

A conversation with film historian and critic Joseph McBride, author of *Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge*—Wilder helped “lead America out of its puritanical isolation and xenophobia”

David Walsh
20 December 2021

The WSWS spoke recently to Joseph McBride, film historian, biographer and academic, about his new work, Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge.

David Walsh: I’ve always had mixed feelings about Billy Wilder, to be honest with you. I think I have a better impression and understanding of him, his work and his difficulties from your book, *Billy Wilder: Dancing on the Edge*. Numerous issues are raised, both directly in regard to his own life, and the events through which he passed or witnessed—fascism in Germany, world war, McCarthyism, the 1950s and ‘60s. Essentially, his life encompasses the 20th century.

Joseph McBride: Wilder was always at heart a journalist, a point I spend a lot of time on in this book. He certainly was a chronicler of the times, like an important novelist, and a writer-director of exposés on film. One reason I wanted to write the book was to get a handle on some of those questions myself, because certain things about him have been elusive.

DW: This critical study is an artistic work on its own. In a culturally difficult climate, your books stand out, from the point of view of challenging, demanding and fighting for a richer and more realistic cinema in our day.

JM: As a film teacher, I’m on the front lines with young people who for the most part know nothing about the cinematic past, which is sad. You and I emerged from a period where cinema was the art form, and everybody was talking about it, but that’s no longer the case. A vast ignorance has been fostered by our educational system. I try to do my part in reversing the trend.

DW: The low level of historical knowledge is a problem. But that’s why *Dancing on the Edge* is important and why we’re doing this conversation. It’s part of the fight to correct that situation.

JM: Since Wilder was a reporter when he was a young man in Vienna and Berlin, that’s one reason I gravitated toward him. I’m an old journalist. My first article for which I was paid was published in a magazine in May 1960, in the same week I received a letter from John F. Kennedy thanking me for volunteering on his Wisconsin presidential primary campaign. I met Wilder for the first time in 1974, on the set of his newspaper movie *The Front Page*, based on the play by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. I had an instant rapport with him. Newspaper guys recognize each other and speak the same language.

When I began writing this book, there were no English-language versions of his journalism available. But I read two collections in German of his journalism published in Vienna and Berlin. A collection of some of those pieces was published recently in English translation, edited by Noah

Eisenberg [*Billy Wilder on Assignment: Dispatches from Weimar Berlin and Interwar Vienna*].

Wilder thought of himself primarily as a writer throughout his life, and studying the early life of an individual is something I always do, to find out where the artistic impulses and all the subsequent material comes from. I wrote my first article on Wilder in 1970, with Michael Wilmington, “The Private Life of Billy Wilder,” a career profile for *Film Quarterly*. I’ve written a lot of articles about him over the years and I interviewed him for various publications.

DW: How do you choose a subject for a book?

JM: I take a lot of time mulling it over, because it’s such a major investment of time and energy. For a long time I thought I’d like to do an interview book with Wilder—as I did with Howard Hawks, *Hawks on Hawks*—because Wilder was so witty, smart and sophisticated.

Books reach their true form as they germinate and are written. The true form for this book was a critical study and a thorough engagement with his work. It’s not a biography. I make that distinction because people think of me as a biographer, because I’ve done three big biographies of Frank Capra, John Ford and Steven Spielberg. But I’ve also done critical studies of Orson Welles, Ernst Lubitsch and Ford (with Wilmington). So, with my recent critical studies, I’m going back to my roots. Back in Wisconsin, before I moved to California in 1973, I didn’t have access to the filmmakers; I mostly had access to the films.

Part of the reason I didn’t do a biography of Wilder was because there are two really good ones, *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder* by Ed Sikov and, in German, Andreas Hutter and Klaus Kamolz’s *Billie Wilder: A European Career*.

Anyway, I can’t afford to write biographies anymore, they’re too expensive. You get an advance, but it’s never enough. Every time I’ve done a biography, I’ve been financially ruined.

In those cases, I was always writing critical biographies. I explain to people that you can write a biography of anybody, but if you write one about an artist, you should write about his or her work in detail, because that’s why we’re interested in them. Where does the work come from?

DW: You seem attracted to artistically serious but popular artists.

JM: Yes, I gravitate toward popular filmmakers, partly because I grew up with popular culture in the 1950s. I loved American cinema, and I loved American television, which kept me sane in that period. Then I started seeing foreign films. Part of our big critical movement in the 60s was trying to legitimize American cinema as a subject worthy of study.

The French had done that before us, they led the way. So, we championed people like Ford and Hawks, and Allan Dwan and Frank Capra, all sorts of people who were considered by snobs to be mere commercial filmmakers. We were engaged in a battle to make American films legitimate and make popular culture legitimate.

I didn't like the distinctions made between high and low culture. So, we tried to destroy those distinctions. We succeeded too well, in a sense, because the whole culture has been taken over by pop culture. There still are difficult literary works and difficult films, but foreign films don't get shown much in America. We succeeded beyond our wildest expectations. It's unfortunate, in that way, but there are many other reasons for what has become the general decline of cinephilia.

DW: I think there are other factors. I don't think you should blame yourself.

JM: Let me tell you a funny story. I used to review films for an internet site, and they were always assigning me independent films or foreign films. I said, I love these films, but once in a while I'd like to review a big Hollywood mainstream film, why don't you ever give me one? I've done biographies of Ford, Capra and Spielberg. My editor said, "You write about popular culture, but you write about it in an unpopular way."

Which I thought was true, actually. When I was in Hollywood, as a reporter and screenwriter, they used to say I was "too academic." And then I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area to be a professor at San Francisco State University. Then they said, naturally, that I was "too Hollywood." If there are two institutions of which I am often critical, among many others, they are Hollywood and academia.

DW: The Internet Movie Database rates Alfred Hitchcock and Wilder as number one and two most popular filmmakers of the 1950s and 60s. I have no idea which algorithm that's based on.

I can remember when *Some Like It Hot* [1959] came out. I was young, but clearly, it was a breath of fresh air. There were a number of films that represented a breakthrough, including *Vertigo* [1958], *Written on the Wind* [1956] and *Imitation of Life* [1959], *Bonjour Tristesse* [1958], *Some Came Running* [1958]. The height of the Cold War hysteria and McCarthyism was over, the blacklist was cracked, the civil rights movement had begun, there were militant strikes like the 1959 strike of 500,000 steelworkers. Kennedy's election represented part of that too. Did Wilder have more popular films than anyone else in the 1950s and early '60s, aside perhaps from Hitchcock?

JM: I think Wilder was in the forefront, helping to lead America out of its puritanical isolation and xenophobia into a more cosmopolitan realm because he, like Lubitsch, was a European sophisticate. Part of their mission was to bring European values into American culture. In a revealing paradox, the immigrants interpreted America for Americans.

John Ford is also a fascinating case. You mentioned to me once how filmmakers back then were retreating into Westerns and science fiction. I found a letter Ford wrote a woman in 1948. She asked, how come you've been making only Westerns since you came back from World War II? Ford replied very candidly that the political situation in America was too dangerous and fraught, but that you could smuggle political themes into Westerns and nobody would notice, because they literally didn't care.

DW: When I talk about a "retreat," I'm not making a moral judgment. I think the filmmakers didn't have much of a choice, the conditions were too unfavorable. They could not for the most part make films about contemporary American life, the political situation was too toxic in the blacklist-McCarthyite era.

JM: The '50s was actually a very rich decade for American films artistically. And many films deal with betrayal and informing, in one form or another. Take *Stalag 17* [1953], for example, which is one of Wilder's run-for-cover projects, because it's based on a bona fide Broadway hit.

Stalag 17 is about the presence of a disguised German informer in the Americans' midst in a POW camp run by the Germans. The prisoners

mistake William Holden's Sefton for the informer. François Truffaut wrote a thoughtful essay about the film at the time. He liked it because he felt Sefton represented the intelligent solitary man, who is always an outsider in society. That's an important theme in the '50s. People were worried about conformism and the corporate mentality, and Wilder attacks that in *The Apartment*.

Some Like It Hot also was such a groundbreaking film in many ways. That was a big part of my education, including my sex education, which was crucial for me as a repressed Catholic youth. Hitchcock, Vincente Minnelli and Douglas Sirk, each in his own way, continued to make films about contemporary life, but significant American directors who did so were few in number.

DW: You write: "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."

You get the title of your book from that. Could you speak about that idea a bit?

JM: I was influenced by Peter Gay, who wrote good books about Weimar Germany. Wilder was a dancer for a living in Berlin, and part of his legend includes the fact that he was a gigolo or "tea dancer," an "Eintänzer." His most famous and most wonderful newspaper work was a four-part series called "'Waiter, Bring Me a Dancer!': From the Life of an Eintänzer," which he wrote for a Berlin newspaper in 1927. It would make a good movie. He was dancing with ladies for tips at hotels. Wilder takes pains in the series to make clear he didn't have sex with the women.

Wilder was struggling to earn a living in the '20s and sometimes was thrown out of his apartment. He slept on benches. So he had this job as a dancer, and he had to groom himself constantly—it's almost feminization. It's one of the sources for *Some Like It Hot*. The role-playing, the element of masquerade goes through all of Wilder's work.

One of my challenges was to try to understand why Wilder always has masquerades going on in his films. I eventually realized it's because exiles do that. They have to masquerade whether they want to or not. They're playing a role. If you come from Europe, you have to adapt to America. Wilder was fascinated by this kind of double life, and the whole doppelgänger theme in German culture was very strong too.

Wilder liked to make fun of Freud, but his films drew a lot from some of the same sources that Freud drew from. He told that famous story about supposedly having interviewed Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, Alfred Adler and Richard Strauss on the same day. I grilled him about this. He said, no, actually it was two days. I said, well, what was the assignment? He said, this Viennese publication wanted to ask famous people their opinions on the new phenomenon of Mussolini and fascism in Italy. So Wilder went around and solicited views from these four people, and Freud threw him out of his apartment. Freud was having lunch when he called. Wilder said he saw "the couch." Then Freud came out with a little napkin around his neck and took Wilder's card, "BILLIE S. WILDER/Reporter der STUNDE." He said, "Raus!" [Out!], just one word. The entire thing may be apocryphal. I found no record of any of it.

DW: "The Phantoms of the Past" is the name of one of the sections.

JM: I wanted to call the book *Billy Wilder and the Phantoms of the Past*. The publisher thought that was too gloomy and not what people expected from Wilder.

DW: *Dancing on the Edge* is fairly ominous as well.

JM: It's a metaphor for his various forms of risk-taking and envelope-pushing, dancing on the edge of the abyss, but it is dancing at least. It captures both sides of him. It sums up both the resilience and the darkness, the back-and-forth balancing between the two.

DW: He was a very smart, sophisticated guy trying to make sense of a very difficult century, a very traumatic past. What happened to his family

in the Holocaust ... how do you deal with that?

JM: Wilder wanted to film Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List* as a tribute to his family. He thought his mother had died in Auschwitz. The Austrian biographers turned up a document from Yad Vashem. His mother's brother said she died at the Plaszów camp, which was run by the psychopathic SS officer Amon Göth, played by Ralph Fiennes in *Schindler's List*. Wilder evidently never knew that.

Wilder called Spielberg at one point and said, "Why don't we do *Schindler's List* together? We could produce, direct, whatever." Spielberg had to tell him that "we're in preproduction, we're going to make this film." Spielberg said it was the most difficult phone call of his life, but Wilder was gracious about it.

Wilder was a great survivor. He was in exile several times, from Poland to Vienna and to Berlin, later to France and then the US. And there was what I call his 21-year internal exile, when he was not allowed to make films in his later years. One of the most traumatic events of his life occurred in 1935, when he was already a Hollywood screenwriter. He traveled to Vienna to try to persuade his mother and her second husband to come to America. But they wouldn't leave, they were too old and they didn't believe in Hitler's threat. Wilder knew that Vienna would be overrun by the Nazis.

I empathize a lot with the Hollywood blacklistees. The most remarkable thing you learn from the diaries of Wilder's first major screenwriting partner, Charles Brackett, is that what really broke them up was the blacklist. Wilder was discreet about their breakup and Brackett was too.

They had these violent arguments about HUAC. Brackett, who was a conservative and a blueblood, actually supported HUAC and didn't understand why Dalton Trumbo would defy it, for example, and Wilder said, "I spit upon the Congress of the United States," which is quite a remarkable thing for him to say. Because he loved the freedoms of America. He thought the most important thing about America was the Supreme Court, which is ironic because it's under threat today.

DW: Wilder was more left-wing in the 1930s and '40s than I had realized.

JM: He was on the left, and he contributed to leftist causes. He and Brackett wrote a film about the Spanish Civil War, *Arise, My Love* [1940], which is a mixed success, partly heavy-handed and preachy as well as a romantic comedy/drama, but it was ahead of its time. It was one of the few Hollywood films that dealt with that subject at all.

When the blacklist came, Wilder stuck his neck out, especially bravely because he was an immigrant. He was one of the 25 directors who signed a petition to oppose Cecil B. DeMille's loyalty oath in the Screen Directors Guild. DeMille was trying to get rid of Joseph L. Mankiewicz as president. They had to have 25 signatures to demand a meeting.

Louis B. Mayer, one of the worst reactionaries in Hollywood, exploded at Wilder after a screening of *Sunset Blvd.* [1950]. According to Wilder, Mayer said, "You bastard, you have disgraced the industry that made you and fed you. You have dirtied the nest. You should be kicked out of this country, tarred and feathered, you goddamned foreign son-of-a-bitch." Wilder gave different versions of that story, but deportation was his biggest anxiety.

I believe the only totally honorable way to live in Hollywood during the blacklist period was either to leave the film industry altogether or ... well, actually that was the only honorable way, other than being blacklisted.

Albert Maltz, one of the Hollywood Ten, said of the blacklist, "One is destroyed in order that a thousand will be rendered silent and impotent by fear." Wilder was one of the people who had to make a choice: do I keep making films or not? He wanted to keep making films, and that's a moral compromise to some extent. He couldn't officially work with blacklisted people, and I don't have any knowledge of his hiring blacklisted writers.

Then he made a couple of unfortunate remarks, which I talk about in the book, that people quote a lot as if that's the entire story. Speaking about

the Hollywood Ten, who were called "unfriendly" witnesses and sent to prison for contempt of Congress because they refused to cooperate with HUAC, he said, "Two of them have talent. The rest are just unfriendly." That's a wisecrack which is cruel ...

DW: ... and it's kicking people when they're down.

JM: As a result, people think he must have been pro-blacklist, but he wasn't. He was very much against it, but once it became a fait accompli he could have left and gone back to Europe or gone into another line of work. But he stayed in Hollywood and that's a compromise, but he didn't name names or sell out.

DW: I agree with Wilder that *The Apartment* [1960] is his best film. Shirley MacLaine's performance is one of the finest in American film. Fred MacMurray is a nasty piece of work. He has this awful conformist home life that you see for 30 seconds or so. It's all very painful. The scene of the Christmas party, and the suicide attempt by MacLaine's Fran, all of that is truly remarkable. I don't know much in the postwar period that's sharper than those sequences.

JM: When I showed *The Apartment* to my Lubitsch & Wilder class recently, they all said, "It seems so contemporary, we can all relate to their dilemmas and their sexual problems," and that's a sign of a film that endures. It is a scathing critique of American values. Wilder made a striking comment to an interviewer who accused him of sentimentality in this film. He said, "I portray Americans as beasts." That's a very harsh comment and not unwarranted.

The insurance business for Wilder is a metaphor for the corruption of corporate America. MacMurray links *Double Indemnity* [1944] and *The Apartment*. He's an insurance man in both films. Wilder also frequently deals with prostitution. There's open prostitution and then there's this kind of pseudo-prostitution. MacMurray treats MacLaine like a prostitute in the most devastating scene, when he gives her a \$100 bill to buy something for Christmas. It's a sign of disrespect and cruelty, and it leads to her complete despair.

DW: Lemmon is a kind of minor brothel-keeper himself.

JM: He's a pimp, in effect. But even so, Molly Haskell observed, "There's something deeply honorable about him that you feel all along, so the casting has a lot to do with the redemptiveness that the film has."

DW: His aspiration to rise in the corporation is not portrayed in a flattering light, to say the least.

JM: No, no, Wilder is extremely critical of it. Some of the reviews of that film were really bizarre. Hollis Alpert in the *Saturday Review* called *The Apartment* a dirty fairy tale." He actually thought Wilder was condoning Lemmon's behavior. Wilder was offended by the "dirty fairy tale" line, but then embraced it. He thought, OK, it is kind of a dirty fairy tale.

The Apartment is an example of great popular art, a serious film that critiques our culture. People could see themselves in those characters and their modest lives, people struggling to survive in this humiliating and demeaning atmosphere.

People who don't like Wilder use "cynical" as an all-purpose word to demean him. Cynical implies nihilistic, and he's not nihilistic. I think of him as a closet romantic. I. A. L. Diamond, his screenwriting partner for many years, said Wilder was part of "an old Viennese tradition that comes down from Schnitzler. It is a Middle European attitude, a combination of cynicism and romanticism. The cynicism is sort of a disappointed romanticism at heart," and I've found plenty of evidence of that.

His wonderfully caustic and moving film maudit *Kiss Me Stupid* [1964] is an example of a Wilder satire of American sexual hypocrisy. It's about a prostitute who becomes a wife for a night and a wife who becomes a prostitute for a night. One of the ironies is that in 1964, American audiences were scandalized that an ordinary guy would sleep with a prostitute and pass her off as his wife, and when I show it to students today, what they're scandalized by is a prostitute who wants to be a

housewife!

I once unthinkingly used the word “cynicism” to Wilder in describing his work, and he replied, “But if I’m cynical, what adjective do you have for [Sam] Peckinpah pictures?” I quickly apologized, realizing I’d been simplistic. I said “‘Cynical’ is another word in Hollywood for ‘realistic.’” He said, “I think every play by Ibsen was cynical, right? Every play by Strindberg was cynical... Now take, for instance, a picture like *The Apartment*. Do you really think that I went out of my way to dramatize things which did not exist? A society where things like this could not happen?” He said that to show people getting out of that situation, you have to show the horror of what they’re trapped in.

DW: Hollywood is a difficult, nasty industry, a difficult, nasty town. For the most part, he navigated then both with some integrity.

JM: As you do, I like people who try to appeal to a mass audience with an elevated sensibility. On occasion, Wilder scorned art films in a way that sounded kind of philistine. He made fun of neorealism, but *A Foreign Affair* [1948], a remarkably daring film, is neorealistic and it’s a “rubble film,” as they called films made in the ruins of Berlin. It was released the same year as Roberto Rossellini’s more grimly dramatic *Germany Year Zero* and Fred Zinnemann’s *The Search*. But in *A Foreign Affair*, Wilder is taking chances and mixing genres, in this case setting a romantic comedy in that hellhole. He was dancing on the edge all the time.



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