

I'm Ready for my Close-up, Mr. DeMille

ROYAL S. BROWN

SUNSET BLVD. (1950). Billy Wilder, director. Fullscreen (1.33:1), B&W, Dolby Digital 2.0. Commentary by Ed Sikov, featurettes, etc. Paramount.



In the ultimate “life imitates art” role, Gloria Swanson portrays Norma Desmond at career’s end.

Ed Sikov, who has written one book on *Sunset Blvd.* and another on Billy Wilder, notes in one of the excellent featurettes included on this Paramount DVD that the Austrian-born producer/writer/director, who died in 2002, stands as a kind of bridge between the old and the new Hollywood. Sikov suggests that the “bitter and sardonic” tone of the films directed and often scripted by Wilder, whose parents died in the Holocaust, is what carried him from Hollywood’s past into its present and beyond. I’m not sure it’s as simple as that. Three of Wilder’s bleakest looks at human nature—*Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Lost Weekend* (1945), and *A Foreign Affair* (1948)—came out during the ’40s, a filmic era not exactly associated with the bright side of life. Following the crushingly cynical *Sunset Blvd.* from 1950, Wilder would make *Ace in the Hole* (1951; AKA *The Big Carnival*), whose take on that same human nature is so relentlessly pessimistic that it left precious little darkness to explore. After that, Wilder, while not totally pulling his punches, submerged the nastier side of his vision in comedies, including perhaps the funniest picture ever made with one of the greatest last lines ever spoken, *Some Like It Hot* (1959). By the time he made his last film in 1981, the underrated comedy *Buddy Buddy*, Wilder, forever the consummate craftsman, sharp-tongued writer, and not totally reformed cynic, found himself standing almost totally outside the new Hollywood looking in.

Descriptions of *Sunset Blvd.*, in

which a young and largely unsuccessful writer (William Holden) finds himself fatally drawn into the fantasies, delusions, and, ultimately, madness of an aging but extremely wealthy silent-era actress named Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) living in a huge but dilapidated mansion on Hollywood’s Sunset Boulevard, inevitably focus on the film’s scathing portrait of the Hollywood establishment. The movie offers its share of biting-the-hand-that-feeds-it glimpses of the greed and insensitivity of producers and agents, not to mention the self-prostitution of writers. But the Hollywood of *Sunset Blvd.* ends up as an almost arbitrary milieu allowing Wilder to examine his usual themes involving the conscienceless narcissism, soullessness, and weakness displayed by human beings in their interactions with each other, money, and the establishment. The writer in *Sunset Blvd.* in particular is so fatalistically trapped by his tragic flaw(s) that even when, in the film’s heartbreaking climax, he is offered a way out by a particularly wholesome and intelligent young woman (Nancy Olson, in a performance about which much more needs to be written), all he can do is stand surrounded by the opulence and decadence of his self-made prison and send her away, an act that reveals both love and resignation.

The interactions between Wilder’s fictional Hollywood and the real Hollywood blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction so thoroughly that, rather than participating in the spectacle of a self-devouring industry, the viewer often has the eerie impression of wandering through a mirrored

labyrinth that offers no possible exit onto solid ground. The fifty-two-year-old Gloria Swanson courageously plays the role of a film star who is at exactly the same dead-end point in her career as Swanson was in hers, and the character finds herself in a situation where all she can do is play the role of the grande dame rather than being it. Norma Desmond’s German butler, who plays Bach on the organ while wearing white gloves, is, in the film, a former silent-film director who directed Desmond in her last hit. In “real” life the role is played, in one of the cinema’s great characterizations, by Erich von Stroheim, who directed Swanson in her last major silent film, *Queen Kelly* (1929), which at one point early on in *Sunset Blvd.* Desmond screens in her palatial home for the already helplessly ensnared writer. Later on Desmond/Swanson pays a visit to the Paramount Studios—the same Paramount Studios that produced *Sunset Blvd.*—to call on Cecil B. DeMille, who not only plays himself but used the cast and crew of the film he was shooting (*Samson and Delilah*) at the time as extras.

I can’t heap enough praise on Paramount’s immaculate, full-black-and-white-spectrum video transfer of this landmark film. Wilder had a particularly opulent visual style that in many ways leaves noir behind, and which has been captured by Paramount. Also notable is the musical score by Franz Waxman, whose symphonic jazz and crackling orchestral modernism put him right up there with a Leonard Bernstein or a Dmitri Shostakovich.

