

Gold Diggers of 1935 (1935) Busby Berkeley

P Michell, 2022

Synopsis

In the resort of Lake Waxapahachie, the swanky Wentworth Plaza is where the rich all congregate, and where the tips flow like wine. Handsome Dick Curtis (Dick Powell) is working his way through medical school as a desk clerk, and when rich, penny-pinching Mrs. Prentiss (Alice Brady) offers to pay him to escort her daughter Ann (Gloria Stuart) for the summer, Dick can't say no – even his fiancée, Arline Davis (Dorothy Dare) thinks he should do it. Mrs. Prentiss wants Ann to marry eccentric middle-aged millionaire T. Mosley Thorpe (Hugh Herbert), who's a world-renowned expert on snuffboxes, but Ann has other ideas. Meanwhile, her brother, Humbolt (Frank McHugh) has a weakness for a pretty face: he's been married and bought out of trouble by his mother several times. Every summer, Mrs. Prentiss produces a charity show for the "Milk Fund", and this year she hires the flamboyant and conniving Russian dance director Nicolai Nicoleff (Adolphe Menjou) to direct the show.

Justly Famous for its musical numbers all by Harry Warren (music) & Al Dubin (lyrics):

Introduction to Wentworth Plaza Hotel (often overlooked in bibliography)

Going Shopping with You

The Words are in My Heart – Piano Dance

Lullaby of Broadway – Dark Piece d'Resistance – film within a film

This song became hugely popular. Covered by Andrews Sisters, Doris Day, Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald et al. Won Academy Award for best original song. The significance of the song can be seen at Wikipedia's entry:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lullaby_of_Broadway_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lullaby_of_Broadway_(song))

The film represents the best and worst of Hollywood on the 1930s. People worked 12 hour days! Whilst the film's story, a loose 'Grand Hotel' scenario, is not as strong as it should be likely because and there's no leading lady of the calibre of Ruby Keeler or Ginger Rogers. Sadly Winni Shaw, a terrific talent, is underused til the famous end number.

Yet the film represents Berkeley's ideas about how a film should be made – a coat-hanger for the musical numbers! Lullaby continues to endure.

Box office: US domestic \$897,000, Foreign \$468,000. Berkeley always said his numbers cost \$10,000 a minute.

Creative Personnel

See Dames (1934) notes, 2021, for more info on Ray Heindorf, Harry Warren, Al Dubin. All major contributors to this film.

Busby Berkeley – Director / Dance Director (connected with 41 films)

Influenced major Hollywood films for three decades!

Used his military experience on Broadway where he choreographed Eddie Cantor. When the latter went to Hollywood in early 1930s brought Berkeley with him. Some interesting movies made for MGM. But at Warner Bros his star dazzled! Then directed the drama They

Made Me a Criminal with John Garfield (1939). At MGM he was involved with Wizard of Oz – doing the original If I Only Had a Brain number (deleted for release) and directed many of the Judy Garland / Mickey Rooney ‘Babe’ films. (Louis B Mayer had instructed that Berkeley supervise and stage any production number devised for Judy and Mickey Rooney in their film appearances.)

At 20th Century Fox did the notorious ‘The Gang’s All Here’ (1943) with overtly sexualized Carmen Miranda number – Lady with the Tutti Frutti Hat. (How it got past the censors?). At MGM directed ‘Take me Out to the Ball Game’(1949) though with musical numbers by Gene Kelly & Stanley Donen. A year later he began the association with Esther Williams where he directed the aquacade musical numbers in the early 1950s.

In the mid 1960s Berkeley’s kaleidoscopic numbers were rediscovered by university students and he was invited to attend festivals.

Was involved with Ruby Keeler with Broadway stage show (in name only) of No No Nanette (1971).

Forty-Second Street – the highly successful Broadway musical showcasing some of the best Warren & Dubin numbers debuted in 1980.

Berkeley’s contributions to cinema: single camera musical numbers, playback, long tracking shots, kaleidoscopic numbers, blonde bombshell, facial closeups of dancers, sexualized numbers, overhead shots (often achieved by cutting holes in studio roofs), always trying to ‘top himself’. His dance numbers for 42nd St (1933) and its box office success saved Warner Bros from financial ruin.

Cinematography – George Barnes (145 credits)

Under his auspices Gregg Toland (Citizen Kane et al) learned his craft, particularly Barnes' trademark soft-edged, deep-focus photography and intuitive composition and camera movement. Barnes was an expert at lighting. He often utilized curtains or reflective surfaces to create patterns of light and shade. Most importantly, he perfectly suited the required style of photography to each individual assignment.

Known for War of the Worlds (1953), Greatest Show on Earth (1952), Jane Eyre (1943).

Barnes did his best work in the 1940s, shooting two classic Alfred Hitchcock thrillers: for Rebecca (1940) he created an atmosphere of sinister foreboding, right from the beginning, with his shots of Manderley (Barnes was hired because Toland was unavailable, but he ended up winning an Academy Award); and Spellbound (1945), with its unsettling surrealist Salvador Dalí-designed dream sequence of wheels, eyes and staircases.

Trivia – Incestuous Hollywood of the 1930s! One of his many wives was Joan Blondell who was a BB girl! She later married Dick Powell and they adopted Barne’s son (with Blondell) - Norman S Powell.

Robert Lord co-author (72 credits)

Wrote for the New Yorker before being lured to Hollywood.

Known for 20,000 Years in Sing Sing (1932). Same year wrote screenplays for 11 movies! A favourite of production manager Hal B. Wallis, Lord remained at the WB studio until 1941, by which time he had won an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for One Way Passage (1932) and been nominated for another, the controversial social drama Black Legion (1937), a hard-hitting indictment of bigotry and mob rule. Following the death of Mark Hellinger in 1947, Bogart went out of his way to procure Lord as vice-president of his independent Santana Productions.

Dick Powell – Dick (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 young in 1963, aged 58.

Wini Shaw

Youngest of 13 children! Always remembered for Lullaby of Broadway. 22 films, by the end of the '30s her screen career had faded away.

Performed for troupes during WWII, then Broadway touring the lead in “Call Me Madame” and nightclubs as lead singer. Married in 1955 and retired.

Made only one record because of a clause in her Warner Brothers contract. It was the 78 of "Lullaby of Broadway" (side A) and "I'm Goin' Shoppin' With You" (side B)

Alice Brady – Mrs Prentiss (79 credits)

This was made one year before the Academy Awards created the Best Supporting Actress category, so Alice Brady's performance as a dithery rich matron did not earn her an Oscar nomination. The following year, Brady portrayed an essentially similar character in My Man Godfrey, and became one of the first five women ever to be nominated in the new category.

Gloria Stuart – Ann Prentiss (81 credits inc TV)

Leading lady Gloria Stuart would have many successes in the 1930s, then all but disappear from movie screens until her triumphant return in 1997, playing "Old Rose" in the mega-hit Titanic. Stewart herself was nominated as Best Supporting Actress.

Adolphe Menjou – Nicolai Nicoleff (151 credits)

Knowns as a suave and debonair actor, always looking very sophisticated and European.

Famous for Front Page (1931). A Farewell to Arms (1932), Morning Glory (1933), A Star is Born (1937), Stage Door (1937).

Warner Bros stock characters bounce the film along nicely: Hugh Herbert, Frank McHugh, Joseph Cawthorn, Grant Mitchell

Trivia

In the song "I'm Going Shopping With You," lyricist Al Dubin is alluding to Shakespeare in the line about the beauty shop: "If they paint you, they're silly./You can't paint a lily." The line from the play King John, "To gild refined gold, to paint the lily," as examples of pointless "improvements," is often misquoted as "to gild the lily."

The "Milk Fund" was likely the Free Milk Fund for Babies of New York City, founded in 1921 by Millicent Hearst, wife of William Randolph Hearst.

This film's Oscar winning song "The Lullaby of Broadway" became one of Warners' "go to" songs among the studio's music library and in 1951.

Wini Shaw's recording of "Lullaby Of Broadway" was an unlikely hit in Britain in 1976. When told about this Shaw was amazed!

Analysis

The Life and Art of Busby Berkeley, Jeffrey Spivak (2011)

Lullaby of Broadway number:

“The first evening star is visible amid a black velveteen sky; a pinpoint of light is adrift in the darkness; a voice in song emanates from the white dot. Slowly, meticulously, either we are moving closer to the image of it as it approaches us ... The singer Wini Shaw, becomes identifiable as the monorail-mounted camera inches its way closer to the source. There’s passion in her singing as she slows her delivery for the maximum effect of the song’s final syllable: ‘Listen ... to ... the lullaby ... of ... old ... Broad ... way ...’

She pivots here head 180 degrees, her chin now at the top of the screen and places a cigarette in her mouth. Buzz freezes the image into a close approximation of a well-known photograph, Man Ray’s unofficially titled ‘Woman Smoking a Cigarette’ from 1920. The face morphs into a representative of New York City, and the number’s narrative begins in earnest.”

Darwin’s Secrets: Evolutionary Aesthetics, Time and Sexual Display in the Cinema.
Barabara Creed, 2011.

In her chapter on Busby Berkeley films, Creed makes the delightfully provocative argument that “the Hollywood musical is essentially a mating ritual in which the sexes meet and impress each other with their spectacular song and dance routines as a prelude to mating” (p. 75). She acknowledges that a number of Berkeley films were set amidst a backdrop of “poverty, loss and despair” (p. 90), and that Berkeley chose to “choreograph his erotic musical numbers in terms of the new assembly line” (p. 84). Yet, regardless of these remarks, Creed does not attempt to synthesise Darwinian theory with class analysis in the way that (when discussing the “Darwinian uncanny”) she synthesises Darwin’s work with psychoanalysis. Class, in this chapter, becomes the proverbial “elephant in the room”.

Review

From DVD Sant Review by Glenn Erickson

(<https://www.dvdtalk.com/dvdsavant/s1934busb.html#return%201>)

Busby Berkeley's phantasmagorical musical extravaganzas were a highlight of 1930s culture, a bridge between the insufferably literal stage transpositions of the talkie transition and the later star-centred musical formulas at RKO and MGM. Berkeley had contributed to Goldwyn's Eddie Cantor pictures but it was Warners that gave him the creative go-ahead. The home of Rin-Tin-Tin got more than it bargained for, because Berkeley combined stagecraft cleverness, camera tricks and his own visual ideas to create musical numbers that were wholly cinematic: they could only exist on a screen, and nobody had ever put visuals like his on a screen anywhere. Those moguls must have thought Berkeley was some kind of crazy genius.

The memory of these pictures faded as America entered the war, and it wasn't until the middle 1960s that the Busby Berkeley flag was picked up by kitsch 'n' Camp-loving movie

revivalist culture. His films found new life on college campuses in the 1970s. So far out of style that they form a style of their own, his amazing musical numbers are now revered as 'music videos' on a colossal scale: outlandish, sexually-charged surreal masterpieces. The shows may not be everyone's cup of tea -- but artists and surrealists tend to love them.

Gold Diggers of 1935 starts out promisingly with a musical opening in a new setting, a country getaway hotel. The staff prepares for its snooty customers to a tune that sounds a bit too much like *Dames*. More fun is had via the hotel's bizarre payroll system. Bellboys, bartenders and service people work for free but are assured that the rich clientele will tip them generously. When work begins, however, the employees discover that everybody from their supervisors to the greedy manager expects a cut of their pay. It all sounds like a criticism of what it's like to work for Warner Bros.!

The old Berkeley cast is gone entirely, with only Dick Powell making a connection to the series. His costar is the non-singing, non-dancing Gloria Stuart (*The Invisible Man*, *Titanic*), who looks great and helps him carry the show. She might as well not sing, because the movie has so few tunes that *The Words are In My Heart* is given a full reprise. The rich and goofy Alice Brady (*My Man Godfrey*) gets most of the attention, as does Adolph Menjou's overripe and only marginally amusing 'crazy Russian' character.

Terribly wasted is Glenda Farrell, once the equal of Joan Blondell in the smart wisecracks department and irreplaceable in pictures like *Mystery of the Wax Museum*. This is Busby Berkeley's first full-on directing job, and the picture has a lot of loose ends that could have been tied up a little better in the script.

Using 40-odd dancing pianos, the big number for *The Words are in My Heart* seems innocuous enough until we realize that hiding under each of the fake instruments is a dancer in black, bent over at the waist. These guys guide the pianos and their chorus-girl pianists around while being functionally blind. We wonder what other tortures Berkeley's dancers went through, as we can imagine the kind of back distress this would cause after only a few minutes -- and these guys are doing complicated moves that can't have gone right the first ten times. For all their work, they remain totally anonymous. **Wrong! See Footnote 2.**

The Words are in My Heart is but an appetizer for *The Lullaby of Broadway*, Berkeley's magnum opus. Some German-style expressionism comes through in *Dames* but *Lullaby* pulls out all the stops. It's not a dream sequence. It begins with a disembodied head in an inky void, singing a full rendition of the title song. The head belongs to Winifred (Wini) Shaw, a statuesque beauty with lesser credits in other Warners films of the time -- both she and this film's Dorothy Dare are in the unsung *Sweet Adeline* from the year before. Shaw reclines, inverts her head, and her face becomes Manhattan itself. The camera moves in and the story plays out *inside* her. Shaw is like a soul in perdition, endlessly repeating her danse macabre.

The number is a prototype for the long dance ballets championed later by Gene Kelly at MGM; there's even a reel change in the middle. It's structured as one of those 'symphony of a city' tales told in little glimpses of daily life. The rest of the city goes off to its life of subways and time clocks while "The Broadway Baby" (Shaw again) is just getting to bed. Everyone else is seen to have a job to do, even a street organ grinder. Unlike the hordes of workaday proles around her, The Broadway Baby and her carefree lover (Dick Powell, smothered in lipstick) lead a nocturnal life of endless nightclubs and champagne, a dazzling existence above the anonymous workers. Milkmen and housewives smile with winking indulgence at

The Broadway Baby's lifestyle. But as the sequence gets darker a creepy tone of moral judgment takes hold.

What we see makes us think that the playful pair has already lost their souls, as the 'Club Casino' turns out to be a gigantic blank space for an enormous orchestra and at least 150 dancers, with the two of them the only patrons. A single pair of dancers set the romantic mood but then lead a couple of hundred clones into a sexually charged 'call and response' dancing battle between men and women. The dancers first appear in the guise of sexual symbols: The women hold their arms to form little circles while the men advance jutting their arms upward like those little arrows. Savant rejects the notion that they're giving Fascist hand salutes.

The Lullaby of Broadway turns out to be a dance of sin and death, a strange ritual that will make the Broadway Baby pay a terrible price for her luxurious existence. She literally "asks for it": "*Come and dance! / -- My baby may not let me. / Come and dance! / --- Why don't you come and get me?*" The Broadway Baby spins with multiple dance partners and then rushes toward a climax of horror and implied moral retribution, as the city claims its sinner. While still in shock, the audience is shown The Broadway Baby's empty apartment, and the little kitten that now will not be fed. Manhattan transforms back into Wini Shaw singing her warning as she once again retreats into the vanishing point.

The number pulls together all of Berkeley's storytelling skills and graphic talents to create something essentially scary; it gives little kids nightmares. The dancers are aggressive and demanding and the initially seductive main dance turns into a kind of mindless assault. The echoing footsteps in the giant hall match the hollow 'roller rink' ambience of the music.

Busby Berkeley would go on to highlights at MGM and Fox (I'm partial to the giddy, fruity fun in *The Gang's All Here*) but this must have been his high point, the only thing that could top and summarize Berkeley's earlier achievements. ¹

1. *The Lullaby of Broadway* is the closest thing to a horror musical number next to various versions of *The Night on Bald Mountain*. In Val Lewton's *The Seventh Victim* the suicidal Jacqueline Gibson is described as an "adventuress and sensationalist" who once led a wild Manhattan lifestyle but has now collapsed into darker pursuits, toying with dangerous ideas like Devil Worship. Lewton may have had somebody like Louise Brooks in mind, but I've always thought of Gibson as a haunted version of The Broadway Baby, living in quiet despair.

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2. A Major Correction from Author Brendan Carroll, 3.19.06:

Hi there. Mightily enjoyed your review of the Berkeley set. I just thought you might like to know that when I interviewed Harry Warren in the mid 70s, he told me that in *Gold Diggers of 1935* - the "Words Are In My Heart" dance of the grand pianos number (which, by the way uses 56 pianos in total) was actually achieved by using midgets in black, not full sized dancers bent double!!

While the number was heard on playback, they followed taped lines on the black floor and moved the pianos (on casters, totally empty inside and made of balsa wood so they were super light!) while Berkeley shouted directions through a megaphone at them. The entire thing was shot silent.

Warners had apparently got a contractual arrangement with an outfit called the Singer Midgets, that they had used the previous year in the ballets for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I doubt anybody else knows this little bit of trivia but every time I see the number, I remember with great fondness, the irrepressible Warren telling me this tale over a delicious lunch at the Bel Air Country Club, while Andy Williams & Bing Crosby teed off outside the window!

Thought this might amuse you... Best -- Brendan Carroll

(Brendan Carroll is well-known as an authority on Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and is the author of the massive Korngold biography *The Last Prodigy*.)