

Footlight Parade: Hollywood, Roosevelt's New Deal and the Warner Brothers

backstage musical

by Christian Hayes

The Wall Street Crash of October 1929 at first appeared to have a very different effect in Hollywood than was the case across the country. Commenting on this, the Warners biographer Michael Freedland writes: 'The Wall Street disasters had a strange effect on the motion-picture business. While everyone else was going broke, the studios were busier than they had been for years.'¹ Andrew Bergman also concedes this fact: 'In 1929, Hollywood was riding the high crest of the profits' but then Bergman highlights the problems that were soon faced: 'from 1930 to 1933, the industry saw those profits turn into hefty debits.'² He states that it was 'nineteen thirty-one, not 1933, [that] represented Hollywood's first deeply jolting confrontation with the hard facts of America's dying economy; the dream factory was stricken along with the steel factory...Hollywood would suffer badly until mid-1933,'³ It was in 1933 that Warner Brothers would release three key musical films: *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933) and *Footlight Parade* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933), films that would coincide with the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal policies. I will look at how Warner Brothers dealt with the Depression and how the coming of Roosevelt and the New Deal informed these Warners musicals, focusing specifically on *Footlight Parade*.

¹ Michael Freedland, *The Warner Brothers* (London: Harrap, 1983) p.52

² Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1971) p.xi

³ *Ibid*, p.xxi

During the Depression film-going was a particularly popular pastime, proving that the American people needed escapism throughout this time especially. Even though the public was suffering from poverty, ‘whole families would sacrifice a few cents from their relief money for two or three hours of escapism.’⁴ Michael Freedland goes on to say that:

This could only mean one thing to the studios: a demand for more films which just had to be met...Theatres in some towns were filled to capacity for the first three or four days of the week, and then empty the rest...This meant that it was wise to change programmes halfway through the week. So still more films had to be made... Naturally, the demand for more films meant more work for the studios.⁵

At the turn of the decade, Warners turned to the gangster film. Pictures such as *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930) and *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931) caused Warner Brothers to be thought of as a studio that made tough, unsentimental films. Thomas Schatz’s believes that this was the working of Darryl Zanuck. In what he calls the ‘The Zanuck Era’,⁶ Schatz writes: ‘Once Zanuck became production chief in 1930, his taste permeated Warners’ entire program. He emphasized male action films and promoted a stark vision and hard-bitten dramatic style at every opportunity.’⁷ The gangster genre was very popular at the time even though there was certain controversy

⁴ Freedland, *The Warner Brothers*, p.53

⁵ Ibid, p.52

⁶ Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998) p.135

⁷ Ibid, p.137

surrounding these films. In 1927 the MPPDA agreed to guidelines about how violence should be portrayed in motion pictures after an outcry from certain groups regarding the apparently corruptive possibilities of violent films⁸. Bergman states, ‘Despite all the clamor and warnings, the simple fact was that a great many people, and not just the young, were going to see the gangsters’.⁹ Warners took advantage of the popularity of the genre, so much so that ‘Warner Bros became known as the Gangster Studio’¹⁰ due to its output of these films.

The fact the gangster film was so popular during the Depression reveals certain aspects of the national state of mind. Nick Roddick in his book *A New Deal in Entertainment* writes that in the gangster film, ‘they showed characters responding actively and often with a strong sense of personal honour to social circumstances which, in real life, seemed to condemn their audiences to inactive frustration in the face of the ‘system’ which often appeared *dishonourable*.’¹¹ These films were certainly social tales, set in the city, and its concerns appeared relative to the common man. Andrew Bergman comments on this, the public’s attraction to the gangster film:

That Americans were attracted to outlaws during the Depression’s most wrenching years is an undeniable and useful fact, but the manner in which the outlaws operated only reinforced some of the country’s most cherished myths

⁸ Bergman, *We’re In The Money*, pp.4-5

⁹ *Ibid*, p.5

¹⁰ Freedland, *The Warner Brothers*, p.56

¹¹ Nick Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment, Warner Brothers in the 1930s* (London: British Film Institute, 1983) p.99

about individual success. The outlaw cycle represented not so much a mass desertion of the law as a clinging to the past forms of achievement. That only gangsters could make upward mobility believable tells much about how legitimate institutions had failed—but that mobility was still at the core of what Americans held to be the American dream. Both the bleakness and determined faith of the early thirties are illuminated.¹²

The Warners backstage musical would provide a counter view to that represented in the studio's gangster films. During the early thirties, prior to 1933, it appears as though the American Dream was very much about 'mobility' and striving singularly to success. Mark Roth states that 'the gangster is basically a loner, and he fails; the musical hero and heroine are parts of larger groups, and they succeed.'¹³ The coming of Roosevelt and the New Deal in 1933 would present a major shift in the mood and state of mind of the public, a shift that is also present in the backstage musicals that very same year. Of this shift of tone, Nick Roddick states:

The bleak portrayal of losers in a lost world, which characterizes *Doorway to Hell* (1930), *The Public Enemy* (1931) and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) gave way to a kind of determined optimism, expressed through the all-pulling-

¹² Bergman, *We're In The Money* pp.6-7

¹³ Mark Roth, 'Some Warners Musicals and the Spirit of the New Deal' in Rick Altman (ed.), *Genre: The Musical* (British Film Institute/Routledge, 1981), p.44

together-to-make-it-work philosophy of the 1933 musicals, through the images of problems being faced and solved.¹⁴

It was Roosevelt who would face and attempt to solve the problems of America, reacting against President Hoover's ineffectiveness.¹⁵ Roosevelt's first session in congress resulted in, amongst other things, the inflation of currency, wages and production in all industries, and a \$3.3 billion public works program.¹⁶ Roth states, that 'With these actions and inspiring rhetoric Roosevelt created, for a time at least, a spirit of unity, optimism and pride which found expression in the best of the Warners musicals of the period.'¹⁷

Roosevelt also coincided with a particularly low period at Warner Brothers as business had steadily declined since the start of the Depression. Roddick writes, 'As Roosevelt took office in March of 1933, receipts hit rock bottom: they were forty percent of what they had been in January of 1931.'¹⁸ At this time, Warners would shift their focus to what would be a more optimistic genre, the musical.

The classic examples of the Warners backstage musical were *42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and *Footlight Parade* and are imbedded in both implicit and explicit ways with Roosevelt's New Deal policies. This probably stems from the Warner Brothers' personal political stance. Michael Freedland states: 'Franklin D. Roosevelt, whom the [Warner] brothers, to everyone's surprise—and probably also to their own—

¹⁴ Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment* p.64

¹⁵ Roth, 'Some Warners Musicals and the Spirit of the New Deal', p.42

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment*, p.xxii

decided to back, following his highly successful term as Governor of New York.’¹⁹ Nick Roddick concedes that this new Warners stance extended as far as the terminology used for publicity:

Of all the studios, Warner Brothers was the one whose production programme most enthusiastically reflected the New Deal...facing up to the social crisis in a more direct way than any other studio – and after, adopting the Roosevelt administration’s terminology (for what it’s worth, *42nd Street* was billed as a ‘New Deal in Entertainment’), placing its symbol, the NRA Eagle, on the main title card of its films, and preaching the paternalistic concern which was a feature of the FDR years.²⁰

42nd Street along with *Footlight Parade* were key examples of the Warners backstage musical. These films were based around a strong director leading a troupe of dancers to the success of the films’ musical finales. The elaborate climaxes of these films, along with *Gold Diggers of 1933*, were choreographed by Busby Berkley and would be utterly contrasting to the harsh style of the gangster film. The ‘By the Waterfall’ sequence in *Footlight Parade* contained, for example, ‘slightly clad ladies wade and swim about a pool, bask on rocks with water cascading over them, form into ensembles shaped like stars, like a sea serpent and other interesting and beautiful groups.’²¹

¹⁹ Freedland, *The Warner Brothers*, p.63

²⁰ Roddick, *A New Deal in Entertainment*, p.65

²¹ Roth, ‘Some Warners Musicals and the Spirit of the New Deal’, p.46

It was in these Busby Berkley numbers that Roosevelt's New Deal policies were most succinctly portrayed. In the same 'By the Waterfall' sequence, many women swim synchronized, and shot from above, their bodies have become part of a larger being as they form giant circles and star-like shapes. Roth states, 'The implication of the Berkley-directed numbers is that individual skill matters much less than coordination, cooperation and leadership'²² and in this we get images of the New Deal, of everyone pulling together to succeed. Roth continues, 'each person is shown to be part of an interdependent group; the overall impression emphasizes the importance of social cohesion and harmony – symbolized most clearly in the dances.'²³ There is an unspoken understanding in these musical sequences, an almost embedded sense of the New Deal. But in the film, aside from the dance sequences, we find the idea of pulling together to succeed directly within the main plotline as the director Chester Kent (James Cagney) ruthlessly works his dancers and leads them to victory. Bergman states:

Of course, they were escapist...but the three musicals...all had Depression motifs. Warner Baxter is broke in *42nd Street*, everybody is broke in *Gold Diggers of 1933* and star producer Jimmy Cagney on the skids ("Breadline, I hear you calling") in *Footlight Parade*.²⁴

²² Ibid, p.47

²³ Ibid, p.44

²⁴ Bergman, *We're in the Money*, p.64

It was the strong director characters that Mark Roth found to be the most significant and key to the success of the films themselves. He writes, ‘The directors...dominate their respective films. As the musical form weakens, the production of the show-within-the-film becomes progressively less important and the director of the show becomes a weaker figure.’²⁵ But these characters also contain very strong implications. The directors were the leader-figures within the world of these films, and in relation to the real world, were symbolic of Roosevelt himself. Roth states:

The parallel between the strong director of the show-within-the-film and the new strong succeed do so only by following the orders of the director. This change represents a major modification of the American Dream. The idea of individual success has been transformed into an ideal of success through collective effort under the guidance of the strong director.²⁶

This ‘collective effort under guidance’ was exactly what the New Deal was all about. Throughout the film there are many allusions to the New Deal. For example, Kent’s colleague Frazer states, ‘We’re giving you a new deal’, a line of dialogue that plays alongside many other such lines. This therefore shows that Roosevelt and the New Deal is embedded within the film, but it is not until the climax of the film that these ideals are explicitly (and perhaps bluntly) put across. Roth describes the climax of the final number, ‘Shanghai Lil’: ‘Shot from above, we see hundreds of chorus boys and girls dressed as

²⁵ Roth, ‘Some Warners Musicals and the Spirit of the New Deal’, p.43

²⁶ Ibid, pp.47-8

American sailors form an American flag, superimpose a picture of Roosevelt over it, and then form an NRA eagle and fire their guns in salute.’²⁷ Amongst these characters is the director Chester Kent and the character of Shanghai Lil, both of whom are also dressed in American sailors uniform. In this world, not even the leader is adverse to helping out, nor are other nationalities from around the world.

Roth reviews a contemporary critique of *Footlight Parade* by Cy Cadwell and quotes directly, ‘There must be something sacred about the plots of these Warners musicals that the high priests of the studio guard the ritual so religiously and bear off any suggestion for the major change.’²⁸ What Cadwell is highlighting is that the backstage musicals of 1933 all had near-identical plots, with the fast-talking sequences lasting for roughly an hour until the three big Berkley numbers of the final act. Roth argues that these repetitious plots serve a specific purpose. He writes, ‘The musical form is essentially ritualistic. It is meant to reaffirm faith – not to illuminate conditions or states of being. The Warners musical of the early 1930s tried to come to terms with the questioning of the American Dream and to reaffirm faith in that ideal.’²⁹

This ritualism is embodied by the repetitious plots, and as the American watches and re-watches the same story, within the same format, they are also repeatedly being presented with the New Deal policies. Roth argues that with the reaffirmation of these policies, we are also presented with ‘a ritualistic rededication to the ideal of the American Dream.’³⁰ These films therefore give us an insight into the shifting ideal of the American

²⁷ Ibid, p.47

²⁸ Ibid, p.45-6

²⁹ Ibid, p.44

³⁰ Ibid, p.46

Dream. No longer is the American Dream about the gangster figure's singular rise to the top but about the hard-working common man (or as is mostly the case of these musicals, the common woman) pulling together, as embodied by the dancing girls of the chorus line, to achieve a common goal.

1933 saw the return of profits to Warner Brothers. Jack Warner, talking of the backstage musical *42nd Street* said, 'The success of that picture was so sensational that it helped in no small measure to bring about a revival of general business and started it on the upgrade that it has been climbing ever since.'³¹ Warner Brothers had managed their way through the Depression by screening the aspirations of the public, at first through the rise of the gangster, and then by embracing Roosevelt's New Deal policies into their films more than any other of the Big Five. It was by tapping into the shifting ideals of the American people that the studio managed to find success with their backstage musicals and it was these musicals that lifted Warner Brothers out of the Depression and back into business.

³¹ Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money*, p.64

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