



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# 42nd Street

*Introduced by Miles Eady, BFI Cinemas and Events (Wednesday 2 March)*

‘Naughty, bawdy, gaudy, sporty’, *42nd Street* is a prime chunk of fantasy real-estate – not just a movie, but a novel, a song, a play, an act, an attitude, a dream, a racket, a rhythm, a way of life.

*42nd Street* is the hectic intersection where industrial folklore crosses show business myth. It’s the tale of how America licked the Depression, how the Warner Brothers elected Franklin Roosevelt, and how Hollywood got to out-sing, out-dance, and out-entertain Broadway. Indeed, America’s pre-eminent theatrical strip, the thoroughfare in ‘the heart of little old New York’ that gives *42nd Street* its name, was well in decline on 9 March 1933 when the movie’s theme first blared out and its iconic title filled the screen at the Strand Theatre, five blocks away.

Times Square, where 42nd Street crosses Broadway, had once been the best-lit stage in American culture. But as burlesque, vaudeville and second-run movies replaced legitimate shows, *Variety* declared that the ‘gayest, white wayest and most expensive nite life street in the world’ had turned ‘cut-rate’. It was as though the street predicted its own democratisation – or should we say, Warnerisation. For even before the studio produced *42nd Street*, Warner Bros was the celebrant of that particular turf, the purveyor of brash, racy, cynical, up-to-date movies populated by fast-talking wiseguys – shysters and news-hounds, racketeers and their molls.

*42nd Street* ‘has the lean, hungry, underlit look of Warners’ films of the same era,’ writes Rocco Fumento in his introduction to the 1980 publication of the movie’s screenplay. The sets are threadbare, the costumes look to be strictly off-the-rack. Even the musical extravaganzas seem frugal: ‘The “Young and Healthy” number has a lot of chorus boys and girls but no setting whatsoever except for three revolving platforms.’ But that squadron of chorines and those motorised platforms tell all: *42nd Street* is the Times Square of the assembly line.

This is a street movie where there are almost no street scenes – and then they are mainly rear-projected stock shots as seen from a stage door or a taxi window. The street here is a state of mind. The stage in *42nd Street* is the distillation of the street, the spectacle is the making of the show, and the show itself is a model metropolis – the nexus of glamorous display, fantastic abundance, and utopian social order.

*42nd Street* is inextricably bound up in the experience of the Depression and the coming of the New Deal. Its production spans the 1932 Presidential election campaign and its release – together with that of *The Gold Diggers of 1933*, which opened in Los Angeles and New York the very week that Congress passed the National Recovery Act – coincided almost exactly with the celebrated ‘first hundred days’ of the Roosevelt administration. (The only other film so spectacularly to embody the popular mood was Disney’s animated short *The Three Little Pigs* which, released a few days before *Gold Diggers*, provided an even catchier anti-Depression than ‘We’re in the Money’, with ‘Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?’) Thus *42nd Street* is one of a handful of Hollywood movies which not only reflect but *are* American social

history – films that might include *Casablanca*, the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Rocky* and *Ghostbusters*.

On the one hand, *42nd Street* is a Horatio Alger story as refracted through the *Ziegfeld Follies*: the virtuous Peggy Sawyer works hard, resists temptation, gets her break, and makes the most of it. On the other hand, the film offers the vision of some new, collective social order, founded on the industrial production of erotic fantasy, the joyous orchestration of the masses, the confusion between making love and making work. Even more than most musicals, *42nd Street* presents ‘head-on’, as Richard Dyer suggests in his essay on the use-value of entertainment, just ‘what utopia would feel like’.

For the movie’s reviewers and audiences, *42nd Street* more than lived up to its publicity, even though most commentators deemed the premise overfamiliar. *42nd Street*, wrote *The New York Times*, was ‘the liveliest and one of the most tuneful screen musical comedies that has come out of Hollywood.’ The *New York Herald Tribune* found it ‘brisk and alert’, particularly in comparison to the previous glut of backstage movies. Hearst’s *New York American* thought *42nd Street* brought ‘musicals back with a great big bang’, reporting that the opening night crowd applauded the dance numbers. The *New York World-Telegram* felt the movie ‘too lavish, perhaps’ but the *Daily News* correctly predicted ‘a box-office smash’. In any case, the New Deal in Entertainment had arrived. Echoing the radio-broadcast ‘fireside chat’ which the new President delivered on 12 March, Warners took an ad in *Variety* to announce that ‘America’s Pocketbook is Open for Business. No Shutdown – No Letdown – but a SHOWDOWN in the war against depression. Whether you’re a Democrat or a Republican you’ll endorse – WARNER BROS’ 10-WEEK RECONSTRUCTION PROGRAM.’

The week that *42nd Street* opened in New York, the Hollywood studios, led by MGM, initiated a temporary 50 per cent pay cut for all salaried employees. Zanuck, who had his own salary slashed, opposed the reductions and attempted to rescind them. Not only was he overruled, but Harry Warner threatened to extend the cuts beyond the initial eight-week period. ‘Furious and shaken,’ historian Thomas Schatz writes, Zanuck ‘conducted studio business with an air of detachment and was all but oblivious to the tremendous impact of *42nd Street*.’ On 15 April, he resigned.

Hence the appropriateness of the morose *42nd Street* coda: a crowd in evening clothes leaves the theatre, bizarrely complaining that Julian Marsh is taking unjustified credit for the discovery of that new sensation, Peggy Sawyer. Marsh stands off to the side unrecognised, listening ironically and holding his stomach, the ubiquitous cigarette dangling from his lips. As the show-within-the-show ended with Sawyer and her consort on top of the world, the ‘real’ show concludes with the lonely stage director sitting on the bottom rung of a fire-escape in a dark alley.

Before the fade-out there are a few wistful bars of Brock’s theme, as if to suggest that the former silent stars, Baxter and Daniels, are being supplanted by the ‘Young and Healthy’ Keeler and Powell. It’s a distinctly downbeat close – but then the whole finale is a kind of fantastic wish fulfilment. Peggy Sawyer may have flattened the Empire State, but the show itself is still in Philadelphia.

**J. Hoberman, *42nd Street* (BFI Film Classics, 1993)**

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42ND STREET

Directed by: Lloyd Bacon  
Production Companies: Warner Bros., Vitaphone Corporation  
Screen Play by: Rian James, James Seymour  
Based on the novel by: Bradford Ropes  
Photography by: Sol Polito  
Edited by: Thomas Pratt, Frank Ware  
Art Director: Jack Okey  
Gowns by: Orry-Kelly  
Silks by: Cheney Brothers  
Words & Music by: Al Dubin, Harry Warren  
Music Performed by: Vitaphone Orchestra  
Vitaphone Orchestra Conducted by: Leo F. Forbstein  
Dances & Ensembles Created & Staged by: Busby Berkeley

uncredited

Producer: Darryl F. Zanuck  
Supervisor: Hal B. Wallis  
2nd Unit Director: Ray Enright  
Assistant Director: Gordon Hollingshead  
Screenplay: Whitney Bolton  
Additional Photography: Byron Haskin, Dev Jennings  
2nd Unit Director of Photography: James Van Trees  
Director of Photography of Trailer: Arthur Todd  
Camera Operators: Thomas Brannigan, Conway Davis, Kenneth Green, Michael Joyce, David Kesson, H.F. Koenekamp, William Schurr, Richard Towers, Rex Wimpy  
Assistant Cameramen: Archie Anderson, I.G. Burks, John Crouse, Louis De Angelis, Perry Finnerman, Carl Guthrie, Jack Koffman, J.M. Larson, R.G. Mitchell, Fred Terzo, William Whitley  
Chief Electrician: George Whittemore  
Chief Grip: Harold Noyes  
Stills: George Baxter, John Ellis, George Hommel, Buddy Longworth, Charles S. Welborn  
Sound: Nathan Levinson, Dolph Thomas  
General Press Agent: S. Charles Einfeld

Cast

Warner Baxter (Julian Marsh)  
Bebe Daniels (Dorothy Brock)  
George Brent (Pat Denning)  
Ruby Keeler (Peggy Sawyer)  
Guy Kibbee (Abner Dillon)  
Una Merkel (Lorraine ‘Lolly’ Fleming)  
Ginger Rogers (Ann ‘Anytime Annie’ Lowell)  
Ned Sparks (Thomas Barry)  
Dick Powell (Billy Lawler)  
Allen Jenkins (MacElroy)  
Edward J. Nugent (Terry Neil)  
Robert McWade (Al Jones)  
George E. Stone (Andy Lee)

uncredited

Milton Kibbee (news spreader)  
Wallis Clark (Dr Chadwick)  
Charles Lane (author)  
Harry Akst (Jerry, the pianist)  
Dave O’Brien (chorus boy)  
Al Dubin, Harry Warren (song writers)  
Tom Kennedy (Slim Murphy, another thug)  
Jack La Rue (thug)  
Henry B. Walthall (old actor)  
Louise Beavers (Pansy, the maid)  
George Irving (house doctor)  
Clarence Nordstrom (groom, ‘Shuffle off to Buffalo’ number)  
Toby Wing (showgirl in ‘Young and Healthy’ number)  
Rolfe Sedan (stage aide)  
Patricia Ellis (secretary)  
Harry Seymour (aide)  
Kermit Maynard (dancer)  
Virginia Albertson, Loretta Andrews, Alice Arnold, Betty Bassette, Adrian Brier, Lynn Browning, Edna Callaghan, Maxine Cantway, Margaret Carthew, Mildred Claire, Dorothy Coonan, Hazel Craven, Sue Curtis, Alice Dahl, May Daly, Patsy Daly, Irma Dane, Dallas Dexter, Joan Dix, Mildred Dixon, Ruth Eddings, Kay English, Patricia Farnum, Gloria Fayth, Vina Gale, Sugar Geise, Virginia George, June Glory, Bernice Graves, Harriette Haddon, Sally L. Haines, Mary Jane Halsey, Ann Hovey, Peaches Jackson, Ruth Jennings, Adele Lacy, Margaret Lamarr, Skeeter Lamarr, Rose Lane, Patsy Lee, Laura Morse, Nancy Nash, Nita Pike, Sue Rainey, Sandra Rambeau, Betty Recklaw, Donna Mae Roberts, Barbara Rogers, Jane Shadduck, Bee Stephens, Alice Stombs, Virginia Thomas, Dorothy White, Renée Whitney, Emily Williams, Pat Wing, Evelyn Wise (chorus)

USA 1933  
90 mins

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Le Mépris (Contempt)

Tue 1 Mar 18:15; Tue 8 Mar 20:50; Sat 12 Mar 20:50

42nd Street

Wed 2 Mar 18:00 (+ intro by Miles Eady, BFI Cinema and Events); Fri 4 Mar 20:40; Mon 14 Mar 20:45

Cabaret

Thu 3 Mar 20:40; Sat 12 Mar 18:15

8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo) Fri 4 Mar 18:00; Mon 7 Mar 20:15; Wed 16 Mar 17:50 (+ intro by Giulia Saccogna, BFI Programme & Research Coordinator)

F for Fake

Fri 4 Mar 20:50; Wed 9 Mar 18:10 (+ Intro by Programmer-At-Large, Geoff Andrew); Wed 16 Mar 21:10

Nashville

Sat 5 Mar 19:45; Wed 9 Mar 14:15; Sun 13 Mar 18:00

Les Demoiselles de Rochefort

(The Young Ladies of Rochefort)

Sun 6 Mar 13:15; Fri 11 Mar 18:05; Tue 15 Mar 18:10

Baadasssss!

Thu 10 Mar 20:40; Sat 12 Mar 18:10

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