are standing on, even though it is clearly impossible for the street scene to be contained within a theatre. This means that there is both a theoretical audience inside of the theatrical facade and the "real" audience that is watching Keeler and Powell in the street scene, as well as us, the movie theatre audience, who are also watching the film. The result is a tremendous amplification of the audience and the subjects: we are three times larger than we normally are when we watch a movie, and Keeler and Powell are being watched three times over. But then we see the two of them walk away from the theatre toward the subway to sing a song about not caring about anyone or anything that is nearby, which would seem to include not caring about us. As soon as they begin to sing, the lyrics deflate the complex setting.

Sitting in a subway train, Powell sings to Keeler, expressing in fairly repetitive lyrics that he “only has eyes for her.” He begins to imagine her taking part in the ads that adorn the train car walls. The camera zooms in on one such ad with a static image of Keeler substituted over it, and suddenly the production erupts into one of the most bizarre musical numbers I have ever seen. We transition into an enormous hanger of some kind where giant paper Keeler faces move around in a synchronized dance. Then the film segues into another scene, where dozens of women dressed and styled as Keeler dance up, down, and around a ferris wheel set. The camera cuts in and out of the set and at choice moments reveals Keeler dancing by — the real Keeler, and not just one of the women made up to look like her. In this way, we come to believe that possibly some special effect is being used to duplicate Keeler throughout the set, although careful study reveals this to be only an illusion. Eventually the dancing ladies turn over to reveal that each one carries a piece of a picture of Keeler’s face on her backside (I’m not sure if this is supposed to be flattering or not), and they assemble themselves into a large Keeler portrait. The camera closes up on the assembled Keeler eye, from which Keeler herself emerges, still smiling. At this point a strange undercurrent to the piece emerges that seems inadvertently to reveal how awkward and uncomfortable the harmless but obsessive love of the lyrics is. Keeler is a slightly awkward person, and her smile seems somewhat uncomfortable, so to watch her appear and reappear smiling in a slightly painful way suggests to me that being the centre of attention of someone’s unceasing gaze is actually a difficult experience.

One of the most important things that happens in any Busby Berkeley musical sequence occurs in this routine when Dick Powell’s singing becomes very faint, almost like background noise. His voice takes on this effect when he and Keeler awaken back on the empty subway train and he carries her through the rainy train yard. As the camera pulls out, we see him at the far right corner of the screen in front of rows of stationary trains and their tracks. For a moment, as the camera moves away from him, it seems as though he and his increasingly small voice may disappear. There is something so beautiful in this moment: it is as if the two lovers, Keeler and Powell, are very tiny and insignificant in the grand of scheme of things, in this enormous and wet train yard, by comparison with the mammoth and complex routines we have seen on the Ferris wheel set. Their love is not all grandeur and effects; it is actually something humble and enduring, something that exists in spite of the stage show and its strange conceptual dances, and also beyond the world outside of the stage show with its comedies of inheritances and social change.

The peeling away of layers in front of the theatre at the beginning of the sequence is mirrored in this final, beautiful deflation. Of course, it is one moment in the middle of a series of fantastically large musical productions. But it would be a shame if Busby Berkeley’s choreography were to be remembered solely for the kaleidoscopic marvels that we are so often drawn to and rightly celebrate. He was also capable of creating small, tender moments within his chosen milieu of the phenomenally spectacular.

### **Berkeley Influences:**

Significantly, one of the influences that the Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl most happily admitted to was that of **Busby Berkeley's** elaborate musical numbers in early Hollywood musicals. (Of course from her we get the modern grand sports spectaculars. Opening and closing ceremonies.)

Single 'flying' camera – gives movement and fluid style. With sound – cameras were bulky and noisy thus reducing the 'freedom' seen in the apogee of silent films.

Playback – music and taps could all be added later.

The Video Clip harks back to the tight editing in his musical numbers. The more you watch them then realise how its all joined together.

Feature on the individual face – personalise the dancer

Blonde bomb shell

Sexual innuendo

Overhead kaleidoscopic shots

Flower, abstract patterns using mostly women

Larger than life dance numbers – supposedly set within a proscenium arch of a stage

Synchronised swimming (from Footlight Parade – By a Waterfall)

Abstraction of women – not necessarily good.

Esther Williams aquatic feats

Army references

Long tracking shots / Elevated shots – special cages had to be built for camera

Designed girl's costumes

Absolute escapism

Enduring success of the dance numbers – look at YouTube!

Carmen Miranda's hat

Enduring success of 42<sup>nd</sup> St.

Closeups on legs, faces, bodies.

With Astaire / Rogers reinvigorated the movie musical form

'Berkeleyesque' now part of the lexicon.

Invented the 'interrupted musical number' for dramatic effect and as a reference to delayed sexual conclusion.

Warners numbers were often socially related– meshed well with the Berkeley and Warren & Dubin's numbers;

Enduring success of 42<sup>nd</sup> St.

Use with [at WB] of Warren & Dubin's melodies artfully arranged by Ray Heindorf.

Legacy of music with Bugs Bunny cartoons.

Many contemporary performers reference BB – from Miss Piggy (Muppets), 'Take That', 'Chemical Brothers', 'Bjork', 'Red Hot Chilli Peppers'.