

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *SUNSET BLVD.*

USA, 1950. Unrated. 110 min

Cast: William Holden, Gloria Swanson, Erich von Stroheim;

Music: Jay Livingston, Franz Waxman; Cinematographer: John F. Seitz; Producer: Charles Brackett;

Director: Billy Wilder

an essentially tragic figure, a monster made of fan letters, box office receipts and a lifetime of empty flattery. As Cecil B. DeMille (also one of Swanson's directors, here appearing as himself) says, "A dozen press agents working overtime can do terrible things to the human spirit". The film is partially an exploration of how, exactly, such monsters are created and who is to blame when they meet their, more often than not, sad conclusions.

Wilder, an Austrian-Hungarian immigrant whose parents were killed in the Holocaust, brought what so many exiled European directors did to their American films: the perspective of an outsider. Like fellow émigré Douglas Sirk, Wilder saw America in general, and Hollywood in particular, in



a somewhat harsher light than many Americans, and the dissenting voice in his films is often distinct. But unlike Sirk, Wilder took few pains to submerge his criticisms. Where Sirk's audience could easily miss the sub-textual jabs at American values, there are no mistaking Wilder's true feelings. His cynicism, though not unusual today, was shocking enough at the time that mogul Louis B. Mayer, outraged at Wilder's gall in attacking the industry, is said to have collared the director at a test screening of the film and threatened to run him out of town. But Mayer's threats were empty. Within a year, the 65-year-old legend was himself run out of town, fired by the studio he'd built. If this altercation is factual, it can hardly be more appropriate.

Sunset Boulevard is also a study of the transitions between the stages of film's evolution as an art form and an industry. Desmond's star fell because of the advent of talking pictures. Haughtily telling Gillis in the legendary line that, "I am big. It's the pictures that got small," Desmond sums up a main

difference between the silent era and the sound era: silent pictures were big. The acting (showing its roots in the theater) was broad and exaggerated, the stories were grand and melodramatic. It was, to a large extent, the cinema of spectacle. Desmond's dream of writing and starring in *Salome* reveals how irretrievably rooted she is in this artistic sensibility. And Gillis, sarcastically telling her, "They'll love it in Pamona" (a reference to test screenings), highlights how obsolete such films had become.

Soon to become just as obsolete as silent film, of course, was American film's second stage, the studio system, which was winding down just around the time of *Sunset Blvd.* It had received its deathblow two years earlier when the studios' so-called "vertical integration" (wherein large studios controlled the means of production, distribution and exhibition of films) was broken up in the government's anti-trust suit. This led directly to the rise of the independent producer and the free-agent actor, and in this new system Wilder flourished as a writer-director-producer, scoring hit after hit with a range of acerbic comedies and gritty dramas (Wilder scored 14 Oscar nominations in his career and placed four films in the AFI's Top 100 list, the second most of any director). But Wilder, like everyone in Hollywood history, would see his career decline.

The same cynical voice that had made his work so distinct began to seem strident and bitter, and audiences resented it. By the late 1960s, as a new generation of maverick filmmakers were taking over Hollywood, Wilder was having trouble getting film projects together. One can easily imagine Wilder's phone calls, like Desmond's, going unanswered. And who is to blame for this cycle of consumption and disposal? Certainly, as *Sunset Blvd.* says, the industry is largely to blame, and the press plays a part, as well. But the film also points out another offender in this fevered cult of personality and fame. As Desmond herself says in her final, mesmerizing descent into madness, it is us, the fans, "those wonderful people out there in the dark."

- Written by Lawrence Fahey

"I sure turned into an interesting driveway," Joe Gillis (Holden) tells butler Max von Mayerling (von Stroheim, one of Swanson's real-life directors) early on in *Sunset Blvd.* This must qualify as one of the greatest understatements in screen history. Gillis is speaking, of course, of the driveway belonging to faded star Norma Desmond (Swanson). A down-and-out screenwriter literally on the run from automobile repo men, Gillis appreciates that driveway mostly for what lays at its end: "A great big empty garage, just standing there going to waste," he tells us in the voiceover narration. With his car tucked safely out of sight in one of the carports, he explores the grounds of the mansion to which it belongs. It is a lavish, ornate structure, "The kind crazy movie people built in the crazy '20s." But it is now in a state of elaborate romantic decay, its swimming pool filled with leaves and rats, its Spanish tile roof crumbling, its glory days lost and gone. Just as antiquated is the mansion's primary fixture, Desmond herself, calling to Gillis from an upstairs window and mistaking him, we'll soon learn, for an undertaker come to help bury her dead pet chimpanzee. Desmond, too, is dead in a way, "a sleepwalker," as Gillis will call her. She just doesn't know it yet.

Wilder is best known for his sharp comedies, but *Sunset Boulevard* qualifies as arguably his greatest film in part because it is more than just a comedy, more than the heady romp of *Some Like It Hot* or the cheeky satire of *The Apartment*. Working with longtime collaborator Charles Brackett (*Sunset Boulevard* was their last collaboration on a theatrical feature, much to both their detriment), Wilder (with able assistance from the brilliant Swanson) creates in Desmond a heartbreaking blend of pathos, power and delusion. She is not simply to be laughed at, although her preposterous theatricality, ravenous megalomania and absurd wardrobe make her the butt of the joke more than occasionally. At her heart, Desmond is