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Buzz: The Life And Art Of Busby Berkeley (Screen Classics)



Synopsis

Characterized by grandiose song-and-dance numbers featuring ornate geometric patterns and mimicked in many modern films, Busby Berkeley's unique artistry is as recognizable and striking as ever. From his years on Broadway to the director's chair, Berkeley is notorious for his inventiveness and signature style. Through sensational films like *42nd Street* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *Footlight Parade* (1933), and *Dames* (1934), Berkeley sought to distract audiences from the troubles of the Great Depression. Although his bold technique is familiar to millions of moviegoers, Berkeley's life remains a mystery. *Buzz: The Life and Art of Busby Berkeley* is a telling portrait of the filmmaker who revolutionized the musical and changed the world of choreography. Berkeley pioneered many conventions still in use today, including the famous "parade of faces" technique, which lends an identity to each anonymous performer in a close-up. Carefully arranging dancers in complex and beautiful formations, Berkeley captured perspectives never seen before. Jeffrey Spivak's meticulous research magnifies the career and personal life of this beloved filmmaker. Employing personal letters, interviews, studio memoranda, and Berkeley's private memoirs, Spivak unveils the colorful life of one of cinema's greatest artists.

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Customer Reviews

"In this thoroughly researched book...Spivak shows a keen understanding of Berkeley's talents but does not ignore his flaws...recommended for knowledgeable movie buffs."--Stephen Rees, Library

Spivak's well-written biography of the Hollywood choreographer and director, famous for the complicated, kaleidoscopic dances he choreographed for such films as *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, has scholarly depth yet is gracefully accessible. Spivak's writing is especially strong when he discusses Berkeley's trademark style •playful, visually arresting dances, packed with large numbers of chorus girls dancing in lockstep• and his myriad artistic influences, which include his mother, who was in the theater and silent movies; and a stint in the military, where he drilled soldiers to march in formation. In his prime, Berkeley worked extremely long hours like a man possessed, driving himself and his dancers to the brink of collapse and, in Berkeley's case, beyond, into an alcoholism that eventually all but destroyed his career. Cineastes will enjoy Spivak's close attention to Berkeley's obsessively detailed planning and execution processes, and Spivak's no-less-detailed descriptions of the final films. And for those who like movie gossip, there's Berkeley's wild, dysfunctional private life (which included parties, love affairs, and multiple marriages, all fueled by too much alcohol). --Jack Helbig

Prior to the publication of Mr. Spivak's book, Busby Berkeley's genius was primarily saluted in books with glorious visuals ("The Busby Berkeley Book" by Tony Thomas and Jim Terry) or provocative analysis ("Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle" by Martin Rubin.) Author Spivak dives into the "why" and "how" of Berkeley's visions with a detailed examination of their creation and impact. Along the way, he tries his very best to find the man in the middle. The details he has researched and shared are exemplary and, without moral judgement, presents them for the reader to process. Some of the theories which have been examined by previous writers, film historians and "talking heads" in the excellent 1997 TCM Documentary "Busby Berkeley - Going Through the Roof" and the many "extras" on the two Warners Home Video "Busby Berkeley" DVD collections get a new twist, such as: When did a Kaleidoscope influence his vision? Who came first - Leni Riefenstahl and her Nazi Germany visions or Busby Berkeley and his patriotic American military drills? Were his sexually provocative formations meant to "push the bounds" of censorship? Unlike Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly, Buzz was not interested or knowledgeable in dance. His angles and editing were the prototype and inspiration of how movement would be filmed in music videos and today's dance films. The film itself "dances." Mr. Spivak lets us simply admire - and be dumbfounded by - Busby Berkeley's one-of-a-kind vision which still astounds us today.

This was a well done book on film legend, director Busby Berkeley. We see Berkeley's early life and his parent's work on stage and his strong attachment to his mother. His work on Broadway is discussed and then we get into his memorable films - Dames, Gold Diggers of 1935, Hollywood Hotel, For Me and My Gal, Babes on Broadway, and so many others. He was fanatical in his work and I believe the author details this from the quotes by the various people who worked with Berkeley. However, I thought there was too much description of the scenes from the film rather than the how they were done. Most reading this book would be familiar with Berkeley's kaleidoscope shots and I would have liked to have learned more of how they were designed, shot, and other technical tidbits behind them. Berkeley was a self-destructive man - most likely an alcoholic who was responsible for a car accident in which killed several people. The book covers the trials as well as some of the Warner Brothers' stars who testified. Berkeley's later life is also covered as well as his final, happy marriage and move to the Palm Desert area. A good book for anyone interested in films.

This book was full of detail and facts about a genius of movie musicals. It had lots of photos and information on a man who was a complete wonder in his field. He was an original and so creative. I've seen many of his musicals and the concepts he came up with in filming and set decoration were daring and extreme. His personal demons might have aided in his originality.

It delved into his life from the minute he was born. How he was influenced by his mother. He was very clever in his making of a movie picture with his sense of timing. His use of an overhead camera was a new procedure to show the intricacies of the girls timing in their routines.

This struck me as an academic biography that goes into great detail describing the art of Busby Berkeley. So we hear about each important scene in his films and graphic descriptions of how they were designed and executed, but do we ever feel like we truly see and understand the man himself? I think we get a glimpse. We certainly have a sense of what happened in his life - each picture - his relationship with movie moguls -- his compulsion to marry many, many times - and certainly his devotion to his mother, a former stage actress. What I liked best about the book was Spivak's focus on the man's constant acts of self-sabotage. He bullies himself out of his jobs. He drinks too much. He drives recklessly and eventually this leads to a terrible tragedy. He fights off the IRS and seems constantly in debt. And he marries women far too young who may indeed be gold

diggers - the very thing he exploits in his films. But, eventually, he finds true love, settles down, and reinvents himself. That part of the book is wonderful, and I'm looking forward to see how all this translates into film.

GREAT!!!!

This bio of Berkeley while quite good at describing the visuals of his art it never gets into his life with any depth. His mother love, drinking and multiple wives never get the space or understanding they deserve.

I love Busby Berkeley movies and was delighted to find a book from a press I could trust on the subject. The book is, in general, well written but suffers in spots either from inattention to grammatical niceties by the author, Jeffrey Spivak, or careless editing. As a former professor of French (and hence grammar), I tend to pounce on problems and found a few scattered here and there throughout the book. I was going to let it go. But after reading the treasure trove on pp. 214-15, I feel compelled to point out the following from the hardcover edition: p. 214 "[Gertrude] insisted on going, saying to whomever [sic] would listen..." Surely someone who is a professional writing for a university press should know that the subject of "would listen" should be in the subjective case. p. 214 "Hopefully her opinion of the show was brighter than the critics', for the next-day reviews were perfectly awful." This sentence simply does not parse. And the author's misuse of the overused and usually misused "hopefully" is unforgivable. p. 215 "More than a mere employee, Buzz respected Frank..." Frank is the employee. Can you spell: dangling modifier? Spivak really dishes the dirt and his style is eminently readable. But I found myself gritting my teeth at errors unworthy of a great press. If the book goes into another printing, "hopefully" [grrr] a bit of judicious re-editing will be forthcoming.[...]

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