

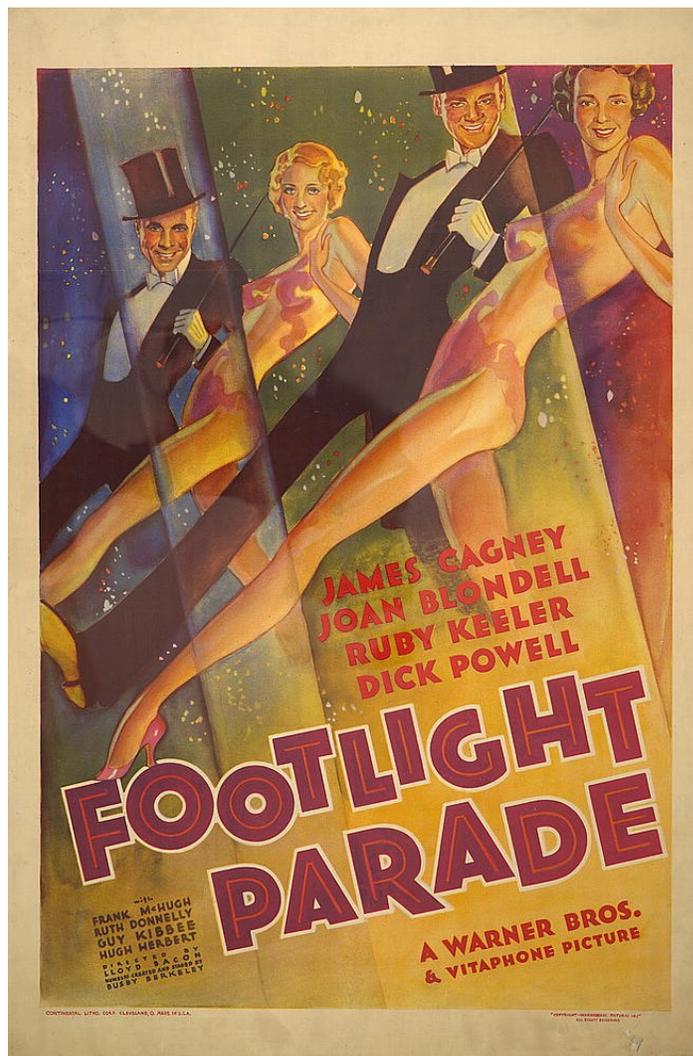
Footlight Parade

By Randy Skretvedt

Chester Kent, who has been writing and producing musical stage shows for impresarios Frazer and Gould, is in a quandary. The new talking pictures have become a sensation, and Chester's bosses have decided to only show them from now on – no more live stage presentations. When Chester sees a live musical number performed on stage at a movie house, Frazer and Gould explain that these are only brief prologues before the feature film, and they're too expensive to produce on a large scale. Chester goes to a drugstore for some aspirin, and a friendly clerk explains that his store can sell the product cheaper because it's part of a large chain. Chester decides to apply the chain-store business model to prologues, and soon Frazer, Gould and Kent have a factory employing hundreds of singers, dancers and musicians. Chester's overwork is compounded by a spy in the ranks, who is stealing his ideas and giving them to a competitor. Further, Chester is under pressure to deliver three terrific prologues to impress potential client Mr. Apolaris, who owns a large network of theaters. On the big night, one of the key performers is drunk – but somehow Chester and company save the day and win the contract.

This is the third of the great Warner Bros.-Busby Berkeley musicals, and the only one which is pure fun. "42nd Street" had a dramatic, gritty story about a director who had to scrape together one more hit show or face financial ruin and a complete breakdown; "Gold Diggers of 1933" had constant reminders of the Depression and a final number which was about the World War veterans' protest march to Washington, "Remember My Forgotten Man." "Footlight Parade," while certainly depicting the stresses and strains involved in putting on a show, is pure enjoyable escapism.

It stands the test of a truly great musical film – it would be wonderful even if it didn't have the musical numbers. While it's often referred to as a "Busby Berkeley Musical," Berkeley handled only the four major musical sequences ("Sittin' on a Backyard Fence," "Honeymoon Hotel," "By a Waterfall" and "Shanghai Lil"). The rest of the film is a hilarious, snappy comedy with plenty of Pre-Code humor, directed with flair by Lloyd Bacon, who learned how to keep the action moving in the mid-1920s by making silent comedies for Mack Sennett.



Original release poster features stylized images of the four stars. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection.

In the 1920s and early '30s, when movie theaters still had stages – often because they had originally been designed as vaudeville houses – the bigger and better establishments offered a live prologue before the filmed entertainment. This would be a miniature musical number running about fifteen minutes, featuring elaborate costumes and scenery and usually tied in some way to the theme of the feature film. (The El Capitan Theater in Hollywood, owned by Disney, still presents prologues when a high profile new film opens.) Ironically, not long after "Footlight Parade" was released, the B-Movie came into vogue. This new shorter, cheaper second feature spelled the end of the prologue – and also endangered the short comedies which had formerly been part of a typical film program.

The early movie musicals of 1929 and '30 had emu-

lated stage choreography, with long shots of chorus girls and boys dancing in a straight line, as if they were in a theater facing the footlights. Dance director Busby Berkeley, whose training had been with military drill teams, created a form of musical number that could only be achieved in movies. The unique properties of the motion picture are of primary importance in Berkeley's scenes. He's also a creature of extremes: the sets and costumes are often designed in stark black and white; he juxtaposes long shots with close-ups; he varies lighting from underneath with illumination from overhead. There's often a touch of grimness to his numbers (girls fall to their death in both "42nd Street" and "Lullaby of Broadway"), and they often end on a small vignette (for example, the baby in the magazine advertisement at the end of "Honeymoon Hotel," or the birds waiting for food at the finish of "By a Waterfall").

Berkeley's numbers are the exact opposite of what Fred Astaire would soon be making at RKO. With Astaire, the camera serves only to record his amazing dancing as faithfully as possible, ideally in one unbroken take. With Berkeley, there's very little actual dancing at all; what matters to him are the camera angles, the lighting, the editing, and above all the grouping of chorus girls and boys into geometric patterns. The elaborate numbers in "Footlight Parade" couldn't possibly be staged in a theater, but that's a moot point when you're being overwhelmed with the amazing imagery – not to forget the great orchestral arrangements by Ray Heindorf and that powerful Warners orchestra conducted by Leo Forbstein.

Composer Harry Warren and lyricist Al Dubin had been teamed for "42nd Street," and were already so successful and busy that they could only write "Honeymoon Hotel" and "Shanghai Lil" for this picture. The other four songs were by up-and-coming composer Sammy Fain and wordsmith Irving Kahal – including the wondrous "By a Waterfall."

The film benefits from a great script by Manuel Seff and James Seymour, which includes several saucy

and hilarious lines which would not have been permitted a year later, after the enforcement of the Production Code. The wonderful Warners stock company is on display here, with gorgeous Joan Blondell as Chester's faithful secretary, Guy Kibbee as a duplicitous producer, Ruth Donnelly as his busbybody wife, Hugh Herbert as an annoying censor, and the marvelous Frank McHugh as a peripatetic dance director. Winsome Ruby Keeler may not have the greatest singing voice or even the finest ability as a dancer, but she has charm to spare. Dick Powell, too, exudes charm and charisma and is down-to-earth, never cloying. And then there's Cagney.

"Footlight Parade" is James Cagney's fourteenth film. He had at this point already been typecast as a tough guy. The public had little knowledge of his vaudeville background as a dancer, so they were astonished to see how graceful he was in the "Shanghai Lil" number and at various other too-brief moments throughout the film. Cagney likely would never have gotten the lead in "Yankee Doodle Dandy," the one movie which spotlights his dancing, if it hadn't been for his success here. Esther Williams, who became a top star at MGM with her all-swimming musicals engineered by Berkeley, likely wouldn't have had a film career if not for the precedent of "By a Waterfall."

Despite the technical advances that the movies have made since 1933, few films are as astonishing, dazzling, and as consistently entertaining as "Footlight Parade."

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Randy Skretvedt is the author of Laurel and Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies, and co-author of Steve Martin: The Unauthorized Biography, The Nostalgia Entertainment Sourcebook and Laurel and Hardy on Stage!. He was managing editor of Past Times: The Nostalgia Entertainment Newsletter, and currently hosts Forward into the Past, a weekly radio show on KSPC (www.kspc.org)