BILLY WILDER (Samuel Wilder, Sucha, Austria-Hungary, 22 June 1906) wrote more than 60 screenplays and directed 24. Some of the films he wrote and directed are Irma a 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. He was nominated for 21 Oscars and won 7 of them, 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. For more on him visit www.geocities.com/hollywood/cinema/1012/wilder.html

CHARLES BRACKETT (26 November 1892, Saratoga Springs, New York—9 March 1969) produced and co-wrote several classic films, many of them for and with Wilder. He was, for example, producer and one of the writers of Titanic 1953, Niagara 1953, A Foreign Affair 1948, The Lost Weekend 1945, and Ninotchka 1939. He won an Honorary Academy Award in 1958, and a screenwriting Oscar for Titanic. He also shared Oscars with Wilder for the scripts of Sunset Boulevard and The Lost Weekend, and nominations for A Foreign Affair, Hold Back the Dawn 1941, and Ninotchka.

GLORIA SWANSON (27 March 1899, Chicago—4 April 1983, New York, natural causes) was one of the great and beautiful stars of the silent era. Like a lot of old-time stars, she took to playing herself grown old in her last few films, e.g. Airport 1975 1974. Her first screen appearance was in The Fable of Elvira and Farina and the Meal Ticket 1915, about which nobody seems to know anything. He most recent screen role before Sunset Boulevard gave her a second career playing faded old-time actresses (see the quotation from her below), was in Father Takes a Wife 1941, and her role before that was a full decade earlier in Indiscreet 1931. Some of her other 70 screen roles: What a Widow! 1930, Sadie Thompson 1928, Wages of Virtue 1924, Manhandled 1924, Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife 1923, Don’t Tell Everything 1921, Why Change Your Wife? 1920, For Better, for Worse 1919, Don’t Change Your Husband 1919, and The Romance of an American Duchess 1915. She received Oscar nominations: for Sunset Boulevard, The Trespasser 1928, and Sadie Thompson 1928.


ERICH VON STROHEIM (Erich Oswald Stroheim, 22 September 1885, Vienna, Austria—12 May 1957, Paris) was the son of a Jewish hatter in Vienna and didn’t pick up the “von” until shortly after he left Europe in his early career...
20's. He directed 12 films, including the most famous film no one ever saw, the 7-hour-long Greed 1925, based on Frank Norris’s novel McTeague. Under great pressure from Irving Thalberg, he cut it down to 4 hours; the studio cut another hour before the film was released. For years it was available only in a 2-2/4 version, but there’s a 4 hour videotape available now. In the original black and white release prints, everything yellow was tinted by hand: gold coins, a brass bed, tooth fillings, even the canary. Von Stroheim took his directing very seriously, which is probably why they didn’t let him do it very often. He acted in more than 70 films, beginning with an uncredited role as a man shot from the roof in Birth of a Nation 1915 (a stunt in which he broke two ribs), and including his superb performance in tonight’s film as Max von Mayerling, a former director turned Norma Desmond’s driver. His most famous screen role was as the German prison camp commandant, Captain von Rauffenstein, in Jean Renoir’s La Grande Illusion (1937). The Nazis hated that film because one of the central characters was a non-caricatured Jew played by a Jewish actor— Rosenthal played by Marcel Dalio—and because the primary vision of the German military was as jailors. They surely would have hated it more had they known that the senior German officer in the film was also played by a Jew, albeit one who made his career mimicking monocled Prussians.

NANCY OLSON (14 July 1928, Milwaukee, Wisconsin) appeared in 20 films, not one of which (other than this one) will you ever see in any other BFS Tuesday night at the Market Arcade. Some of those films you’ll have to go elsewhere to experience are Flubber 1997, The Walt Disney Comedy and Magic Reveu 1985, Airport 1975 1974, Snowball Express 1972, Son of Flubber 1963, The Absent-Minded Professor 1961, Pollyanna 1960, So Big 1953, Force of Arms 1931, Mr. Music 1950, and Canadian Pacific 1949. Well, maybe Airport 1975. That one is so tacky it’s transcendent—and it does have Helen Reddy as Sister Ruth, Gloria Swanson as Gloria Swanson, and Larry Storch, Normon Fell, Jerry Stiller, Dana Andrews, Myrna Loy, Erik Estrada...there is no end to this. I better stop with these names before I lose control and call Mike Clement and tell him to book this monstrosity of foolishness.


FROM Jeffrey Meyers, introduction to the script of Sunset Boulevard U. Cal Press 1999:

During his fifty-year career Wilder has shown astonishing versatility—and real genius—as both coauthor and director (beginning in 1943) of films about war, murder, alcoholism, Hollywood, sensational journalism, prison camps, trials and aviation, as well as of dazzling romantic comedies...and bittersweet love stories.

Explaining his need for a coauthor, Wilder said: “I started the idea of collaborating when I first arrived in America, because I could not speak the language. I needed somebody who was responsible who had some idea of how a picture is constructed. Then I found out that it’s nice to have a collaborator—you’re not writing into a vacuum, especially if he’s sensitive and ambitious to create a product of some value.” After several years of screenwriting hackwork...his career took off in 1938 when he began a long and fruitful collaboration with Charles Brackett. They began with witty and intelligent movies like Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife, Ninotchka and Ball of Fire and ended with their greatest film, Sunset Boulevard....

Born in 1892, fourteen year before Wilder, Brackett graduated from Williams College and Harvard Law School, was a vice-consul in France and a lieutenant in World War I. He practiced law, wrote two novels, and was the drama critic for the New Yorker before coming to Hollywood, two years before Wilder. The sophisticated Easterner helped the young émigré master his new language and refine his skills as a screenwriter. Wilder later recalled what he learned from Brackett: “He spoke excellent English. He was a very classy guy, a couple of pegs above the ordinary Hollywood writer. He was very patient with me but he also insisted on my English becoming less ridiculous than it was then. I went to a good school—it lifted my English a few pegs.”

Wilder, with the energy of a hyperactive child, would pace the room and walk out, disappear from the office, and suddenly stroll back in. He was brash and rebellious, cynical and sardonic. Brackett—silver haired, courtly, and reserved—was well known for his patient manners and refined conversation, his elegant style, well-turned epigrams, and conservative and conservative views. (Jeffrey Meyers, introduction to the script of Sunset Boulevard U. Cal Press 1999)

Unless there are sparks that fly, it is totally unnecessary to have a collaborator.” Brackett disliked some of Wilder’s essential qualities—his wildness, misanthropy, cruelty, and sense of the macabre. They had great battles, yelling and screaming at each other. The third screenwriter who collaborated on Sunset Boulevard, D.M. Marshman, Jr., a Life magazine reporter and film critic, was invited to join the team when he suggested that the aging silent screen actress have an affair with a young Midwestern screenwriter. (Meyers, ix-x)

Brackett said of their idea of the film: “Wilder, Marshman and I were acutely conscious of the fact that we lived in a town which had been swept by a social change as profound as that brought about in the Old South by the Civil War. Overnight, the coming of sound brushed gods and goddesses into obscurity. We had an idea of a young man stumbling into a great house where one of these goddesses survived. At firsts we saw her as kind of a horror woman...an embodiment of vanity and selfishness. But as we went along, our sympathies became deeply involved with the woman who had been given the brush by 30 million fans.” (Quoted in Meyers, ix-x)

For the hero, Joe Gillis, Wilder tried for Montgomery Clift, who refused to make love to an older woman on screen; Fred MacMurray, who had given a fine performance in Wilder’s Double Indemnity; and even Gene Kelly, before turning to William Holden. When Holden seemed uncertain of how to play his role and told Wilder, “I’m having trouble getting a bead on Joe Gillis,” the director replied: “That’s easy. Do you know Bill Holden?.... Then you know Joe Gillis.” (Meyers, x)

Wilder linked silent and sound pictures, Norma’s real past and her imaginary present, by using silent-era actors for her bridge party with the “wax works” figures: Buster Keaton; H.B. Warner, who played Christ in DeMille’s King of Kings (1927); and Anna Q. Nilsson, a Swedish-born star. DeMille, who had directed Swanson in silent movies, appears as himself—for a fee of $10,000—when Norma visits him at Paramount (her old studio) while he directs Samson and Delilah—a variant of the Salome script she is writing with Gillis. Kind and sympathetic, the only man Norma defers to, DeMille is complete convincing in the part and, under Wilder’s direction, gives a more subtle performance by far than any actor ever did in one of DeMille’s own pictures.” (Meyers xi.)
MGM head Louis B. Mayer said of the film: “We should horsewhip this Wilder! We should throw him out of this town! He has dirtied the nest! He has brought disgrace on the town that is feeding him!” (Quoted in Meyers, xv)

In her autobiography Swanson ruefully recorded the effect of the role on her career; “I had played the part too well. I may not have got an Academy Award for it, but I had somehow convinced the world once again of that corniest of all theatrical clichés—that on very rare artistic occasions the actor actually becomes the part...Swanson is Norma Desmond. Most of the scripts [I was] offered since finishing Sunset Boulevard dealt with aging, eccentric actresses.” (Meyers xvi)

The 1950s were the last great period in which films dealt thematically with acting. The change might be indicated by two films directed by Billy Wilder, Sunset Boulevard (1950) and Kiss Me, Stupid (1964). Gloria Swanson in Sunset Boulevard and Dean Martin in Kiss Me, Stupid play different versions of their film selves. They both have two faces aesthetically, in a way typical of film and no other form: each faces into the film as a fictional character—Norra Desmond and Dino—and each faces out as a star. Each as they appear in the film is a caricature of the way they might be, save for the self-consciousness involved in taking such a role and the detachment toward the screen self playing the role implies. (William Holden, who narrates Sunset Boulevard, even though his character is dead at the beginning of the film, similarly faces inward)

Billy Wilder’s Sunset Boulevard...characterizes ambition as deadly, the scarlet “A” of our twentieth century puritan conscience. And like other film noir movies, Sunset Boulevard depicts a woman who is more ambitious than the man she covets, calling up the biblical image of a fallen Eve seducing Adam into sin.

However, Norma Desmond, the middle-aged has-been movie queen who seduces and ultimately kills a luckless screenwriter, is not a typically enigmatic “just plain rotten” film noir villainess. Nor is Betty Schaefer, with whom the screenwriter falls in love, simply a sweet young contrast to Norma. And Joe Gillis, the object of both women’s desires, is not merely an innocent victim.

In shooting Joe, Norma–like Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens Great Expectations, to whom she is obliquely compared in Joe’s narration—strikes out against the deflection of her lover, not merely Joe but what Joe symbolizes to her: the audience who has ceased to love her and thereby robs her of her only creative outlet. She also gives vent to a thinly disguised fury against all men. For the central irony of Norma’s existence as a woman is that she is dependent on men, while at the same time she is the powerhouse that supports them.

Not only does Norma keep Max, whom we learn was at one time her director and her first husband, but also Joe. And as the star of twelve DeMille pictures, “his biggest successes,” she asserts her claim to a portion of his maintenance as well. Nonetheless, she is dependent upon Max to protect her from the reality of her abandonment by the outside world, dependent upon Joe to rewrite her script for her and to love her, and dependent upon DeMille to restore her career in the movies...

DeMille represents both the power of the individual and of the institution. As such, he is the most culpable character in Sunset Boulevard, and yet he is the least blamed. Or so it seems. In fact, Wilder assaults DeMille in a series of sly and implicit ways.

Throughout the scene in which Norma visits DeMille’s set, we watch DeMille (in jodhpurs and boots) giving orders. His dulcet tones camouflage his control in a grandfatherly benevolence, but everyone around him proceeds in a flurry of humble obedience.

The most telling instance of the nature and scope of this awesome power occurs during a scene with an electrician named Hogeye. DeMille leaves the set momentarily, advising Norma to observe how different films are being made. In his absence Hogeye recognizes Norma and turns a spotlight on her. Suddenly, members of the cast who formerly worked with her or who remember her films gather around; she is a celebrity again. But when DeMille returns, he sternly commands Hogeye to “turn that light back where it belongs,” Clearly, DeMille decides where the spotlight belongs, and he decides that it does not belong on Norma, although he acts as if he has no power to salvage her career.

DeMille’s “helplessness” is further belied in an implicit way by Wilder’s casting of Gloria Swanson (as well as Erich von Stroheim and Buster Keaton) in Sunset Boulevard. In an act of protest against Hollywood’s institutional policy of human discard, Wilder put the spotlight on Swanson, and she became a star once again.

But blaming DeMille for destroying Norma is as misleading as lionizing Wilder for saving Swanson; it mirrors the distinction between the good plantation master and the bad one—a distinction which ignores the slavery that both masters preserve.

Norma, Joe and Betty are drawn together because they are alike. The behavior of each is dictated by the savage, competitive, impersonal world they inhabit, a world in which mutual exploitation is the rule. This spirit of Hollywood is slyly indicted in a subtitle from a fragment of one of Norma’s silent films: “Cast out this wicked dream which has seized my heart.” A heart seized by a wicked dream—the dream of success—is not free to love, except insofar as “love” advances the fulfillment of the dream. Wilder pursues this idea by sabotaging the romance between Betty and Joe... Hollywood, not Norma, dooms Betty and Joe’s romance.

Gish and Pickford had emerged before America’s entry into World War I. Gloria Swanson broke out as a major star in the aftermath of the Armistice, and in 1920 represented the new breed. A transitional figure, Swanson arrived on the stage just in time to be caught between Victorian purity and modern openness. She made sex comedies and sex dramas with no sex, yet sex was on everyone’s mind. She played the glamorous woman who could—if she so chose, but she never chose, but could if she wanted to, but she never wanted to—behave with the same license as a man.
The Swanson formula, an elaborate tease, made her the most popular actress of the first half of the twenties.

...Swanson would have loved to have gone further. Late in life, she lamented “all the puritanical hypocrisy of the early and mid-1920s and grieved that it had persuaded her to have an abortion in

FROM SILENT STARS, JEANNINE BASINGER. KNOPF, 1999:

The disappearance of Queen Kelly and Sadie Thompson for many years, so that modern viewers didn’t get to see them even in the rare instances when silent classics were revived, diminished Swanson’s reputation as an actress. (“I was a star at twenty-one,” said Swanson, “and a has-been at thirty-three.”) Although she is known as one of the four “fabulous faces” of American movies—along with Garbo, Crawford and Dietrich—hers is often thought to be the least beautiful, least interesting face of the group. Seeing her animated, alive and moving, and watching her magnificently expressive face at work reveals quite a different story.

There has always been much speculation as to just whom Norma Desmond was modeled on, but it was probably no one actress. She’s most likely a combination of the ego of Negri (who always knew what she was doing) and the genuinely crazy Mae Murray (who apparently never knew what she was doing). Having Swanson play the part verifies the character, and, in fact, gives the entire story a credibility it might not otherwise have. She’s magnificent. Who could know better than she did how to play an exotic diva from the era? Everything about her, from her leopard trim, her cigarette holders, her bangle bracelets, to her bed shaped like a golden swan and her outré open-air automobile seems completely authentic—because it is. And when Norma goes on the lot, to Swanson’s old studio Paramount Pictures, and meets her old director Cecil B. DeMille playing himself, everything rings true. For many people in the audience, it was an extraordinary blurring of fact and fiction, since for them it had been less than twenty-five years since it had all been real. Swanson herself was just past fifty years old, yet she and the world of the movie seemed to come from a time and place so remote that few could remember it. When Norma’s bridge group meets, and the other players include Anna Q. Nilsson, Buster Keaton, and H.B. Warner, older people in the audience gasped.

And, of course, being able to use clips from the never-released Queen Kelly not only gave viewers Norma as she authentically was as a younger woman, but also convinced them it could have been Norma, not Swanson, in the part, because they themselves had never seen it as a Swanson film. This was heady stuff, and when you add in Swanson’s imitation of Charlie Chaplin, the superb writing and directing, the other members of a.auteurism or genre. Film noir is

M. A. F. A. C. Sunday Classics

Tonight or Never (1931), directed by Fritz Lang and starring Adrian Booth and Anna Q. Nilsson, is the M.A.F.A.C. Sunday Classics series for this weekend, October 14. Join us in the French-American Center at 3:00 for this week’s presentation in the M.A.F.A.C. Sunday Classics series, Andrei Tarkovsky’s Stalker. For a complete schedule with descriptions of each film visit

MOVIES, MOVIES, MOVIES

Join us next week, Tuesday, October 16, for Henri-Georges Clouzot's classic thriller, Le Salaire de la peur/Wages of Fear. In 1953 William Friedkin remade this in 1977 as Sorcerer, with hugely expensive special effects and Roy Scheider for his star, but all of that money didn’t come close to the astonishing tension created by Clouzot’s direction and editing, Armand Thirard’s electrifying cinematography, and Yves Montand’s brilliant first film performance. We’ll see the restored version, 20% longer than what Americans were permitted to see when the film was released here nearly 50 years ago.

There’s other great classic movie action this weekend. Come down to MAFAC Sunday at 3:00 for this week’s presentation in the MAFAC Sunday Classics series, Andrei Tarkovsky’s Stalker. For a complete schedule with descriptions of each film visit
WWW.SUNDAYCLASSICS.COM. And the Jewish Community Center of Greater Buffalo’s 17th Annual Film Festival begins Friday and runs through October 13. For film list, screening times and ticket prices go to www.jccbuffalo.org/page21.html.

WORDS & PICTURES
Diane is giving UB's College of Arts and Sciences lecture on October 15 at 8:00 p.m. in UB’s Center for the Arts. The title of her talk is Gratified Desire: Ideas of Eros in Blake and “Sex in the City.” The official UB description of that talk is: “Blake's nude engraving 'Glad Day' and Sarah Jessica Parker's nubile persona in 'Sex in the City' both offer images of erotic affirmation. Where do the ideas on sex in a great religious artist and a racy TV series meet and diverge?” Where indeed! We'll have to go out to CFA to find out.

59 of the photographs Bruce took of wall and fence and kiosk postings and street shrines in lower Manhattan the weekend of September 22 are on display in the exhibit Missing Persons, at the Mainstage Wall in the Atrium, Center for the Arts, UB, through October 22. For more info, visit http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~bjackson/missingpersons.html

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