

The Apartment

Produced and directed by Billy Wilder; original screenplay by I.A.L. Diamond and Billy Wilder; cinematography by Joseph LaShelle; edited by Daniel Mandell; music by Adolph Deutsch; production design by Alexandre Trauner; set decoration by Edward G. Boyle; starring Jack Lemmon, Shirley MacLaine, Fred MacMurray, and Ray Walston. Blu-ray, B&W, 120 min., 1960. An Arrow Films release, www.arrowfilms.com.

On Oscar night, April 17, 1961, Billy Wilder's *The Apartment*, which had been nominated for ten Oscars, won five: for best Art Direction, Editing, Original Screenplay, Director, and Picture. Beautifully shot by Joseph LaShelle, it was the last black-and-white film to win an Oscar for Best Picture until *Schindler's List* (if you exclude the child's red coat and the final sequence in Spielberg's film) in 1993 and *The Artist* in 2011. In accepting the shared screenwriter award, Wilder simply said, "Thank you, I.A.L. Diamond," to which Diamond replied, "Thank you, Billy Wilder." The directing Oscar was Wilder's second (he had won for *The Lost Weekend* fifteen years earlier): clutching the statuette, he told the audience, "Thank you so much, you lovely discerning people." The first person to win a screenwriting, directing, and producing Oscar for one film, Wilder had probably reached the apex of his amazing career. The new Limited Edition Blu-ray release by Arrow Films gives us a chance to look again at this important film.

Wilder, of course, was an Austrian-born journalist turned screenwriter who left the German film industry after Hitler's rise to power in 1933. He eventually made his way to Hollywood via Paris and got his first big break co-writing *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1938) and *Ninotchka* (1939) with Charles Brackett for director Ernst Lubitsch. By 1942, he was directing, too, and by 1944 he had written and helmed one of the classics of film noir, *Double Indemnity*. In later films such as *Lost Weekend* (1945), *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), and *Ace in the Hole* (1951), Wilder was always sharply observant, quick-witted, and sometimes so cynical that William Holden would reputedly claim that he had a "brain full of razor blades."

The Apartment was Wilder's first film after the success of *Some Like It Hot* (1959), and it qualifies as a response in part to the 1950s world of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* that we've seen depicted more recently in *Mad Men*—a male-dominated corporate culture with women in subordinate positions. The film's genesis came from an old notation in Wilder's notebook. After he saw David Lean's *Brief Encounter*, about a married man who borrows a friend's apartment to conduct an affair with a married woman, Wilder scrawled, "What about the friend who owned the flat" where the couple meets? He and I.A.L. Diamond answered that question by creating Jack Lemmon's character, C. C. "Bud" Baxter. To

put it succinctly and in the words of the film, Baxter is depicted as a *schnook* who in the course of the film becomes a *mensch*.

When Diamond observed that Wilder's films combined "the sweet and the sour," he perfectly captured the tone of *The Apartment*. The sour in the film focuses on the morally corrupt corporate culture of Consolidated Insurance. Wilder savagely satirizes that culture through the married executives who use Baxter's apartment for their casual flings with female employees; Baxter, in exchange, gets favorable treatment for promotions. One of those executives, Joe Dobisch (Ray Walston), tags Baxter as a *schnook*—they also mock him as "Little Lord Fauntleroy" and "Buddy Boy"—but the worst of the bunch is the Director of Personnel, Jeff Sheldrake (Fred MacMurray, playing against type as he had earlier in Wilder's *Double Indemnity*). He's a serial adulterer, and his current girl is the elevator operator Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine). Besides his ambitions of getting his own office and a key to the executive washroom, Baxter is sweet on Kubelik, unaware of her affair with Sheldrake.

The Apartment has close ties to King Vidor's *The Crowd*, a 1928 critique of an average man working on the ground level of a massive and alienating corporation. Like the protagonist Johnny Simms in *The Crowd*, C. C. Baxter is a hero hard to like for much of the movie. Wilder visually links his film to Vidor's through set designer Alexandre Trauner's gigantic office set, in which scores of office workers sit in vast rows of desks. Trauner makes the office seem even bigger by using forced perspective: the largest desks (and biggest office workers) are in the first row of desks, and each successive

row has smaller desks (and people). One biographer notes that Wilder asked Vidor how he achieved the anonymity of the office set in *The Crowd*, and he ends up pretty much replicating it in *The Apartment*. That vastness helps viewers understand Baxter's desire to rise in the organization, if only to escape the soul-deadening work in that office. But that bargain begins to cut at his conscience and, by the end of the film, Wilder's razor blades are slashing at the men, like Sheldrake, who promise—with no intention of carrying it out—that they'll divorce their wives to marry their mistresses.

The sweet in the film relates to the growing relationship between Fran and Baxter. Both are depicted as basically decent people who wish for change in their lives but go about it in soul-damaging ways. One of the film's best props is a broken compact mirror that Fran mistakenly leaves in Baxter's apartment. In a key scene in the film, Baxter realizes because of the mirror that Fran is the person having an affair with Sheldrake. Both see broken people when they look in her mirror. Baxter's neighbor, Dr. Dreyfuss (Jack Kruschen), who mistakenly thinks Baxter is a real Don Juan because he hears the parties going on every night in the next-door apartment, disapproves of this behavior, and urges Baxter to become a *mensch*, a person of honor and integrity. In the end, Baxter does regain his integrity, and he's rewarded for his kindness toward the despairing Fran with at least a chance of a warm relationship with her. Their relationship may be sweet, but Wilder ends the film not with a traditional kiss and swooning music but, after Baxter declares his love during a game of gin rummy, by granting Fran the film's great concluding line: "Shut up and deal."



In *The Apartment*, C. C. "Bud" Baxter (Jack Lemmon) hopes that if he provides favors for his boss, he might get a promotion, including his own office. (photo courtesy of Arrow Films)



Baxter (Jack Lemmon) unsuccessfully flirts with Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine), the elevator operator, who is the other object of his desire in *The Apartment*. (photo courtesy of Photofest)

The 4K restoration by Arrow Films, scanned from the original 35mm camera negative, is immaculately done. A short presentation on the disc demonstrates the effects of the restoration by using before-and-after examples of how chemical stains, scratches, damaged frames, and instances of dirt and debris were repaired from the negative, employing a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques. The restoration also offers either the original uncompressed PCM mono audio or a Dolby 5.1 DTS-HD master audio track.

The box set contains a wide variety of supplementary material. The audio commentary by Bruce Block and two documentaries, *Inside the Apartment* and *Magic Time: The Art of Jack Lemmon*, were also included in the 2008 20th Century Fox Collector's Edition DVD of the film. Among the other documents are an archival interview with Wilder from the Writers Guild of America's Oral Histories series; a new visual essay by David Cairns, *The Flawed Couple*, about the collaboration between Lemmon and Wilder; and a brief new interview with Hope Holiday, who played the woman Baxter meets in a bar on New Year's Eve. The box set also includes a small book (the size of a Blu-ray case), with new essays on the film by Neil Sinyard, Kat Ellinger, and Travis Crawford and Heather Hyche, lavishly supplemented by images from the film. In an insightful discussion, Sinyard concentrates on *The Apartment* and includes some close analysis of key scenes in the film; Ellinger broadens out to discuss the comedy collaborations between Wilder and Diamond; and focusing on the Production Code Administration, Crawford and Hyche argue that Wilder "was at the forefront of a group of directors operating within the studio system who intended to test the boundaries of the code and explore stories that challenged what had been the prevailing conventional Hollywood film morality for

decades." That testing eventually led to the abandonment of the Production Code and the establishment of the MPAA ratings system in 1968. Although Wilder was a master of pushing the envelope within the boundaries of the code, David Cairns's visual essay notes that he was less successful in dealing with the new freedoms accorded filmmakers after 1968.

When Moss Hart presented the best screenplay Oscar for *The Apartment*, he whispered in Wilder's ear, "This is the moment to stop, Billy." Although there are some notable achievements in Wilder's later films, he probably did reach his peak with *Some Like It Hot* and *The Apartment*, a consecutive pair of films whose achievement rivals that of Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952) and *Seven Samurai* (1954) or Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* and *Wild Strawberries* (both in 1957). We're fortunate to have this 4K restoration of *The Apartment*, particularly in this era of #MeToo. Although the film's condemnation of Sheldrake's serial philandering and its depiction of Fran's subsequent emotional devastation were created fifty-seven years ago, we're still learning its lessons.—Charles Maland

Errata for Cineaste, Vol. XLIII, No. 1

The photo caption on page 8 mistakenly spells the name of the young actress Fantine Harduin.

In the photo caption on the bottom of page 19, the correct title of the film is *Lampedusa in Winter*.

The photo caption on page 43 of the *Dunkirk* review should have described the British Spitfire pilot's aerial dogfights with Messerschmitt fighter jets and not German Stukas.

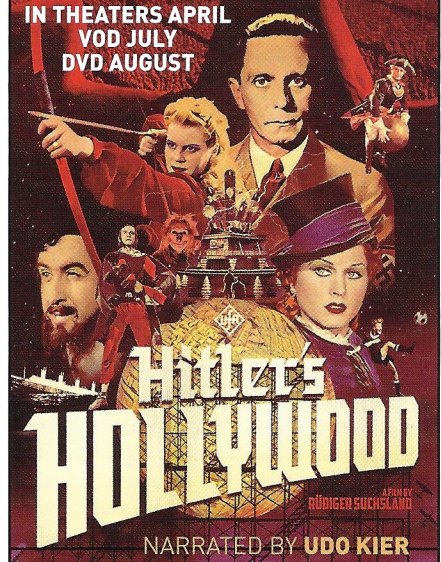
On page 49 of the review of Frederick Wiseman's *Ex Libris*, the filmmaker's previous documentary, *In Jackson Heights*, is called "a Brooklyn mosaic," but Jackson Heights is in the borough of Queens.

We neglected to include two authors in our "Contributors" column. Michael Sicinski, who reviewed *Ex Libris*, is a writer and teacher based in Houston, Texas. Catherine Russell, author of the "Migrant Cinema" article, is professor of film studies at Concordia University. Our apologies to both writers.

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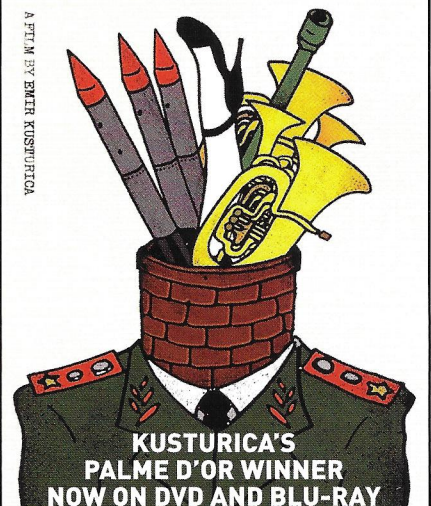
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