

Biography: Billy Wilder

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Billy Wilder

Billy Wilder (June 22, 1906 – March 27, 2002) was a screenwriter, film director and producer whose career spanned more than 50 years and 60 films. He is regarded as one of the most brilliant and versatile filmmakers of Hollywood's golden age. Many of Wilder's films achieved both critical and public acclaim.

Life and career

Origins

Born **Samuel Wilder** in Sucha Beskidzka, Austria-Hungary (now Poland) to Max Wilder and Eugenia Dittler, Wilder was nicknamed Billy by his mother. After dropping out of the University of Vienna to become a journalist, he moved to Berlin, Germany. While in Berlin, and before his writing career became more successful, Wilder also allegedly worked as a taxi dancer. After writing crime and sports stories as a stringer for local newspapers, he was eventually offered a regular writing job at a Berlin tabloid. After gaining an interest in films, Wilder started working as a screenwriter. Wilder, who was Jewish, left for Paris and then the United States after the rise of Adolf Hitler. Wilder's mother, grandmother, and stepfather all died at the Auschwitz extermination camp.



Hollywood

After arriving in Hollywood in 1933, Wilder shared an apartment with fellow emigre Peter Lorre, and continued his career as a screenwriter.

Wilder's first significant success was *Ninotchka*, a collaboration with fellow German immigrant Ernst Lubitsch. Released in 1939, this screwball comedy starred Greta Garbo (generally known as a tragic heroine in film melodramas), and was popularly and critically acclaimed. With the byline, "Garbo Laughs!", it also took Garbo's career in a new direction. The film also marked Wilder's first Academy Award nomination, which he shared with co-writer Charles Brackett. For twelve years Wilder co-wrote many of his films with Brackett, from 1938 through 1950. He followed *Ninotchka* with a series of box office hits in 1942, including his directorial feature debut, *The Major and the Minor*, as well as *Hold Back the Dawn* and *Ball of Fire*.

Wilder's directorial choices reflected his belief in the primacy of writing. He avoided the exuberant cinematography of Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles because in Wilder's opinion, shots that called attention to themselves would distract the audience from the story. Wilder's pictures have tight plotting and memorable dialogue. He was skilled at working with actors, coaxing silent era legends Gloria Swanson and Erich von Stroheim out of retirement for roles in *Sunset Boulevard*. Wilder sometimes cast against type for major parts such as Fred MacMurray in *The Apartment*. MacMurray was famous as a wholesome family man from the television series *My Three Sons*, yet played a womanizing villain in Wilder's film. Wilder mentored Jack Lemmon and was the first director to pair him with Walter Matthau. Wilder filmed in black and white whenever studios would let him. Despite this conservative directorial style, his subject matter often pushed the boundaries of mainstream entertainment.

Wilder established his directorial reputation after helming *Double Indemnity* (1944), an early film *noir* he cowrote with mystery novelist Raymond Chandler. *Double Indemnity* not only set conventions for the *noir* genre (such as "venetian blind" lighting, and voice-over narration), but was also a landmark in the battle against Hollywood censorship. The original James M. Cain novel *Double Indemnity* featured two love triangles and a murder plotted for insurance money.

The book was highly popular with the reading public, but had been considered unfilmable under the Hays Code, because adultery was central to its plot.

Two years later, Wilder earned the Best Director and Best Screenplay Academy Awards for the adaptation of a Charles R. Jackson story *The Lost Weekend*. This was the first major American film to make a serious examination of alcoholism. Another dark and cynical film Wilder cowrote and directed was the critically acclaimed *Sunset Boulevard* in 1950, which paired rising star William Holden with Gloria Swanson. Swanson played Norma Desmond, a reclusive silent film star who dreams of a comeback; Holden is an aspiring screenwriter and becomes a kept man, echoing Wilder's experience as a gigolo in Berlin. In 1959 Wilder introduced crossdressing to American film audiences with *Some Like It Hot*. In this comedy Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis play musicians on the run from a Chicago gang, who disguise themselves as women and become romantically involved with Marilyn Monroe and Joe E. Brown.

From the 1950s, Wilder made mostly comedies.^[1] Among the classics Wilder produced in this period are the farces *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) and *Some Like It Hot* (1959), satires such as *The Apartment* (1960), and the romantic comedy *Sabrina* (1954). Wilder's humor is cynical and sometimes sardonic. In *Love in the Afternoon* (1957), a young and innocent Audrey Hepburn who doesn't want to be young or innocent wins playboy Gary Cooper by pretending to be a married woman in search of extramarital amusement. Even Wilder's warmest comedy *The Apartment* features an attempted suicide on Christmas Eve.

In 1959, Wilder teamed with writer-producer I.A.L. Diamond, a collaboration that remained until the end of both men's careers. After winning three Academy Awards for 1960's *The Apartment* (for Best Picture, Director, and Screenplay), Wilder's career slowed. After the lesser films *Irma la Douce* and *Kiss Me, Stupid*, Wilder garnered his last Oscar nomination for his screenplay *The Fortune Cookie*.



Later life

Billy Wilder died in 2002 at the age of 95 after battling health problems, including cancer, in Los Angeles, California, and was interred in the Westwood Village Memorial Park Cemetery in Westwood, Los Angeles, California.

In 1988, Wilder was awarded the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award. He has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.



Legacy

Several of Billy Wilder's films are regarded as cinema classics. He holds a significant place in the history of Hollywood censorship for expanding the range of acceptable subject matter. Yet film schools do not study Wilder's work in the comprehensive manner they approach other major directors such as Alfred Hitchcock. This may be because Wilder is not a good example of the auteur theory.

The American Film Institute has ranked four of Wilder's pictures among the top 100 American films of the twentieth century. These are:

- *Sunset Boulevard* number 12
- *Some Like It Hot* number 14
- *Double Indemnity* number 38
- *The Apartment* number 93

Trivia

- Wilder is often confused with director William Wyler; the confusion is understandable, as both were German-speaking Jews with similar backgrounds and names. However, their output as directors was quite different, with Wyler preferring to direct epics and heavy dramas and Wilder noted for his comedies.

- Billy Wilder's twelve Academy Award nominations for screenwriting were a record until 1997 when Woody Allen received a thirteenth nomination for *Deconstructing Harry*.
- Billy Wilder is one of only four people who have won three Academy Awards for producing, directing, and writing the same film (*The Apartment*).
- Billy Wilder once said: "My English is a mixture between Arnold Schwarzenegger and Archbishop Tutu."

Academy Awards

Year	Award	Work
Won:		
1988	Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award	Lifetime Achievement
1961	Best Picture	<i>The Apartment</i>
1961	Best Director	<i>The Apartment</i>
1961	Best Original Screenplay	<i>The Apartment</i>
1951	Best Story and Screenplay	<i>Sunset Blvd.</i>
1946	Best Director	<i>The Lost Weekend</i>
1946	Best Screenplay	<i>The Lost Weekend</i>
Nominated:		
1967	Best Original Screenplay	<i>The Fortune Cookie</i>
1960	Best Director	<i>Some Like It Hot</i>
1960	Best Screenplay	<i>Some Like It Hot</i>
1958	Best Director	<i>Witness for the Prosecution</i>
1955	Best Director	<i>Sabrina</i>
1955	Best Screenplay	<i>Sabrina</i>
1954	Best Director	<i>Stalag 17</i>
1952	Best Story and Screenplay	<i>Ace in the Hole</i>
1951	Best Director	<i>Sunset Blvd.</i>
1949	Best Screenplay	<i>A Foreign Affair</i>
1945	Best Director	<i>Double Indemnity</i>
1945	Best Screenplay	<i>Double Indemnity</i>
1942	Best Original Story	<i>Ball of Fire</i>
1942	Best Screenplay	<i>Hold Back the Dawn</i>
1940	Best Screenplay	<i>Ninotchka</i>