

The Buffalo Film Seminars



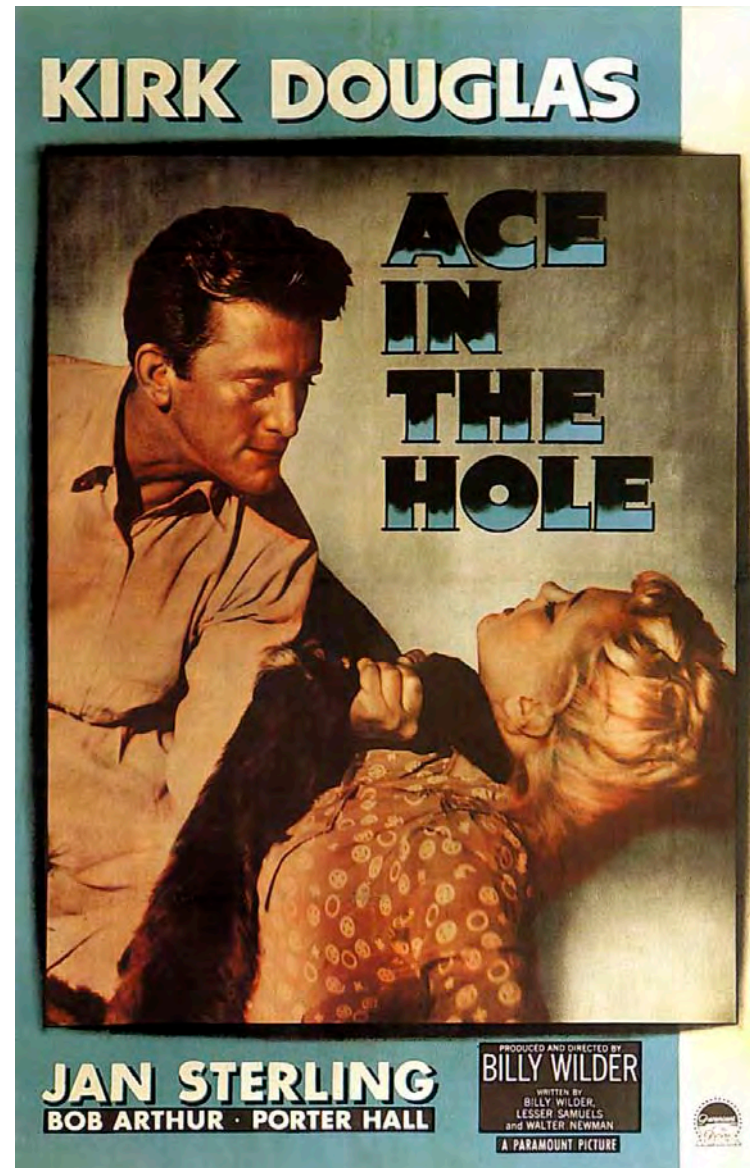
Kirk Douglas...Charles 'Chuck' Tatum
Jan Sterling...Lorraine Minosa
Robert Arthur...Herbie Cook
Porter Hall...Jacob Q.Boot
Frank Cady...Mr.Federber
Richard Benedict...Leo Minosa
Ray Teal...Sheriff Gus Kretzer
Lewis Martin...McCardle
John Berkes...Papa Minosa
Frances Dominguez...Mama Minosa
Gene Evans...Deputy Sheriff
Frank Jaquet...Sam Smollett
Harry Harvey...Dr.Hilton
Bob Bumpas...Radio Announcer
Geraldine Hall...Nellie Federber
Richard Gaines...Nagel
Iron Eyes Cody...Indian Copy Boy

Directed by Billy Wilder
Written by Billy Wilder, Lesser Samuels & Walter Newman
Produced by Billy Wilder
Original Music by Hugo Friedhofer
Cinematography by Charles Lang
Film Editing by Arthur P.Schmidt
Costume Design by Edith Head
Makeup Department Wally Westmore

BILLY WILDER (Samuel Wilder, Sucha, Austria-Hungary, 22 June 1906—27 March 2002, pneumonia) wrote more than 60 screenplays and directed 24. Some of the films he wrote and directed are *Irma La Douce* 1963, *The Apartment* 1960, *Some Like it Hot* 1959, *The Spirit of St. Louis* 1957, *Witness for the Prosecution* 1957, *The Seven Year Itch* 1955, *The Lost Weekend* (1945), *Double Indemnity* 1944; *The Lost Weekend* 1945, director, screenplay. He was nominated for 21 Oscars and won 7 of them *The Fortune Cookie* 1966, *The Apartment* 1960, director, best picture, best screenplay; *Sunset Boulevard* 1950, screenplay; as well as the Academy's Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award (1988), the American Film Institute's Life Achievement Award (1986), and nearly every other international major award given to directors and screenwriters, most of them several times.

CHARLES LANG (27 March 1902, Bluff, Utah—3 April 1998, Santa Monica, CA, pneumonia), shot 146 films, among them *40 Carats* (1973), *Walk in the Spring Rain* (1970), *Cactus Flower* (1969), *Inside Daisy Clover* (1965), *Charade* (1963), *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961), *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957), *Sabrina* (1954), *The*

February 5, 2008 (XVI:4)
Billy Wilder, *Ace in the Hole* 1951 (111min)



Big Heat (1953), *Ace in the Hole* (1951), *A Foreign Affair* (1948), *So Proudly We Hail!* (1943), *Tovarich* (1937), *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (1935), *Death Takes a Holiday* (1934), *A Farewell to Arms* (1932), and *The Night Patrol* (1926). He was nominated for 18 best cinematography Oscars but took home only one, for *A Farewell to Arms*.

KIRK DOUGLAS (Issur Danielovitch, 9 December 1916, Amsterdam, NY) was nominated for three best actor Oscars: for *Champion* (1950), *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1953), and *Lust for Life* (1957), but the only one he ever got was an Honorary Award in 1996. *Bio from Leonard Maltin's Movie Encyclopedia*: "His ready grin, granite-chisled features, cleft chin, and an approach to acting that made him equally convincing in both sympathetic and unsympathetic roles made Kirk Douglas one of the brightest stars of post-WW 2 Hollywood (and, later, the international arena as well). Born into immigrant poverty, he saw an acting scholarship as his ticket out of the ghetto. He secured small roles on Broadway before entering the Navy in World War 2, and

afterward resumed his stage career. His old classmate Lauren Bacall suggested that producer Hal Wallis test him, resulting in his being cast in the lead role in *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946). Douglas won excellent reviews, which encouraged him to remain in Hollywood, and in 1947 he made the classic noir *Out of the Past*, the film adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (as Peter), and the undernourished drama *I Walk Alone* (the first of several films with close friend Burt Lancaster). Douglas also had a key role in the multi-Oscared *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949), then scored a knockout as the venal boxer Midge Kelly in that year's *Champion* a classic prizefighting drama that cemented his stardom and earned him his first Oscar nomination as Best Actor. Now acknowledged to be a top leading man, Douglas played a thinly disguised Bix Beiderbecke in *Young Man With a Horn*, the "gentleman caller" in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (both 1950), a heartlessly ambitious reporter in *Ace in the Hole* (aka *The Big Carnival*), a two-fisted cop in *Detective Story* (both 1951), a frontiersman in *The Big Sky*, a ruthless movie producer in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (both 1952, the latter Oscar nominated), an intrepid seaman in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954, in which he sang "A Whale of a Tale"), the title role in *Ulysses* (1955), a sharp-tongued cowpoke in *Man Without a Star* (1955), artist Vincent van Gogh in *Lust for Life* (1956, again, Oscar-nominated), gambler/gunfighter Doc Holliday in *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* and a war-sickened colonel in *Paths of Glory* (both 1957). Douglas infused every role with passion, and his performances were often multilayered ones; he could bring sinister traits to sympathetic characters, and vice versa. Something in his eyes, in his voice, behind that toothy grin, suggested lurking menace in some characters and suppressed mirth in others....He formed his own production company, Bryna, in 1958; its initial venture was a big-scale adventure film, *The Vikings* (1958), followed by *The Devil's Disciple* (1959), which was a coproduction with Lancaster's company, and the sexy melodrama *Strangers When We Meet* (1960). That same year also saw the release of Douglas' most ambitious film, the epic drama of Roman Empire days, *Spartacus*, as its producer, he broke a long-standing Hollywood blacklist by insisting that scripter Dalton Trumbo (a member of the "Hollywood Ten") get proper screen credit for his contribution. Douglas remained busy throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with a decided emphasis on Westerns and war films; among the more notable were *Town Without Pity*, *The Last Sunset* (both 1961), the cult "modern" Western *Lonely Are the Brave*, *Two Weeks in Another Town* (both 1962, the latter a semi-sequel to *The Bad and the Beautiful*), *The List of Adrian Messenger* (1963), *Seven Days in May* (1964), *In Harm's Way* (1965), *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966), *The War Wagon* (1967), *The Brotherhood* (1968), *The Arrangement* (1969), *A Gunfight* (1971), and two that he directed: *Scalawag* (1973) and *Posse* (1975). Thereafter he concentrated on character roles in such varied fare as *Once Is Not Enough* (also 1975), *The Fury* (1978), *Home Movies* (a hilarious turn as an egocentric star), *The Villain* (bravely mocking movie-Western villainy in a hamfisted, cartoonish parody, both 1979), *The Final Countdown* (1980), *The Man From Snowy River* (1982, in a dual role for this Down-Under "Western"), and *Tough Guys* (1986, his last film with Lancaster). And though he abandoned the first Rambo film, *First Blood* early in its production, he eventually worked with star Sylvester Stallone in *Oscar* (1991). More recently he was cast as Michael J. Fox's crafty uncle in *Greedy* (1994). His autobiography, *The Ragman's Son* (1988), was a best-seller; his most recent novel was

The Gift (1992); his most recent book was *Let's Face It: 90 Years of Living, Loving and Learning* (2007).

JAN STERLING (3 April 1921, NYC—26 March 2004, LA, series of strokes), appeared in 87 films, tv series and tv films, among them "The Incredible Hulk," "Three's Company," "Little House on the Prairie," "Kung Fu," "Hawaii Five-O," "The Virginian," "The Alfred Hitchcock Hour," "Naked City," "Wagon Train," "Bonanza," "The Untouchables," "Playhouse 90," *The Harder They Fall* (1956), *The High and the Mighty* (1954), *Ace in the Hole* (1951), "Pulitzer Prize Playhouse," *The Mating Season* (1951), (1950) and *Johnny Belinda* (1948)



BILLYWILDER
from World Film Directors V. I. Ed. John Wakeman. H.H. Wilson Co. 1987

"Billy" (Samuel) Wilder was born in Vienna, Austria, the younger of two sons of Max Wilder, a hotelier and restaurateur and Eugenie Dittler. Sent to the Vienna *realgymnasium* and University of Vienna which he left after less than a year to work as a copy boy and then as a reporter for *Die Stunde*.

In those years after the First World War, young writers working in the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire gravitated naturally to the cultural ferment of Berlin, and Wilder made his way there at the age of twenty. For a time he worked as a crime reporter on *Nachtausgabe* (and/or as a film and drama critic; accounts vary). Many colorful stories are told (mostly by Wilder himself about this part of his life: it is said that he fell in love with a dancer, neglected his work, lost his job, and became a dancing partner for "lonely ladies," and a gigolo. He spent his time on the fringes of Berlin café society, met some young filmmakers and tried his hand as a scenarist.

The first picture made from a Wilder script was *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*, 1929), directed by another young hopeful, Robert Siodmak. [Other collaborators included Edgar Ulmer, Fred Zinneman and Eugen Schüfftan] "It was about young people having a good time in Berlin, and it was talked about a lot," Wilder says. "It represented a good way to

make pictures: no unions, no bureaucracy, no studio, shot silent on cheap stock: we just ‘did it.’ As a result of its success, we all got jobs at UFA, the huge German studios. . . . I’d write two, three, four pictures a month. I accumulated about a hundred silent picture assignments, and then, in 1929, when sound came in, I did scores more.” They included Gerhard Lamprecht’s version of *Emil and the Detectives* and vehicles for many of the German stars of the period.

Wilder had his eye on Hollywood but left Germany faster than he had intended when Hitler came to power in 1933: “It seemed the wise thing for a Jew to do.” Stopping over for a time in Paris, Wilder (in collaboration with Alexander Esway) directed his first film, *Mauvaise Graine* (*Bad Blood*, 1933). A fast-paced movie about young auto thieves, it was made on a shoestring and featured Danielle Darrieux, then seventeen. Soon after, Wilder sold a story to Columbia and this paid his way, via Mexico, to California. Wilder arrived in Hollywood speaking almost no English and shared a room and “a can of soup a day” with Peter Lorre.

After two hard years, Wilder became a writer for Paramount. He had no great success, however, until in 1936 the producer Arthur Hornblow asked him to collaborate with Charles Brackett on a script, *Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife* for Ernst Lubitsch. Brackett was a novelist and a *New Yorker* drama critic, an urbane man from an old New England family. In spite of the radical differences between the two men, they formed a highly effective writing team, with Brackett selecting and polishing the most promising of Wilder’s “prodigious stream of ideas.” Among the excellent entertainments they wrote for Paramount directors in the late 1930s and early 1940s were *Midnight* and *Hold Back the Dawn* for Mitchell Leisen, *Ball of Fire* for Howard Hawks, and Lubitsch’s *Ninotchka*.

Wilder was infuriated by directorial misinterpretations of his scripts and frequently bounced onto the set to say so. Eventually Paramount gave him a chance to show how it should be done. His first American film as director was *The Major and the Minor* (1942), about a disenchanting career girl stranded in New York who masquerades as a twelve-year-old because she lacks the adult train fare back to Iowa. Ginger Rogers (then thirty) played the heroine, Ray Milland, the military-school officer she falls in love with, and the result was universally enjoyed as “an enchanting film farce.” Wilder followed this very successful debut with *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943), a fairly ludicrous war thriller, which cast Erich von Stroheim as Field Marshal Rommel. Wilder, who was awed by the inventiveness of Stroheim’s performance, says, “he influenced me greatly as a director: I always think of my style as a curious cross between Lubitsch and Stroheim.”

Raymond Chandler, not Brackett, was Wilder’s coauthor on *Double Indemnity* (1944), based on the novella by James Cain. This brilliant *film noir* starred Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray as lovers who plan the “accidental” death of Stanwyck’s husband, and Edward G. Robinson as the cold-blooded insurance agent who investigates the claim. *Double Indemnity* (which the Hays Office condemned as “a blueprint for murder”) is a film of great originality, not least in Wilder’s decision to begin the film with MacMurray’s Dictaphone confession. Wilder has “always felt that surprise is not as effective as suspense. By identifying the criminals right off the bat—and identifying ourselves with them—we can concentrate on what follows—their efforts to escape, the net closing, closing.” Shooting

the film on location in Los Angeles, Wilder, and his cameraman John F. Seiz worked for seedy realism rather than Hollywood chic—“I’d go in kind of dirty up the sets a little bit and make them look worn. I’d take the white out of everything. . . . The whole film was deliberately underplayed, done very quietly; if you have something that’s full of violence and drama you can afford to take it easy.” Howard Barnes in his review called *Double Indemnity* a thriller that more than once reached “the level of high tragedy,” and the film is now widely regarded as a classic of the genre. Neil Sinyard suggests that it is also an indictment of American materialism and a study of the conflict between reason and passion, order and anarchy.

The Lost Weekend (1945) captured four Oscars: one for best picture, one for Ray Milland as best actor, two for Wilder as best director and as coadapter with Brackett of Charles Jackson’s novel. Set (and partly filmed) in New York, it observes an alcoholic writer as he struggles against his craving; then succumbs, then lies, cheats, and steals to buy drink. As in *Double Indemnity*, the audience is forced to share the growing desperation of an individual in a state of moral collapse. . . . The film has touches of mordant humor and an unconvincing upbeat ending but is otherwise quite uncompromising; it was nevertheless a commercial as well as a critical success, confounding the studio bosses and movie columnists who had prophesied disaster.

The Emperor Waltz (1948) took Wilder from Third Avenue to fin de siècle Vienna, where an American phonograph salesman (Bing Crosby) falls in love with an Austrian countess (Joan Fontaine). This mildly amusing romance was followed by a more acerbic study of the clash between American and European values in *A Foreign Affair* (1948), which has Congresswoman Jean Arthur visiting postwar Berlin to investigate the moral turpitude of occupying GIs. Like many subsequent Wilder films, this one derives excellent comedy from the spectacle of human depravity. Wilder, whose mother, grandmother, and stepfather had all been murdered by the Nazis, had first revisited Berlin in 1945 during a brief tour of duty as colonel in charge of the film section of the United States Army Psychological Warfare Division. *A Foreign Affair*, in its rigorous eschewal of national stereotypes and its cheerful insistence on the universality of human weakness, is in its ribald way an act of faith. It drew from Marlene Dietrich a wonderfully ironic, coolly defiant performance as a nightclub singer.

A cruel and haunting picture, *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) was a controversial, world-wide success, regarded by many as the best film ever made about Hollywood and by others as a treacherous calumny. . . .

Louis B. Mayer wanted Wilder horsewhipped, but it seemed to James Agee that the film allowed Norma Desmond and her contemporaries a barbarous intensity that had a “kind of grandeur” compared to the “small, smart, safe-playing” Hollywood of the 1940s.

Sunset Boulevard, which brought Wilder and Brackett Oscars for best story and best screenplay, was the last film they wrote together—“sometimes match and striking surface wear out,” Wilder explained. His next picture was one of the blackest ever to come out of a commercial studio, *Ace in the Hole* (1951), also known as *The Big Carnival*. An Albuquerque newsman down on his luck (Kirk Douglas) finds a man trapped in a mine cave-in and creates a journalistic scoop by postponing a rescue for six days. Vast crowds arrive to enjoy the tragedy, a carnival moves in to exploit the crowds, and in the end the man dies. The film was much admired in Europe, but in the United States it was a disaster,

destroying at a stroke Wilder's reputation as an infallible audience-pleaser who could make gold out of trash. *Ace in the Hole* was seen as an insult to the American people in general and to the Fourth Estate in particular. Its failure was regarded as clear evidence that Wilder had all along owed his success to Charles Brackett. (Since then the picture has been discussed with increasing admiration by critics who praise it as "a harsh allegory of the modern artist" and compare it, in its passion, anger, and courage to Stroheim's *Greed*.)



Wilder's next three films were all highly profitable adaptations of stage plays—the exuberant prison-camp comedy *Stalag 17* (1953), the romantic satire *Sabrina* (1954; Wilder's last film for Paramount), and *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), in which the dreamy humor is sometimes overwhelmed by the prodigious presence of Marilyn Monroe. *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1957), Wilder's account of Lindberg's 1927 flight from New York to Paris, was an expensive failure. It was followed by another estimable play adaptation, *Witness for the Prosecution* (1958), with Charles Laughton hamming unforgettably as the barrister defending Tyrone Power against Marlene Dietrich. These five movies were written by Wilder with an assortment of collaborators; the next film, however, marked the beginning of the second great writing partnership of his career, with I.A. L. Diamond. *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), about the regeneration of an aging American playboy (Gary Cooper) through his love for a Parisian innocent (Audrey Hepburn), has been called "Wilder's most emphatic tribute to Lubitsch," a romantic comedy of the greatest elegance and charm.

In the roaring comedy of errors that followed, two broke, speakeasy musicians (Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis) happen to be in a Chicago garage on February 14, 1929, just in time to witness the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Choosing between death and dishonor, they dress up as women and join an all-girl band, which is on its way to Florida. . . . Completed with great difficulty because of Marilyn Monroe's increasing incapacity for work, *Some Like It Hot* (1959) is widely regarded as one of the cinema's greatest comedies. Gerald Mast, indeed, thinks it's Wilder's best film, "a rich, multilayered confection of parodies and ironies," calling subtly into question conventional notions of masculinity, femininity, sex, love, and violence.

After the delirious pace of *Some Like It Hot*, Wilder achieved an almost equal success with *The Apartment* (1960), a quiet, sad, often bitter comedy about the perennial conflict between love and money. . . . The film brought Wilder Oscars for best film, best director, and—with coauthor Diamond—best story and best screenplay.

None of Wilder's subsequent movies has equaled the success and prestige of the best of the films he made between

1950 and 1960, though all have had their admirers and defenders. . . . *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964), admired abroad for its "glorious" bad taste, its ruthless way of poking fun at American greed and hypocrisy, opened in the United States to a storm of abuse. It was called "sordid" and "slimy" and was condemned by the Legion of Decency for leaving adultery unpunished. Deeply hurt, Wilder retired for a time to Europe and, according to Maurice Zolotow, actually considered suicide. The improbably positive ending of the otherwise savage satire that followed, *The Fortune Cookie* (1966), was regarded by some critics as evidence that Wilder had lost his nerve.

The most widely discussed of Wilder's late films was *Fedora* (1978), a sadder and wiser variation on the theme of *Sunset Boulevard*. . . . *Sunset Boulevard* was made when Wilder was at the peak of his success, and it has a confidence and audacity lacking in the later films. Perhaps, as Adrian Turner and Neil Sinyard suggest, *Fedora* is "even richer because of that, the vision of a man who knows the system inside out but who. . . has been increasingly placed in the situation of an outsider looking in. Thus, the tone of the film is extraordinarily ambivalent, constantly pulling between sombreness and romance. . . this ambivalence is thematically of the utmost relevance and importance. . . the whole film is about ghosts, mirror images and doubles—about the pull between truth and illusion, youth and age."

Dutch Detweiler in *Fedora* complains that his Hollywood has gone: "The kids with the beards have taken over, with their zoom lenses and handheld cameras." Wilder himself, though he has been generous in his praise of some of his juniors, is similarly contemptuous of that which he regards as stylistically pretentious and self-conscious in contemporary cinema. His own work is for the most part not visually distinctive, relying more on language than on images to convey his misanthropic vision.

Coming of age in Berlin between the wars, it seemed to Wilder that (as one of his characters says) "People will do anything for money. Except some people. They will do *almost* anything for money." That, as he acknowledges, is the theme of all his pictures, and in the best of them he has expressed it dramatically enough or wittily enough to make it palatable to millions. That he has been concerned to sweeten the bitter pills he hands his audiences displeases some of his recent critics: David Thomson, for example, has called him "a heartless exploiter of public taste who manipulates situation in the name of satire." In fact, what has happened, as Neil Sinyard says, is that "a director previously identified with a cinema of acerbity and risk in a climate of tasteful timidity has come to represent a cinema of temperateness and geniality in a climate of sensationalism and shock."

He lived in a relatively modest apartment crammed with paintings by such artists as Picasso, Klee, Chagall, Dufy, and Rouault.

He is a chain-smoker, and, according to Axel Madsen, his most striking physical trait is restlessness: Walter Reisch similarly says that "speed is absolutely of the essence to him. He cannot do anything slowly." Wilder is a famous wit and sometimes a cruel one; he once remarked that "All that's left on the cutting-room floor when I'm through are cigarette butts, chewing-gum wrappers and tears. A director must be a policeman, a midwife, a psychoanalyst, a sycophant, and a bastard."

from Philip Kemp's entry in *The St. James Film Directors Encyclopedia*. Ed. Andrew Sarris. Visible Ink, Detroit, 1998.

—Kemp says born in Sucha, Austria (now part of Poland), US citizen 1934.

During the course of his directorial career, Billy Wilder succeeded in offending just about everybody. [He offended the public, press, Congress, Hollywood establishment and religious leaders and critics]



Wilder presents a disillusioned world, one (as Joan Didion put it) “seen at dawn through a hangover, a world of cheap *doubles entendres* and stale smoke. . . the true country of despair.”

Themes of impersonation and deception, especially emotional deception, pervade Wilder’s work. Frequently, though—all too frequently, perhaps—the counterfeit turns genuine, masquerade love conveniently developing into the real thing. For all his much-vaunted cynicism, Wilder often seems to lose the courage of his own disenchantment, resorting to unconvincing changes of heart to bring about a slick last-reel resolution. Some critics have seen this as blatant opportunism. “Billy Wilder,” Andrew Sarris remarked, “is too cynical to believe even his own cynicism.” Others have detected a sentimental undertow, one which surfaces in the unexpectedly mellow, almost benign late films like *Avanti!* and *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*.

But although, by comparison with a true moral subversive like Buñuel, Wilder can seem shallow and even facile, the best of his work retains a wit and astringent bite that sets it refreshingly off from the pieties of the Hollywood mainstream. When it comes to black comedy, he ranks at least the equal of his mentor, Lubitsch, whose audacity in wringing laughs out of concentration camps (*To Be or Not To Be*) is matched by Wilder’s in pivoting *Some Like It Hot* around the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre.

The consistency of Wilder’s sardonic vision allows him to operate with assurance across genre boundaries. *Sunset Boulevard*—“full of exactness, cleverness, mastery and pleasure, a gnawing, haunting and ruthless film with a dank smell of corrosive delusion hanging over it,” wrote Axel Madsen—has yet to be surpassed among Hollywood-on-Hollywood movies. In its cold fatality, *Double Indemnity* qualifies as archetypal *noir*, yet the same sense of characters trapped helplessly in the rat-runs of their own nature underlies both the erotic farce of *The Seven Year Itch* and the autumnal melancholy of *Sherlock Holmes*. Acclamation, though, falls beyond Wilder’s scope: his Lindbergh film, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, is respectful, impersonal, and dull.

By his own admission, Wilder became a director only to protect his scripts, and his shooting style is essentially functional. But though short on intricate camerawork and stunning compositions, his films are by no means visually drab. Several of them contain scenes that lodge indelibly in the mind: Swanson as the deranged Norma Desmond, regally descending her final staircase; Jack Lemmon dwarfed by the monstrous perspectives of a vast open-plan office; Ray Milland (*The Lost Weekend*) trudging the parched length of Third Avenue in search of an open pawnshop; Lemmon again, tangoing deliriously with Joe. E. Brown, in full drag with a rose between his teeth. No filmmaker capable of creating images as potent—and as cinematic as these can readily be written off.

from Conversations with Wilder. Cameron Crowe. Alfred A. Knopf, NY, 2000.

CC: It’s in several of the extended pieces written about you that you left the university to become a newspaperman.

BW: No. I never went. I had the right to go to the university, because I made the final exam in the gymnasium—it’s called the *Matura*—and I passed it. And then came a scene with my father, and I just said no, I would not go and become a lawyer. I just said, “I’m gonna become a newspaperman.” And I did, through a lucky circumstance. I never went to the university. But people go by the old interviews. Which they made up. No, I never went. I got my foot in the door of a newspaper that came out at noon, the noontime newspaper [*Die Stunde*]. Then I started writing about football, and about movies. Little things.

CC: It’s been theorized that you got part of your sense of humor from trying to make your mother laugh. What about your father?

BW: My father was a rather easy laugh. My father had kind of everyday humor. He, for instance, would construct a joke. He would come out of the bathroom and I would say to him, “Dad, you forgot to button your pants”—in those days we had buttons—and he looked at me and said, “I have not. There is a law that you don’t know, my son, which says, ‘Where there is a corpse, the window must be open.’”

CC: If someone was to look over all your films, what would be the more personal ones? Is there one that stands out to you, the one that really felt closest to your heart?

BW: You know, I make a picture, and then I forget about it. I don’t have a print, I don’t have a cassette. I have a script at the office, in case I would like to look. Which is the best picture I have ever seen? My answer always is *Battleship Potemkin*, by Eisenstein [1925].

CC: How about a best picture of yours?

BW: I used to say “The next one.” [laughs.] I’m not doing any more.

CC: [Pressing] But I wondered if there was one.. You said earlier that if you had made *Schindler’s List* it would have been very personal for you. Of the movies that you *did* make, which one feels the most complete? Which one feels the closest to who you are?

BW: The picture that has the fewest faults, obvious faults, would be *The Apartment*. But I like the end result in *Some Like It Hot*. It was a very successful picture. Or maybe, this and *Sunset Boulevard*. It really caught them unaware. Nobody expected a picture like it. And it's very difficult to make a picture in Hollywood about Hollywood. Because they really scrutinize you....

BW: *Ace in the Hole* was a very peculiar thing. I was very fond of the picture—I got wonderful, wonderful reactions to it from more serious people. But for some reason or other, people did not want to see that *grim* a picture, that boasted the guy in the hole there, and the reporter, Mr. Kirk Douglas. It was very somber. It was one of my most somber pictures. And they did not believe me that when somebody's a newspaperman, they are *capable* of that behavior.

CC: Very much ahead of its time.

BW: [Shrugs.] Yeah.

CC: In this current age of tabloid culture, *Ace in the Hole* has never felt more up-to-the-minute. Is it amusing to you, how this film has held up?

BW: Yeah, that's very funny, I must say. It was a complete failure. It was just...I don't know. I just changed my mind about the audience. I just think that if you do something very fine, that they will get to the core of the thing, what it's about, what it's really about. But they never, at the time, they never gave it a chance. Somebody in an editorial, I think, in *Life* magazine said that "Mr. Wilder should be deported." I felt that I was not with it anymore. That I wrote against the audience, the people who paid, in those days, a dollar fifty, two dollars. They felt robbed. They wanted to be entertained, entertained in a serious way, but not *too* serious a way. I don't know. Then again, they did go for *Double Indemnity*. You can never, never predict an audience's reaction. You never know how it's going to affect them. But I hear about *Ace in the Hole* quite a bit these days.

CC: It's no surprise that Spike Lee recently wanted to remake it.

BW: He wanted to remake it? Spike Lee came one day to the office. He wanted to have some autographs, he brought some pictures, I said, "To whom?" He said, "To Spike Lee," and I said, "You're Spike Lee?" I did not know him. I never saw a picture of him. But I don't know whether *I* would have gone to see *Ace in the Hole*. And then one day Mr. Y. Frank Freeman, the head of Paramount—and as the joke goes, "Why Frank Freeman?" "A question nobody can answer—he decided the title was bad, *Ace in the Hole*. So he gave it a new title, *The Big Carnival*. Idiot. It was an unpleasant picture, I grant you that.

CC: *Ace in the Hole* is one of the few times you didn't help yourself out by casting a sympathetic actor to play a louse. It seems you didn't want to do that on this picture. Kirk Douglas is much more serious than many of your leading men.

BW: Yeah, a little serious, yeah. But that was the story. And my wife gave me the best line in the picture. It's on a Sunday, in that little town in New Mexico where Douglas asks the wife of the man who's down in the hole, Jan Sterling—she was then married to Mr. Paul Douglas—"It's Sunday, aren't you going to church?" [*With a connoisseur's appreciation of the line:*] "I never go to church," she says, "because kneeling bags my nylons." That was Audrey's line.

CC: I remember when I came to visit you with Tom Cruise, and we asked you to act in *Jerry Maguire*. You asked what the story of our movie was. We told you, briefly, and you replied,

"How will you make this man sympathetic?" Was this a question you asked yourself about your own movies, particularly *Ace in the Hole*?

BW: Yeah. I did not make him sympathetic, but I made him, I hope, interesting. I made him kind of riveting, as close to riveting as I could. So that you're just in the laboratory of a potential killer, which he turns out to be. But he does not have to be sympathetic. That was the plan for the film.

CC: Now you say that you usually go against your own feelings when you direct. If you're feeling angry, you'll do a romantic comedy, and vice-versa. Is it safe to say that you were in a good mood when you made *Ace in the Hole*?

BW: I was in a good mood, yes. I was in a good mood, and I took

Aud along with me. We stayed in Gallup, and we had a wonderful, wonderful Mexican restaurant there. We just made the picture, but it was kind of...more or less rejected by the audience. [Pause.] I thought, It's gonna be an interesting thing if I make him a killer. Not a killer, but he was a newspaperman and an attacking guy, because he had been rejected. Because he lost face in New York. So he wanted to come back with something big, and he made it big....



CC: It's funny reading the books written about you.

They're filled with comments like William Holden's famous line—"Billy Wilder has a mind full of razor blades." You're constantly characterized as the Great Cynic. The Legendary Cynic.

BW: Yeah.

CC: Do you think your cynicism has been overrated?

BW: My cynicism? Yes. But not much. Maybe it's been overrated because I dismiss things that are not important, that are lousy. I dismiss them with a line and then go on. I am never cynical to my friends. I don't know where they get the idea that I am cynical.

CC: Ironic, maybe?

BW: Ironic, maybe, yes. Nothing, in any of my pictures...you know, there is no cynicism. Maybe in *Ace in the Hole*. It was the way I thought the picture should go. There was the cynicism of the reporter who gets fired from the New York paper and then runs into that situation with the trapped man in the hole. It's cynical that he wants to use it, but then he pays for it. He pays for it because he had them there in that hole one day too long. He could have helped to get the man out. But he made a circus out of it.

But the same day we previewed the picture, I was on Wilshire Boulevard and there was an accident. There was a woman, I think, she did not see the light, and she was thrown from the car. They took her out. Suddenly I saw a cameraman and he was taking pictures, and I said, "Somebody go and find a telephone, call the police, call an ambulance." And the cameraman says, "Not me, I've got to get the picture!" *This* is cynical....

CC: One of your greatest shots, the most bravura shot in all your films, in the final shot of *Ace in the Hole*. Kirk Douglas, stabbed with a pair of scissors, falls dead on the floor into a close-up. Spike Lee, who did an homage to the shot in *Malcolm X*, asks how you came up with that.

BW: [Smiles.] I like Spike Lee. He's a good, lively filmmaker. The shot was always in my mind, but it wasn't part of the script. I never put much camera direction into the screenplays. We dug a hole and put the camera there. We were sure he was going to end up in the hole himself. The shot we had as we wrote the script. The camera is down low because something's gonna happen. It's gonna pay off. And then Kirk Douglas falls into the close-up. I wanted something powerful, and that was one of the few times I went for a bold shot like that. I needed it, but I never based a scene around a shot. Never an outré shot. That was outlandish. Never to astonish people. It was logical there. Instead of—he falls down in a long shot, then we cut to the close-up. No. I didn't want to do that.

CC: Were you a big one for lenses? Knowing what lenses you wanted to use for what scene?

BW: Yeah...yeah. I always go for a thirty-five or forty. I just say, "Give me a wide lens, because I need a long shot."

BW: [About *Ace in the Hole*] I was hoping that it would find an audience because it was so self-evident why people behave the way they do. And they didn't get it at all, lots of them. Some discerning critics lauded it up and it was their favorite picture. But many at the time did not want to face that people are sensation-grabbing, and any time you see an accident, you know, you see people coming and staring at it. They love to see...to see. They can be smug about Princess Di and the paparazzi, but then they sit in the theater and say, "All right, entertain me." But this was not exactly the entertainment they wanted to see. ...

One of Wilder's most controversial movies, *Ace in the Hole* needed a generation's passing to be fully appreciated. Nothing about the film was easy. Wilder had split with longtime collaborator Charles Brackett ("The surface of the matchbox had been struck one too many times") and hooked up with new partner Walter Newman for his next movie. They turned to an idea of Newman's, the reality-based story of a newspaperman who capitalized on the tragedy of a young man who'd fallen into a cavern.

The original title of the project was *The Human Interest Story*. With the help of former journalist Lesser Samuels, the screenplay evolved into a real scorcher. Kirk Douglas plays Chuck Tatum, the hard-nosed reporter who thirsts for a big story and finds it. Douglas's performance is as unrelenting as the finished movie. Jan Sterling's turn as the jaded wife of the trapped man is equally hard-ass. When told by Douglas to go to church and show

some concern for her husband, Sterling responds with a stellar retort credited to Audrey Wilder: "Kneeling bags my nylons."

There was a price to pay for such wicked fun. Released in the summer of 1951, *Ace* was Wilder's first true flop. With Wilder directing a new movie in Paris, Paramount tried to tie a prettier bow around it, quickly retitling the film *The Big Carnival*. It didn't work.

As the years went by and the rise of tabloid television created a thousand Jack Tatum's, *Ace in the Hole* increased in stature. Spike Lee wanted to remake it. Costa-Gavras did his own homage; and while the resulting *Mad City* (1997) never officially credited Wilder, opening-day reviews nearly unanimously hailed Wilder's original film. Forty-six years later, *Ace in the Hole* received the accolades that never arrived in its day. Watch for the final shot, a rare bit of bravura cinema from the man who still delights in shaking his finger at the complicated shots of other directors. "Just tell the story!"



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