

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON BILLY WILDER
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Billy Wilder's first name is not a nickname for William. His Viennese mother, in love with all things American, christened him Billy. Doubtless her impulse reflected that romantic idealization of the New World which has characterized many European intellectuals for a hundred years. If so, it had strange issue. Her son has become the most precise, indeed relentless, chronicler of the post-war American scene, in shade as well as light, that the movies have produced. Most of his films are enormously entertaining comedies, but they appeal to the experience of audiences with a sharp-edged bite of truth that seems the product of long observation of and involvement with the American ethos on all its levels. They leave a certain sediment in the mind.

Billy Wilder was born in Austria June 22, 1906. Like many of the sophisticated young in Europe after World War I, he tried many trades before deciding that the new twentieth century medium of the cinema was his destiny. He studied law briefly, had a stab at professional dancing, reported sports for DIE STUNDE in Vienna and crime for NACHAUSGABE in Berlin, then, by one of those miracles for which the film-enraptured hope but which they are seldom vouchsafed, became script writer for Robert Siodmak's famed, low-budget, stylistically radical MENSCHEN AM SONNTAG (1931?), and for Gerhard Lamprecht's delightful EMIL UND DIE DETEKTIVE. With Hitler's advent, he joined the exodus of German film-makers who headed for Hollywood via a brief sojourn in France, where he did various film chores in the highly competitive, and at that time depressed, French industry.

After several lean years in California, Wilder was lucky enough to team with the mordant Charles Brackett in a writing collaboration which produced such scripts as those of Lubitsch's BLUEBEARD'S EIGHTH WIFE and NINOTCHKA, the greatly successful HOLD BACK THE DAWN, and Mr. Goldwyn's BALL OF FIRE. The skill of these two in shaping more....

literary material toward film terms, and in avoiding censorship problems, soon made them invaluable to the studios, but more important things were to come. Beginning in 1942 with THE MAJOR AND THE MINOR, their professional relationship transformed itself. In their next seven pictures, Brackett and Wilder wrote their screenplays together, sometimes with the help of others; when the films went to the studio floor, Wilder directed and Brackett served as producer. This new relationship produced, in addition to a number of successful literary adaptations, A FOREIGN AFFAIR (1947) and SUNSET BOULEVARD (1950), with little question the most important and effective "originals" to be created in Hollywood since the early Thirties.

After SUNSET BOULEVARD, Brackett and Wilder parted company. Since then, the latter has written, directed, and produced his subsequent twelve films, though he has sometimes shared his producing or writing responsibilities with others, most frequently I. A. L. Diamond. In any case, his films of the Fifties and Sixties are more nearly the product of one mind and one temperament than would seem possible in this day of the pre-sold product and the big deal. That can only be because Wilder has managed to stay closer to the spirit of the time and the experience of living today than any of his colleagues. Even when he looks back toward a wartime prison camp or the ardors and absurdities of the Twenties, whether his scene is the flesh-pots of Long Island, the deceptive blandness of the corporate life, or a desolate cave in the Western desert, there is visible behind his story-lines what has to be called a theme: the bewilderment of us all who, living in the midst of plenty and under the shadow of doomsday, must still make choices, and make them without guidance, flying blind. As is appropriate to the medium, these things are expressed in what in another field of art would be called the objective correlative: glamour in the ruins, the key to the executive washroom, the wind moaning through a Hollywood pipe organ, speak, amidst roars of laughter, of equivocal goals, doubtful satisfactions, belated regrets. Wilder rarely allows such matters to dominate the smiling mood of his films. He says instead, after all, there's always tomorrow, and the species being what it is, who knows? In Carl Sandburg's words, "Where to? What next?," and in the bartender's in IRMA LA DOUCE, "But that's another story."

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