

Sunset Boulevard: Comments

Perhaps it is my limited experience, but I have always associated Billy Wilder with silly or romantic comedies such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959) or *Sabrina* (1954) so I was surprised to see him as the director of *Sunset Boulevard* - a gritty, Film Noir drama with critical overtones. On the surface it is a scathing indictment of the Hollywood contract system, but underneath is a critique of human greed and societal indifference, in general. But when I looked deeper into Billy Wilder's resume I saw that these frivolous films are the exception and that, to the date of *Sunset Boulevard*, he was already an established Film Noir director with such credits as *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Lost Weekend* (1945).

Every once in a while Hollywood produces a film that "gives itself the finger" (source unavailable) and *Sunset Boulevard* is one of these. Other examples include Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992), The Coen Brothers' *Hail, Caesar!* (Joel and Ethan Coen - Directors, 2016) and, of course, *A Star is Born* (William A. Wellman, Jack Conway {uncredited} - Directors, 1937) or any of its three remakes. All of these movies take a serious tone but Blake Edwards' *S.O.B* (1981) turns the tables with a satirical take. I mention this film for two reasons. Firstly, the irony that William Holden is in both, although playing very different characters - in *Sunset Boulevard* a jaded and cynical Hollywood writer and in *S.O.B* a sane and rational Hollywood director. Sadly, it would also be his last film role (*Love*, 1981).

The other reason that I mention the film relates to an interview with Blake Edwards regarding the film's release where he states that he was concerned (although unperturbed) by the prospect of offending individuals in the industry (Wygant, 2012). Blake Edwards was also well established in his career when he made *S.O.B*, having already directed such classics as *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?* (1966) and *The Pink Panther* (1963) as well as its six original sequels. However, I can find nothing to suggest that Billy Wilder had any such concerns. I would suggest that it is only because of their resumes that people like Blake Edwards and Billy Wilder can make such films and not suffer a backlash.

It's very easy to look at old films with a modern eye and such anachronisms dilute the impact of the groundbreaking techniques of the time. Modern audiences will greet the concept of Joe Gillis as a voice from beyond the grave with a shrug as they have already been acclimatized to the concept in films such as the one mentioned in class: *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes - Director, 1999) or *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead* (Gary Fleder - Director, 1995) which actually depicts interviews with a departed Andy Garcia rather than a simple voice-over narration.

Starting with a body floating in a pool immediately sets up the story and the intrigue - right off the bat we want to know who this person is and how he ended up where he is. Ironically, the film is very dialog heavy - there is not much screen time with nothing spoken - such scenes are usually polluted with

Holden's narration which makes this a strange juxtaposition from the Silent Era that Norma Desmond came from.

Speculation abounds regarding the dead chimpanzee including, apparently a rumour spread by Billy Wilder himself, that Norma Desmond had unnatural relations with the animal (Saporito, 2015). Whether or not this idea was his intent is debatable but secondary to its true significance anyway, in my opinion. Celebrities owning exotic pets is not new, dates back to ancient Egypt (Mark, 2016) and continues to this day (Huffington Post, 2019). Keeping an exotic pet is expensive, not only to secure, but also upkeep (Emerson, 2016) which is why it is a practice limited to the affluent or dedicated few. This would not have been a concern for Norma Desmond as she came from a golden age of cinema "when they were making eighteen thousand a week, and no taxes." (Brackett, Wilder & Marshman, Jr, 1949).

No, I think the significance of the chimp lies elsewhere and it's possible that Billy Wilder was simply trying to impress on Gloria Swanson how much the chimp meant to Norma Desmond. I see the animal as the last element of a bygone era - her empty loneliness is compounded by her last companion's departure from this world and increasing the urgency for her to fill the void, which she does with Joe.

Did he or didn't he? I raised this question in class and there seemed to be universal assent. As I mentioned, the scene wherein Norma attempts suicide suggests as much. The ages between the two actors at the time, which we can assume are similar to the ages of the characters - clearly defines the relationship: Joe is a toy boy. He is emotionally replacing the chimp, but if not sexually. What do people do with their pets? They pamper them because it makes them feel good to do so. Norma pampers Joe with "baubles" as he takes the place of her pet. "Was her life really as empty as that?" Joe muses. Yes, it was.

But one would be totally heartless not to feel some sympathy for Norma - the strongest impression of the film, and the overarching theme, is the insensitivity of a Hollywood that casts its stars aside like used Kleenex. *The Rose* (Mark Rydell -Director, 1979) is loosely based on the life of Baby-Boomer rock star Janice Joplin (Maslin, 1979) and has a similar feel - it makes one feel sorry for a person who has been perverted into a despicable personality by an uncaring and rapacious industry (in the case of *The Rose*, the music industry, film's equally heartless cousin). This mood is the same even though the premises are different. Whereas *The Rose* (Bette Midler) destroys herself by her fear of losing her popularity and escapes from it, as have so many of the "Dead at 27" club (History.com, 2018), by the use and abuse of chemical substances, Norma Desmond actually loses her popularity and escapes from it by going to La La Land (pun intended); liberating herself by withdrawing into her own memories of a bygone era.

"...the whole place seemed to have been stricken with a kind of creeping paralysis, out of beat with the rest of the world, crumbling apart in slow motion" Joe said of the mausoleum that Norma Desmond called home and I was reminded of an odd parallel - the image of a crumbling mansion occupied by a similarly reclusive star of yesteryear: Kermit the Frog was the unusual occupant in James Bobin's revival of Jim Henson's Muppets in *The Muppets* (2011). Like Norma, Kermit is also on a path to reviving a dormant, if not dead, career. Unlike Norma, however, Kermit and his Muppet friends are successful.

The early twentieth century was not only the era of silent film but also a time of great interest in the occult. Joe Gillis is a Sagittarius. Norma says that she likes Sagittarians. you can trust them. Later, before

presenting the script to C.B. DeMille she says that she consulted an astrologer. Sadly, neither prediction held true: DeMille wasn't interested in her script and in the end Joe betrayed her.

And speaking of DeMille, one may be tempted to think of him as a kindly old man but when one looks beneath the covers one finds that he is the epitome of the heartless industry. He entertains Norma, is kind to her, welcomes her back to the studio and even makes promises that he has no intention of keeping. The limit of his kindness is to spare her the cruelty of knowing that it is her car that the studio is interested in, not her; delivering that blow was left to William Holden and is the final act that made me leave the theatre (metaphorically speaking) thinking his character was a complete jerk.

We are led to believe that Norma was turned into a narcissist by her career. However, that does present an interesting question: was that indeed the case or are narcissists drawn to the glamour, glitz and adoration of celebrity life? The intricacies of such an examination are beyond the scope of this treatment, however, it is important in assessing the sympathy factor for Norma Desmond. One is much more inclined to feel sorry for one who has been trumped up only to be knocked down as such a person is a puppet (or, as Saporito suggests, a trained animal as the chimp symbolizes) than one would for a fallen star who started out as a bitch.

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