

Billy Wilder, filmmaker and satirist, dead at 95

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Director Billy Wilder, whose films were renowned for their wit, cynicism and satirical edge, died March 27 in Beverly Hills, California at the age of 95. Wilder, Austrian-born, but in the US since 1934, directed his last film in 1981. Among his best-known works are *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *Stalag 17* (1953), *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *The Apartment* (1960).

Although I think one is entitled to have reservations about Wilder's work, his place in the history of American cinema is secure. As Philip French noted in the *Observer*, he "was the last surviving member of that great generation of filmmakers who brought their acerbic wit, social sophistication and visual flair to Hollywood after being driven out of Germany by the Nazis." That generation, shaped by the cultural and political life of pre- and post-World War I Germany and Austria, includes many remarkable talents. One has only to consider some of the directors' names—Fritz Lang, Fred Zinnemann, Otto Preminger, Douglas Sirk, Edgar Ulmer, Robert Siodmak and Max Ophuls.

Wilder was born in 1906 in Sucha, a town in what was then the Austro-Hungarian empire (now southern Poland). His father was in the hotel business, his mother had lived in the US and loved everything American; she nicknamed her son "Billy" after Buffalo Bill Cody. The Wilders moved to Vienna and Billy was an adolescent at the time of the collapse of the Hapsburg empire and the Hungarian revolution. After briefly studying law in 1924, he moved to Berlin two years later, eventually falling in with film circles. He began his screenwriting career in a serious way with *Menschen am Sonntag* [People on Sunday, 1930]. The film was co-directed by Robert Siodmak, Curt Siodmak, Fred Zinnemann and Edgar Ulmer, written by Wilder and shot by Eugen Schüfftan, all of whom were to be working prominently in Hollywood in a few years' time.

Wilder, who was Jewish, made preparations to leave Germany the day following the Reichstag fire in February 1933. Family members who stayed behind—his mother, stepfather and grandfather—were eventually murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz. On leaving Germany Wilder stopped briefly in Paris, but traveled on to the US and Hollywood, having agreed to a six-month contract with Columbia Pictures. When that ran out, he was unemployed for two years, sharing a room with fellow exile actor Peter Lorre (who had worked with left-wing dramatist Bertolt Brecht in Germany). Wilder was determined to Americanize himself. He later told an interviewer that unlike most of the refugees, who secretly hoped to return to Germany, "I never had such a thought. This was home.... I had a clear-cut vision: 'This is where I am going to die.'"

In 1936 Wilder began a long-term artistic relationship with writer Charles Brackett, a novelist and former drama critic. The pair wrote a number of successful screenplays for various directors, including Ernst Lubitsch, Howard Hawks and Mitchell Leisen. Disgusted with what he considered Leisen's caving in to actor Charles Boyer during the filming of *Hold Back the Dawn* (1942), Wilder set out to direct his own work. His first effort (from a scenario co-written by Brackett and himself) was *The*

Major and the Minor, an amusing film, in which Ginger Rogers passes herself off as a 12-year-old to save train fare and becomes the object of Ray Milland's attentions. The Lolita-like implications apparently did not dawn on the censor. From the outset there is a transgressive element, relatively mild in this case, in Wilder's work.

The first work with which Wilder made a deep impression was *Double Indemnity*. The film is based on a novel by James M. Cain, one of the extraordinary "hardboiled" novelists of the time, and explores the author's favorite themes—adultery, greed, murder and the "American way of life." Not only that, Wilder got famed detective novelist Raymond Chandler to co-write the screenplay with him. The experience was not pleasant for either of them; Chandler was a terrible drunk and something of a misanthrope. The film's story concerns an insurance salesman who hooks up with a conniving and unhappy wife to murder the latter's husband and collect on an insurance policy. Naturally, everything goes wrong in the end. The film has its weaknesses—neither the transition of Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) from sleazy salesman to cold-blooded murderer nor the relationship between Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) is fully established or explored—but it stands up today, and has its moments of genuine cold-hearted brilliance. It is a minor American tragedy. Edward G. Robinson is particularly memorable as the insurance claims manager who smells deceit.

Sunset Boulevard is one of Wilder's most highly regarded works, a critique of Hollywood opportunism, self-delusion and madness. Studio executive Louis B. Mayer was reportedly so infuriated by the film, which recounts the fatal relationship of a cynical screen writer (William Holden) and an aging silent-screen star (Gloria Swanson), that he stormed out of a screening, shouting, "We should horsewhip this Wilder, we should throw him out of this town! He has brought disgrace on the town that is feeding him!"

This was the last joint venture of Wilder and Brackett. Wilder later teamed up with I.A.L. Diamond, with whom he collaborated for nearly 25 years, producing *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), *Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment* and *Kiss Me Stupid* (1964), among other works.

The next film Wilder directed (and produced, for the first time), following the much-acclaimed *Sunset Boulevard*, was *The Big Carnival* (also known as *Ace in the Hole*, 1951), one of his most scathing. A scheming reporter (Kirk Douglas) turns the search for a man trapped in a cave into a media sideshow, exploiting the "human interest" angle for his own ends. He purposely delays the rescue operation, to heighten the suspense, and the man dies. This denunciation of the tabloid press, released during the height of the McCarthyite period, was not well received.

Wilder remained coy about his own political beliefs, at least publicly. One commentator notes: "Although he [Wilder] was a 'social democrat' in the European sense and a socialist sympathizer, he was also neither a joiner, a follower, nor a man who would attend meetings and toe the party line. Even when he was politically aligned with certain causes (as he was

in sympathy with the ‘unfriendly witnesses’ who refused to name communists during the congressional witch hunts of the late 40s and 50s), he couldn’t resist making jokes at their expense.”

Wilder was among those, along with John Ford, John Huston, William Wyler and Richard Brooks, who supported Director’s Guild President Joseph Mankiewicz at the tumultuous meeting in October 1950 when the latter was the target of a recall vote, organized by right-winger Cecil B. DeMille. Mankiewicz had refused to endorse DeMille’s plan to force every Guild member to sign a loyalty oath. This was the high point of Wilder’s opposition to the witch-hunt, as it was in the case of the other filmmakers mentioned. As they did, he then proceeded to accept more or less the limits of postwar American studio filmmaking.

In *Stalag 17*, set in a German prisoner of war camp, a deeply cynical US army sergeant (Holden again) is accused of being a Nazi spy, before turning the tables on his tormentors. It is coincidental that Wilder made a film along vaguely patriotic lines in response to the McCarthyite witch-hunt? Perhaps not. He was certainly accused, more than once, of accommodating himself to prevailing moods in Hollywood.

It was about this time (actually, at the time of the release of *Sabrina* in 1954) that François Truffaut wrote an influential piece in the French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* dismissing Wilder as an artist with a minor comedic flair, but lacking the structural capability for more serious films. In general, Wilder’s critical reputation declined from this period.

Andrew Sarris, the American critic, dismissed Wilder in his 1968 *American Cinema* as a director who “is too cynical to believe even his own cynicism.” He made reference to the scene in *Stalag 17* in which Holden’s character “bids a properly cynical adieu to his prison-camp buddies. He ducks into the escape tunnel for a second, then quickly pops up, out of character, with a boyish smile and a friendly wave, and then ducks down for good. Holden’s sentimental waste motion in a tensely timed melodrama demonstrates the cancellation principle in Wilder’s cinema.” He charged that Wilder’s “conception of political sophistication” added up to “a series of tasteless gags, half anti-Left and half anti-Right.” Sarris further asserted that even Wilder’s best films “are marred by the director’s penchant for gross caricature, especially with peripheral characters. All of Wilder’s films decline in retrospect because of visual and structural deficiencies.” Sarris later famously reversed his opinion, and, in his most recent work, apologetically paid tribute to Wilder, observing that he had “grossly under-rated Billy Wilder, perhaps more so than any other American director.” It is my view that Sarris underrated Wilder in 1968 and overrates his work now.

The film that brought Wilder the widest audience was *Some Like It Hot*, the story of two Chicago musicians in the 1920s, who witness a gangland slaying and are obliged to pose as members of an all-female orchestra to hide from pursuing mobsters. The film was the biggest comedic money-maker in history up to that point. The script is amusing and inventive, but, more than anything else, the work benefits from the felicitous casting of Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe, at her most entrancing, along with Joe E. Brown, George Raft and others. *Some Like It Hot* both helped along a more tolerant attitude toward sexuality in American films and appeared at a moment when the social mood was changing and the censorship structures in place since the 1930s were breaking down.

Perhaps emboldened by success, Wilder again returned to more biting material in *The Apartment*, a satire of the corporate world. Lemmon plays a junior executive who is rising through the ranks in part by lending his apartment to his superiors for their extramarital affairs. The film takes a fairly ferocious look at the conformism, opportunism and corruption endemic to American business life. In typical Wilder fashion he followed up *The Apartment*, which was praised for its attack on “capitalist” enterprise, with *One, Two, Three* (1963), which satirized the East Germans, as well as American corporations. Neither *Kiss Me Stupid* nor *The Fortune Cookie* (1966) are terribly memorable, except for their

cynicism. *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970) represented something of a return to form, and *The Front Page* (1974) has its moments, but these, as well as the later *Fedora* (1978) and *Buddy Buddy* (1981), take place within the context of a general decline.

More importantly, from the point of view of the Hollywood studios, Wilder, who won six Academy Awards, was no longer box office magic. As Gavin Millar pointed out in 1980, “Satirists too are without honour in any country they satirize, and Wilder has only been saved from recurrent damnation by the financial success of his films.”

For the past 20 years Wilder apparently continued to show up at his office on a regular daily basis, still hoping that he would be offered the opportunity to make another film. He was not. (At one time he was interested in obtaining the rights to film *Schindler’s List*). Understandably, Wilder chafed at the inactivity and the implied disrespect. In the 1980s he received a variety of what he termed “Quick, before they croak” awards, at the hands of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the American Film Institute and other such bodies.

Wilder held definite opinions about the decline of the film industry. In January 2000, he told an interviewer, “It’s much harder to direct now. Everything’s in the hands of the money people; they dictate what has to be done. When I was making pictures, we went to the front office and told them what we wanted to do, and then we did it.”

Various complaints can be launched against Wilder. Critics have consistently taken him to task for his wide streak of cynicism, as well as the aforementioned tendency to tailor his films, or at least their endings, to market requirements. In the 1960s Wilder responded with some heat, “I am a dedicated man, not after the fast buck. I wanted to say [in *The Apartment*] how corrupt we are, how money-mad we are.... I guess that’s the theme of all my pictures. Maybe my philosophy is cynical, but I have to be true to what I feel.” Sarris describes a “recurring theme” as that of “wretched opportunists wistfully seeking redemption.”

Millar comments: “The truth is that no one comes comfortably out of a Wilder picture. This refusal to betray sympathy or award moral marks has been reproved as coldness, bitterness, contempt for the audience, or, more generally, for humanity, and his critics have usually managed to indict Wilder at the same time on the grounds of bad taste.... More often he is simply abused for having told the truth about an unpleasant area of human behavior.”

While true in a general sense, this may be a little too generous, as is Sarris’s critical volte-face. There is no question that some of those who leveled criticisms at Wilder’s supposed cynicism simply did not care to take a hard look at the institutions or practices at which the filmmaker was taking satirical aim. That is to Wilder’s credit. There is no need to pull one’s punches in regard to the state of American life or morals.

That does not settle the issue, however. There are missing elements in nearly all of his films. Compassion, for example, and the sense of an alternative to existing reality, even a moral or emotional one. At times his targets seem a trifle obvious, the work as a whole a little brittle, like a bright and shiny object in the water that remains near or close to the surface. The films, by and large, lack extraordinary resonance, texture and depth, at least when compared with the greatest films.

It has been noted that Wilder is the probably the best known film director to have lost family members in the Holocaust. There may have been feelings too painful to probe, feelings for which he overcompensated by an excess of not entirely convincing sardonic mockery.

Perhaps in the end one should not concern oneself so much with what is lacking in Wilder’s work, and appreciate what is present. Within the bounds of the commercial film industry, he represented the principle of satire and irony, legitimate tendencies, and ones that are sorely lacking in the contemporary cinema world. He is a giant when compared to nearly everyone involved in American filmmaking today.

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