

Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*: The cruelty of the motion picture business

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Directed by Billy Wilder; screenplay by Wilder, Charles Brackett and D.M. Marshman, Jr.

Turner Classic Movies, in conjunction with Fathom Events and Paramount, recently presented Billy Wilder's 1950 classic *Sunset Boulevard* in select theaters.

Wilder's much-beloved movie centers on a struggling Hollywood screenwriter (played by William Holden) who accidentally stumbles upon a "golden opportunity." He first becomes the personal editor, then later companion and kept man of a former silent film star (Gloria Swanson), one of the most popular of her day.

Sunset Boulevard, the street, stretches from Downtown Los Angeles to the Pacific Ocean. It was associated with the silent film era in Hollywood, a period of excess and opulence as well as remarkable artistic achievement. The thoroughfare had been a symbol of the film industry since the 1910s and was the location of the area's first studio (as well as many mansions). The "sunset" in the title, of course, also refers to the twilight (or even later hour) of that early glory.

Wilder (1906-2002) was born in what was then part of Galicia, Austria-Hungary (now Poland) to Austrian Jewish parents. In fact, his mother, grandmother and stepfather all died in the Holocaust.

Having emigrated to the US in 1933, Wilder was a significant figure in American filmmaking, first as a screenwriter and then as writer-director, for more than three decades. He was one of the most popular directors of the 1950s and 1960s in particular. His works include *The Major and the Minor* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Lost Weekend* (1945), *Ace in the Hole* (1951), *Stalag 17* (1953), *Sabrina* (1954), *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *The Apartment* (1960), *The Fortune Cookie* (1966) and *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970).

As noted above, *Sunset Boulevard* centers on the relationship between a cynical, journeyman writer, Joe Gillis (Holden), and a onetime movie star, Norma Desmond (Swanson). Much of the film's pathos and occasional broad comedy (for better or worse) are bound up with Norma's inability to accept that her day has long past. She relentlessly prepares for a comeback that will never materialize. Feeding her delusional ego is Max von Mayerling (silent film director Erich von Stroheim), the filmmaker who discovered her, who now serves as her chauffeur and butler.

Wilder, Charles Brackett and D.M. Marshman Jr. wrote a clever script with a number of very memorable lines. As Wilder's strength was language and humor, and not primarily a strong visual style, it seems worth citing a number of the film's passages.

Sunset Boulevard opens with a shot of "SUNSET BOULEVARD" stenciled on a curbstone. It is early morning and police sirens are wailing. Floating face down in a pool is Joe Gillis, dead from gunshot wounds. The deceased man proceeds to narrate the film!

Gillis explains his situation six months previously: "I hadn't worked in a studio for a long time. So I sat there, grinding out original stories, two a week. Only I seemed to have lost my touch. Maybe they weren't original

enough. Maybe they were too original. All I know is, they didn't sell."

Joe needs \$300 to keep his car from being repossessed. Desperate to sell a story, Gillis pitches to and is shot down by a crass studio executive (Fred Clark), whose script reader Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olson) only confirms that Joe's 40-page outline has no potential. (Betty: "I just think pictures should say a little something." Gillis, bitterly: "Exactly what kind of material do you recommend? James Joyce? Dostoyevsky? ... Next time I'll write [Norman Mailer's] *The Naked and the Dead*.") We later learn that the winsome Betty is engaged to Joe's best friend, assistant director Artie Green (Jack Webb).

On a golf course, Joe's venal agent (Lloyd Gough, later a blacklist victim) refuses him a loan: "Don't you know the finest things were written on an empty stomach?"

The same day, while evading the repo men, Joe suffers a blow-out and steers his limping vehicle into the driveway of a decaying, palatial estate. "It was a great big white elephant of a place ... the kind crazy movie people built in the crazy '20s. A neglected house gets an unhappy look. This one had it in spades." The owner turns out to be Norma Desmond.

Joe is first mistaken for a pet mortician who has been hired to officiate at the burial of Norma's beloved chimpanzee. Once his identity is set straight, Joe suddenly recognizes Norma: "You used to be in pictures. You used to be big." Desmond replies, famously, "I am big. It's the pictures that got small." She goes on: "There was a time when this business had the eyes of the whole world. But that wasn't good enough for them. Oh, no! They had to have the ears of the world too. So they opened their big mouths and out came talk, talk, talk."

Norma thereupon enlists Joe in editing a screenplay she has been working on, scribbled semi-coherently across hundreds of pages: "It's a story of Salome. I think I'll have [Cecil B.] DeMille direct it." Always with an eye to the main chance, Joe accepts the assignment ("I had no pressing engagement, and she'd mentioned something to drink...").

Soon Joe's belongings are moved into Norma's manor, a place that "seemed to have been stricken with a kind of creeping paralysis, out of beat with the rest of the world, crumbling apart in slow motion. There was a tennis court, or rather the ghost of a tennis court, with faded markings and a sagging net. And of course, she had a pool—who didn't then?"

In terms of Norma's script, Joe was charged with "getting some coherence into those wild hallucinations of hers." And "she was around all the time, hovering over me, afraid I'd do injury to that precious brainchild of hers." But no one can argue with a "sleepwalker," a woman who was "still sleepwalking along the giddy heights of a lost career—plain crazy when it came to that one subject: her celluloid self. The great Norma Desmond! How could she breathe in that house so crowded with Norma Desmonds? More Norma Desmonds and still more Norma Desmonds."

When Joe objects to her showering him with gifts, Norma boasts: "I'm rich. I'm richer than all this new Hollywood trash. I've got a million dollars ... I own three blocks downtown. I've got oil in Bakersfield, pumping, pumping, pumping. What's it for but to buy us anything we

want.”

On one occasion, to quell Joe’s boredom, Norma amusingly and skillfully transforms herself into Charlie Chaplin’s “Little Tramp.” From time to time, a few actors of Norma’s generation come over to play bridge—the immortal Buster Keaton among them.

But when Gillis seeks more youthful companionship on New Year’s Eve, after declaring she loves him, Desmond attempts suicide. Out of sympathy, Joe stays with Norma, “the only person in this stinking town that has been good to me.”

Paramount Pictures has been phoning Norma. In fact, the movie studio simply wants to rent her antique automobile. But, mistakenly believing that Cecil B. DeMille wants to work with her again, Norma descends on the studio in all her fading splendor and is greeted respectfully by older crew members and the veteran director, who tells an assistant: “Thirty million fans have given her the brush. Isn’t that enough? ... You didn’t know Norma Desmond as a lovely little girl of 17 ... with more courage and wit and heart ... than ever came together in one youngster.” It is a moving sequence, one of the film’s strongest.

Under the sway of the illusion that DeMille is going to direct her absurd *Salome* script, Norma has an “army of beauty experts” invade her house: “Like an athlete training for the Olympic Games ... she counted every calorie ... went to bed every night at 9:00. She was absolutely determined to be ready ... ready for those cameras that would never turn.”

When Joe takes Max to task for nourishing Norma’s fantasies about a “return” to the screen, the subservient butler shockingly replies: “I discovered her when she was 16. I made her a star and I cannot let her be destroyed ... I directed all her early films. There were three young directors who showed promise in those days: D.W. Griffith, C.B. DeMille, and Max Von Mayerling [von Stroheim] ... I was her first husband.” To maintain the pretense that she is still loved and admired, Max sends her fictitious fan mail.

Joe has been sneaking out at night to meet Betty and write a screenplay of his own. They fall in love, but a madly jealous Norma forces the issue, and Gillis is obliged to reveal the truth to Betty about his living and economic situation. He has the younger woman come out to the palace on Sunset Boulevard, determined to wake her up to the realities and, self-sacrificingly, send her back to Artie: “Ever been in one of these old Hollywood palazzos? That’s from when they were making 18,000 a week and no taxes. Careful of these tiles. They’re slippery. Valentino used to dance here. ... Did you ever see so much junk? ... It’s lonely here ... so she got herself a companion. Very simple setup. Older woman who’s well-to-do. Younger man who’s not doing too well.”

Betty runs from Joe and Joe walks away from Norma, who threatens to kill herself: “Oh, wake up, Norma. You’d be killing yourself to an empty house. The audience left ... Norma, you’re a woman of 50. Now grow up. There’s nothing tragic about being 50 ... not unless you try to be 25.” Nonetheless, with gun in hand, Norma replies, “I’m the greatest star of them all. No one ever leaves a star. That’s what makes one a star. Stars are ageless.”

As Joe later floats lifelessly in the pool, the paparazzi swarm through Norma’s gothic world. The police fish him out of the water. “Funny how gentle people get with you once you’re dead,” he observes.

In a further voiceover, as a crowd of reporters with newsreel cameras gather in the downstairs hall of Norma’s mansion, Gillis quips: “So they were turning after all, those cameras. Life, which can be strangely merciful, ... had taken pity on Norma Desmond. The dream she had clung to so desperately ... had enfolded her.”

In *Sunset Boulevard*’s legendary concluding sequence, the wild-eyed Norma slithers down the marble staircase, believing she is playing *Salome*: “I can’t go on with the scene. I’m too happy! Mr. DeMille, do you mind if I say a few words? Thank you. I just want to tell you all how happy I am to be back in the studio making a picture again! You don’t

know how much I’ve missed all of you. And I promise you, I’ll never desert you again, because after *Salome* we’ll make another picture, and another picture! You see, this is my life. It always will be! There’s nothing else—just us—and the cameras—and those wonderful people out there in the dark.

“All right, Mr. DeMille, I’m ready for my close-up,” as she glides, now in a hyper-dramatic, demented state, toward the dream-like, soft-focused camera lens.

Sunset Boulevard is a remarkable, clear-eyed and sane film made at a time when Hollywood was going up in flames thanks to the Cold War hysteria and anti-communist blacklist. Although Wilder’s film does not refer to those events, the cruelty of the film industry is at the center of the work.

Everyone is disposable here—the aging, waxwork Desmond (although the beautiful Swanson was only 50 years old at the time) barricaded in a mausoleum; the struggling, younger writer; the innumerable eager aspirants—everyone except the talentless money men. The philistine executives and bottom-feeding agents exploit an army of young writers and readers living on the edge of poverty.

The opening sequences sharply set out the reasons for Joe’s desperation and his accommodation to Norma’s unreal universe. It was this unflattering portrayal of the industry that provoked the ire of its upper echelons. Studio chief and renowned thug Louis B. Mayer is alleged to have yelled at Wilder, “You bastard! You have disgraced the industry that made and fed you!” Rumors circulated that Mayer tried to buy up and bury the film (as he had attempted to do some years previously with Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*). At the height of the patriotic, pro-American fervor and postwar economic boom, it took courage for Wilder to criticize one of America’s corporate structures.

In an interview with film historian Joseph McBride (in *Two Cheers for Hollywood: Joseph McBride on Movies*, 2017), Wilder asserted that his exposé was not just about “the picture industry—it is every industry. You make a picture about Exxon vs. Texaco vs. Shell, every industry has got this kind of slush that is underneath the whole thing.” He fell short of using the word “capitalism.”

In his 1977 book, *Billy Wilder in Hollywood*, author Maurice Zolotow asserts that “Billy’s political feelings at this time [in the 1940s] were on the radical side. He thought of himself as a ‘social democrat’ in the European sense. He had had vague sympathies for socialism and was almost a fellow traveler. ... Billy was for the Spanish Loyalists and he was of course a passionate anti-Nazi. However, he did not like to join organizations. He did not like meetings. He was, however, on friendly terms with many Communist and left-leaning writers. ... Wilder, during the witch hunts of the 1950s, was a proponent of freedom of expression and took a stand against the investigations and the blacklist.”

Wilder took part in establishing the Committee for the First Amendment, the group of Hollywood personalities who opposed the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) witch-hunt against left-wingers. When it was proposed at a general meeting of the Screen Directors Guild that those in the film industry sign a loyalty oath, only Wilder and John Huston opposed it. Huston later recalled, “I am sure it was one of the bravest things that Billy, as a naturalized German, had ever done. There were 150 to 200 directors at this meeting, and here Billy and I sat alone with our hands raised in protest against the loyalty oath.”

(Unpleasantly, however, in his book, Zolotow adds that Wilder “was one of the few writers at Paramount who would not sign a loyalty oath. He supported the Committee for the First Amendment, which defended the Unfriendly Ten [the Hollywood Ten, who were sent to prison]. But he just couldn’t hold a civil, or civil rights, tongue in his head. Asked what he thought of the Unfriendly Ten, he said, ‘Two of them have talent. The rest are just unfriendly.’”)

Of course, a shrewd and careful tactician for the most part, the writer-

director covered his “right flank,” so to speak, by incorporating DeMille and gossip columnist and right-winger Hedda Hopper into *Sunset Boulevard*. Moreover, Wilder’s co-writer, Charles Brackett, was a firm Republican and president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences at the time.

Many of his later films suffer from a rancid cynicism, a product in part of the McCarthyite period and its legacy, but in *Sunset Boulevard*, Wilder unashamedly counterposes Betty’s idealism to the corruption of the executive types and company men—and of Gillis himself to a certain extent. The fresh young woman wants to revise one of Joe’s scripts—tellingly, about teachers.

There are other perceptive touches in the movie. Ironically, DeMille, who played such a foul role in the purges, demonstrates great sensitivity and affection here in his treatment of Norma, as does Max when he assumes the role of directing her final descent into madness.

There are numerous weaknesses too, the occasional vulgarity and obviousness, a few cheap shots, those lines of Gillis-Holden that seem strained and unconvincing, the not entirely persuasive transformation of Norma into a homicidal killer. But *Sunset Boulevard*’s popularity is not a fluke, or an error. Along with its jibes, there is seriousness and commitment here, and genuine anger too, all of which audiences have sensed and responded to over the years.

Furthermore, Wilder offers up a strange, fascinating, sensual, grandiose world, a visual cornucopia that stands out against the mediocrity pumped out by the studios. The filmmaker was able to accomplish this with the talented assistance of co-writers Brackett and D.M. Marshman Jr., and award-winning cinematographer John F. Seitz, along with German-born composer Franz Waxman and costume designer Edith Head. Art directors Hans Dreier and John Meehan created the mesmerizing look of Norma’s sumptuous castle.

Wilder is a sharply contradictory figure. Indeed, a group of French auteurist critics in the early 1950s referred to him as “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” But these same critics stupidly considered *Sunset Boulevard* “unviewable.” Critic Andrew Sarris went from early admiration for Wilder to sharp criticism, and then back to reverence.

But those contradictions were not simply personal ones. Wilder went from the backwater of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to great success in the most glamorous business on earth, directing Ginger Rogers, Barbara Stanwyck, Audrey Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe, among others.

At the same time, as Sarris once noted, Wilder “was perhaps the most famous film director in the world to have lost his mother and other members of his family to the Holocaust, yet he never treated the subject explicitly in his films.” “Yet” is perhaps inappropriate—“and therefore” might be more suitable.

Sarris added that the filmmaker was “a humorist and an ironist, not a polemicist and a propagandist. If there is a recurring theme in his most powerful films, it is that of wretched opportunists wistfully seeking redemption.”

The behavior of Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard* is in part a commentary on the wider opportunism and cowardice of Hollywood at the time that had so appallingly manifested itself in the film community’s accommodation to the blacklist and witch hunt.

We recommend that readers view *Sunset Boulevard* and see for themselves.



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