

The Buffalo Film Seminars



Directed by Billy Wilder
Based on the play by Agatha Christie
Adapted by Larry Marcus
Screenplay by Billy Wilder and Harry Kurnitz
Produced by Arthur Hornblow Jr
Original Music by Matty Malneck
Cinematography by Russell Harlan
Film Editing by Daniel Mandell
Dietrich's makeup by Wally Westmore
Dietrich's costumes by Edith Head

Tyrone Power...Leonard Steven Vole
Marlene Dietrich...Christine Helm /Vole
Charles Laughton...Sir Wilfrid Robarts
Elsa Lanchester...Miss Plimsoll, nurse
John Williams...Brogan-Moore
Henry Daniell...Mayhew
Ian Wolfe...Carter
Torin Thatcher...Mr. Myers, prosecutor
Norma Varden...Emily Jane French
Una O'Connor...Janet McKenzie
Francis Compton...Judge
Philip Tonge...Inspector Hearne
Ruta Lee...Diana

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. 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.

Russell Harlan (16 September 1903, LA—28 February 1974, Newport Beach, CA) shot 99 films. Some of them were *Darling Lili* (1970), *Tobruk* (1967), *Hawaii* (1966), *The Great Race* (1965), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), *Rio Bravo* (1959), *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), *Lust for Life* (1956), *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Ruby Gentry* (1952), *Tarzan and the Slave Girl* (1950), *Red River* (1948), *A Walk in the*

February 12, 2008 (XVI:5)

Billy Wilder, *Witness for the Prosecution* 1957 (116 min)



Sun (1945), *Hoppy Serves a Writ* (1943), *Hopalong Rides Again* (1937), and *North of the Rio Grande* (1937).

Tyrone Power (5 May 1914, Cincinnati, Ohio—15 November 1958, Madrid, Spain, heart attack) appeared in 53 films, the last of which was *Solomon and Sheba* (1959) in which he appears only in long shots and is uncredited because he died in a sword fight in it and was replaced by Yul Brynner. The last film he completed was *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957). Some of his other films were *The Sun Also Rises* (1957), *The Eddy Duchin Story* (1956), *The Long Gray Line* (1955), *The Mississippi Gambler* (1953), *Prince of Foxes* (1949), *Captain from Castile* (1947), *The Razor's Edge* (1946), *The Black Swan* (1942), *The Mark of Zorro* (1940), *Jesse James* (1939), *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (1938), *Tom Brown of Culver* (1932), *School for Wives* (1925).

Marlene Dietrich (27 December 1901, Schöneberg bei Berlin, Germany—6 May 1992, Paris, France, kidney failure) appeared in 54 films, the last of which was *Schöner Gigolo, armer Gigolo*

(1979). Her roles in the three films preceding that were knockouts: *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), *Touch of Evil* (1958), and *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957). Some of the others were *Rancho Notorious* (1952), *A Foreign Affair* (1948), *Destry Rides Again* (1939), *The Garden of Allah* (1936), *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *Dishonored* (1931), *Morocco* (1930), *Der Blaue Engel/The Blue Angel* (1930), *Prinzessin Olala/Art of Love* (1928), *Kopfhoch, Charly!/Heads Up, Charley* (1927), *Manon Lescaut* (1926), *So sind die Männer* (1923) and *Im Schatten des Glücks* (1919).

Charles Laughton (1 July 1899, Scarborough, Yorkshire, England—15 December 1962, Hollywood, cancer of the gall bladder) appeared in more than 50 films, the last of which was *Advise & Consent* (1962). Some of the others were *Spartacus* (1960), *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), *Abbott and Costello Meet Captain Kidd* (1952), *Arch of Triumph* (1948), *The Paradine Case* (1947), *Captain Kidd* (1945), *The Canterville Ghost* (1944), *It Started with Eve* (1941), *They Knew What They Wanted* (1940), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), *I, Claudius* (1937), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *Les Misérables* (1935), *Ruggles of Red Gap* (1935), *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934), *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), *Wolves* (1930) and *Blue Bottles* (1928). He also directed and pretty much wrote (though James Agee got the screenwriting credit) one of the alltime film classics, *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). He won a best acting Oscar for *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. (1933).

Elsa Lanchester (28 October 1902, London, England—26 December 1986, Woodland Hills, Los Angeles, California, bronchial pneumonia) appeared in nearly 100 films and tv series, among them *Die Laughing* (1980), *Murder by Death* (1976), "The Bill Cosby Show," "It Takes a Thief," "Burke's Law," Mary Poppins (1964), "Shirley Temple's Storybook," "I Love Lucy," "Studio One," *Androcles and the Lion* (1952), *Les Miserables* (1952), *The Inspector General* (1949), *The Big Clock* (1948), *The Bishop's Wife* (1947), *The Razor's Edge* (1946), *The Spiral Staircase* (1945), *Lassie Come Home* (1943), *Son of Fury: The Story of Benjamin Blake* (1942), *Rembrandt* (1936), *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), *The Personal History, Adventures, Experience, and Observation of David Copperfield, the Younger* (1935), *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. (1933), *The Officer's Mess* (1931), *Blue Bottles* (1928), *The Scarlet Woman: An Ecclesiastical Melodrama* (1925).

From Wikipedia: **Dame Agatha Mary Clarissa, Lady Mallowan, DBE** (15 September 1890 - 12 January 1976), commonly known as Agatha Christie, was an English crime fiction writer of novels, short stories and plays. She also wrote romance novels under the name Mary Westmacott, but is best remembered for her 80 detective novels and her successful West End theatre plays. Her works, particularly featuring detectives Hercule Poirot or Miss Jane Marple, have given her the title the 'Queen of Crime' and made her one of the most important and innovative writers in the development of the genre. Christie has been called - by the *Guinness Book of World Records*, among others - the best-selling writer of books of all time, and the best-selling writer of any kind together with William Shakespeare. Only the Bible sold more with about 6 billion copies. An estimated four billion copies of her novels have been sold.[1] UNESCO states that she is currently the most translated

individual author in the world with only the collective corporate works of Walt Disney Productions superseding her. As an example of her broad appeal, she is the all-time best-selling author in France, with over 40 million copies sold in French (as of 2003) versus 22 million for Emile Zola, the nearest contender. Her stage play, *The Mousetrap*, holds the record for the longest initial run in the world, opening at the Ambassadors Theatre in London on 25 November 1952, and as of 2007 is still running after more than 20,000 performances. In 1955, Christie was the first recipient of the Mystery Writers of America's highest honor, the Grand Master Award, and in the same year, *Witness for the Prosecution* was given an Edgar Award by the MWA, for Best Play. Most of her books and short stories have been filmed, some many times over (*Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, *4.50 From Paddington*), and many have been adapted for television, radio, video games and comics.



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: Did an actor ever move you to tears while you were filming?

...

BW: I don’t know whether it’s to tears, but sometimes it just moves me. I was taken aback with the world’s greatest actor that ever lived, Mr. Charles Laughton.

CC: Why Charles Laughton?

BW: when he was at the Old Bailey, and he came forward with his theories for *Witness for the Prosecution*...screaming, then very low, for a page and a half, one take. I wanted to hear it again, and I did. And [Edward G.] Robinson, a wonderful actor.

CC: Yes.

BW: But I cannot let myself



be seen there directing, and crying over somebody’s performance, with all the other performers there too. No. Then it’s “He never cried for *me*, the son of a bitch!”

CC: Good point.

BW: Laughton was everything that you can dream of, times ten. We would stop shooting at six o’clock, and we would go up to my office and would be preparing for the next day’s shooting. There were twenty versions of the way he could do a scene, and I would say, “That’s it! All right!” And then the next day, on the set, he comes and says, “I thought of something else.” And that was version number twenty-one. Better and better all the time. He was a tremendous presence. Tremendous presence, and a wonderful instrument, wonderful vocal instrument. When he spoke to the audience, they were very quiet, because they knew. He did not just speak. He *said something*. And the sum total of it was a great performance. He only got one [Academy] Award, for *The Private Life of Henry the VIII* (1933). But he was an absolute marvel.

Then I had him for another picture. I wanted him to play the bartender in *Irma La Douce* (1963), and he said, “Look, I’ve got cancer, but I’m gonna get better. Instead of starting in April,

maybe you could start late summer.” Late summer came, and I got a call, and he says, “Come over to our house, and I’ll show you how well I am.” And I went there. It was one of those side streets off Hollywood Boulevard, west between La Brea and Fairfax, you know. That’s where the stars then lived. He lived there, with his wife. And he would call me at midnight. There’s a certain flower that opens at midnight, and he would say, “Come, get dressed, and come over immediately!” And I got dressed, and Aud too, and we went there immediately because the flower was open. Now, he said, “Look, I’ve done everything the doctors told me to do, and I now have male nurses with me all the time, and I’m gonna be ready, ready, ready in September. Come over and see for yourself!”

So I took the car, we went there, and he was sitting at the pool, all dressed, and made up a little, and there was a male nurse sitting there. And he said, “Now watch me.” And he got up and went around the outside of the swimming pool, you know, but he could not quite make it—the last two or three steps were very hard on him...He had lost about sixty pounds. So I knew that he was not well. But I said, “That’s very good, keep doing it. September, we will start!” And a week later he was dead. But he was... [Shakes his head, doesn’t finish sentence.]

One summer, Tyrone Power, Laughton, and I, after *Witness for the Prosecution*—I left my wife home—took a trip to Europe. We went to Paris, we went to Vienna, we went to where you take the famous cures, Badgastein, and we were marching through the forest, and everything was terrific, we had very, very successful previews, but I was just kind of wondering. Is he going to make even a slight move towards Tyrone Power? He didn’t, he didn’t. [Laughs.] And he was a wonderful, wonderful, very, very learned man. Whether it was Shakespeare, whether it was wines, Bordeaux... We went to Burgundy and we tasted the wines, we had the most wonderful time. And then Mr. Tyrone Power died, young as he was, of a heart attack. In Madrid—he was shooting a picture. And then Laughton died. It was very sad, very sad. Very wonderful people to work with. ...

CC: But I just wonder, as I listen to you talk about Laughton or Izzy Diamond, do you believe there’s a hereafter where you might see someone like Izzy Again?

BW: I hope not, because there are so many shits that I’ve met in my life, I don’t want to meet them again. [Laughs.] Yeah, miserable people. And I say to myself, God almighty, am I glad I don’t have to run into this guy again!...

CC: I was watching *Witness for the Prosecution* last night, and in it is a great example of silent filmmaking. Right in the center of the movie, Vole [Tyrone Power] is outside the window and he’s complimenting the hat of the woman who’s going to be murdered. It’s just a wonderful silent moment.

BW: A silent moment where he had to pick up a woman, right? For what he wanted to do. It was a very elegant moment. I did it with cars kind of reflecting, and I liked the idea of him picking her up by becoming her fashion advisor. “This is no good,” he says. [He acts the moment, making a sour face over the hat.] “Thank you so much, young man. what is your name?”

CC: These days, I think, the studio system is too anxious for you to pull out any silent moments. “Just pull it out pull it out. Get the movie playing faster!” It’s wonderful to see silent drama, silent humor live on in your pictures.

BW: Yeah, and there’s always a little music there underneath. Yeah, that was the easy, the pickup there. We had to have a widowed lady with money and some collection of African art, that

was just right for him. Tyrone Power was an actor who loved those silent things, you know, because his father and his grandfather, they were also in show business, you know. He just wanted to have a good part.

CC: The way you filmed *Witness for the Prosecution* was deceptively simple. It’s very sly. You spotlighted Charles Laughton by placing him alone in the shot, just filling up the frame.

BW: And God, could he do it! He could do it very well.

CC: Yes, and the other people you shoot in groups, or you play them in master shots. But Laughton stands apart, powerfully. How much of that was planned with your cinematographer?

BW: Not much. I just had the script, not quite finished. We were still working on the last scene, as we always do. We knew that this was the payoff—she kills him with the confiscated knife. I told you that when we had a big scene coming up the next day, Laughton would come to my room, and he would do that big scene, and know every word. Then he would do it differently. Then he would do it another way, twenty times. And he was better and better and better. [Shakes his head; he is still somewhat awed by the actor’s talent.] I just had to choose.

CC: Would you shoot it twenty different ways?

BW: [Immediately:] No. We had rehearsed it the day before, and by then we were kid of happy with version number twenty, let’s say. Then he came to the studio the next morning, and said he had an entirely *different* idea of working up to the big line “... Or are you not a LIAR?” He had the idea of staying quiet, working up to it. So we did it, we kind of combined twenty and twenty-one. The whole thing we did in one close-up. You could see the whole up-and-down, the scale of the actor. ...

[Wilder pauses. Almost forty years later, Laughton’s performance is still so pleasing to him. Laughton, it seems, is the quintessential Wilder actor—powerful, professional, creative without being obtrusive, always serving the character with a light, comic touch. The director is searching for a way of expressing his highest praise. He settles for understatement, four words said with great respect.]

That was very good.



And then his wife [Elsa Lanchester], she played the nurse. Both are dead now, unfortunately. [Pause.] I had a hell of a lot of fun with that picture. It was somewhat easy, forty days.

CC: The interesting thing is, as he drinks the brandy out of his thermos, you appear to have done something special with the key

light in his eyes, to give him more of a twinkle. It really does appear that he's starting to get drunk.

BW: I did it with the light? No. He just knew where the key light was. He was just a very, very good listener and a very, very good inventor. Very, very good. Didn't get any awards, though he got a nomination [for *Witness*].

CC: But the public must have loved him in the movie.

RW: Yeah, they loved the movie. But it was very, very strange, because people said, "What the hell are you going to do? Are you going to do the whole picture in the Old Bailey?" And I said [*a sly smile, knowing the power of Laughton*], "No, I'm just going to do a little something. That's where the third act plays."...

BW: Overall, I think audiences are much smarter than what they are getting. Mostly they are being talked down to....

CC: Another quote form you on screenwriting. "The second-act curtain launches the end of the picture."

BEW: Yes, but not just the end. You'd better have another twist in the third act—like with *Witness for the Prosecution*. There's another end, you know? You expect that it's all over. No. Now comes the *end*. In *Double Indemnity*, I followed everything very logically. I did not have any other possibility. It was not a detective story. where you follow the detective and you know everything he knows. I played with open cards. In *Witness* we did a complete switch, right? And they went for her.

CC: In *Witness for the Prosecution*, Marlene Dietrich seems to tear into her part with a vengeance. Was that actually the case, or was it just another part for her?

BW: No, she wanted that part. As a matter of fact, the picture was done for Eddie Small, with the producer, Arthur Hornblow. And she said, as they approached her—I was not in the company, I was just a freelancer—she said she was going to do it, but they have to get me. Why, I don't know. So they got me. I knew her, of course, from *Foreign Affair*. That was long before. For her to play a Nazi, she was very much afraid, but she did all right. [*Shrugs, with typical understatement.*] She was always Marlene. She was a good actress. But, sure, you have to go for acting skills. Then there was Marilyn. She did it automatically, you know.

CC: The character Marlene plays in *Witness for the Prosecution* is one of the most unsympathetic roles a woman could have played—until the end. Getting an actress to do that must have taken some persuading.

BW: Yeah, it took some, but that she liked. She likes to play a murderess, she likes to do anything that is action. She was, I think, a little bit embarrassed when she played the love scenes. I think that she was a little bit embarrassed for her privacy because she thought, "I would not do it." I would *do* it, but not for people. I don't know, she was just strange. But she kind of captured the audience with the way she was—the way she wore clothes, for instance. She was some *model* there. But I don't think she was as good an actress. Then again, I didn't think that Garbo was a great actress. She always did the same, kind of half-asleep thing. Never angry. She was always holding the arm like this. [*Does Garbo.*] But it was *Garbo*. I just think that Marlene played {the part} quite well.

CC: You don't see any of her plot moves coming.

BW: No, if it were an American, or it was just another actress... [*Shakes head, as if to say, "It would be a much different story."*] But those stars, they don't exist anymore.

CC: with Tyrone Power's character, Leonard Vole, you see his twist coming, because he's so virtuous at the beginning of the picture. But still, you're shocked.

BW: Yeah, and it was good that Marlene was her age. That she was not younger.

CC: How did you say goodbye to your parents?

BW: Goodbye to my parents? They had stayed in Vienna, and when I left Vienna to go to Berlin, I said, "I probably will never come back again, because Berlin is where I want to be." Then I corresponded with them. In 1928, my father went to America to visit my brother Willie, who had a big business in New York. He was there a few months, and he was returning to Vienna to pick up my mother and bring her back to America. He returned by boat, and on the way back he stopped in Berlin to see me. He died in Berlin. He died of an intestinal obstruction, a problem he had ignored. We were together when he had an attack. The doctor came and packed him up, put him on a stretcher. I was with him in the back of the ambulance when he died. He died before he could bring my mother back to America.

My mom was a mom, and she was a good cook, and we ate at home always. only once in a while in a restaurant. I was never as close to my mother as I was to my father. I never met the husband, the new husband. Mr. Siedlisker. And they all died. People who were with her then. She was taken to a concentration camp with her mother, my grandmother, and with her second husband. And I tried to correspond, but there was no way. And nobody had any idea. In 1935 when I came back from Europe—I went to Europe to see my mother—nobody had any idea that Hitler, who had taken over, would even contemplate an idea like the purge, the concentration camps idea...that the Jews had to be eliminated from the traffic.

My mother never saw me successful. My father, of course, never saw me successful, because he died in 1928, just about the time we were shooting *Menschen am Sonntag* [*People on Sunday*]. They never saw me successful. I regret that very much, because they would have been proud of me. I never saw her after 1935....

CC: what was the atmosphere in Vienna as the war escalated?

BW: They were living there in panic, you know—what was Hitler going to do?-but nobody moved. And Austria did not ask for the Anschluss, for the bringing together of Germany and Austria. The German army marched in ...and the Austrian Republic was overturned. The Germans who moved to Austria were absolutely in jubilation. And the Austrians were beating up the Jews, and the German troops, they had to separate the Jews from the Austrians. [*Shakes his head.*] And now Austria says that they were the first ones who were occupied by Germany! Occupied! Then they were *begging* to be taken into the great German Reich. That was in '38, yeah. And shortly after that, Czechoslovakia went, Sudeten Germany went. And the jubilation in Austria and Vienna, when Mr. Hitler came! He is an Austrian, you know. They were very proud of him.

CC: How did you find out your mother had died?

BW: I found out by letters form the Red Cross. Nothing official came to me, just letters from people who knew her. They knew a little something, and told me. That's the way I got it. I never got any letters [from her]. Just from others. That's how I knew she was dead. They told me she had died at Auschwitz....

CC: You've described *Witness for the Prosecution* as a Hitchcock-style movie. What do you think you did that Hitchcock would *not* have done?

BW: Well, I told my story. Which was not exactly a Hitchcockian situation, because he dealt with other things. I think Hitchcock

would have had a few more tricks up his sleeve, which he did very, very well. But there was an element of truth that I don't think was the strength of Hitchcock.

CC: I like how you stay on the master shot for the stabbing. Also during the trial, when Laughton is playing with the pills, lining them up, or drinking, you photograph him from the upper balcony, looking down. You never push the audience's face into anything.

BW: Yeah, I was a little bit soft on them. But the end had to be violent. I wanted that knife there on the desk, the knife with which the old woman was killed. It is there on the desk. There is Marlene, there is Tyrone Power, and there is Laughton. And when the truth comes out, I wanted him to put on that monocle. And there is a *little reflection* off that monocle. He had the reflection earlier in his office, when Marlene visited, when she pulled the curtain. But now, the moment when the truth comes out, when Tyrone Power reveals the girl he lives with—I wanted Laughton to point out that knife with the reflection, for Marlene to use. But that would have been permitted.

CC: Why not?

BW: Because that will tell them that a member of the legal profession points something up to the murderess, who is not a murderess, to get the guy she was supposed to be in love with. What's in there now is close, but it's subliminal.

CC: Yes, Laughton is looking down. He is playing with the monocle, and the reflection is an accident. [*Pause.*] Was that in the play?

BW: Nothing was in the play. No monocle. Kind of tricky idea, but it went all right without it.

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Witness for the Prosecution

Wilder moves to a new genre—the courtroom drama. His original intention was to do a “Hitchcock movie.” *Witness for the Prosecution* is that and much more. Hitchcock rarely left room for acting fireworks like this at the center of his films. Laughton's performance as the great Sir Wilfred Robarts, one of London's most celebrated barristers, lifted him into the ranks of Wilder's favorite actors. Tyrone Power delivers a beautifully slippery performance, and, of course, there are few delights as sinful as Marlene Dietrich in a Billy Wilder film. Bold truths are dealt, plots turn about, and Laughton delivers the craftiest and juiciest performance of his career. Yes, this is the movie where he shouts, “LIAR!”

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Mar 25 Sydney Pollack TOOTSIE (1982)

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Apr 8 Jane Campion THE PIANO (1993)

Apr 15 Clint Eastwood UNFORGIVEN (1992)

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