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The Dance Master With Kaleidoscope Eyes

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He was known as Buzz and used to boast that he had never had a dance lesson in his life. He wasn't the type to gas on about his choreographic ideas, the best of which, he often said, came to him while he soaked in the bath.

But the director and choreographer Busby Berkeley's vision was solidified by two seemingly disparate concepts: his appreciation for beautiful women and his time spent in the Army, where he created large-scale parade drills for troops while stationed in Europe during World War I. Whether or not there was any tangible connection between those ravishing dances and the rejuvenating power of time spent in a bathtub, Berkeley's wild imagination and famous overhead shots remain astonishing, especially in the way he turned dancing bodies into intricate human kaleidoscopes.

As part of this year's Dance on Camera festival, which continues at the Walter Reade Theater on Saturday, Berkeley's work will be highlighted in two programs. The first, **"Blithe Spirits: Rudavsky Meets Busby Berkeley,"** features four shorts by the Slovakian artist Ondrej Rudavsky, along with a screening of Berkeley's 1934 film "Dames" in honor of its 75th anniversary. The second program is a stand-alone screening of "The Gang's All Here," Berkeley's first color film, made in 1943.

Additionally, there is "Under the Influence of Busby Berkeley," a free discussion by the choreographer and filmmaker Kriota Willberg, who will illustrate how Berkeley's style has continued to infiltrate media culture. As Ruby Keeler wrote

in 1973, three years before Berkeley's death, "He was energetic, tireless, tough and sometimes rough, but look at his pictures and tell me how any other kind of man could have achieved what he did."

Berkeley's scope is still astounding. He wasn't the first to shoot his numbers from above, but his agile camera changed the way dance and musicals were filmed. In his work the power is not rooted in the individual dancer, but in the majestic force of the group. Somehow the notion of rhythmic precision is also poignant; for all their symmetry and rigorous construction, Berkeley's dances are not merely inanimate designs or cinematic artifacts frozen in the past. After all these years they remain alive, paired with an invisible partner: Berkeley himself. In his glorious array of pas de deux, it is the camera — with an almost cheeky elegance — that dances with the group.

In "The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat," from "The Gang's All Here," Carmen Miranda is joined by a long line of barefoot chorus girls who carry giant bananas aloft, lowering them to the ground in what now brings to mind a stadium-style wave. As an overhead camera passes by, 12 dancers, linked at the feet and holding jumbo strawberries, form a star while others surround them, raising and lowering their bananas like petals on a flower. (Berkeley was always up for a bit of surreal, phallic fun.)

As Miranda sings her final verse, the camera pulls back to reveal two rows of strawberries and her stupendous headwear: a towering sprout of ripe bananas.

Later, in "The Polka Dot Polka," Berkeley plays with an arrangement of pink neon hoops. (He similarly used white neon violins for his spellbinding "Shadow Waltz" in "Gold Diggers of 1933.") The result is one of his most opulent psychedelic kaleidoscopes. Vibrant colors singe the screen until only rows of legs remain, spinning like a disc on a record player. The story in the film is inconsequential; what matters most, as always, is the dance.

But strangely enough, for the extra thrill that Technicolor provides, Berkeley's productions are most ideally represented in the subtle shadings of black and white, where they shimmer incandescently under silvery light.

The black-and-white "Dames" has it all, beginning with "The Girl at the Ironing Board" and its witty homage to "Swan Lake," in which a laundry room comes alive with swans as dancers slip their arms into white fabric, curving their palms like delicate heads. Moments later the clothes come to life in a dance without dancers. The scene is still modern: last fall the French choreographer Christian Rizzo took on a similar subject with the seemingly simple tools of just a costume and a fan in his conceptual experiment "100% Polyester."

One of the most famous sequences in "Dames," starring Keeler, Joan Blondell and Dick Powell, occurs in "I Only Have Eyes for You," a tour de force in which dancers wear masks of Keeler's face as they sway from side to side in long white dresses. Here there is a lush beauty in the way that Berkeley's eye lays out a

vision of choreographic order: it is spectacle, and within this gilded world Berkeley strips past the chaos and grime of the everyday to create a space for dreaming.

Back then, dreaming was more than a way of passing the time. If “The Gang’s All Here” was created as a wartime diversion, “Dames” fits the bill for escapism in hard times. (Both, unfortunately, qualify for the present.) Just as Berkeley detached cinematic dance from its proscenium trappings, he also liberated the viewer from reality.

As layoffs pile up, and it seems that there will be darker days ahead, rarely has there been a better moment to plunge into his world of enchantment. Sometimes there’s nothing more relaxing than watching nubile chorines —with their underlying twinkle of humor and intelligence — gliding along contentedly in Berkeley’s silver-screen sea.

Dance on Camera continues through next Saturday at the Walter Reade Theater, 165 West 65th Street, Lincoln Center; (212) 875-5601, filmlinc.org.