

Melbourne Cinémathèque

The Big Carnival: The Films of Billy Wilder

2021

19 APRIL – 5 MAY

In a monumental career spanning seven decades, Billy Wilder (1906–2002) started out as a central-European émigré who spoke no English and rose to become one of the most widely celebrated writer-directors of Hollywood's Golden Age. The young Wilder developed an obsession with American films while working as a freelance tabloid crime reporter in 1920s Berlin. Following Hitler's rise to power in 1933, he found himself exiled in Paris where he directed his first film, *Mauvaise graine*, and from there he moved to Hollywood, where he brought an outsider's perspective and a journalist's eye for detail to the dark – and darkly comic – aspects of American life. Over a wildly successful career, Wilder became one of the most versatile filmmakers in Hollywood, switching freely from gritty potboilers and realist noirs to romantic melodramas and comic musicals, all defined by a sophisticated wit and crisp, clever dialogue. Themes of investigation and deception abound in his work, but he rejected genre clichés in favour of morally complicated characters and stories that deeply probed the ironies and contradictions of modern life. A lifelong reporter at heart, his restrained directorial style always reflected the primacy of storytelling and the written word to his work. "If the viewer notices direction", he once remarked, "you have failed". This season spans the length and breadth of Wilder's formidable directorial career featuring key but rarely screened works including the delightful farce *The Major and the Minor*, the bracingly cynical *Ace in the Hole*, and the irreverent and autumnal personal project *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*.

MONDAY 19 APRIL &
WEDNESDAY 21 APRIL



7:00PM MAUVAISE GRAINE

Billy Wilder and Alexandre Esway (1934)
77 mins : Unclassified 15+

Collaborating in Paris with a group of exiles, including composer Franz Waxman and screenwriters H.G. Lustig and Max Kolpé, Wilder made his directorial debut with a playful action-comedy about a rich playboy who falls in with a ragtag gang of car thieves. Wilder explored naturalistic on-the-fly filmmaking, including shooting on the streets of Paris with a camera mounted on a moving car, and his formal techniques, self-conscious criminals and sight gags foreshadow the *nouvelle vague* as well as his distinctive Hollywood style. Starring Danielle Darrieux.



8:30PM THE PRIVATE LIFE OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

Billy Wilder (1970)
125 mins : PG

Originally intended to run over three hours, Wilder's melancholy, deeply affectionate and subtly queer take on the "private life" and unpublished stories of the great detective was a passion project he had been working towards for over ten years. Brilliantly designed by Alexandre Trauner and utilising huge sets constructed at Pinewood Studios, this is Wilder's last great film and a significant influence on latter-day adaptations such as TV's *Sherlock*. Featuring one of Miklós Rózsa's most richly enigmatic scores it stars Robert Stephens, Colin Blakely and Christopher Lee.

MONDAY 26 APRIL &
WEDNESDAY 28 APRIL



7:00PM ACE IN THE HOLE

Billy Wilder (1951)
111 mins : PG

Wilder's acerbic, lacerating wit comes to the fore in this masterful social satire about the practices of journalism, the perils of newsworthiness and the morality of the masses gathering at the scenes of tragic accidents (hence the film's alternate title, *The Big Carnival*). In one of his greatest and most intense performances, Kirk Douglas plays a cynical newspaper hack who, for the sake of making front-page national news and resurrecting his career dragooned on a small-town paper, gambles with a man's life by forestalling his rescue from a collapsed mineshaft.



9:05PM KISS ME, STUPID

Billy Wilder (1964)
126 mins : PG

Dean Martin limns a comic self-portrait as a lecherous singer whose car "breaks down" in the small town of Climax, Nevada. Enter Kim Novak in full bombshell mode, closely followed by two amateur songwriters who hope Dino will make them rich. Raunchy, vulgar and outrageously funny, this is Wilder's harshest view of the American landscape since *Ace in the Hole* but its "rancid atmosphere conceals the virtues of the movie's classical structure... and deft comic timing" (J. Hoberman). Scripted by Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond, it was inevitably condemned by the Catholic Legion of Decency!

MONDAY 3 MAY &
WEDNESDAY 5 MAY



7:00PM THE MAJOR AND THE MINOR

Billy Wilder (1942)
101 mins : G

Coming after an incredibly successful screenwriting career, Wilder's first American feature as director includes many of his most beloved hallmarks. This audacious comedy of (sexual) manners features an array of iconic Golden-era Hollywood faces including Ray Milland and, as the street-smart city girl Susan Applegate, Ginger Rogers. Rogers' brilliantly manufactured comedic performance is crucial to maintaining the daring charade at the narrative's core that alternates between her impersonation of a 12-year-old girl and a grown-up woman. Co-scripted by Charles Brackett.



8:50PM STALAG 17

Billy Wilder (1953)
120 mins : G

Based on a successful Broadway play written by ex-inmates of Stalag 17B, Wilder's exquisitely detailed and sardonic adaptation provides a fascinating insight into the camaraderie, treachery, comedy and tragedy of prison life. Set during the intense 1944 Allied bombing campaign, it focuses on a group of American airmen and their attempts to uncover a spy within their midsts. A huge influence on films such as *The Great Escape*, it turns on the Oscar-winning performance by William Holden as a self-interested, widely distrusted recent arrival who must prove his innocence. With Otto Preminger.

Melbourne Cinémathèque 2021 Screenings

Presented by the Melbourne Cinémathèque and The Australian Centre For The Moving Image.

Curated by the Melbourne Cinémathèque.

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FILM CLASSIFICATIONS:

* Where a film is labelled "Unclassified 15+" viewers are required to be 15 years or older, unless accompanied by an adult.

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Articles on many films in the program can be found in 'CTEQ Annotations on Film', online at www.sensesofcinema.com

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