

15 December 2014

Gold Diggers of 1933 (U)

Director: **Mervyn LeRoy**
USA 1933

Running time: 97 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Ruby Keeler** (Polly), **Dick Powell** (Brad), **Joan Blondell** (Carol), **Aline MacMahon** (Trixie), **Warren William** (Lawrence), **Ginger Rogers** (Fay), **Guy Kibbee** (Peabody), **Ned Sparks** (Barney).

SCRIPT: **Erwin Gelsey, James Seymour, with additional dialogue by David Boehm and Ben Markson, based on a play by Avery Hopwood.** PHOTOGRAPHY: **Sol Polito.** EDITING: **George Amy.** MUSIC: **Ray Heindorf, musical numbers created and directed by Busby Berkeley.**

Gold Diggers of 1933 is an archetypal studio product of the Thirties. In the first place, as a remake of *Gold Diggers of Broadway* (1929) and the harbinger of a series of *Gold Diggers* films through the decade, it is a classic instance of Warner Brothers' policy of recycling tried and tested material, especially as early sound successes promised even greater artistic returns as the technology improved. (*The Maltese Falcon* is another example, remade as early as 1936 as *Satan Met a Lady*, the latter starring *GD1933* actor Warren William, the former directed by *GD1929* director, Roy Del Ruth!)

In the second place, as suggested by the above trivia, it is an assignment product: on the technical side, director LeRoy, cinematographer Polito, responsible for that greyish sheen characteristic of Warner Bros pictures, and set designer Anton Grot, might find themselves working on a crime picture or a historical adventure the next week. The only auteur here is Berkeley, who barely gets a mention in the credits, but it is his phantasmagoric production numbers that we now all recognise as bearing his signature.

The plot concerns three chorus girls, their endeavours to stay in work, and the attempts by Carol and Trixie to distract the pair of killjoys out to prevent the love match of Polly and Brad, who, it turns out, is not a penniless songwriter but the scion of a wealthy Bostonian family, going *incognito!* In fact a good portion of the film involves not the 'putting on a show' element of the screenplay but the elaborate fleecing of brother Lawrence and lawyer Peabody so that they can be blackmailed. Since they dismiss the demure Polly as a degenerate 'gold digger', they will be thoroughly hoodwinked by the genuine article!

This distraction from the main event also serves to disguise the flimsiness of the whole enterprise, a show to commemorate the Great Depression. One minute the impresario Sparks has no backers and no real property to exploit, the next, thanks to Brad's unstoppable creative urge, he has tunes, lyrics, funding, in a word: a show. The genius is not so much in the songs (*We're in the Money*, *Pettin' in the Park*, *My Forgotten Man*) as in Berkeley's presentation of them. In his hands they cease to be a musical number as witnessed from the front row of the stalls, so to speak. His roving camera liberates the viewer from any sense of context, chronology or diegesis by plunging him into the midst of a surreal elaboration for which the song is but a trigger, and the dancers' legs, smiles, silhouettes and so on are as so many musical notes to a pianist improviser. The erotic power of Berkeley's visual orchestrations (I hesitate to use the word choreography) derives also from their oneiric qualities, the sense that anything at all can be given form. It is not for nothing that he has the first and last word in this picture.

A final thought: this is a film of and about the Depression, even down to the opening number, which is not part of Brad's creation. ('*We're in the Money*' could be an ironic taunt for the impoverished masses, were it not for the pay-off that comes moments later.) But it also looks back to the Great War: '*My Forgotten Man*' bemoans how America's brave soldiers now find themselves doubly on the scrap heap of history, concluding the film on a melancholy note, and with hindsight a rather ominous one.

David Clare