

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 2023

7 P.M. • HUMANITIES

QUADRANGLE

LECTURE HALL

SUNSET BLVD.

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



Shortly before *SUNSET BLVD.*'s August 10, 1950, premiere, Paramount held a preview screening for studio VIPs, many of whom were upset by the film's bitter portrayal of Hollywood. MGM's Louis B. Mayer screamed at Billy Wilder, "You have disgraced the industry that made you and fed you. You should be tarred and feathered and run out of Hollywood!" There are various accounts of Wilder's response, all containing colorful expletives. Wilder and screenwriting partner Charles Brackett may have bitten Hollywood's hand, but they had generously fed the film business since 1938, with sixteen scripts, including Ernst Lubitsch's *NINOTCHKA*; Howard Hawks's *BALL OF FIRE*; and Wilder's *THE LOST WEEKEND*, which won Oscars for Screenplay, Director, and Picture. Wilder said that he and Brackett were "Hollywood's happiest couple," but during *SUNSET BLVD.*'s writing, they feuded so often that it turned out to be their last project together.

Wilder's only other collaborator during the 1940s was Raymond Chandler, on Wilder's *DOUBLE INDEMNITY*, often cited as the quintessential film noir. *SUNSET BLVD.*, with its cynical and doom-laden first-person narration, claustrophobic atmosphere, low-key cinematography, and femme fatale, is a noir. It's also, as Richard Corliss has pointed out, a horror film, complete with floating corpse, gothic mansion, dead chimp, creepy butler, and vampire figure. Its sardonic humor also qualifies it eminently as a dark comedy. Perhaps above all, in Andrew Sarris's words, it's "the best Hollywood movie about Hollywood."



The original 1948 draft leaned more toward comedy, and Wilder first offered the role of Norma to Mae West, who, fortunately, turned it down, as did retired silent film stars Greta Garbo and Mary Pickford. Gloria Swanson, who had struggled unsuccessfully in the sound era, still was insulted that she had to do a screen test—she had been in movies since she was 15 years old, and had been one of the most celebrated silent film stars—but director George Cukor convinced her that Norma could be the role of her life. He was right: Swanson's tour-de-force performance made Norma simultaneously a femme fatale, a vampire, *and* a pathetic, self-deluded victim. Unfortunately, *SUNSET BLVD.* did not lead to a comeback: Swanson went on to do some TV and just four other films, the final two being *KILLER BEES* and *AIRPORT 1975*.

Newcomer Montgomery Clift, originally cast as Joe Gillis, dropped out two weeks before filming began. William Holden was a better choice anyway: at 31 he was only two years older than Clift, but he had a much more hardened quality. And there were slight parallels with the washed-up-before-his-time Gillis. Holden had made a big impact with *GOLDEN BOY* (1939) and *OUR TOWN* (1940), but his subsequent 18 films were mostly unremarkable. Holden was the real comeback kid: he became one of the biggest stars of the 1950s.

In the midst of shooting her last silent film, *QUEEN KELLY* (1928), Swanson had legendary director Erich von Stroheim fired, and the film was never completed, marking the end of von Stroheim's directorial career. Wilder mischievously cast von Stroheim as Norma's butler (and more than that), and the film that Norma shows Joe as a highlight of her stardom is the never-seen-before *QUEEN KELLY* (with von Stroheim as projectionist). Swanson's first important features had been directed by Cecil B. DeMille, who appears as himself, on the set of Paramount's *SAMSON AND DELILAH*; and there are cameos by silent film stars Buster Keaton, Anna Q. Nilsson, and H.B. Warner. The silent era had ended barely two decades earlier, yet it already was consigned to ancient history, with those luminaries labeled as "waxworks."

SUNSET BLVD. opened to almost unanimous critical praise. *The New York Times* called it a "rare blend of pungent writing, expert acting, masterly direction and unobtrusively artistic photography which quickly casts a spell over an audience and holds it enthralled to a shattering climax." The film was a box office success, and Hollywood rewarded the unflattering portrait of itself with 11 Oscar nominations, including for all four principal actors (none won, but the film did manage three Oscars, for Screenplay, Art Direction, and Music). Billy Wilder's career flourished in the ensuing decade, with films such as *STALAG 17* (Best Actor Oscar: William Holden), *SABRINA*, *WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION*, *SOME LIKE IT HOT*, and *THE APARTMENT*, and in 1989, *SUNSET BLVD.* was among the first 25 films selected for the National Film Registry.

DIRECTED BY **BILLY WILDER**

SCREENPLAY BY **BILLY WILDER, CHARLES BRACKETT, AND D.M. MARSHMAN JR.**

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **JOHN F. SEITZ**

PRODUCED BY **PARAMOUNT** (1950), 115 MINS.

STARRING **GLORIA SWANSON, WILLIAM HOLDEN, ERICH VON STROHEIM, AND NANCY OLSON**

DID YOU KNOW: WHEN THE CAMERA CREW ASKED WILDER THE LOOK HE WANTED FOR THE BURIAL CEREMONY FOR NORMA'S CHIMPANZEE, WILDER REPLIED, "YOU KNOW, THE USUAL MONKEY-FUNERAL SEQUENCE."

NEXT UP: DIRECTOR TSAI MING-LIANG EXPLORES THE ROMANTIC, MELANCHOLY QUEST FOR CONNECTION THROUGH LONG TAKES, PARALLEL NARRATIVES, AND SPECTRAL SWATHS OF COLOR, IN **WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?** (2001), SCREENING ON 35MM, **THURSDAY, APRIL 20 AT 7 P.M.**