Professor David Peimer | The Genius of Billy Wilder

– Right so thanks again to Lauren as always for all your kind help and time. And hi to everybody everywhere and hope you're well. We're going to start today looking at Billy Wilder and primarily the movie, the main, in my opinion, his primary film, "Some Like it Hot" but with a bit of mention of some of the others as well. And obviously that's the one with Marilyn Monroe. And thought about this quite long and hard before having this title, The Genius of Billy Wilder. But I think there is something quite remarkable about him if one thinks of him as an artist, as a filmmaker, and the sheer volume and quality of the films that he made and that he wrote them and directed them is quite extraordinary. Aside from the number of Academy Awards that he won for writing, directing, for best film, and so on, it's the quality of so many of these films, which I want to suggest fundamentally comes from the writing. And the other thing for me about him is that given the life that he went through and we'll come to a bit of his bio in a moment but essentially getting out of Berlin in 1933 to Paris and then to Hollywood and escaping the Nazis. But what happened to the rest of his family as I'm sure many will know, was the horror and catastrophe of the camps. So it's all of that going on with Billy Wilder. And yet he arrives totally foreign language, he has to learn a whole language. He has to make connections, networks and so on, and yet manages to write such remarkable scripts. Sure often co-writing with his partner, Diamond, but nevertheless and one or two with Raymond Chandler. Nevertheless, the incredible amount of, it's the writing of the scripts and the storytelling ability and the brilliant editing in the films that to me make him really, really stand out to possibly together with people like Woody Allen, Groucho, obviously in terms of comedy and then others like Bob Dylan, we've spoken about Leonard Cohen, you know, in terms of artists who are Jewish, Jewish artists over the last century. And the extraordinary output, the extraordinary achievement. And when one steps back and just looks at the scale of achievement and the magnitude and the quality, it's quite remarkable. So Billy Wilder for me comes as one of the great film artists of the century. And anybody in film always knows all about their films and, you know, has this almost reverence towards him. So I want to look at his work and his writing ability. The film obviously we're looking primarily at "Some Like It Hot" and why it is so superb.

But in addition, I think there are a couple of important things to say just at the start which I want to suggest and I have felt this with other Jewish artists of the 20th century where there is something of which, and it is a truth not just a cliche. I think it is something of the outsider, something of the outsider, but on the inside, I mean, in Hollywood you can't get more inside, but it's the outsider status trying to find a position in a new insider culture. And some people have argued that the crisis of our times is a crisis of identity. And I think in his times and these earlier periods and even after the war

with Woody Allen and others and so on, there's this constant, if identity wasn't a central issue, it was at least a haunting shadow always on whatever the changes societies in the West would undergo. And identity obviously has a close possible link with nationalism when economic and other times get bad. But it's this question of identity and how he forges an identity in the new American culture in the West, but yet takes something of the middle European, obviously the middle European, Austrian German culture, obviously with him to America and succeeds beyond possibly his dreams. So there's something of the outsider which I think is profound, and I think it's very linked to what he achieved and the others like Woody Allen and so on certainly in comedy that we'll be looking at. Then I think a second main point is the bringing of irony. And often it's been called, we are not only in a post-modern age to use the cliche, but an age of irony. And that's a very interesting idea where we look at his period and our period. I think there is a connection where the ironic becomes almost not only the main device in drama or theatre or film, but the ironic attitude, the ironic voice becomes the only way to understand what is going on with all the contradictions and paradoxes in life today. So for me, there's the outsider insider question. There's the irony. Obviously this links to him being Jewish, the two are pretty clear. And then something I mentioned with Woody Allen and I think it applies to Billy Wilder as well. And we see this in the main characters where you have the outsider who has to rely on his wits to outwit the characters who represent the host culture. And I mentioned this with Woody Allen, I think it's with Groucho, and a lot of others, it's the obvious use and wit not only as comedy, but wit in terms of all the machinations and opportunities using the mind really gives a person. And so the mind becomes the centre and the abilities of the mind. And of course this harks back to a certain Talmudic, rabbinical educational tradition in Jewish history and Jewish culture. So in Hannah Arendt's phrase for me, the parvenu, the upstart who makes good but how does he make good? It's by outwitting the characters or the systems of the host culture.

And then the last point that I would make with Billy Wilder is the character of the clown. Not that he is the character but obviously in his comedies we have the idea of the clown, but a very different kind of clown which is where the lineage of Groucho, Billy Wilder, Woody Allen, possibly even parts of Neil Simon click in where the clown character compared to the clown in Shakespeare and in old times where the clown would be more the narrator or the observer or commentator on the action of the play. Here the clown takes agency, the clown comic characters are the ones who direct the action of the movie and they take agency. They are the deciders. They are not the follower, observer, commentators. And I think this is a huge development in the role of the comic clown in film. And it is happening in theatre. It was happening from Gogol in Russian theatre in the late 19th century and then happening through Dario Fo in Italy and many others where that clown becomes a central protagonist and determines action. And

the last one in a way is of course the old idea of mistaken identity, which goes way back in theatre and is so contemporary. It still works. An extraordinary device, you know, in "Some Like It Hot" where the two male characters, Tony Curtis, Jack Lemmon take on female persona, and are dressed in drag for 80-90% of the movie. So it's a classic play on mistaken identities which audiences love. You know, we all know it from some of the great classics of Shakespeare and many others but the audience is in on the joke but many of the other characters in the movie are not. The two main ones obviously are. And there's an enormous amount of entertaining fun in that old comic theatrical device. Okay, so just to remind, I mean if you haven't had a chance to maybe re-look at the film recently, in essence Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon are two ordinary, down-and-out musicians in Chicago. They witness a killing by some mobsters and the mobsters are after them because they've been the witnesses. And so they decide they're going to dress up in drag and they're going to take the train to Florida and become part of a 30 female person band musicians who are going to play in some hotels in Florida. So they dress in drag and they dress as women to fit in and be part of the female only orchestra or band. And that's the basic premise of the whole movie. And then all sorts of things that happen you know, along the way after that. Just a couple of quick things about Billy Wilder, his achievements and this is a career in Hollywood of five decades. He gets there in 1933.

If we can go onto the next slide, please. Thanks, Lauren. So 1906 and he gets to Hollywood in 1933 and then he passes away in 2002. So he spans that entire century of before the war, during, and obviously after. Now these are pictures obviously of Wilder himself. One of my favourites is the bottom one on the left. And that is when he is in Berlin taken in 1926 working as a journalist for a Berlin tabloid. You can see in that, you can see the love of the West, of American, of gangster, of culture, the look of irony and wit. You know, he's going to make it, he's going to push, he's got ambition and the look of cheek and charm and wit and cleverness and he's manufacturing an image in that picture. I love that picture of him. And it is of course, classic, you know of many men who use these sort of images. And a bit of the Leonard Cohen look with a hat that Leonard Cohen took up much later. But the angle of the hat, it's just so perfectly poised and it's filmic. That's a little favourite image of mine. And then of course he changes over the years. If we go onto the next slide, please. Thanks. This is much later. It's Billy Wilder with Gloria Swanson for "Sunset Boulevard." If we can go onto the next one, please. So this is an image from "Some Like It Hot" and this shows here on the top left is the Jack Lemmon character. I'll show some clips of the film in a little while. But the Jack Lemmon character on the top left glancing sideways and the Tony Curtis character is next to him but dressed in obviously in the female clothes part of the band. There's the Marilyn Monroe image and there's the others playing. So this is a still taken from the movie. The reason I wanted this was because we can get a sense of, you know, everything he's worked with

Marilyn Monroe, the body, the neck, the head, the angle, the eyes, everything he's worked with Jack Lemmon. He's not succumbing to the temptation of looking at the camera nor is she. He's looking at Tony Curtis next to him. But the camera is coming at another angle and he's constantly aware, Jack Lemmon is constantly aware of Tony Curtis. And then as the movie runs and the Marilyn Monroe character and others never needs to really look at the camera. The camera will find him and it's one of his abilities, brilliant abilities of Jack Lemmon's which Billy Wilder raved about, raved about Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau in particular and Marilyn Monroe and we come on to some fascinating thoughts of his in a bit.

Okay, if we could look at the next slide, please. Thanks. So this is just one of the posters to show obviously the fun, the comedy of it, and the wit intended in the triangle of these three characters of "Some Like It Hot." Okay, so a couple of things that this guy has really achieved in five decades in Hollywood, aside from learning a language from scratch, he's writing in English, directing in English, and he's writing some of the best film scripts certainly in comedy ever written: "Sunset Boulevard," "Some Like It Hot," "The Apartment," and others "Lost Weekend." He's really regarded as one of the most brilliant and versatile filmmakers 'cause not only comedy, also did some serious stuff, "Stalag" and, you know and some of the other movies. He is nominated as best director for the Academy Award eight times and he wins twice. I think it's four or five directors in the history of the Academy Awards have won the Oscar twice for directing. And for the screenplay, he's nominated for the Academy Award 13 times, winning three times. The only person nominated for more screenplay Academy Awards is Woody Allen who just overtook him much later in his career. So this is, you know, if we just really think about it to nevermind winning, just to be nominated 13 times for script writing, for me, that's a phenomenal achievement. To be nominated eight times as director, extraordinary. He gets there at '33 and he works on various short films and other films, et cetera not major at the moment. "Double Indemnity" is probably the first most important one in 1944 which he co-wrote with Raymond Chandler. And then "Sunset Boulevard," of course everyone knows it in 1950 where he won the second of his screenplay Academy Awards. "Stalag 17," very interesting film, which is obviously about the prisoners in 1953. And then a very interesting film but I think is very underrated, "Sabrina" in 1954 is with Humphrey Bogart and William Holden and Audrey Hepburn. And it's again, the triangle. He often plays with a classic triangle and the two men and a woman. But if you look at it, it's one of the warmest performances of Bogart. 'Cause as we all know, Bogart is usually the cynical sort of semi macho, you know, tough guy image, sort of classic of "Casablanca" and others. But in "Sabrina," Billy Wilder gets a vulnerability out of him, a real softness not only in the moment of falling in love, but a growing softness of the character throughout the whole film. You know, which I think is a huge achievement that he gets it out of Bogart. And the comedy and the wit there, the classic,

the two brothers going for the one girl and then, you know, the one giving up all the money and the wealth and the future of the business to go for the girl. So he uses classic comic structures with characters but the writing is so tight, the directing is so tight, and the editing of the scenes. For Billy Wilder, it was the story above everything. Tell the story, get on with it, cut to the chase, move on. Very similar to the way David Mamet talks about playwriting and film. Cut anything that is not necessary, cut it out. It may be a fantastic line, a fantastic image, cut it. And it's very different to Hitchcock and Orson Welles and others of his generation where the shot itself is often so fascinatingly constructed. And he said himself that he was very different to them and others, not better or worse, just different because he felt anything that distracted from the storytelling shouldn't be in it. So just get on with telling the story was his primary focus. And that's what he stuck to all his life, very clear. And Mamet is very similar in his ways of making film and theatre.

Okay, then he goes on with directing Monroe in "The Seven Year Itch" we all know in '55 and the great one for me, "Some Like It Hot" in '59, then "The Apartment" which wins awards as well. Seven movies with Jack Lemmon, four of them co-star Walter Matthau. And the first collaboration we know "Fortune Cookie" in 1966. I mean, just throwing out these names, we all know these names are films even if it's years ago we saw them. But these were all written and directed by the same person. It's an extraordinary achievement. "Double Indemnity," "Sunset Boulevard," "Some Like It Hot," "The Apartment" was voted in the American Film Institute, top 100 films of all time, four movies by one writer, director in the top 100 of all time by the American Film Institute. That's an extraordinary vote. And for the best comedy is "Some Like It Hot" voted by the American Film Institute. So that's to give you a sense of the achievements. Samuel Wilder, as was the original name, he came from a family of Polish Jews, small town, which was part of the Austrian Hungarian empire of the time. Much later living in America, he said the town he grew up in was half an hour from Vienna by telegraph. His mother described him as a wild and vivacious, intelligent, young kid. He was inspired by watching Buffalo Bill Wild West shows, American movies always obsessed and inspired. His parents had a successful cake shop in a train station which grew into a chain of railroad cafes. His father, Max, died when Billy was 22 and the family moved to Vienna. But Wilder decided not to go to the University of Vienna which there wasn't much pressure. And instead he wanted to become a journalist. He then gets a job in Berlin with a tabloid and begins working as a screenwriter as well. And writes part of the writing team of about 12 movies in Berlin. This is before he leaves. And then of course comes the advent of Hitler in '33. He goes to Paris and then relocates as I said to Hollywood. His mother, grandmother, his stepfather are all murdered in the Holocaust. He's the only one of his immediate family in that sense that manages that gets to the free world before. He works as a screenwriter in '33. And obviously this has a massive impact on him all the time. Then

interestingly in 1945, he was asked to make a documentary by the American Psychological Warfare Department and he made a movie called "Death Mills," a documentary which was ostensibly to educate Germans about the atrocities in 1945.

Okay, this is just to give you an idea of his life before the war and some of the salient facts if we like. It's interesting because in 1950 when he writes "Sunset Boulevard," he's aware of the fading dreams of the silent movie era which is "Sunset Boulevard," obviously the theme. Gloria Swanson, the main character, she dreams of a comeback with delusions of her greatness from a bygone era. And I think there's a sense of dreaming of the past but without a naive nostalgia. And in "Some Like It Hot," there's a sense of a possible future. We can always make something happen when things go wrong and disastrous. The Lemmon and Curtis characters will make a plan, will find something, will outwit the gangsters coming to hunt us and you know, whoever else. We can always quickly come up with something. So it's fascinating for me that contrast between how he looks back at the past and how he looks to the future as this outsider Jewish filmmaker. I mentioned some of all the awards that he's won. Interestingly, that he had discussions with Groucho, very serious discussions with Groucho to do a comedy which was going to be titled, sorry, I've just lost this here for a moment which was going to be titled "A Day at the United Nations" with Groucho and the Marx Brothers but it was abandoned when Chico Marx died in 1961. So we have all of this and the quality, the calibre of people he's working with, he's friendly with, he's obviously mixing with. This is the top of the top. And of course we have the Hollywood studio system and the Jewish and other individuals running the studio system. Extraordinary. And then the collaborations with Marilyn Monroe on "The Seven Year Itch" and "Some Like It Hot." When "Some Like It Hot" was released in 1959, it came without a production code seal of approval. In other words, the American censors they didn't ban it but they didn't approve of it because of the film's "sexual comedy" and that it had a "cross-dressing theme." And in other films, there was another one of his "The Lost Weekend" about alcoholism. He wasn't scared to take on certain things which would push the boundaries. And of course we know the great joke at the end of the movie. "Nobody's perfect." I've mentioned the American Film Institute selected it the best comedy, the British Film Institute in 2012. And these are huge numbers of people voting in each country voted that it was the second best comedy of all time. Okay, I'll give you this as a couple of examples. And then towards the end of his life he said that he had wanted to make or much later in his life, "Schindler's List." And I'm quoting, he said, "I wanted to do it as a memorial to my mother, my grandmother, and my stepfather, who I loved all of them and they were murdered in the Holocaust." And that's a quote from him as to why he had wanted to do "Schindler's List." And if we think of the extraordinary trajectory of doing comedy and brilliance with comedy and writing and directing and then to do "Schindler." Spielberg, you know, has a totally different kind of

trajectory but also moves extraordinarily from, you know, the fantasy sci-fi genre much later to "Schindler," "Saving Private Ryan" and so on. Okay, Billy Wilder was one of only two American directors who opposed the House of Un-American Activities, the McCarthy Era. John Huston was the other, the great director, John Huston. And John Huston said of it afterwards. "Billy was brave. Let's not forget Billy was a naturalised German. There were over 200 directors and Billy and I alone protested against the loyalty oath. He risked everything but he did it." The Spanish filmmaker, Fernando Trueba who won a 1993 Academy Award for the best foreign language film. He said, "I would like to believe in God in order to thank God, but I just believe in Billy Wilder so thank you Mr. Wilder."

And there are many, many others, filmmakers who have this reverence to Billy Wilder in terms of the writing and the directing. And you know, there are many that we can go on with, but it's quite an extraordinary achievement. In his journalist career, just one or two references where you can see at the age of 19, 20, 21, writing in the tabloids, he wrote about an all female musical troupe called the Tiller Girls who were a famous British dance group. And they came to Berlin and arriving at the Westbahnhof station. And this is what Billy wrote in 1926 for the tabloid that he was working for. "This morning 34 of the most enticing legs emerged from the Berlin Express train when it arrived at Westbahnhof station. Those figures, those legs, the way they got out of the train, my God, you should have been there." This prefigures the idea of "Some Like It Hot." And when you look at his journalist writings from in his early 20 to mid 20s, a lot of the ideas that later became movies are there. I just wanted to share that one example that the idea he saw and absorbed so much of what was going on in his life to then years, decades later, put them into films. You can see in the pieces, the early pieces he wrote, the desire to entertain and the desire to play and the desire to comment on society and three-dimensional characters. He said himself of his characters. "My characters try to claw their way through an unforgiving world with wit and humour often." It's a different kind of wit. It's not necessarily belly laughs and guffawing. It's an intelligent, fairly subtle, but you're constantly smiling or laughing to yourself wit. Okay, if we could show the first film clip, please. That's just Shirley MacClaine and Jack Lemmon in "The Apartment." This is with Jack Lemmon and Billy Wilder.

(A video clip of the 1960 film "The Apartment" plays)

– I called Mama. She was so happy she cried. She wants you to have her wedding gown. It's white lace.

– Osgood I can't get married in your mother's dress. She and I, we are not built the same way.

– We can have it altered.

– Oh no, you don't. Osgood, I'm going to level with you. We can't get married at all.

– Why not?

– Well, in the first place, I'm not a natural blonde.

– Doesn't matter.

– I smoke. I smoke all the time.

– I don't care.

– I have a terrible past. For three years now, I've been living with a saxophone player.

– I forgive you.

– I can never have children.

– We can adopt some.

– But you don't understand, Osgood. I'm a man.

– Well, nobody's perfect.

– [Jack Lemmon] Maybe nobody's perfect but Billy Wilder comes as close to it as you'll find among filmmakers in Hollywood today and also yesterday. I'm Jack Lemmon and I was fortunate enough to make half a dozen pictures with Billy and had a chance to watch him up close as writer, director, and producer. Billy Wilder is responsible for more classic films than any of his contemporaries. But it's his talent as a writer on which all of them are based. Audiences like to believe that actors make up the lines as they go along. But I can tell you that we don't. Although some of us try. But not with Billy Wilder. Vienna 1908, that's Billy in the centre. His parents had wanted a girl so they put him in a dress. At the tender age of two, Billy Wilder already began rehearsing for "Some Like It Hot." But that film, the first I made with Billy, with Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe, was a long way off in Billy's crowded future. It was only one movie in his astonishing list of film credits extending over six decades from 1929 through 1989 including some of the most memorable films ever made from farce like "The Major and the Minor" to film noir like "Sunset Boulevard." In the words of one film critic, "early on he developed the tightly woven intricate narrative structures marked by incredible reversals, paradoxes, and inversions that would characterise his best American work." Another put it more simply, "Billy Wilder has a brain full of razor blades." Wilder arrived in Hollywood in 1933, part of a large wave of German and Austrian talent whose exit from Europe was

hurried immeasurably by the rise to power of that perfect heavy Adolf Schicklgruber, also known as Adolf Hitler. In 1938, Billy and screenwriter, Charles Brackett began a collaboration that quickly made them one of Hollywood's hottest teams writing such screenplays as "Bluebeard's Eighth Wife," "Midnight," "Ninotchka," and "Ball of Fire." Billy continued writing his onscreen plays even after he began directing such films as "The Major and the Minor" and "Double Indemnity." Back with Brackett at Paramount, he wrote and directed "The Lost Weekend" and "Sunset Boulevard." Then in 1957 he began a collaboration with a new partner, screenwriter, I.A.L. Diamond. Billy and Iz writing together and Billy directing "The Apartment," "Irma la Douce," and "Some like It Hot" among many others until Diamond's untimely death. Talent cannot be taught. But Billy Wilder can teach us a great deal about the technique of screenwriting which he has studied for 60 years in the kindergarten known as Hollywood. The foundation's cameras caught up with that brain full of razor blades in his offices in Beverly Hills. Asking the questions you may occasionally hear the voices of Jeff Silverman, screenwriter and journalist, Paul Lucey, formally of the faculty of the USC Film School, and Mel Shavelson, president of the Writers Guild Foundation. And I'll get out of the way.

– [Interviewer] Billy, how would you determine structure?

– Structure to me is, compare it with building a house, you have to have a base where the house is going to stand. You have to have walls, you have to have pillars that are going to hold it up, the staircase, the second story, whatever. It is a kind of a mixture. Writing a movie's a mixture of architecture and forgive me the pompous word, poetry of storytelling on a certain level. It has to have a very solid thing so that the second act follows the first act. It's strong enough to keep the audience in the seats, to see the third act what is happening there. But you need that very, very, very strongly. It's not that I make myself a drawing and a blueprint. it's just kind of an instinctive thing. I'm talking about myself because you've talked to another 500 writers. Everybody has got his own method. Some just start writing, you know. Some have the kind of flighty mind, we have a very good example now, "Forest Gump," you know, writers who function like "Forest Gump." You don't know where it's going. You can't do that with a picture. I mean, I couldn't do it with a picture.

– [Interviewer] Well, how do you do it?

– I tell you, I manage it, kind of another unique thing that I don't like it if you write a scene and we say, we'll fix that later, we will manicure it and go to the next scene, to the next scene. I just go back to the first scene until it is about as good as possible. I may change something subsequently.

– Thanks if we can hold it there, please, Lauren. Thank you. So I

wanted to show this 'cause it gives a sense of Jack Lemmon and his perception of Billy Wilder in the beginning, and then a bit of a glimpse of Billy Wilder himself speaking. And so clear when you look at the writing and you see the scripts, you can see it's worked word-for-word, line-for-line, the amount of effort and time as later Woody Allen as others, you know and as Jack Lemmon said, none of it is left up for improvisation or you know, make it up. It's written. That opening scene that I showed at the very beginning of this clip which is the final scene. I'm sure we all know it, the famous scene from "Some Like It Hot" where, "I can't marry you because I'm a man." Finally, Jack Lemmon takes off the drag, the woman's costume. And Jay Cook, you know, the fantastic vaudeville actor, he's 67 there. And he says, "Nobody's perfect." If there was ever an ironic outsider and dare I say it Jewish influenced line it's that. It's gone down in film folklore as one of the greatest lines of all time. "Nobody's perfect." There was a great line from Gloria Swanson in "Sunset Boulevard" where the William Holden character tells her, she's an ageing silent star et cetera. "You used to be big." And Swanson replies, "I am big. It's the pictures that got small." So it's this brilliant ability to twist and turn, raise the blade if you like, the language and the wit and at the end, "Well, nobody's perfect." And that phrase, it just makes almost a perfect ending to one of the most brilliantly written scripts that I've ever come across in the whole film. And once you have a line like that at the end, you just can't top it so you just end it there, finished. And I think even the actors were stunned at the ability of the writer to build it to such an ending, you know as he does there when Jack Lemmon, you know, goes over with Osgood, the millionaire to marry and all the rest of it. Okay, if we could show the next clip, please. So this is earlier on in the film when they're arriving at the train station.

(A video clip of the 1959 film "Some Like it Hot" plays)

– What's the matter now?

– How do they walk in these things?

– Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis.

– How do they keep their balance?

– It must be the way the weight is distributed. Now, come on.

– It is so draughty. They must be catching cold all the time, huh?

– Will you quit stalling? We're going to miss the train.

– I feel naked. I feel like everybody's staring at me.

– With those legs, are you crazy? Now, come on.

- Uh-oh. It's no use. We're not going to get away with it, Joe.

- My name is Josephine and this was your idea in the first place.

- Can we hold it there please, Lauren?

- Look how she moves.

- Thank you. So I wanted to show this because it's obviously showing the entrance of Marilyn Monroe in this section. She plays a down-and-out ukulele player who joins the group and has the dream of marrying a millionaire. So here's Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis dressed as women. The acting is in the writing. You know, you couldn't, your legs, the way that the, the shoes, the heels, et cetera. It's giving the actor all the time, you know, the clues of what to act, what to do. And what he's achieving also is the story is carrying on. For him the story was the most important as it was for well, Mr. Aristotle. What I also want to mention here is that when these guys were, you know, when they met and were cast in it and so on, and were battling how on earth are we going to make these characters believable? And yet everybody knows they're real men but at the same time dressed in drag for 80% of the film. You know, how do you do it? And as Billy Wilder kept saying, well, to encourage you to every now and then, do something that is obviously male, be aware of you know, you're trying to be female, you're not trying to perfect female but you're trying to be it. You know, and it's one of the classic ideas given, you know, if you're trying to act drunk, don't act drunk, act trying to be sober. Hmm. And Billy Wilder twigs on all of this very intelligently, very early on in his way of working with Curtis and Jack Lemmon. And what I liked is Tony Curtis was interviewed and spoke about how Jack Lemmon came up with a semi, this fairly neurotic character. And we get it in "The Odd Couple" as well, this sort of neurotic, you know, fairly familiar character. And he had a problem, Tony Curtis 'cause how's he going to find something different in relation to that? And that's when it dawned on him to play quite a high status in control, in charge, almost graceful, you know, pretending to be more aristocratic kind of character to contrast with the more neurotic, lower status, lower self image of the Jack Lemmon. And we get it in this little scene. We can't get away with it. We're never going to do it. He's self doubting all the time. The Lemmon character and the Curtis one reminding him your idea. Come on. And in that way, Tony Curtis sussed on how to make the chemistry between the two so fantastic. And I think that's such a big part of you know, this whole secret to the film, aside from the writing is how these two worked so hard. Okay, if we can go on to the next clip, please. This is an interview with Jack Lemmon.

(A video clip of an interview with Jack Lemmon plays)

- [Jack Lemmon] About four years after I started, I did about five

years. The first film was late '54 and "Some Like It Hot" came along in '59. And we had met socially just, hello, how are you? That's all. And I had admired his work, my God from the time I was a kid. But I didn't know him well. He came up to me in a restaurant and I was sitting with Felicia and having a bite and I said, Hello Billy. And he says, "Listen." He says, "could I sit for just a moment? I just want to say something very quick.' And I said, sure, sit down. And so he says, "I got this thing here." He says, "it takes place, there are a couple of guys, they're musicians and they see the St. Valentine's Day Massacre with the gangsters with the they see you and you run with this other guy and now you got to hide because they're going to go and they're going to get you. And so you join an all girl orchestra which means you're going to be in drag for about 3/4 of the picture. You want to do it?" And for some reason I thought for one split second. And I said, yes. He said, "okay." Then he walked away. And about six months later the script showed up and I read it. I thought it was the most brilliant farce I'd ever read. But it literally happened that way.

– It holds up still today of course. Let's just remind ourselves, actually we have a moment from that.

– Could you hold that please, Lauren?

– This is one of the most memorable.

– Okay, thank you. If we can show the next clip please? And this is the beach scene with Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe. So all the orchestra go to swim in the beach at Florida. Tony Curtis is dressed up as pretending to be a multimillionaire sailor

(A video clip of the 1959 film "Some Like it Hot" plays)

– Just a little trick I picked up in the elevator. Look out here comes the big one. Wee!

– Daphne, I had no idea you're such a big girl.

– Oh sugar, you should have seen me before I went on a diet.

– I mean your shoulders and your arms.

– Oh well that's from carrying that bull fiddle around all day.

– That's one thing I envy you for.

– What's that?

– You're so flat chested. Clothes hang better on you than they do on me.

- [Band Member] Watch out, Daphne.

- Sugar, come on, let's play ball.

- Okay.

- Let's go junior, time for your nap.

- No, I want to play.

- You heard your mother junior, scram. This beach ain't big enough for the both of us. Get out of here.

- Mommy! Mommy!

- Here we go.

- I'm terribly sorry.

- My fault.

- You're not hurt, are you?

- I don't think so.

- I wish you'd make sure.

- Why?

- Because usually when people find out who I am, they get themselves a wheelchair, a shyster lawyer and sue me for 3/4 of $1 million.

- Don't worry, I won't sue you no matter who you are.

- Thank you.

- Who are you?

- Now really.

- Sugar! Come on! Honestly.

- Cheerio.

- Haven't I seen you somewhere before?

- Not very likely.

- You staying at the hotel?

– Not at all.

– Your face is familiar.

– Possible you've seen it in the newspapers or magazines. "Vanity Fair?"

– That must be it.

– Would you mind moving just a little please? You're blocking my view.

– Your view of what?

– They run up a red-and-white flag on the yacht when it's time for cocktails.

– You own a yacht? Which one is it? The big one?

– Certainly not. With all the unrest in the world. I don't think anybody should have a yacht that sleeps more than 12.

– I quite agree. Tell me who runs up that flag? Your wife?

– No, my flag steward.

– Who mixes the cocktails? Your wife?

– No, my cocktail steward. Look if you are interested in whether I am married or not.

– Oh, I'm not interested at all.

– Well, I'm not.

– That's very interesting. How's the stock market?

– Up, up, up.

– I bet while we were talking, you made like $100,000?

– Could be. You play the market?

– No, the ukulele and I sing too.

– For your own amusement?

– A bunch of us girls are appearing at the hotel. Sweet Sue and Her Society Syncopators.

– You're society girls.

– Oh yes quite. You know, Bryn Mawr, Vassar. We're just doing this for a lark.

– Syncopators, does that mean you play that very fast music... jazz?

– Yeah, real hot.

– Oh well I guess some like it hot. I personally prefer classical music.

– Oh I do too. As a matter of fact I spent three years at the Cheboygan Conservatory of Music.

– Good school. And your family doesn't object to your career?

– They do indeed. Daddy threatened to cut me off without a cent but I don't care. It was such a bore, you know, coming-out parties.

– Inauguration balls.

– Opening at the opera.

– Riding to hounds.

– And always the same 400.

– You know, it's amazing we never ran into each other before. I'm sure I would've remembered anybody as attractive as you are.

– You're very kind. I bet you're also gentle and helpless.

– I beg your pardon.

– You see I have this theory about men who wear glasses.

– What theory?

– I'll tell you when I get to know you better. What are you doing tonight?

– Tonight?

– I thought maybe you could come to the hotel and hear us play.

– I would like to but that would be rather difficult.

– Why?

– I only come ashore twice a day when the tide goes out.

– Oh.

– It's on account of these shells. That's my hobby.

– You collect shells?

– Yes. So did my father and my grandfather. You might say we had a passion for shells. That's why we named the oil company after it.

– Shell Oil?

– Please no names. Just call me Junior.

– Sugar, sugar! Come on dear, it's time to change for dinner.

– Run along Daphne, dear. I'll catch up with you later.

– Okay. No.

– What is it young lady? What are you staring at? This happens to me all the time in public.

– I recognised him too. His picture was in "Vanity Fair."

– "Vanity Fair?"

– Would you mind moving along please?

– Yes, you're in his way. He's waiting for a signal from his yacht.

– His yacht?

– It sleeps 12. This is my friend, Daphne. She's a Vassar girl.

– I'm a what?

– Or was it Bryn Mawr?

– I heard a very sad story about a girl who went to Bryn Mawr. She squealed on her roommate and they found her strangled with her own brazier.

– Yes, we have to be very careful whom we pick for a roommate.

– Well I think I better be going.

– It was delightful meeting you both.

- You will come and hear us play?

- Okay, thanks Lauren.

- Do come. Don't disappoint us. It'll be such fun.

- So I wanted to show this scene in its entirety 'cause I think it's an amazingly worked scene in the writing and the acting and shows a hell of a lot of the triangle where we know that Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon, he's still, you know, acting in drag. He's decided he's going to play it that he's a multimillionaire, obviously that he owns the yacht. His father's Polish, you know, runs Shell et cetera in order to get the girl. So out of the drag, we've seen him as the musician at the beginning. Then we see him in drag. Now we see him dressed and acting this role. So multiple roles, mistaken identities all the time playing up in the comedy. And then of course the Jack Lemmon character realises what's going on entirely. But this is where the falling in love moment happens for Sugar, the Marilyn Monroe character. Amongst the hardest scenes all to write are the falling in love scenes so they don't sound corny or kitsch. But I think Billy Wilder makes it happen because I think and what he sussed with Marilyn Monroe is quite brilliant. Billy Wilder said, "Don't ever cast actors where they're beyond their limitation." And he didn't mean that in a nasty way. He just meant that every human being has certain strengths and limitations. We all know in any kind of area of recruitment, you know, whether it's casting, auditioning, or recruiting in business or in work, people have strengths and limitations. We all do. And he saw and I think he saw it the best, which is why he got I think some of the best work out of her that she combined what he called the dualities between a kind of innocence and a very sexy playfulness. A sexual flirtatious and playful all the time in every movement, her voice, everything but also a certain quality of innocence. It's almost like a girl woman character you saw in her. And he works on this in the script and he works on this with her in the acting to get it which is why I think, you know, she does it and does it so superbly. And we see from the opening shot of her walking down next to the train, it's the exact same thing. She's trying to be more woman, less girl. You know it's exaggerated with the hips and her top body and her arms, her legs, everything. It's exaggerated for comedy but also exaggerated because she's a girl trying to be a woman playing between the two of girl woman. And he sussed this in her. And I think a lot of other directors didn't. And I think Arthur Miller and others when she went to study with the method acting school in New York and so on and she wanted to try and become a so-called serious actor you know, et cetera. Well you know it's tough enough getting comedy right. And I think that he said that she was a brilliant comedian and to work on that and to play with that. And I think that Billy Wilder was the one to suss the best how to write and get the best out of her. And I know many of the attacks on her and her acting and the endless debates and so on. But I think this scene for me shows it superbly, you know when

she says, "you work for Shell?" Those eyes wide and her face looks up. But we buy it for that split moment. We believe it and that's all that matters. Whereas in a lot of the other films, we don't necessarily. You know during the filming it was really hard because she would often be very late, a couple of hours late for shoots, drive Tony Curtis mad. He said kissing her was like, was worse than kissing Hitler. You know he was at the end of his tether 'cause there were more far more scenes with Tony Curtis alone with her than with Jack Lemmon or even with the triangle. And she would come late. But Billy Wilder said, although she was a nightmare and impossible and so difficult, he didn't stop and he would take 40, 50 takes again and again and again until they got it. And he was willing to put up with all the nightmare because she's trying to get perfection 'cause she's so, you know, sort of insecure and anxious and unsure. But he's trying to do it endlessly because he knows that she can achieve it in the end.

Now what's fascinating, I'm not going to show it at the moment but Laurence Olivier worked with her much later and in a very different kind of film and Olivier admits that it was a failure. And Olivier says it's because she had a divided self. And I'm quoting Olivier that she had a divided self and she was doing something she did not really want to do deep down. In other words, she wanted more to be a model than really be an actress and is pushed more to acting. And of course in Olivier's opinion, was really set back seriously by studying in New York with the method acting group, Strasberg and all the others. I don't want to invalidate Olivier's opinion but I think that Billy Wilder got it when he said cast according to limitations and strengths. You know, as I said earlier, we would do that in business in life, in anything recruit according to limitations and strengths, whether it's a sports team, a university department, a business group, whatever. And he saw the limitations and the strengths and he somehow found ways to get the best out of her and out of Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis for that matter. He later spoke about working with Walter Matthau and how fantastic it was 'cause Walter Matthau like Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis would come with so many ideas to every rehearsal that all he had to do was sit back and say, right, let's take idea number 1, not 7, 8, 9, and 10. And he talks about it in interviews such a pleasure working with those kind of actors. And one always looks for that. One doesn't look for the automaton actor but the actor who will have so many ideas bubbling that they just want to contribute from sheer intelligence. So I bring this in because I think Billy Wilder understood better than anybody really how to work with her in film and get the best. Because when you read accounts of their rehearsals, it was a nightmare on the set. I mean, to redo a take 40, 50, 60 times, to wait for an hour or two before she arrives, you know you can go crazy and very angry. And yet with all this happening on the set while they are rehearsing and filming, he is nevertheless able to in his own mind, put that aside and create such an extraordinary end product. It's a writer, director, totally, we would call it in today's language, zoned in, in the zone focused so clearly what he

wants and where and how. That earlier clip I showed of the interview with him, you have to know the structure and the architecture like a house, da da da. And you have the structure of this, this, and this. You know what you want and the script is written for that reason. And so much time is spent on the script for that reason. And the shared joy of the language and writing good scripts and dialogue which I think is so minimised in so much of the the kind of action, adventure movies of today where the writing is minimised because we can do so much with special effects in action and adventure stories. But the sheer enjoyment, the entertaining, fun of intelligent script writing. And I think not only of Billy Wilder obviously, but he joins a remarkable tradition of screenwriters and takes it a whole step further where every line, every scene is so worked creating three-dimensional believable characters which is not easy. And with these three 'cause this is the fundamental triangle, you know, the triangle always gives a classic comedy or a seriousness but then how to work it of course is part of the brilliance and the genius for me of Billy Wilder. He also doesn't do it with crass and crude jokes like Groucho you know, and Woody Allen and others. They don't need an extreme sense of, you know, let's get more and more vulgar, crude, vicious. And I'm certainly not trying to be a prude 'cause I'm certainly not and I love "Pulp Fiction" and the others, but even there it's got a poetry in the language with Tarantino but it's in innuendo, it's not insult. It's hinting and suggestion. It's not as punched in your face. And you know, that very final line, "nobody's perfect." Well of course not but it's the perfect ending line. Irony after irony, wit after wit playing with the doubles and where I think Olivier talking about the divided self but I think, you know, Marilyn, that Monroe wasn't necessary a divided self but needed to have her strengths made aware of by a good director and how to take it further. I don't think that these films, this is going way back to '59, '55 "Sunset Boulevard," '59 and "Some Like It Hot." I don't think it's an easy sentimentality. I think that he is part of the age of irony. He senses it, he knows it from his own life history, the age of irony, the age of crisis of identity. He has a jaundice view of human nature but he shows it in remarkably razor sharp wit and humour to cover up the pain underneath as so many great comics do. He shows it as a clown in the characters of clown, but not in the obvious, you know, tradition of clown, long nose, red nose, and you know, the makeup, the circus, and so on. Fantastic there. But how the comic character can be the leading characters in the films, how to outwit, be the parvenu, you know, the outsider Jewish outwit the system and other characters, outwit in this case some of the mafia guys, you know, have come down, Spats and others who've come down to hunt them and kill them, you know, in all those fantastic chase scenes, et cetera. The sheer brilliance of the editing and the brevity of the scene and the brevity of the writing is so good. And I think ultimately it does go not only to the parvenu has the wit to outwit the host culture or the system rather as evidenced by characters, but it's ultimately the outsiders and how do they through numerous identities, including even the Monroe character 'cause she's

pretending to be something much more than she is. She's a down-and-out alcoholic who plays the ukulele, earns a few bucks playing in this group, but has the dream of marrying a multimillionaire and this is the scene that she meets, the fantasy of the multimillionaire. In the end, the love story, he reveals his truth in that boat scene. You know, they're behind there with the Osgood scene at the very end. And Tony Curtis reveals well he's just also, he's a down-and-out musician but she's fallen in love nevertheless. She can see beyond mistaken identity is the ultimate end of her character's story. It's so well crafted and she's also playing different identities pretending to be something she's not, you know, as we get in the walk in the beginning that she's much higher class, much more sophisticated and knowledgeable than all the other musicians. But the reality is she's an alcoholic who plays ukulele not that well in the band to earn a few bucks but has the dream. So I would say that it's not about division, it's about dualities in characters and that's what creates such fascinating three-dimensional characters in his writing. And he gets it out of his actors, Billy Wilder. Some like it hot, the phrase just comes out in the writing because yeah, well I guess some like it hot. It just feels so natural because she's talking about jazz and yeah, how hot jazz is and you know, well I guess some, and we get it and the whole meaning of the film kicks in. But it's just a natural sounding line, you know, again the mark of a great writer. Okay, so for me at the end of all this is a guy who I think realised coming from incredibly traumatic origins of the Holocaust in his family to achieve way beyond probably his own dreams not only in directing, but in the sheer volume and quality of the writing. And I think, you know, it gives an incredible contribution to Jewish artists but also to film itself. Okay, thank you very much everybody. Let's hold it there. And if we can go into questions, if you wouldn't mind helping, Lauren. Thank you.

Q & A and Comments

- [Lauren] Sure. Our first question comes from Romaine. He says:

Q: Aside from humour, do you think the absurdity serves other emotional functions?

A: That's a great question, Romaine. Yeah, I do. I think the absurdity shows up this irony. You know, when you see irony and double meanings, you can't trust is the meaning this or is the meaning that and therefore it feels absurd. So there's constant double, triple meaning in any situation. You see it from the mafia's point of view, you see it from the Lemmon, from the Curtis, from the Monroe character, all of their points of view. And that's part of the jigsaw that Billy Wilder creates. And in that way we get a sense of the absurdity of anything. 'Cause you know, one person will look at a tree and see green leaves, another one brown branch, another one may be a root, another one the

wind rustling in the leaves, you know. And he creates all these perceptions of the same reality, put it all together and it's a feeling of the absurd, not necessarily sorry, not only funny. If we can get the next one.

- [Lauren] Our next question is:

Q: what did Mr. Wilder die of?

- When did he die?

- [Lauren] What did he die of?

- A: Good question. I think he died of natural causes. No, it was pneumonia, I think in 2006. I'll check that. Thanks.

- [Lauren] And then Arlene is asking:

Q: What did the British vote the best comedy of all time?

A: Ha ha, secret that's going to come. I have to bring some dramatic tension into this. Okay.

- [Lauren] All right, we're all on the edge of our seats then.

- Okay, well you can Google it if you want.

- [Lauren] That's true. Another person was asking the same question. What was the number one comedy in Britain? Going to have to wait.

- I knew I was going to be honest. Going to have to wait. Yep.

- [Lauren] Q: Any thoughts on Wilder's first film, "La Mauvaise Graine/The Bad Seed" starring Danielle Darrieux that he made in France before coming to the U.S.?

- A: Yeah. I mean I think it's all fascinating and the influence of film noir, and other things, you know, in some of the films and there are a lot of them, but I don't think it achieves anywhere near what he achieves once he gets to Hollywood starting with these movies. You know, I think by then he's honed the craft so brilliantly that you know, the characters are so much more three-dimensional and the stories just they interweave and constantly move so quickly. 'Cause the other thing not to be underestimated what he got from Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and others is the quick cut and edit and Eisenstein. But you know, cut, edit, don't let it go on too long. Keep the story moving as he would always say.

- [Lauren] Great. Neville says: I was lucky to meet Billy Wilder in Hollywood in Michael Chow's Chinese restaurant just before he died and

gave him my polar exploration book, "Some Like It Cold" published in 2001. Wilder accepted it with good humour as being an homage to him as I explained how I'm using the two similar titles and interviews to segue between film and exploration.

– That's fantastic. Thank you so much, Neville. I appreciate it, hope you're well. That's wonderful to hear "Some Like It Cold."

– [Lauren] Romaine's asking:

Q: Is it the poignancy of unrequited love transformed into comedy that addresses his sense of loss? Brilliant.

A: I think that's a fantastic point, a really, really good point. I think it is because if one takes his own personal life story, unrequited love and the sense of incredible loss and you know, different ways of dealing with it. And I think one of the ways he does it is through unrequited love in the classic love triangle. He does it in "Sabrina." He does it here and in you know the other movies. I think it's transferred perhaps not necessarily from his own life but immediately in terms of love, but the loss of his own family in the Holocaust. It's hard to deal with loss and grief.

– [Lauren] Great. Dennis says when he died in 2002, a French newspaper headline read, "Billy Wilder is dead. Nobody's perfect."

– Yeah, I know. I mean that line is so iconic and it, you know, I was almost hesitant whether to go on about it but it has really gone down as one of the great lines, you know, together with, "I could have been a contender" and you know, a couple of the other lines, "beginning of a beautiful relationship" in "Casablanca" and others. You know, there are just some lines and I'm sure he didn't know it when he wrote it, but they become utterly iconic and become part of mass culture, you know, serious culture. It's extraordinary achievement.

– [Lauren] Elliot is asking:

Q: Do you not note that the photography advances the story?

– A: Yes, I mean, I agree with you that it's the cinematography and the editing but it's all written and that's why I wanted to show that little clip in the beginning. That first piece I showed with Jack Lemmon where you just get a glimpse of the script of that final scene in the boat and it's all written exactly as he filmed it. And I think he very much because he was such a brilliant writer in the writing he had so much given for him that he knew he was going to do in the filming and the editing. So the two are going together is what I'm really trying to get to, the cinematography and the writing.

– [Lauren] Yep. Monty says that the wife of Billy Wilder wanted to

announce at a dinner party that it was their wedding anniversary. To which he replied, "Please not while I'm eating."

- Great, thank you.

- [Lauren] Yvonne is asking:

Q: Who suggested the Curtis character should imitate Carey Grant in "Some Like It Hot?"

A: I'm not sure there. I know that there were quite a few other, there were people from the studios and you know, to get the exact source 'cause I read that but I'm not exactly sure who really suggested it. You know, I think it might have been Tony Curtis in the end but there's no hard evidence. Okay, thanks, Lauren.

- [Lauren] Ralph is asking:

Q: Did Wilder typically begin casting for his movies before he had written the script?

A: That's a great point 'cause he said, that's a wonderful point. He does say that he would often write with actors in mind. And he wrote with Marilyn Monroe in mind and he wrote with Jack Lemmon in mind and later with Walter Matthau, et cetera. He tried to write as often as he could with certain actors in mind because of what he said in the beginning. You know, no actor can do everything, no writer can do everything, no director can do everything. So obviously you know, when you're writing you have certain actors and persona in mind of what you feel you can play to their strengths. And I think that's an intelligent director and writer working and that goes way back in the old days, Orson used to write for certain actors. So I think it may be seen as old school today, but it's effective and often successful I think because again, you're playing to the strengths and so you can help the areas of limitation.

- [Lauren] He has a second part of his question which says:

Q: Do you think there has been a general dumbing down of more recent movies in terms of the script and the acting?

A: Yeah, great question and I know this is an endless debate and I don't want to fall into a generational cliche and show my age. But I do think because they didn't have access technologically to so much that is possible today with digital special effects and so many other things where the seduction today is to supplant the script with action, digital visual wizardry and visual magic, almost spectacle if you like. I think that they had to focus more on the script. I think it was of necessity and thus certain writers could really push through like Billy Wilder and others of course. But you know when you read

"The Social Network," Aaron Sorkin, you know, on the beginning of Facebook and Mark Zuckerberg, you know, there are some fantastic, Aaron Sorkin and others are fantastic contemporary writers so I don't want to knock them at all but I think that there are maybe fewer of them today than there were then because they didn't have all the technology and the possibly seductive wizardry that you can do today. Thanks, Lauren.

- [Lauren] Arlene says Tony Curtis himself suggested the Carey Grant persona in an interview. Thank you.

- Okay, thank you. I thought that and I remember he did confirm it in a way but wasn't completely, okay, thanks.

- [Lauren] Lorna is asking:

Q: Could the movie "The Major and the Minor" be made today?

A: I honestly don't know. I mean, you know, Billy Wilder often would say, you know, the budgets today, this is much later in his life, the budgets where the money's going, the insecurity to make money to make a profit for the investors obviously for the company, for the studios is so huge because the outlay is so huge. So the financial aspect, you know, has really come in big time and perhaps, although again, I don't want to be generationally romanticising old days but I think that there is a greater pressure to focus much more on the financial and what has worked already than something that may not. Because if we think about it for a moment, this is voted the best comedy of all time by the American Film Institute and almost by the British as well. That's huge. It's a screwball comedy about two guys dressed in drag for 80% of it. They're out of work musicians, they're running to escape the mafia in Chicago they've seen kill a few people. They meet up with an all woman group. The one guy falls in love with an alcoholic failed ukulele player. There's fantasy of millionaires owning yachts. I mean, it sounds ridiculous. If you pitch that today, would that story be made as a pitch? I don't think so. And it would be a rare person who took it on you know, to finance. So we can imagine trying to pitch this essence of the story, you know, in the five minutes with a possible producer or a couple of them for money. They think you're nuts, a screwball comedy, et cetera, et cetera. I'm not sure this kind of thing would see the light of day. I don't know.

- [Lauren] And those are all the questions. I have a bunch of people saying thank you and that they really enjoyed and loved your presentation. So thank you again and that's that for this week.

- Okay, so Lauren, I want to thank you 'cause I know we had some glitches earlier on with some of the technical and thank you so much for your help. And thanks to everybody for coming today and hope you have a fantastic wherever you are, Saturday night, and Sunday. Take

care and just let's all remember, "Nobody's perfect." Okay, thanks, ciao.