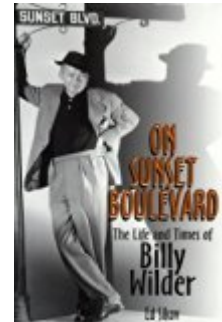


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ed Sikov. *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder*. New York, NY: Hyperion Press, 1998. 416 pp. \$17.45 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7868-8503-9; \$34.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7868-6194-1.

Reviewed by Robert C. Sickels (Whitman College)
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As a result of director Cameron Crowe's recently published *Conversations with Wilder*, Billy Wilder, at the age of 93, is enjoying something of a renaissance. Stories about the legendary Wilder have appeared in a number of major magazines, and Crowe has been ubiquitously promoting the book on the television and radio circuit. Unfortunately, a side-effect of the success of Crowe's book is that Ed Sikov's excellent *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder* has seemingly drowned in the deluge of *Conversations with Wilder*'s high profile.

The allure of Crowe's book is that he was granted unprecedented access to Wilder; Crowe made use of this access and modeled his book after Truffaut's *Hitchcock*, replete with blow by blow conversations about the majority of Wilder's films. Conversely, Sikov's biography is "unauthorized," meaning that he had no first hand access to Wilder. Indeed, in his preface Sikov acknowledges that Wilder declined his repeated interview requests, saying "the idea of sitting through an interview made him want to throw up." For his part, Sikov confesses that not having to face the likely onslaught of Wilder's famous verbal venom made him "as much relieved as disappointed." Strangely, Wilder's persona makes this lack of access more help than hinder. While Wilder is unquestionably an entertaining storyteller, he is also widely recognized as one of Hollywood's great fabricators; for every alleged incident, Wilder has any number of tales, each of which differs in intent and result. Accordingly, many of the stories recounted in Crowe's book also find their way into Sikov's. More importantly, Sikov did have access to a number of people who worked with Wilder as well as a rich body of existing film criticism. Because of his seamless blending of numerous first hand observations with the voluminous extant Wilder scholarship,

Sikov's book offers what is to date the most complete portrait of Wilder's work.

Sikov structures *On Sunset Boulevard* chronologically, beginning with Wilder's early life and career in Europe and going right up to the present day, during which Wilder has assumed well deserved elder statesman status in Hollywood. Once Wilder arrives in America (1934), the bulk of the remaining chapters revolve around individual films. Accordingly, we get requisite chapters on *Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Apartment*, etc. Although Sikov has little to say about Wilder's visual style, which perhaps should be expected in a work about a filmmaker whose glory years roughly paralleled the heyday of the classical Hollywood style, these chapters nevertheless fascinatingly detail the genesis of his films, both his hits and his failures, from inception, writing, and funding, to revision, filming, release, and reception. Of particular interest is Sikov's depiction of Wilder's somewhat abusive relationships with his co-writers, most notably Charles Brackett and I. A. L. Diamond.

While Sikov's account of the most successful years of Wilder's Hollywood career is interesting, it doesn't dramatically differ from what has already been written; but what makes *On Sunset Boulevard* unique is Sikov's equally intensive focus on Wilder's European career, particularly his years as first a jazz hound reporter and then a fledgling screenwriter learning his craft at Ufa, and the down years following his Hollywood success. While the early chapters frame Wilder's development against the backdrop of the rising tide of Nazism, the later sections recount his painful decline as he stubbornly persisted in making films that were increasingly out of synch with audiences who "preferred young Jedi Knights and vora-

cious sharks” to Wilder’s often vicious character driven films.

What’s missing in *On Sunset Boulevard* is what’s missing in virtually everything written about Wilder to date; a better picture of his personal life. Although we learn some things about his relationships with various women, co-workers, actors, friends, and (most entertainingly) enemies, we are still left with something of a hole in our knowledge of Wilder the man. Wilder’s stories, and the many stories about him, are ceaselessly interesting. But despite his loquaciousness, he has remained over the years in many ways a private man, refusing to

talk about things which might give us greater insight into what Sikov calls “the fastest, funniest, meanest mind in Hollywood.” Sikov wisely concedes this fact, writing “*On Sunset Boulevard* is the story of Billy Wilder’s life in motion pictures. It focuses on what he achieved on-screen and how he came to achieve it. . . . I hope to have done him justice.” He has and then some.

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