

## Busby Berkeley (1895-1976)

by Imogen Sara Smith

Busby Berkeley, choreographer and director of Hollywood musicals, was a pioneer of cine-dance: insisting on the primacy of the camera, he created choreographic works that exist only on film. The movements of dancers were merely one element of his vision, subordinated to cinematography, editing, and lighting. Berkeley's name is synonymous with the style of elaborate production numbers he popularized, especially his signature overhead views of chorus girls forming kaleidoscopic patterns with their bodies. Berkeley was perhaps the twentieth century's greatest exponent of dance as spectacle, offering audiences jaw-dropping and ever-escalating forays into pure visual pleasure. He drew on the tradition of stage pageants associated with Florenz Ziegfeld (1867-1932), but used cinema to break down limitations of space and time, to expand the possibilities of theatrical performance, and to free audiences from the theater's fixed viewpoint.

With a combination of lavish elegance and exuberant vulgarity, Berkeley's Depression-era musicals offered audiences both dreamlike escape from reality and populist solidarity. His creations evoked not only shimmering realms of glamour but subway trains and park benches, seamstresses and sailors. In Berkeley's films, dance represents the fantasy life of ordinary people.



Busby Berkeley was born into the theater in 1895; his mother Gertrude Berkeley was an actress on stage and in silent films, and his father Francis Enos was a director and actor. He was named William Berkeley Enos, and nicknamed for the actress Amy Busby, a friend of his mother. Born in Los Angeles, he grew up in New York and made his own stage debut at age five. By the early 1920s—after attending military school and

serving in the First World War—he was acting and directing in stock companies. He had no formal dance training and never performed as a dancer, but began choreographing musical numbers in Broadway shows such as Rodgers & Hart's *A Connecticut Yankee* (1927) and Hollywood musicals like the Eddie Cantor vehicle *Whoopee!* (1930). He picked up dance steps from his dance directors, but his most significant experience and inspiration may have been the drills he conducted while enlisted in the army. From the start, his dance numbers were notable for their regimentation and use of geometric patterns; he incorporated military drill formations in numbers like "Shanghai Lil" (from *Footlight Parade*) and "All's Fair in Love and War" (from *Gold Diggers of 1937*). In the army he also trained as an aerial observer, which likely gave him the idea for the "top shots" (first presented in *Whoopee!*) that are his most recognizable trademark.

Berkeley arrived in Hollywood at the dawn of the sound film era, during a glut of movie musicals. Early sound technology required a static camera, interior sets, and actors speaking into fixed microphones. The "All Talking! All Singing! All Dancing!" movies that were essentially filmed stage musicals made the best use of the primitive medium. Audiences quickly tired of such fare, but Busby Berkeley revitalized the movie musical with three innovative hits made for Warner Brothers in 1933: *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*, *Footlight Parade*, and *Gold Diggers of 1933*. He did not direct these films and was responsible only for the production numbers, which overshadowed the modest dramatic sections. Stories about performers and producers struggling to put on shows amid economic setbacks gave way to Berkeley's fantastic musical productions, which were ostensibly performed in stage shows but abandoned any attempt at

verisimilitude and soared off into cinematic space. These films were hugely popular, and for a time Berkeley's influence was so pervasive that nearly every dance number filmed in Hollywood copied his ideas and methods.

Berkeley remained at Warner Brothers until 1939, but his star gradually declined. His extravagance always put him at odds with studio producers, especially when his films began to lose popularity. He was known for literally "going through the roof" in search of the perfect camera position. [Fred Astaire](#) arrived in Hollywood in 1933 and began presenting an entirely different style of film dance, in which the camera framed dancers full-figure, and editing was minimal and unobtrusive. At the same time, the "integrated" musical was gradually taking hold, in contrast to the revue style that Berkeley practiced in which musical numbers had no connection to dramatic narrative. By the late 1930s, Berkeley's style was looking old-fashioned, and his life was disrupted in 1935 when he was responsible for a car accident that killed three people. He was charged with second-degree murder for driving under the influence, but after two hung juries, a third trial acquitted him.

In 1939, after trying his hand at directing a straight dramatic film (*They Made Me a Criminal* with John Garfield), Berkeley moved to MGM, where he created musical numbers for Judy Garland, Jeanette MacDonald, and [Eleanor Powell](#); made aquatic showcases for swimming star Esther Williams; and directed [Gene Kelly](#)'s first film, *For Me and My Gal* (1942). The Kelly-Frank Sinatra musical *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* (1949), which drew on Berkeley's early love of baseball, was his last directing assignment. By the mid-fifties he was largely forgotten and idle apart from occasional work on television. His Depression-era films were rediscovered in the 1960s, and he had a triumphant swan

song supervising the 1971 Broadway revival of the 1925 musical *No, No, Nanette*, featuring the star of his Warner Brothers classics, Ruby Keeler.



Despite his association with Keeler and other dancers, there is little traditional dancing in Berkeley's creations. His chorus girls are drilled to machine-like precision and deserve credit for enduring exceptionally grueling rehearsals and shoots, but their movements are often reduced to gestures as minimal as repetitively waving their arms over their heads or swinging their wide skirts. Hired for their looks, some could not dance at all. Though Berkeley made a trademark of the "parade of faces" in which the women are granted brief close-ups, the dancers are always a collective entity, not a troupe of individuals. They were selected specifically for their identical proportions; matching wigs and costumes rendered them virtual clones.

Berkeley's choreography often turned the female body into a prop (at times literally: he made harps out of semi-nude women in the "Spin a Little Web of Dreams" number from *Fashions of 1934*) and his camera's close-up ogling of women's legs and crotches intensified the element of sexual display inherent in many stage revues. He built on the tradition of the Ziegfeld Follies in which Florenz Ziegfeld offered scantily and outrageously clad showgirls as living statuary under the rubric of "glorifying the American girl." Berkeley's productions alternated between presenting women as an overtly erotic spectacle and turning them into purely abstract patterns shifting like a kaleidoscope: spinning stars, unfurling flowers, pinwheels, zippers.

Berkeley's style can be criticized not only for objectification, but also for the quasi-

fascistic nature of its regimentation and submersion of the individual into the group. (According to Berkeley biographer Jeffrey Spivak, Josef Goebbels and Leni Riefenstahl both expressed admiration for his films.) “There was something frightening, dehumanizing, about the way he used people—as cogs in a wheel, interchangeable units of a grand design,” Morris Dickstein has written (240). “For Berkeley, as for Riefenstahl, the human form, whether individual or en masse, is merely the raw material for new technological effects, whether of propaganda or visual stylization. The purer the film imagination, the more complete the manipulation” (Ibid., 83).

On the other hand, the patterns of mass movement in Berkeley’s choreography can be read as embodying the Depression-era spirit of populist unity. In “Remember My Forgotten Man” from *Gold Diggers of 1933*, chorus girls are replaced by rows of men marching off to war, then stumbling through trenches, then shuffling along in breadlines. While this number, with its iconography of prostitutes and gaunt farm wives, aestheticizes suffering, it also makes a powerful political statement through synchronized group movement, capturing a genuine spark of anti-government anger.

Though Berkeley’s work is vulnerable to charges of sexual exploitation and glorifying homogenous physical perfection, as well as to accusations of vulgarity and camp, the awesome artistry, visionary scope, and beauty of his creations are undeniable. The fluid way he marshaled hundreds of performers, along with moving sets, revolving turntables, traveling crane shots, wind and water, light and shadow, resulted in unsurpassed marvels. (All were achieved with a single camera; Berkeley planned his continuity and editing in advance.) Alternating extreme long-shots with extreme close-ups as well as filming dancers

from below through glass floors, underwater, and in tracking shots, Berkeley celebrated the freedom of cinema to conquer space. His camera really does dance. His unchained imagination often veered into surrealism: women play neon violins and white pianos that glide around the floor (“The Shadow Waltz” from *Footlight Parade*); an octagonal mirrored hall multiplies dancers into infinity (“Don’t Say Goodnight” from *Wonder Bar*); Ruby Keeler rises through the pupil of the eye in a giant portrait of herself (“I Only Have Eyes for You” from *Dames*).

In addition to the purely decorative, pattern-rich productions with which he is most closely associated, Berkeley produced miniature musical dramas that capture urban life in choreographed rhythm and focus on emotional outbursts or breakdowns that punctuate the chaotic yet mechanical flow of the crowd. The eponymous “42nd Street” number has an edge of danger in its seething, jazzy crowds, who metamorphose into a jostling panorama of skyscrapers. “Shanghai Lil” evokes a louche, glamorously degraded multicultural night-world with all the atmospheric power of Josef Von Sternberg. In what is arguably Berkeley’s greatest achievement, “Lullaby of Broadway” from *Gold Diggers of 1935*, he produced a dreamlike, sinister, elegant mini-masterpiece. The opening evokes the pulse of big-city life through economical and whimsical details, bearing comparison to the lyrical cinema of René Clair. At the climax of the number, hundreds of black-clad male and female dancers tap in unison in a cavernous neo-classical nightclub, a spectacle at once breathtaking and menacing.

In Busby Berkeley’s limitlessly opulent imagination, dance was not a series of steps but a total effect of shifting lighting, swooping cameras, gliding scenery,

glittering costumes, and chorus girls' smiles. Paradoxically, his achievements were both widely imitated, and inimitable.

### **Works Cited**

Dickstein, Morris. *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009.

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