

Billy Wilder Season

Monday 22 July	Ace in the Hole	(1951)
Monday 05 August	One, Two, Three	(1961)
Monday 19 August	Irma la Douce	(1963)
Monday 02 September	Double Indemnity	(1944)

Eden Court, Playhouse Cinema, at 20:15



Billy Wilder, one of the earliest political refugees from Nazi Germany, arrived in Hollywood in January 1934 as a complete unknown. He had set off from Berlin a few days after the Reichstag fire, taking with him \$1,000 in hundred-dollar bills and equipped with the names and addresses of a dozen cheap places to stay. Allegedly a rich girlfriend accompanied him but the lifestyle of a down-and-out did not suit her and she soon returned to the *Heimat*. Wilder did spend several months in Paris before leaving for the US, and even directed his first film there, *Mauvaise Graine*, a justly forgotten fiasco that hardly anyone has seen. The fact that Universal had remade one of the films he had co-scripted in Germany did nothing for him either. He was just one of the many hundreds of hopefuls arriving in Tinseltown trying to get into the movie business. Wilder could speak almost no English, lived in a tiny room and initially made some sort of living from doing odd jobs like walking on the wing of a flying plane over the coast and selling gags to other German speakers who had already established themselves in the film industry. Back in Germany he had been appreciated for his famously irreverent sense of humour, and had worked with other recent expatriates, Robert and Curt Siodmak on one of the great success films of the late twenties, *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*). Wilder's good fortune was getting to know Ernst Lubitsch, who had heard of him and whose style of humour was very similar to Wilder's. He learned English by endlessly listening to the radio, especially to lurid soap operas and baseball commentaries, a particular brand of heightened American colloquialism that enriched his earliest screenplays.

Wilder was born in a small town in Austria that is now part of Poland. The first loss and sense of displacement he, as a twelve year old, encountered was when the Austro-Hungarian Empire ceased to be in 1918. He studied law but gave it up after the first year. Instead he worked as a journalist in Vienna, before moving to Berlin where he gained prominence as a crime reporter, doing, as he often mentioned in later years, the dirty work like interviewing close relatives of convicted murderers. This was also the Berlin of Bertolt Brecht's epic theater, Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique, Bauhaus architecture, cabaret and jazz, Otto Klemperer conducting the most modern works at the Kroll Opera. Wilder interviewed some of the justly famous like composer Richard Strauss, but when he visited Sigmund Freud to put him on the couch to answer questions he was thrown out of his house, because the good doctor loathed newspapermen. He also pretended to be a gigolo for a while, in order to write an article about it for the Berlin journal *Die Stunde*. His predilection for razor-sharp dialogue and stinging one-liners, for tough outsider characters undoubtedly originated in those early years.



His first paltry contract in Hollywood ended after six months and he had to leave the country and wait in Mexico until he received his proper immigration permit. He quickly became an American citizen, yet one who always retained his German accent, as thick and rich as the finest *Berliner Käsekuchen*. On his return the first writing assignments were for trashy films that bombed at the box office. Wilder starved, sharing a room with Peter Lorre for a while, both of them living on a tin of soup a day. In 1937 he managed to sell a few stories to Paramount, and Lubitsch hired him do write the script for *Bluebeard's Eight Wife*. Wilder's career really took off after that, but he would never forget the first four hard years; years paved with soot, certainly not with gold.

After his first film as a Hollywood director, *The Major and the Minor* made in 1942, he formed a creative partnership with Charles Brackett at Paramount that would produce a string of classic American pictures, infused with a cynical smartness that flourished in Hollywood in the thirties and forties. They were brash, pulpy, bitter, sexy, and with that typical sardonic touch that can be found in all of Wilder's films: *Five Graves to Cairo*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Lost Weekend* and culminating in *Sunset Boulevard*. Yet he might have had an American passport by then, he was European too. Wilder joined the army's Psychological Warfare Division and revisited a destroyed Berlin just after the war. The great damage done to a culture of immense richness reminded him that he was also Samuel Wilder, who had lost several members of his family in the concentration camps, most tragically his mother and grandmother who both had died at Auschwitz. For a Jew, to journey through postwar Europe was to journey through a community of ghosts, through huge animated crowds who, since 1945, were no longer there. Those awful crimes against mankind did not deserve redemption. This certainly is at the core of Wilder's art. Often in his films corrupt yet alluring people, a thoroughly curdled vision of humanity, dominate the events.



Romanian born I.A.L. Diamond had become Wilder's second writing partner, and his closest friend, from *Love in the Afternoon* (1957) onward and Izzy, as the director called him, would collaborate with him on twelve screenplays, including *Some Like It Hot* and *The Apartment*. Although by now the overwhelming majority of Hollywood films were shot in glorious technicolor, Wilder continued to shoot his in distinguished black and white. He proclaimed colour films to be "too ice-cream." But for *Irma la Douce* he obviously preferred a Parisian *ice-cream* look.

Adapted, in a rather old fashioned manner with a heavy reliance on clichés, by Diamond and Wilder from a successful French musical, *Irma la Douce* stars Shirley MacLaine as the titular streetwalker near the Les Halles area of Paris and Jack Lemmon as the inept but honest cop Nestor Patou, a clear forerunner of Inspector Clouseau (who would appear a year later in the first of *The Pink Panther* movies). Nestor cannot believe that so many women are selling their charms and he wants to clean-up and reform the area so he personally raids a local bistro where the girls and their pimps gather. In the raid, the chief of police is arrested and our honest cop is rewarded by being sacked from his job. When Nestor, more by accident than by inclination, saves Irma from her abusing pimp, she takes him on as her protector. A pimp should never fall in love with his charge, and this is exactly what happens next. He becomes increasingly jealous of the work she does and, with the help of the local bistro owner Moustache (a marvellous Lou Jacobi), he poses as an aged English gent who rents Irma once a week and pays her so lavishly that she won't need any other customers. This Lord X claims he is unable to perform sexually and just wants to talk to her. Nestor figures that if Irma makes enough money from the fictitious gentleman, she can give the rest of her attention to him. There is a Catch-22 though. Nestor has to do long night shifts at the Les Halles food market to pay for the deceit and when he gets home he is far too tired to make love to her. Suspecting him of seeing another woman, Irma becomes jealous and is convinced she has a much brighter future with Lord X, asking him to take her to England. During a first trip her talent, honed through years of practice, brings the Lord's impotence to an imposing halt. Nestor thinks this is a good time to get rid of his alter ego, but... and in *Irma la Douce* there's more than one but.

Jack Lemmon acted in seven of Wilder's films and became the screen's most distinguished Mister Neurosis and Anxiety of the second half of the twentieth century and therefore the perfect embodiment of the director's sardonic view of insecure masculinity. Wilder originally wanted Marilyn Monroe as Irma, which would have turned it into a very different, sharper film that might

have even have saved Marilyn's life. Tragedy decreed otherwise. MacLaine was aware she wasn't his first choice (even Bardot and Elizabeth Taylor were considered for the part) and complained about the neglect she felt during the shooting of the film; she certainly did not get the attention Wilder gave to Lemmon. "I think that Billy was infatuated with Jack, directorially enamoured. But he did not really like me very much, personally or professionally. He did cast me twice, but I never got the impression he was interested in my ideas. He was always watching Jack to see what he might come up with." It is certainly true that Wilder has always been a man's director. The attitude towards women in his films, especially in the later ones, borders on contempt. The fear of women is a reoccurring theme that is rarely openly discussed in the appreciation of his work. Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* and Lorraine Minosa in *Ace in the Hole* are depicted as utterly selfish creatures who use men for their own purposes, the women in *One, Two, Three* are mainly capricious yet their ditzzy behaviour garners similar results, and in those films made after *Irma la Douce* the female frequently becomes a mere disposable cypher. Here they appear as *Amazon Annie*, *Mimi the MauMau*, *Kiki the Cossack*, *Poule with the Balcony*, *the Zebra Twins*. Critics disliked the film, but it became one of Wilder's biggest box-office successes. Sex remains a big puller, obviously. Originally the action in the stage musical took place in the Montmartre district but Wilder preferred Les Halles, where, even today, so much raw meat is sold. Subtlety was not his aim.

The legendary art director Alexander Trauner's *Rue Casanova* set took three months to build; it is almost an entire neighbourhood consisting of forty-eight buildings and three converging streets. That magnificent set creates an illusion of great depth and a forced perspective within a studio environment; it was constructed in a 360-degree fashion so shooting could be done from all angles. The film itself would have benefitted from some trimming. Unlike *One, Two, Three* it never moves fast enough to paper over its cracks. Tightening the direction (Wilder is unusually lacklustre here, as if having lost Monroe sapped some of his energy) and cutting some of the dialogue might have made it more finely honed, more light-hearted, but Wilder always considered himself a writer first, a director second. He never allowed his actors to deviate from the script. Well, nobody is perfect.

Tony Janssens

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Next... **Double Indemnity.** Monday 02 September 20:15

