

Billy Wilder Season

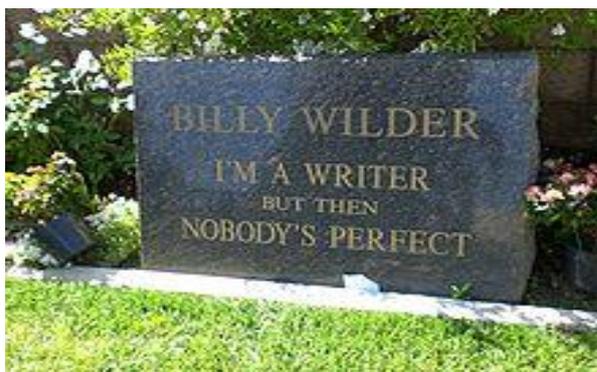
Monday 22 July **Ace in the Hole (1951)**
Monday 05 August **One, Two, Three (1961)**
Monday 19 August **Irma la Douce (1963)**
Eden Court, Playhouse Cinema, at 20:15



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*. The fact that Universal had remade one of the films he had co-scripted in Germany did nothing for him. 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 to 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.



The majority of cinemagoers still wanted fantasy, fun, a couple of hours of escape with the cherry of a happy ending on top. In those films where Wilder had the most creative freedom, that sort of entertainment is hard to find. The taunting and piercing style of Wilder's greatest films troubled the more conventional members of the audience, the financiers and movie bosses. The film where he was least obstructed became his first box-office flop. Wilder believed his partnership with Brackett had lost its fizz, and he wanted a clean break from it. They had been working together since those early successful days co-writing scripts for Lubitsch. Later in their careers, Wilder directed while Brackett produced, *Sunset Boulevard* being their last film together. Brackett never understood the decision, but Wilder got more accolades and certainly more money after their split. Money he would spend mainly on a substantial art collection, an addiction as he would call it. The first film after their break-up, was also the first film he got credited as producer-director. *Ace in the Hole* is Wilder at his most undiluted, no holds barred. The only interference came when one of Paramount's executives changed the title to the rather lame *The Big Carnival*, afraid that the original one might be too much sexual innuendo.



This portrait of a ruthlessly ambitious journalist is the most savage of Wilder's examinations of chunks of the American anatomy, brilliantly photographed by Charles Lang under the relentless sun of Albuquerque and the New Mexican desert. It takes us inside a mountain tunnel where a man is trapped and suffocating in a mine shaft, and inside the mind of a newspaperman, a mind corroding from accumulated layers of a mainly self-engendered moral poison. Kirk Douglas is superb as rotten-to-the-core hack. Proof of one of Wilder's many talents was how masterly he was in casting the right actors for the characters he conceived. He is desperate to improve his prospects when he stumbles on the story of a man imprisoned after an old mine collapsed where he was digging for Indian relics he could sell at his greasy spoon/trading post. Rarely have there been such brutally antipathetic leads in a big studio film as Douglas's reporter and Jan Sterling's (outstanding and never better in a major role) breathtakingly callous wife of the trapped man. Wilder's vision of press and public besotted with sensationalism is relentlessly bleak, but it ends up playing second fiddle to the two characters so monstrous in their mutual self-hatred and the enmity they have for each other, it is remarkable that Paramount released the movie with only a change of title. At the height of McCarthyism in the States it's no surprise that this uncompromising masterpiece was a huge box-office flop. In interviews after his career had ended, Wilder's comments on many of his own films were as barbed as many of his one-liners, but *Ace in the Hole* he rated as one of his best. Amen to that!

Tony Janssens

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Next... **One, Two, Three.** Monday 05 August 20:15

