PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: BILLY WILDER

a candid conversation with the master of filmic seriocomedy

For solo and collaborative efforts as director and scenarist, Billy Wilder has been nominated 24 times for Academy Awards, amassing nine Oscars during 28 years in the movie capital. Recently PLAYBOY interviewed him in his suite of offices on the Goldwyn lot in downtown Hollywood, where he and co-writer I.A.L. Diamond—having just completed "Irma La Douce"—were brainstorming over the script for his next picture. They would be working and reworking it right up to the final day of shooting, for Wilder has conceded that although he always knows where he's going with his plots, he's never quite sure how he's going to get there. Between intermittent sips of a vodka martini, he answered our questions with a rapid-fire delivery reminiscent of the brisk dialog from one of his own films. He strode restlessly up and down as he spoke, slapping his thigh occasionally with an ornately carved walking stick, his colloquial English enunciated in the guttural accents which still bespeak his beginnings as a struggling screenwriter in Berlin between the wars. Much of Wilder's work—from such eminently unfunny films as "The Lost Weekend," "Double Indemnity" and "Sunset Boulevard" to such comedic tours de force as "Some Like It Hot," "The Apartment" and "One, Two, Three"—has been touched by a cynicism which reflects the mood of that world-city during the Twenties. We began with an exploration of these early years and influences.

PLAYBOY: Are you conscious of any kinship in your films or your philosophy, as several critics have suggested, with the savage satire of Bertolt Brecht, or with the intellectual cynicism he articulated for his generation?

WILDER: I knew him in Germany, and I knew him when he lived for a time here in Hollywood, and I regard him with Mr. Shaw—George Bernard, not Irvin—as one of the monumental dramatists of this first half-century, but I was never aware that the influenced me. Brecht was dealing with enormous subjects of the hungry, exploited masses which neither my brain nor my attention-span can cope with. His was a much vaster canvas than mine. After all, was Mickey Spillane influenced by Tolstoy? That's Leo Nikolaevich, not Irvin. If there was any influence on me in those days, it must have come more from American books and plays I read. One of the most popular writers was Upton Sinclair. I read him, and Sinclair Lewis, Bret Harte, Mark Twain. I was also influenced by Erich von Stroheim and by Ernst Lubitsch, with whom I first worked on Bluebeard's Eighth Wife. But I don't believe I have been influenced by the cynicism of the times or even shown any of it on the screen. When they say that I have, they could be referring to, say, Double Indemnity, but this was done from a short story by James M. Cain, an American. It is not sugar-coated, my work, but I certainly don't sit down and say, "Now I am going to make a vicious, unsentimental picture."

PLAYBOY: As a native-born Viennese, you were already living in one of Europe's principal artistic and cultural capitals. What made you leave it to go to Berlin?

WILDER: Simple. After one year at the University in Vienna, I became a space-rate reporter. Paul Whiteman played a concert in town, liked my review, and took me along to Berlin with him. There I danced as a gigolo for a while in the Eden Hotel, and at the Adlon I served as a teatime partner for lonely old ladies.

PLAYBOY: How did you make the transition from dance floor to sound stage?

WILDER: Well, before long I got another

"To make pictures in Europe would be like going to a brothel to take a lover but to fix the plumbing. I go to Europe for fun, not to work."

"I saw a picture about sex the other day. It was a crashing bore. Unless treated with humor, wit and gaity, even sex is unbelievably dull. I can't take it seriously."

"The beauty of our capitalist system is that you can't keep what you make even if you make a lousy picture that's a hit; so why not try to make something good?"
making any pipe taste better!

An exclusive blend of choice Burleys and Brights, with a flavor accent from the Orient, India House produces extra-rich flavor and aroma! For a new smoking experience, try this premium mixture ... a few cents more, and worth it.

PLAYBOY: This was about the time when Hitler began his rise to power. Did political events have any effect on your career?

WILDER: They ended it. I was having my dinner in the Kempinski Hotel the day after the Reichstag fire. I knew I had to get out. The Nazis were getting too warm. I rolled up the paintings I was collecting, packed a small bag and got on the train to Paris. A year later I came to the United States. I've been here ever since and eventually found my way to Hollywood.

PLAYBOY: Your long-time collaborator, Charles Brackett, once said your work was characterized by "an exuberant vulgarity." What is your own appraisal?

WILDER: Did you read that piece by somebody called Simon—or Irwin—who really crappped all over me in Theatre Arts? It boiled down to this: what he objected to was not the vulgarity in my art but the lack of art in my vulgarity. I have been pursued for years by that nasty word there. The bad-taste thing. They sit there in the theater and laugh their heads off, and then they go out and say, "Cheap! Vulgar!" Then they go and see Pillow Talk and pronounce it urban humor. Maybe my work is a little robust, but one has to work with what one has. It would be disaster if I used the sugar tong and tried to regiment myself into something unnatural for me.

PLAYBOY: Less critically, Brackett has also said that you have a "sure sense of audience reaction." Do you feel that's true?
Who wants to go to a barbecue... when you're wearing a '417'?

He's an excellent judge of good steak... an even better one of women. And when he's at the pit, adding just the right dash of pepper, he sports just the right dash of style in his favorite Van Heusen "417". Fashioned in the new "trimline" cut, this sport shirt gives snug fitting comfort, with plenty of moving room left over. She likes the button-downs and gay gingham checks. (When she relaxes she wears a Lady Van Heusen.) Check the complete Van Heusen "417" Collection. At fine stores.

THE WATCH EVERY HEART IS SET ON...

SELF-WINDING Olympos

No ordinary watch!
No hour hand.
No winding. The dial itself revolves to the exact hour.

Zodiac

the name for automatic watches

- LADIES' OLYMPOS 2035 Style matchmate to men's Olympos. Yellow case, dramatic champagne dial, tapered 10K GF expansion bracelet. $95
- Other Omympos models for both men and women. $95 — $225, f.t.t. See for yourself. Your jeweler can show you the remarkable Zodiac self-winding Olympos now.

WILDER: When you start a movie script, it's like entering a dark room: You may find your way around all right, but you also may fall over a piece of furniture and break your neck. Some of us can see a little better than others in the dark, but there is no guaranteeing audience reaction. I've been lucky; I've taken a lot of chances in treading on new ground which could have slipped out from under me. Though I've got away with it about 90 percent of the time, I don't flatter myself that I can hit all the time. But I have to live in the hope — or perhaps under the delusion — that if I like it, a great many other people will like it, too.

PLAYBOY: Your films in this country have been written in collaboration. Why?

WILDER: Here I have the handicap of working in a new language — even after 28 years. Then there is the question of time. A movie is not like a novel. Sometimes the publisher may want to bring a novel out by Christmas; but in films we always have time limitations. Certain stars are available at a certain time, so you have, say, six months to write a screenplay. If they're compatible, two people can collaborate and get it done a little faster and, most of the time, better.

PLAYBOY: A friend of yours once said "Billy's collaborators are $50,000 secretaries." Is your creative hand really that authoritative in writing a scenario?

WILDER: First of all, he is a writer that is no friend of mine. If that were the case I would hire my relatives and make the money I give them tax-deductible, at least. But my collaborator, Iz Diamond, and I work together from the word go, and after it's done it cannot be said that this was his idea, this was mine, this was my joke, this was his. It all occurs together, like playing a piano piece four-handed.

PLAYBOY: Since your native language is not English, how have you managed to become so adept at mastering the nuances of the American comic idiom?

WILDER: If you think I have an accent — which unquestionably I do — you should have heard Ernst Lubitsch. But he had a wonderful ear for American idiom and dialog. You either have an ear or you don't, as Van Gogh said — that's Irwin, not Vincent. I suppose I have it. Many foreigners do. When I arrived in the U.S., I couldn't speak a word of English. Well, let's say I knew a dozen English Johnson Office wouldn't tolerate. I learned by not associating myself with the European refugee colony, by going around with new American friends, by listening to the radio. Perhaps if helps you to learn the language if you go into it cold. It pours into you and it stays.

PLAYBOY: Bucking the trend toward overseas location pictures, you've said you
prefer to make movies right here in Hollywood. Why? Wouldn't you save thousands on budgets by filming abroad?

**Wilder:** To make pictures in Europe would be like going to a cathouse not as a lover but to fix the plumbing. I go to Europe for fun, not to work. But seriously, it's much easier technically to shoot a picture in Hollywood. If you're going to perform a delicate operation, why not do it in the best hospital?

**Playboy:** Many moviemakers claim to have found an intellectual stimulation and creative freedom in Europe that's unattainable in Hollywood. Have you?

**Wilder:** Remember, the movie scripts that Hollywood people go to Europe to shoot are still written in Hollywood, don't forget. So they make *La Dolce Vita* in Rome; but they also make *Hercules and the Seven Dwarfs*. As for freedom, all the Mirisch Company asks me is the name of my picture, a vague outline of the story, and who's going to be in it. The rest is up to me; can you get more freedom than that? And as for there being more intellectual stimulation in Europe, some of my best friends have gone to Europe and then to seed intellectually. I don't believe any of that "intellectual stimulus" crap. Take Confucius—he said some pretty stimulating things, but he never got to Paris in his life.

**Playboy:** Hollywoodians often speak enviously of you as a man of uncompromising standards. How is it that you and a few other film makers have managed to resist the pressures of compromise?

**Wilder:** To me, it is a matter of dollars and cents. It doesn't have only to do with Hollywood, it has to do with a man's approach to the problem of making those dollars and cents. Some compromise, some do not. Look at Fellini. He cleaned up with *La Dolce Vita*. When I saw it I couldn't decide if it was the greatest or dreariest picture I'd ever seen, and finally I decided it was both. A remarkable film, excellent because he had stuck to his own principles. But the worst thing that can happen to us in this business is if a dog picture makes a hit, then we all have to make dog pictures because the people with the money trust dogs. But if one like Fellini's makes a hit, it is the greatest thing—as long as it is not loaded with the stars who are always advertising themselves in the trades. It's a question of money, and yet it is not a question of money anymore in Hollywood. The beauty of our capitalist system is that you can't keep what you make even if you make a lousy picture that's a hit; so why not try to make something good? Today's capitalist system is for those who already have the money, not for those who are making it. There is really very little use in my working, since I can't keep the money. I can never get richer than I am. So why am I beating my brains out? I

The Sunbeam Alpine is for people with a flair. A champion sired by champions, it is the sports car for people with a sense of leadership, too. For a leader it is: in styling flattered by imitation, in such advances as unitary construction, in such safety features as aircraft-type disc brakes. But mostly, this happiest sports car of all is a personal car the whole family can enjoy, and for hundreds of dollars less, at $2595*. The car, in a word, for people who haven't forgotten how to have fun

---

* Sunbeam Alpine A Design of Distinction by Rootes

---

*Last if D.E., eighties even as low. Same and extra taxes, delivered charge. If not, hard top, one wheel, white wall optional. same.
go to the studio because I can't stand listening to my wife's vacuum cleaner at home, and also because I can't find three bridge partners or somebody to go to the ball game with. Also I work to waylay some of the phonies from getting Academy Awards.

PLAYBOY: How do you view the decline of Hollywood as the world movie capital?

WILDER: The future of major studios as we have known them, I view with tremendous pessimism. They are all but dead. But that makes me optimistic. The breakup of the major studios, the advent of the independent producers, and the growing influence of really good foreign films—all these developments are very much for the best.

PLAYBOY: Analytically inclined reviewers are fond of “discovering” secondary levels of social and satirical comment in your films, etc., and then the question is, do you consciously inject such messages?

WILDER: I am not really a message man. Pictures like *Love in the Afternoon* and *Sabrina* are not in any way a comment on the world. Maybe *The Apartment* had a few things to say about our society, but it was not meant to be a deep-searching exploration of how we are. On certain levels, once in a while, maybe we smuggle in a little contraband message, but we try never to jump in their faces with our naked pretensions showing, because they will recall. In certain pictures I do hope they'll leave the theater a little enriched, but I never make them pay a buck-and-a-half and then ram a lecture down their throats. In Munich not long ago I saw Chaplin's *Limelight* for the first time; it was never shown on the West Coast, and I was anxious to see it. A girl in our party said she had seen it eight times, and later I told her I knew how she felt, because I saw it once and it seemed like eight times. I found it completely shallow and commonplace. If only he had stuck to comedy. In the silents he never philosophized. In sound he never stopped philosophizing; when he finally found a voice to say what was on his mind, it was like a child writing lyrics to Beethoven's *Ninth*. I found it shocking to think that he was attacked for his political convictions and forced to leave the U.S. when everything he was saying was on a grammar-school level. Mind you, I still think he was an authentic genius, and I would do a picture the other way for free—if he would only shut up.

PLAYBOY: Some critics have asserted that you do have a message: that man is essentially mean. Playwright George Axelrod has said fairly that you yourself are mean, that “he sees the worst in everybody, and he sees it funny.” True?

WILDER: I cop the Fifth. There are certain traits in certain characters that make them interesting to me, but I don't think I go too far from reality in emphasizing their meanness. I stylize, maybe, but not too much. And if I'm so mean personally, how come I've managed to go through life with a good number of very close friends?

PLAYBOY: Though it certainly didn't dwell on the subject of human meanness, *One, Two, Three* was an incisive satire of both sides involved in the Cold War. Were you concerned, while filming in Berlin, that the authorities on one side or the other might cause trouble?

WILDER: We got to Berlin the day they sealed off the Eastern sector and wouldn't let people come across the border. It was like making a picture in Pompeii with all the lava coming down. Khrushchev was even faster than me and Diamond. We had to make continuous revisions to keep up with the headlines. It seemed to me that the whole thing could have been turned out if Oleg Cassini had sent Mrs. Khrushchev a new dress. But we weren't afraid of creating an incident like Mr. Paar. We minded our manners and were good boys. When they told us we couldn't use the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, we went to Munich and built our own.

PLAYBOY: Was there any negative reaction to the picture as a flip treatment of a serious subject?

WILDER: Of course. There is a little group of people who always say I'm not Spinoza. The thinner the magazine, the fatter the heads of the reviewers. They were shocked because we made fun of the Cold War. Others objected because it was very quick-paced and they could not catch everything. People either loved it or hated it.

PLAYBOY: Why did you switch to comedy after establishing yourself as a director of such grimly ironic dramas as *Double Indemnity* and *Sunset Boulevard*?

WILDER: It wasn't done deliberately. What I make depends on what tickles me at the moment—and what I hope will show a profit. But I will be making serious pictures again; this is a warning.

PLAYBOY: You seem to enjoy taking heavy subjects—the Cold War, transvestitism, adultery, prison camps—and turning them into funny pictures. What is your attraction to such themes, and how do you manage to make them funny?

WILDER: It's not the subject as such, it's the treatment. These thin-named people I mentioned before said that *Some Like It Hot* had homosexual overtones as well as transvestite undertones. Well, I know that transvestites are cases for Krafft-Ebing, but to me they are terribly funny. Wasn't *Charlie's Aunt* one of the most successful comedies ever written? The stronger the basic story, the better the jokes play against it. I think the funniest picture the Marx Brothers ever made was *A Night at the Opera*, because opera is such a deadly serious background. I saw a picture about sex
DO $5.95 SLACKS GO WITH A $15 SPORT SHIRT?
Yes ... when they have the authority of Lee Barasheens

Lee’s new slimmed-down classic slacks tailored with real taper, a narrower cuff. A great look that, as far as the eye goes, really has no price tag at all. Bone, Haze Green, Loden, Black; Sanforized-Plus for reliable wash and wear. $5.95.

You can tell a lot about a man the way he wears sportswear. Ever notice? It’s not a matter of price at all. It’s a matter of taste. A sense of rightness. Proof: this great new Lee-Look . . . the subtle texture of combed cotton Barasheen in

PLAYBOY: You have been accused of playing down to your audiences, via the use of puns and slapstick. Do you?
WILDER: You run into people who shoulder when you make a pun, but it’s only because they can’t make one themselves. I don’t make pictures for the so-called intelligentsia; they bore the ass off me. I think they’re all phonies, and it delights me to be unpopular with them. They are pretentious mez-brows. My pictures seem to appeal more to the true highbrows and lowbrows. I happen to think that puns and slapstick are funny. Those who look down on it and on me, they are overestimating me, they are overestimating my ambition in life. I have at no time regarded myself as one of the artistic immortals. I am just making movies to entertain people and I try to do it as honestly as I can. I don’t want anything more rewarding than to travel halfway around the world. as I did, and hear them roaring at Hot. That was good enough for me.

PLAYBOY: Your films have been criticized for being overloaded with visual bits of business and breakneck action. True?
WILDER: I am not James McNeill Whistler. Nor am I O’Neill — Irwin, not Eugene. I hate to have people face each other and talk-talk-talk-talk-talk, even if they are in a moving taxi cab. I make moving pictures. On the other hand, you will not find in my pictures any phony camera moves or fancy setups to prove that I am a moving-picture director. My characters don’t rush around for the sake of being busy. I like to believe that movement can be achieved eloquently, elegantly, economically and logically without shooting from a hole in the ground, without hanging the camera from the chandelier and without the camera dolly dancing a polka.

PLAYBOY: The fast plot pace and dialog which have characterized your last three pictures have become for the public the expected ingredients of a Wilder movie. Are you concerned about being typecast, or about the possibility of falling back on tried-and-true comic situations for the sake of a sure laugh?
WILDER: If you develop a certain style you inevitably repeat yourself to some extent—but never consciously. Every writer-director with his own distinctive signature will do things reminiscent of pictures he has done before. But I would never do it intentionally. I do and I always try to be original, though sometimes we do say, “Remember when we did this?” — and then do a switch on it. But I would never do a remake of one of my own pictures. I never even look at my pictures after they’re finished —
not on 35 millimeter, not on 16 millimeter, not on eight millimeter. All I have are a few bound scripts at home which are gathering dust there. Witness for the Prosecution was on television a few Sundays ago and I would have dreaded to look at it again. It would have made me sick.

PLAYBOY: Are there any of your own pictures to which you're still partial?
WILDER: As soon as I'm done, I go on to something else. But there are certain parts in a few of them which I remember with fondness: maybe parts of Sunset Boulevard and Double Indemnity; some of Lost Weekend and Hot. I also like the runt of my litter, Ace in the Hole. It didn't make a nickel here even after we changed the title to The Big Carnival, but it cleaned up in Europe and won at the Venice Festival. But believe me, most of the time I remember only the boobos I've committed.

PLAYBOY: Many of the stars you've worked with have vowed they would "work for Billy for nothing." Which of them have you most enjoyed working with?
WILDER: Promises, promises. If they would work for me for nothing, I wish they would tell that to their agents. But I have enjoyed working with nearly all of them, with just a few exceptions. There have been some pleasant surprises. Outstanding among them was Gloria Swanson. You must remember that this was a star who at one time was carried in a sedan chair from her dressing room to the sound stage. When she married the Marquis de la Falaise and came by boat from Europe to New York and by train from there to Hollywood, people were strewing rose petals on the railroad tracks in her direction. She'd been one of the all-time stars, but when she returned to the screen in Sunset, she worked like a dog. Or take Shirley MacLaine; she was infected with that one-take Rat-Pack all-play-and-no-work nonsense, but when she came to work for me and me in The Apartment, she got serious and worked as hard as anybody. Now she's playing drama. And of course Lemmon I could work with forever. Some stars I have trouble with, of course, but it can't be avoided because, after all, they are actors. In Sabrina, Bogart gave me some bad times, but he was a needle and he somehow got the idea that Bill Holden, Audrey Hepburn and I were in cahoots against him. Bill at one point was ready to kill him. Eventually we smoothed it out and everything worked out well. But in most cases there haven't been any problems. In fact, one of the things I am proud of is that tension is totally absent from my sets. People extend themselves to do their best when they're happy, and I feel it's my job to make them feel that way.

PLAYBOY: Are there any stars you haven't worked with yet whom you'd like to

---

**OLD HICKORY**

America's Most Magnificent Bourbon

---

**MAGNAVOX PROUDLY PRESENTS THE WORLD'S SMALLEST, MOST POWERFUL FM/AM PORTABLE RADIO**

Big pleasure in a small package! The Magnavox Surfside . . . a small radio with truly big sound, brings in beautiful FM music or your favorite AM programs wherever you travel. Nine transistors pull in all the stations with remarkable fidelity at all volume levels.

Model FM-93, in Black, Green or Ivory. Beautifully gift-boxed, complete with long-life batteries, leather carrying case and earphone. Now only $49.95 at the Magnavox dealer listed in your Yellow Pages.

**the magnificent Magnavox**
the scotch
that tastes
the way
more people
want their scotch
to taste

DON'T BE VAGUE...ASK FOR

HAIG & HAIG

BLENDED SCOTCH WHISKY, 86.8 PROOF • RENFIELD IMPORTERS, LTD., N.Y.

DIRECT IN A MOVIE?
WILDER: Sure. Grant — Cary, not Irwin. I thought I had him for Sabrina, but at the last minute he changed his mind and told me he wouldn't do it, although I never found out why; so the part had to be rewritten for Bogart. And I'd like to work with Brando. If he wanted me, and we could have a meeting of the minds, it would be worthwhile to take a little beating just to have him in a picture. Jackie Gleason — one of the great, great talents. Dean Martin is a doll. Chaplin of course. And Guinness — an aristocrat; I would like to work with him. And Peter Sellers... but I think I am going to be working with him; Iz and I are planning our picture after Irma La Douce with Sellers.

PLAYBOY: What are your movie plans after Irma and the Peter Sellers picture?
WILDER: Iz and I bought an Italian play, L'Homme della Fantasia, it takes place in the 18th Century, but we are going to do it in the present. After that, who knows? Maybe I'll rest a while, then it will be a year before I'm ready to do the next one, or at least six to nine months.

PLAYBOY: What will you do with yourself during the interim? Isn't it true that when you're between pictures you've been known to volunteer your services to other producers and directors?
WILDER: Only when asked. I enjoy making movies, I enjoy the problems. I'm not working on something of my own and someone calls me up and says, "Look here, Billy, I have a problem," I will try to do what I can to help out. I'm restless. My stomach hurts when I'm working, but it also hurts when I'm not. It's exasperating — I should get into something else. But that's the way it is, and I'm stuck with it. After 30 years of making films I'm used to trouble and well-acquainted with grief.

Do you remember my telling you earlier about that rooming house I lived in when I first was trying to get into the movies in Berlin? Well, next to my room was the can, and in it was a toilet that was on the blink. The water kept running all night long. I would lie there and listen to it, and since I was young and romantic, I'd imagine it was a beautiful waterfall — just to get my mind off the monotony of it and the thought of its being a can. Now we dissolve to 25 years later and I am finally rich enough to take a cure at Badgastein, the Austrian spa, where there is the most beautiful waterfall in the whole world. There I was in bed, listening to the waterfall. And after all I have been through, all the trouble and all the money I've made, all the awards and everything else, there I am in that resort, and all I can think of is that goddamned toilet. That, like the man says, is the story of my life.