

# *Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge*—An invaluable critical study of the popular filmmaker

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20 December 2021

*Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge*, by film historian, critic, academic and biographer Joseph McBride, is a comprehensive, invaluable critical study of one of the most admired and enduring filmmaker-satirists of the post-World War II era. Wilder, born in what is now Poland in 1906, is best known for his Hollywood-made films, *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *The Apartment* (1960), *Irma La Douce* (1963) and *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964). It would be difficult to make sense of popular culture in America over the course of several decades without taking Wilder's efforts into account.

He directed his first film, *Mauvaise Graine* (*Bad Seed*) in France in 1934, and his last, *Buddy Buddy*, in 1981. Wilder also wrote or figured in the writing of more than 80 movies, beginning in Berlin in the late 1920s.

The filmmaker's life spanned nearly the entire 1900s and was inevitably "roughed up" and shaped by the critical events of that turbulent and traumatic century. A consideration of how Wilder experienced those events and interpreted them artistically, and how they haunted him until the end of his days, makes up a good deal of *Dancing on the Edge*.

McBride is the author of numerous scrupulously researched major biographies or studies treating the lives and work of various film directors, including Orson Welles, John Ford, Frank Capra, Steven Spielberg and Ernst Lubitsch. The Wilder book is one of his most intriguing. It should be of great interest to anyone concerned with the evolution of postwar filmmaking, as well as American cinema's present debased condition.

McBride writes with knowledge, honesty and a genuinely anti-establishment viewpoint. He avoids the jargon of works influenced by postmodernism and identity politics, along with their subjectivist, ahistorical moralizing—he is not in the business of cataloguing all the banana peels on which a figure like Wilder may have slipped. Nor, like so many contemporary artist biographers, does he merely heap up countless facts about his subject. The author, in a lively manner, sticks his neck out and offers his thoughtful and well-argued views on Wilder's life and career. One does not have to agree with all of the conclusions in *Dancing on the Edge* to appreciate its lucidity and breadth.

Wilder's early days in Poland (in a region then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), Vienna and Berlin and their continuing influence throughout his life come in for a good deal of attention. In the first section of his study, "Phantoms of the Past," McBride suggests that "Wilder's perpetually restless nature was the result of an early life in constant motion." Much of the future filmmaker's childhood "in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was spent in trains and hotel—his father, Max, ran cafés in railroad stations before settling into managing a Kraków hotel—and Billy's existence encompassed no fewer than five separate moves into exile."

Wilder's films are full, McBride points out, of "hotel and train settings as his characters race from place to place, attempting to find their

bearings." His "bustling energy and impatience were a symptom of enduring anxiety over his rootless condition, his unconscious need to keep moving in order to avoid being trapped." After an unstable upbringing, "and far more deeply after he fled Hitler in 1933 and emigrated to the United States, Wilder experienced the exile's essential feeling of never quite belonging or knowing a firm identity, always having to be ready to move again, no matter how safe you might feel at the moment."

McBride writes further on that "Wilder's habitual feeling of being *ausländisch* (foreign or alien) deeply influenced his work as a filmmaker. As a Jew who lived successively in several countries before finding refuge in Hollywood, he often resembled a cabaret artist darkly amusing his audience by dancing on the edge of an abyss."

"Wilder's characters," the author comments, "cross boundaries of every kind, physical, social, and psychological. They challenge and violate social mores, operate on the edges of the law, transgress what is considered proper behavior." The clashes in his dramas "are often motivated by class distinctions and dig deeply into the most dangerous realms of psychological disintegration and loss of identity." This often propels his characters "into masquerading, hiding behind assumed identities for the sake of self-preservation or reinvention."

This picture is no doubt accurately and importantly drawn, and Wilder stands out as one of those filmmakers most directly and painfully affected by the emergence of Nazism in particular—he was forced to escape the Hitler regime in 1933, and his mother, stepfather and grandmother all died at its hands. However, his insecure and peripatetic existence, accompanied by feelings of anxiety and a perpetual outsider status, in a broader sense, speak to the more general condition of art and the artist during much of the 20th century, battered so often by war, dictatorship and the conditions of decaying capitalism generally, along with disorienting, murderous Stalinism.

In Wilder's case, these challenging historical and social circumstances, working on a restless personality guided by sharp intelligence and a bitter, ironic sense of humor, a perpetual "wise guy," helped produce a distinctive and at times profound body of work.

That the work is "uneven" as a whole, as McBride acknowledges, does not result simply from flaws in Wilder's artistic personality and approach, although those may have existed, but also owes something to the destructive, chaotic or humiliating conditions under which he often labored.

McBride strongly sets out his thematic concerns, bound up with the facts of Wilder's life and film career.

After spending the first ten years or so of his life in and around Kraków, Wilder moved with his family to Vienna in 1916. He lived in the Austrian capital for a decade and began a career in journalism there. In Berlin from 1926, Wilder "gradually cobbled together an increasingly successful but

often precarious career as a newspaper and magazine reporter.” From 1928-1933, he toiled as a screenwriter in Germany, working primarily on films with “formulaic, escapist, sentimental plots.” McBride discusses both Wilder’s journalistic and early film work in considerable and absorbing detail.

*People on Sunday*, a strikingly fresh and realistic look at working class life in Berlin, was an exception during this period of preliminary cinema work. The film brought together an extraordinary group of collaborators, including future Hollywood directors Wilder, Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer and Fred Zinnemann, along with future screenwriter-novelist Curt Siodmak and award-winning cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan, in one small indication of what was lost in Germany culturally when the Nazi thugs came to power.

Wilder left Germany in March 1933 several weeks after the Reichstag fire, which, McBride reports, the aspiring screenwriter and his girlfriend watched “while sitting in the Café Wien on the Kurfürstendamm, the fashionable street that served as the shopping, hotel, and dining center of Berlin. That conflagration dispelled any remaining illusions of safety.”

Settling briefly in Paris, now home to numerous German exiles, Wilder directed his first feature film, *Mauvaise Graine*, about a gang of car thieves, with the teenage Danielle Darrieux. Darrieux later commented that Wilder “was young, but he knew just what he wanted, and he was totally in control, like the other best directors I worked with.”

Wilder left France by ship for the US in January 1934. Joe May, a Berlin colleague and fellow refugee from Nazism “who had made it to Hollywood earlier, persuaded Columbia [Pictures] to send Wilder a one-way boat ticket.” McBride notes that “it is among the bitter ironies of Wilder’s career that ... the first few film assignments he was given in Hollywood, while struggling to establish himself from 1934 onward as he learned to write in a new language, were inferior to his best work in Berlin.”

About the years 1934 to 1936, McBride cites Wilder’s comment that “I dragged my carcass up and down Hollywood Boulevard, and starved around for a year and a half before I sold two original stories.” He was also endeavoring to learn the English language, especially as it was popularly spoken, in that period.

Wilder’s joining up with Charles Brackett in August 1936 was a turning point in his career. So welded together in Hollywood’s consciousness that “they sometimes were referred to as ‘Brackettandwilder,’ the team in their fourteen years together,” writes McBride, “would go on to write sixteen screenplays (not counting others to which they contributed without credit as studio contract writers). Their collaboration encompassed the first eight films of Wilder’s Hollywood directing career, with Brackett also serving as a producer.”

The duo had the good fortune to be assigned to work on films by Ernst Lubitsch, first *Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife* (1938), a screwball comedy with Gary Cooper, and later, *Ninotchka* (1939), about “a stern Soviet commissar [Greta Garbo] on a mission to Paris who finds love in the unlikely person of a seemingly worthless gigolo (Melvyn Douglas).” Lubitsch remained one of Wilder’s artistic idols.

As a director, Wilder came to prominence with dark, caustic works such as *Double Indemnity*, in which a pair of homicidally selfish opportunists hoping to make an easy fortune come to a bad end, *Sunset Blvd.*, about the cruelty of the film industry and the desperation and madness it generates, and *Ace in the Hole* (1951), focused on the vicious manipulations of the American media.

After pulling back during the mid-1950s—like so many others—in the direction of more innocuous work ( *Sabrina* [1954], *The Seven Year Itch* [1955], *The Spirit of St. Louis* [1957], *Love in the Afternoon* [1957], *Witness for the Prosecution* [1957]) under the pressure of anti-communism and conformism, Wilder returned with some of his most penetrating and popular efforts, *Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment* and the

underrated *Irma La Douce*.

*Some Like It Hot*, with Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe, came as a sensual, anarchic breath of fresh air at the end of the 1950s. Lemmon and Curtis play musicians on the run from gangsters in Prohibition-era Chicago, forced to disguise themselves as women and join an all-female band en route to Miami. The relatively relaxed and uninhibited morals of Wilder’s film, featuring Monroe at the height of her comic and seductive powers, struck a chord with the public. Fifty million people went to see *Some Like It Hot* in the US, making it the third most popular film of the year.

In *The Apartment*, Lemmon plays “Bud” Baxter, an aspiring white collar worker at a New York insurance firm. The corruption of the American corporate universe permeates the movie. In the hope of advancement, Baxter has taken to lending his apartment to company executives for their extramarital liaisons. A crisis erupts when he develops deep feelings for Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine), an elevator operator and emotional victim of Baxter’s boss (Fred MacMurray). Fran’s suicide attempt in Bud’s apartment on Christmas Eve is one of the most moving and troubling sequences in Wilder’s work. The director reveals here a genuine hatred of the American business culture, in all its philistinism, arrogance and brutality. Some 27 million people bought tickets for *The Apartment*, the fifth-most popular film of the year in the US.

A naïve Paris policeman, Nestor (Lemmon again), discovers in *Irma La Douce* (the fifth most-watched film release of 1963, with 30 million tickets sold) that enforcing the law brings him up against both lawbreakers and bribe-taking police officers, and he quickly loses his post. He ends up a successful pimp for Irma (MacLaine once more), but he feels like a parasite and hates his girlfriend having to ply her trade. So, Nestor invents an alter ego, a British lord, who can pay Irma large sums of money *not* to have sex. Meanwhile, he goes to work at night and destroys himself laboring so he can afford to play this other part. In this part—“pastel-colored romance” (McBride) and part-Brechtian parable, economic comfort for one partner spells exhaustion and degradation for the other.

*Kiss Me Stupid* was a commercial disappointment and *The Fortune Cookie* (1966) unpleasantly rancid, but despite losing favor in the “New Hollywood” of the 1970s, Wilder made four more interesting works: *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970), *Avanti!* (1972), *The Front Page* (1974) and *Fedora* (1978), the last another sharp attack on the film industry. After directing the weak *Buddy Buddy*, until his death in 2002, Wilder suffered through what McBride terms a two-decade long “internal exile,” as he explains in our accompanying interview, “when he [Wilder] was not allowed to make films.”

*Dancing on the Edge* brings out Wilder’s strengths and weaknesses, which will assist the reader, on the basis of a viewing of the director’s body of work, to draw his or her own conclusions about the filmmaker’s ultimate artistic standing.

McBride cites biographer Maurice Zolotow’s interesting comment that Wilder’s politics in the late 1930s “were on the radical side. He thought of himself as a ‘social democrat’ in the European sense. He had vague sympathies for socialism and was almost a fellow traveler.” The left-wing journalist and author Egon Erwin Kisch, continues Zolotow, “had made him [Wilder] see the promise of socialism and Kisch believed that, in the long run, the Soviet Union would become a free, democratic society.”

Wilder supported the Spanish Loyalists, Zolotow wrote, “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. He recalls now that several of them ceased talking politics to him after *Ninotchka*. He thinks that Communists, by and large, lack a sense of humor. It was sacrilege to poke fun at them.”

Wilder opposed the McCarthyite elements in Hollywood when they launched the anti-communist witch-hunt in the late 1940s. He was a

member, McBride notes, “of the Committee for the First Amendment, a group spearheaded by screenwriter Philip Dunne, [William] Wyler, and [John] Huston to combat the [HUAC] hearings and the influence of the Motion Picture Alliance. Wilder’s activities on behalf of the [persecuted] Hollywood Nineteen—and the eventual Hollywood Ten—were brave in that climate.”

Wilder also acted courageously, *Dancing on the Edge* points out, in defying “the 1950 attempt by Cecil B. DeMille and a group of other right-wing directors to impose a loyalty oath” on members of the Screen Directors Guild and recall guild president Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who initially opposed the oath. At a “tumultuous” meeting in October 1950, George Stevens, John Ford, Huston, Wyler and others spoke out against DeMille, who was booed when he addressed the gathering. “Mankiewicz remained president,” McBride explains, “but in an act of capitulation he never adequately explained, he recommended four days later that the guild members sign the loyalty oath ‘as a voluntary act.’”

Significantly, McBride reveals that sharp political differences between Brackett, who supported HUAC, and Wilder led to the breaking up of this enormously successful film writing partnership.

Once the anticommunist operation in Hollywood was a fait accompli, Wilder, along with most other writers and directors, accepted the state of affairs.

In one of the most incisive passages in *Dancing on the Edge*, McBride observes, “Did Wilder, after taking a strong and courageous public stand against the blacklist while the issue was being debated in 1947–1950, when even his writing partner considered him subversive, retreat into allegory ... and public silence (accompanied with defensive bursts of sarcasm) about the political situation in Hollywood when the blacklist took firm hold on the industry? Yes.”

Could Wilder have done more than he did, McBride asks, to combat the blacklist? “It can be argued,” he writes, “that the only truly honorable course for any employable person in Hollywood during that era would have been to refuse to work there while others were denied work. Like others who continued working during that period, he could not openly defy the blacklist or he would have had to be blacklisted himself or quit the business. Wilder stopped fighting it directly. Nor, as far as is known, did he work with any blacklisted writers under the table or through fronts. And his work suffered in the 1950s from his generally less than noble acquiescence to the corrupt status quo of safe, relatively uncontroversial filmmaking.”

McBride returns several times to the matter of Wilder’s supposed “cynicism.” His fundamental argument is that the director’s detractors who argue along these lines “must be living a Pollyanna existence, protected by a bodyguard of denial, despite (or more likely because of) the abundant evidence provided by the twentieth century, and beyond, that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds.”

There is certainly truth to this, but it may not be the whole story. Without being a Pollyanna, one can criticize Wilder *on occasion* for cynicism. His movies do *on occasion* evince disgust or contempt for humanity as a whole. This is bound up no doubt with the Holocaust and the other tragedies of the 20th century, and the limitations of his historical and social perspective.

McBride makes an eloquent case for Wilder’s filmmaking, which largely stands up to scrutiny. Despite their tendency “toward satire and ridicule,” he writes, Wilder’s films “do not simply deride or discredit moral principles; instead they explore moral issues and deplore or mock the way principles are often violated. Anyone who comes away from a Wilder film thinking the director believes that life is meaningless is projecting on it the kind of film the spectator fears or would like to see. As cold-blooded as Wilder’s characters and situations can be, as skeptical and pessimistic as he is, there is always emotion or humor in his viewpoint.”

And further: “The complex tone of Wilder’s films, the bittersweet nature of his moods and situations, the way they shift from comedy to drama and back again are the essence of his approach to humanity, helping us find common ground with characters who commit reprehensible actions.”

*Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge* shares the complexity and humanity of its subject and his films. It is highly recommended.



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