

## **Billy Wilder (1906-2002)**

“People copy, people steal. Most of the pictures they make nowadays are loaded down with special effects. I couldn't do that. I quit smoking because I couldn't reload my Zippo..”

— Billy Wilder, quoted in The New York Times

### **An Austrian Legend**

He was born Samuel Wilder on June 22, 1906 in a remote corner of a remote province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (now part of Poland). He died at his home in Beverly Hills, California on March 27, 2002. In the intervening 95 years, an impressive life story unfolded, a life that was to have a lasting impact on Hollywood and world cinema.

Wilder's mother nicknamed her young son “Billie” because she had seen the Buffalo Bill Wild West show as a teenager. By the time Billie was four years old (the “Billy” spelling came after Wilder was in the U.S.), the family had a fine home in Vienna's toney First District, living both there and in Kraków until the First World War tore the old Empire apart and created hard times for the Wilders and all Austrians.

The recent Broadway and London musical productions of *Sunset Boulevard*, based on Billy Wilder's 1950 movie of the same name, and the 1995 remake of *Sabrina*, Wilder's 1954 romantic tale featuring Audrey Hepburn, Humphrey Bogart, and William Holden, are good illustrations of how director Billy Wilder's films tend to endure, much like the man himself. Wilder was still active in his nineties, even if he was no longer directing award-winning movies. With wife Audrey, he enjoyed an active retirement not far from Hollywood, a place and an industry that will forever reflect the talents of this Austrian emigré. (People often mistakenly refer to the director as “German,” although he only spent about six years of his long life working in Berlin.)

Remakes of Wilder's movies are unnecessary. His classic films are as viewable today as they were in the forties, fifties, or sixties — the peak decades of his directorial career. Wilder has put his brand on a huge body of films, ranging from the dramatic film noir *Double Indemnity* (1944) to the hilarious *Some Like It Hot* (1959). Over the years, he directed stars such as Marilyn Monroe, Gloria Swanson, Ginger Rogers, Marlene Dietrich, Barbara Stanwyck, Shirley MacLaine, Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart, Ray Milland, Jack Lemmon, James Cagney, and many other famous silver-screen personalities.

The Wilder saga is a true rags-to-riches tale. As a refugee from Nazi Germany (via France), he arrived in Hollywood in 1934 with eleven dollars in his pocket. About half a century later his private art collection went for \$32.6 million at a Christie's auction in 1989. More importantly, his rich contribution to American cinema reflects the personality of a man who always seems to have a wonderful sense of humor, even in his darkest

hours, of which he has had more than his share. The anti-heroes of his films are flawed but nevertheless possess a certain strength of character — similar to the Austrian-American gnome (Kobold in German) who created them. Just who was this cinematic icon?

As a boy in Vienna, Wilder spent a lot of time watching Hollywood movies — westerns, comedies, and adventure films. But, according to Kevin Lally's Wilder Times biography, Wilder also had less-fondly-remembered experiences as a Jew in Austria. “Let us not forget that Mr. Hitler was Austrian. ...I always get into terrible fights with the newspapermen there, because I remember my days in school. I remember the attitudes.”

Ironically, Wilder himself had an early career as a newspaper reporter, first in Vienna and later in Berlin. Wilder left Vienna for Berlin in 1927 at the age of 21. His experience as a reporter and script ghostwriter in the wild and libertine Berlin of the 1920s may help explain his later Hollywood scriptwriting talents. He thus managed to use his writing skills, honed as a reporter, to get his foot in the door of Berlin's growing film community

In 1929 Wilder worked on two films, one of which would become a cinematic landmark. Wilder became part of the mostly amateur team (all later went on to become important in Hollywood) that produced *Menschen am Sonntag* (People on Sunday), including Eugen Schüfftan, the cameraman and the only real pro on the team. One of the last silent movies produced in Germany, the film was a cinema verité, on-location production showing the life of ordinary working-class Berliners on a Sunday. More of a critical than a commercial success, *Menschen am Sonntag* was an “art film” at a time when UFA and the other German studios were starting to focus more on entertainment blockbuster talkies like *The Blue Angel* (with a young new star named Marlene Dietrich).

By 1933 Wilder and German filmgoers had seen his name as scriptwriter in the credits of 13 films, one the best being *Emil und die Detektive* (remade less successfully by Disney in 1964). But Wilder's time in Germany was running out. At first, according to Wilder, no one in his circle was really that aware of Hitler and the rising Nazi tide. But soon the signs were unmistakable — a Jew had no future in the Third Reich. At the premiere of Wilder's 14th and last German film, *Was Frauen träumen* (What Women Dream), on Hitler's birthday, April 20, 1933, as the credits rolled by, the names of the two scriptwriters, Franz Schulz and Billie Wilder, were missing. Their names had also been expunged from the printed program. But by then Wilder was already in Paris.

His wise escape from Germany was made a little easier by the fact that Wilder possessed an Austrian rather than a German passport. Unlike many other Austrian Jews, Wilder realized that his homeland would offer no genuine safety in the long run. So it would be France until he could get to his desired final destination, the United States. Billy — who knew some French — soon found work writing scripts. He even helped direct *Mauvaise Graine* (Bad Seed), a French film about a band of young car thieves, featuring a live-action car chase scene and a musical score by Franz Waxmann (later the award-winning Waxmann). The film also reflected two of Wilder's passions: fast women and fast cars. But despite his success there, Paris was just a way station.

## **An Invitation to Hollywood**

On January 22, 1934, after less than a year in Paris, Wilder traveled by ship to New York, where his brother Willie was now living. During his Atlantic crossing, he read some books in English that he was familiar with in German, desperately trying to learn a language he had never studied. Wilder says, “In school I had studied Latin and French. Counting German, all of a sudden that made three dead languages that I knew.” [quoted in Karasek (in German)] From New York Wilder crossed America by train to Hollywood where Joe May, a fellow Austrian then with Columbia Pictures, had promised him a scriptwriting job.

The 27-year-old Wilder arrived in Hollywood with barely a cent to his name. He soon lost his job when the studio rejected his first script and Billy's early days in the Golden State turned out to be less than golden — a time he has termed his “low calorie years.” For a while he shared a room at the Chateau Marmont (“Hollywood's hippest and hottest haunt”) with Peter Lorre, another Austrian who had spent a few months of exile in Paris before making his way to California. On top of everything, Wilder's tourist visa expired and he was forced to leave the country to reapply for a permanent U.S. visa. He had to endure yet another period of exile — this time only a few days — south of the border in Mexicali waiting to get this vital document. Parts of the experience can be seen in the 1941 film *Hold Back the Dawn* starring Charles Boyer, script by Billy Wilder (and Charles Brackett).

Wilder's big break came when Paramount's Manny Wolf decided to team him with the established writer Charles Brackett. Although the two were opposites in many ways, the partnership went well and produced scripts for *Ninotchka*, *Hold Back the Dawn* and other above-average movies. Working with a co-writer was nothing new for Wilder. In fact, during his entire writing career, Wilder wrote very few scripts without a partner. With the exception of *Double Indemnity* (co-written with Raymond Chandler), Brackett would co-write all of Wilder's films through *Stalag 17*.

It was his work on *Ninotchka* (“Garbo laughs!” was the publicity catch phrase) that brought Wilder together with the great director Ernst Lubitsch. Lubitsch soon became Wilder's idol and mentor, and Wilder always kept a sign hanging in his office that asked, “How would Lubitsch do it?” Indeed, Billy now wanted to become a director himself. This was partly because he was getting tired of directors who, in his opinion, were botching his and Brackett's scripts with their lack of directing talent. His low opinion of some directors became clear when he was once asked if he thought it was important for a director also to know how to write. Wilder's response: “No, but it helps if he knows how to read.”

Wilder's directorial debut was *The Major and the Minor* starring Ginger Rogers and Ray Milland. Not only was the film a resounding success, it reveals Wilder's early talent for directing (and writing) comedy. The popularity of *The Major and the Minor* (1942) meant that Wilder could keep on directing, a fact that surprised more than a few studio skeptics. His next film would be *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) with Erich von Stroheim and

Franchot Tone. Shot in the desert near Yuma, Arizona, *Five Graves* was a war story very loosely based on Rommel's (von Stroheim) North Africa campaign.

Wilder's next film would leave no room for doubt about the director's talent. *Double Indemnity* (1944) would be an almost unanimous critical success, garnering seven Academy award nominations, even if it was not that big at the box office. Today, more than 50 years later, most critics agree that this classic film noir is one of the best films of all time. In creating the *Double Indemnity* script (based on the James M. Cain novel), Wilder worked with the famous crime novelist Raymond Chandler. Although the two did not get along very well personally, their collaboration produced a masterful script and some of the snappiest dialog ever heard in a movie. At one point in the film, Walter (Fred MacMurray) inquires if Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) will also be at his upcoming appointment with her husband by asking, "Same chair, same perfume, same anklet?" The verbal sparring between Walter and Phyllis, dripping with erotic overtones, is a classic piece of movie dialog — "There's a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff..." Wilder the director also managed to coax outstanding performances from his stars, including Edward G. Robinson, for this dark tale of lust and murder.

For his next film, Wilder turned to the theme of alcoholism. *The Lost Weekend* (1945) brought the team of Brackett and Wilder back together. Based on a novel that Wilder had read on a train trip, *The Lost Weekend* was a tense, unrelenting story about a writer battling his drinking problem. Ray Milland earned an Oscar for Best Actor for his portrayal of five days in the life of the alcoholic Don Birnam. The film won a total of five Oscars and earned \$4.3 million in the U.S. alone, a very respectable sum for the time. But, proving the often false validity of the Academy Awards, *The Lost Weekend*, showered with Oscars, and as good as it was, just doesn't hold up as well over time as *Double Indemnity*, which failed to win a single Oscar.

Things were not going all that well in Wilder's personal life. In 1945 he was sent to Germany (with the rank of colonel) to help with de-Nazification and to serve as a sort of German film commissioner for the army's Psychological Warfare Division. While in Germany, Wilder tried unsuccessfully to find his father's grave in a war-damaged Jewish cemetery in Berlin. He also learned that his mother, stepfather, and grandmother had all died in Auschwitz.

Perhaps to compensate for all the bad news, after his return to the U.S. Wilder was dating two women while he was still married. If Wilder's career was shooting skyward, his first marriage (to Judith Iribe in 1936) was going in a different direction. Although his marriage didn't end officially until 1947, it was probably really over before he left for Germany. One of the women he was dating became his mistress for a time, the other would end up becoming Wilder's next wife.

After *The Lost Weekend* and its two Academy Awards for Wilder, the director would go on to make his first Technicolor movie, *The Emperor Waltz* (1948), one of his most forgettable films. Few Billy Wilder films are in color, and his next was no exception. A *Foreign Affair*—with Marlene Dietrich, Jean Arthur, and John Lund—was set in post-

war Berlin and featured some aerial footage of a devastated Berlin that Wilder had shot during his tour of duty there in 1945. Very different from his later *One, Two, Three*, also shot in Berlin, but in the 1960s just as the Wall was going up, *A Foreign Affair* offers a good picture of Berlin and the U.S. forces there right after the war.

Wilder went on to make a string of mostly very successful movies, starting with the critically acclaimed *Sunset Boulevard* in 1950 that earned him his third Oscar. (Hollywood's revenge for his *Sunset* expose about Tinseltown? Because Paramount owns all the rights, Wilder did not receive a dime for the Andrew Lloyd Webber revival of *Sunset Boulevard*.) But with *Sunset* his writing partnership with Charles Brackett was fading out about the same time his marriage to Audrey Young faded in. In the summer of 1949 the pair married quietly in Nevada, with a short honeymoon at a modest hotel at Lake Tahoe. They are still married today.

On his next several films, Wilder was in a continuing search for a new writing partner. For a time, he would work with a different co-writer on each film until he finally found the right one. *Ace in the Hole* (1951, aka *The Big Circus*) did poorly at the box office (it did much better in Europe), but not because of the writing. Wilder's next film, *Stalag 17*, would be a big hit in 1953. Based on a Broadway production, this film was concerned once again with the Germans and the war — this time in a prisoner-of-war camp, or *Stalag*.

After *Stalag 17*, Wilder found another play and a new co-writer to help him adapt it. Ernest Lehman and Billy revised the script for *Sabrina* (1954) in several ways. One of the biggest changes made for the film was to make the character of Linus (Humphrey Bogart) more of a cad, consistent with Wilder's preference for the flawed hero. *Sabrina* would also be his last film for Paramount, where he had worked for some 18 years.

With *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), Wilder began a successful partnership with the screenwriter I.A.L. Diamond (Itek Dommnici), with whom he would begin a series of films that are now considered some of his best work. With the exception of *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957, based on an Agatha Christie novel and play), Wilder co-wrote all of his next twelve movies with Diamond. This body of work, stretching from 1957 to 1981, includes film gems such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *The Apartment* (for which Wilder received three Oscars in 1961), *The Fortune Cookie* (1966) and *The Front Page* (1974) — all four featuring a young Jack Lemmon. Unfortunately, it also includes less sparkling gems like *Irma la Douce* (1963) and *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964).

Billy Wilder worked with some of the most famous actors and actresses of all time. Wilder's first Marilyn Monroe picture was *The Seven Year Itch* in 1955. Four years later he would direct the troubled Monroe again in *Some Like It Hot*. Wilder favorites included Audrey Hepburn, William Holden, Marlene Dietrich, Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau. On the other hand, Wilder and Humphrey Bogart did not get along at all.

Even in his nineties, the Wilder wit continued to sparkle, and over the years he produced one of the world's largest collections of quotable utterances. Speaking of his 1979 film

Fedora, Wilder said, "...if that picture were a person in a crowd, I would not put my arms around it. I would just say, 'Hey, how are you? We had a good time didn't we?'" [quoted in Lally]

During the 1980s and '90s, Wilder collected a wide array of Austrian and American honors and awards, including the National Medal of Honor from President Clinton — all a tribute to his vast talent and significant contributions to the cinematic world.

by Hyde Flippo, 1997-2003

### Director - filmography

Buddy Buddy (1981)

Fedora (1978)

... aka Fedora (1978) (West Germany)

Front Page, The (1974)

Avanti! (1972)

... aka Che cosa è successo tra mio padre e tua madre? (1972) (Italy)

Private Life of Sherlock Holmes, The (1970)

Fortune Cookie, The (1966)

... aka Meet Whiplash Willie (1966) (UK)

Kiss Me, Stupid (1964)

Irma la Douce (1963)

One, Two, Three (1961)

Apartment, The (1960)

Some Like It Hot (1959)

Witness for the Prosecution (1957)

Love in the Afternoon (1957)

Spirit of St. Louis, The (1957)

Seven Year Itch, The (1955)

Sabrina (1954)

... aka Sabrina Fair (1954) (UK)

Stalag 17 (1953)

Ace in the Hole (1951)

... aka Big Carnival, The (1951) (USA: new title)

Sunset Blvd. (1950)

... aka Sunset Boulevard (1950) (UK) (USA: alternative spelling)

Foreign Affair, A (1948)

Emperor Waltz, The (1948)

Death Mills (1945)

Lost Weekend, The (1945)

Double Indemnity (1944)

Five Graves to Cairo (1943)

Major and the Minor, The (1942)

Mauvaise graine (1934) (as Billie Wilder)

... aka Bad Blood (1934)

... aka Bad Seed (1934)