

BILLY WILDER: AN AMERICAN MASTER

Billy Wilder was a remarkable filmmaker who played to his audience while adhering to a “classical” style of film. He saw no contradiction between creating literate films and striving to please a popular audience. Without an emphasis on novelty, experiment, or obscurity—either literary or visual— he attracted a broad American audience (while making his mark overseas as well.) He wanted the ordinary moviegoer to enjoy his films, to laugh at their humor, but also to think about the issues they raised about contemporary life. He sustained a commitment to comedy, but his comedy was mixed with thoughtful reflection on human error and fallibility. And when he made serious dramatic films about moral issues and psychological problems, he wanted his audience to recognize in his stories the complexities of human behavior common to all of us.

By the time he came to Hollywood Wilder had caught the “movie bug” and was determined to work in the industry. At first, he was a writer and always identified himself that way. Later when he directed films, he continued to write his own screenplays. As a young and ambitious refugee in a chaotic time of war, he worked hard and learned fast. With an enthusiasm characteristic of the immigrants of that era, he embraced the American world: its language, its culture and its taste in films.

In the 1950s and ‘60s his reputation in Hollywood rested on the quality of his screenplays and the positive reception for his films, many of which garnered critical praise, public popularity and Academy Awards. He was known too, for his gregarious personality, charm and vibrant wit—a favorite with celebrity interviewers throughout his long career.

We will begin with an introduction to Wilder’s life and early work; in each session of the course, we’ll watch one of his films and discuss our responses. The films included will be *Sabrina*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Lost Weekend*, *The Apartment*, *Ace in the Hole*, and *Some Like it Hot*, and we will refer to other films he wrote and directed. Since we only have time to see parts of the films in class, students are encouraged to watch the complete films on TV, DVD or available streaming programs.

Leader: Judith Walzer was provost and professor of literature at the New School.

Mondays: 1:00 to 3:00 p.m., 6 weeks: February 26 through April 9 (no class on 3/19)

Location: Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville