

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: The Lost Weekend

USA, 1945. Not Rated. 100 min

Cast: Ray Milland, Jane Wyman, Howard Da Silva, Phillip Terry, Doris Dowling, Frank Faylen; Writers: Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder; Music: Miklós Rózsa; Cinematographer: John F. Seitz; Producer: Charles Brackett; Director: Billy Wilder

When the actor Ray Milland received a copy of Charles Jackson's novel *THE LOST WEEKEND* from Paramount with the inscription, "Read it. Study it. You're going to play it," he was uneasy. He knew very little about alcoholism (apart from the fact that drunk people made him tense), and he worried that he was incapable of "serious acting". Milland recognized the power of the novel – the story of an alcoholic would-be writer and one desperate weekend – but it was unlike any motion picture story he had ever read, "downbeat and stark, with not one light moment."

The starkness of the film that was eventually made is its greatest enduring virtue. In the unrelieved despair of the protagonist and in the bleak views of the streets of New York, the director Billy Wilder created a brutal masterpiece, unusually frank for its time and still shocking today. In order to achieve the degree of realism that he sought, Wilder was stubborn in his production meetings at Paramount: he insisted upon shooting on location; he demanded that the set of Nat's Bar have four walls so he could shoot from all sides; he specified that the apartment of Don Birnam, the protagonist, have a genuine Greenwich Village atmosphere, complete with a tiny kitchenette; and he knew he wanted the talented cinematographer John Seitz, who had photographed *Double Indemnity* and who would later photograph *Sunset Boulevard*, to capture

the murky grays of the city. He lost one battle: he had envisioned a character actor playing the role of Don Birnam, but the studio convinced him that audiences were more likely to wish for the recovery of a leading man. Ray Milland was chosen.

On October 1, 1944, shooting began in New York City. One of the earliest and most significant scenes that was filmed was Don Birnam's long walk down Third Avenue in search of a pawn shop. Since the street was open to pedestrians, Seitz and his cameramen hid themselves inside a special box on the back of a truck and took documentary-style



footage of Ray Milland and anyone else who happened to pass by. Light was a problem in New York, and days of filming were lost waiting for it. Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett, his long-time writing partner, both caught terrible colds. Ray Milland, still unsure of himself, arranged to spend a night in the alcoholic ward at Bellevue Hospital, only to find the howling of the inmates so oppressive that he escaped at three in the morning in a hospital gown and bare feet. On October 19, Wilder and Brackett returned to Los Angeles to shoot on the film's sets and to deal with the complaints of Paramount executives and industry censors, both of whom wanted to know why the script was still unfinished.

But none of the minor problems that arose during filming were as devastating as the response of the first preview audience: they laughed. And when they stopped laughing, they were repulsed. Luckily, the fault was in the score, which the filmmakers knew was temporary but which the audience did not. It was urbane and jazzy, with shades of Gershwin, right from the opening shot of the Manhattan skyline that leads to the whiskey bottle dangling from Don Birnam's window; this was the introduction to a sophisticated comedy, not a wrenching psychological drama. Wilder and Brackett gave the Hungarian composer Miklós Rózsa license to compose a more appropriate score. Rózsa chose as his chief instrument an electronic box called a theremin, which he had just used to great success in Hitchcock's *Spellbound*. (The theremin's other-worldly sound became popular in the science-fiction films of the 1950s.) With a new, haunting score (and a revised ending), the picture suddenly seemed full of promise.

And so it was that on Oscar night, 1946, *THE LOST WEEKEND* won the awards for Best Director, Best Picture, and Best Screenplay. Finally, Ingrid Bergman rose to the podium to announce the Best Actor. "Mr. Milland, are you nervous?" she said. "It's yours." The next morning Brackett and Wilder returned to the Paramount Writers Building to find whiskey bottles hanging from every window.

– Joshua J. Friedman



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