

MUSICALS OF THE THIRTIES: PROGRAM 3

Tonight's program ranges from 1932 to 1939, with the emphasis on Busby Berkeley and Astaire-Rogers. The order of screening is not chronological, and is arranged mainly with variety and contrast in mind. Thus, sequences from the same film do not always appear consecutively. The compilation of excerpts runs for one hour, and is arranged in the following order:

TOP HAT (1935, dir: Mark Sandrich) Fred Astaire's simple, stylish title number; stunningly photographed in well contrasted blacks and whites.

TRANSATLANTIC MERRYGROUND (1934, dir: Ben Stoloff) Nancy Carroll and Frank Parker in the catchy "It Was Sweet of You" number, as elaborate a steal from Busby Berkeley as was ever perpetrated. In its construction, its "prologue" and "epilogue", its closeup use of pretty faces and of course in its overhead pattern-weaving routines, it's pseudo-Berkeley with a vengeance -- lacking only the Griffithian size that Berkeley's budgets provided.

SAN FRANCISCO (1936, dir: W.S. Van Dyke) Jeanette MacDonald, her sprightly Lubitsch days behind her, here lets her hair down a bit from the rather staid rut her series with Nelson Eddy had gotten her in to, and does her best to be a female Jolson. Moments later the 1906 earthquake arrived, although historians have their choice of accepting either this, or Dolores Costello's prayer to be saved from white slavery ("Old San Francisco") as the reason for the earthquake.

CAPTAIN JANUARY (1936, dir: David Butler) Last week, Shirley sang to Michael Whalen; here, in one of her most appealing numbers - "The Right Somebody to Love" - it's Guy Kibbee. Shirley's charm and genuine talent seem to grow more amazing as the years go by. This episode involves a curious dream sequence, something a la Tod Browning with scaled sets and props, in which adult Shirley ministers to infant Guy Kibbee? The optical wipe mercifully arrives just as she's preparing to change his diapers. Incidentally, the Fox "chorus" was never more syrupy than in this song!

ONE HOUR WITH YOU (1932, dirs: Ernst Lubitsch and George Cukor) One of the very top Chevalier songs -- "Mitzi" -- which conveniently tells its own story for those who missed the complete feature when we ran it some months ago.

TOP HAT (1935) One of the most pleasing and typical of all Astaire-Rogers numbers - the "Caught in the Rain" number; one of those small-scale but delightful numbers allegedly arising out of "natural" circumstances that began to replace the monster numbers of Berkeley in the mid-30's.

THIN ICE (1937, dir: Sidney Lanfield) With Alice Faye, Shirley Temple and Sonja Henie, Fox held almost a monopoly on dimpled virginal musical heroines in the thirties - although Deanna Durbin at Universal, and Dorothy Lamour at Paramount, were providing healthy competition. The Henie musicals were afflicted with too much inane comedy (Joan Davis et al), but their skating routines were exciting and novel, and production values were good. Were their plots and comic content better, they would hold up rather well today, for musically they haven't dated.

THE STORY OF VERNON & IRENE CASTLE (1939, dir: H.C. Potter) Historically somewhat false, and not too popular because of the tragic ending, this film was in many ways one of the best of the Astaire-Rogers films. Certainly in the non-dancing scenes, they worked better together than hitherto. The old Castle dances were exceptionally well reconstructed, as this good sequence shows.

FOOTLIGHT PARADE (1933, dir: Lloyd Bacon) Dick Powell & Ruby Keeler in the "Honeymoon Hotel" number, about the most robustly indecent of all Busby Berkeley numbers, not excepting the famous "Petting in the Park". But the girls are gorgeous (how did they ever find so many girls of exactly the same height and all with such huge bosoms?), the intricate set fascinating, and the lyrics and music catchy. There appear to be no budding stars among the chorines this time, but Dave O'Brien is one of the chorus boys.

TOP HAT (1935) Astaire and Rogers in one of their best and most graceful numbers - "Cheek to Cheek".

FOOTLIGHT PARADE (1933) James Cagney and Ruby Keeler in Berkeley's marvellous "Shanghai Lil" number - beautifully photographed and edited, and put together with a mathematical precision that leaves one breathless. Quite incidentally, the whole thing takes place in a bordello, and the lyrics include some outspokenly racist cracks! There is the usual WB nod to FDR, and the climax sees guns being shot off in the direction of the audience -- blanks, presumably! Watch for John Garfield in a five frame shot.

- I n t e r m i s s i o n -

DAMES (WB, 1934) Directed by Ray Enright; written by Robert Lord and Delmer Daves; musical numbers staged by Busby Berkeley; photographed by Sid Hickok and George Barnes; 9 reels.

With: Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler, Joan Blondell, Zasu Pitts, Guy Kibbee, Hugh Herbert, Arthur Vinton, Sammy Fain, Phil Regan, Arthur Aylesworth, Lella Bennett, Beaton Churchill, Bill Elliott, Henry Rocquemore and, among the chorus girls, Ann So thern, Jean Rogers, Joan Barclay.

From its plot, it is quite apparent that "Dames" was originally intended as the "Gold Diggers" entry for 1934, but presumably the end result was thought to be of insufficient stature to warrant its inclusion in such an illustrious series. It may be hard to form a really accurate impression of "Dames" this evening; after a compilation of top-calibre numbers, its slow first half may seem doubly tedious. Conversely, you may all welcome a respite from curtains rising and falling. In any event, by any standards, its plotting is routine Grade-B stuff, though given a great deal of flair by all of the stock Warner contractees assigned to it, and it's hard to believe that such an ambitious musical couldn't have had a little more strength to its plotting. Be that as it may, Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler keep the musical end up rather nicely until just past the half-way mark, when Busby Berkeley takes over for three long numbers, two of which - "I Only Have Eyes for You" and "Dames" - are among the biggest, best, and most imaginative he ever created. Apart from the sheer size and total freedom from the restrictions of a theatre stage (Berkeley gives us street scenes, cars, subways etc!) the numbers become literally abstract at times, the optical effects and the designs pushing the girls off the screen. The chorus girls are as blonde and lovely as ever, but sex per se is de-emphasised a bit this time. The "By a Waterfall" number of 1933, and the one big number in "Fashions of 1934" were full of quite startling and blatant Freudian innuendoes. Here the erotic is discarded in favor of melody and design. Incidentally (and inexplicably) the stock shot of audience reaction used in these numbers is from an old British movie!

It's distressing to find that (in the few theatrical and film society showings that the old Warner musicals get) that there's a kind of inverted cult for Ruby Keeler -- a claue that finds her absurd and wildly funny. This is a pity, for Keeler is automatically hampered by costumes and dances that date rather noticeably, and a voice that was never remarkable -- and didn't pretend to be. But her personality comes through rather pleasingly -- as a "good guy" and hard-worker, and the kind of a girl that it must have been fun to pal around with. One also gets the impression that she also has no illusions about the extent and range of her talents. I hope she is forever spared the cruel ordeal of seeing one of her old films with a boorish and unthinking modern audience.

----- Wm. K. Everson -----
Next Sunday - New Yorker Theatre - 9.30 a.m. - BETTY BLYTHE in her second version of SHE; plus Ince's DRUMMER OF THE LIGHTS (the complete 2-reeler of which we years ago showed a 1-reel version); a Sennett comedy; and if they arrive in time, two two-reel westerns starring Al Jennings.
***** Don't forget D.W. Griffith's SALLY OF THE SAWDUST with W.C.Fields is at the New Yorker this coming Thursday evening*****
Next Tuesday: LUCREZIA LOMBARD (1923) with Monte Blue, Norma Shearer; and the following silent shorts: FAST & FURIOUS; KATHLEEN MAVOURNEEN; PARIS POLICE; AN ANGELIC ATTITUDE; AMBROSE IN A RAGE; THE SWITCHTOWER

We're sure that many of his friends --he has been a regular at the Huff for many years, never missing a show -- will be sorry to hear that Jack Wolcott is somewhat under the weather, and is in hospital for what may be a stay of a week or two. We'll try to bring him up to date on the films he missed when he gets out, and in the meantime I'm sure he'd appreciate cards or letters from any of his friends. Write him at Ward G-9, of the Cornell Hospital branch of the NY Hospital, 68th Street and 1st Avenue. We hope we'll see him back at his 2nd row seat very soon.