

Billy Wilder from sort of the start to almost the end

Billy Wilder's first American film, **The Major and the Minor**, is a wonder to behold. The script, which was written by Wilder and Charles Brackett, pulls viewers along and then jerks them sideways at the confrontation of each obstacle. The 1942 Paramount feature, released on Blu-ray by Universal and Arrow Academy (UPC#760137280187, \$40), has a premise so dubious it could only happen in the movies, but that is where it is happening.

After having written and co-written the scripts to a dozen successful films, Wilder was chomping at the bit to stop other directors from interfering with his inspirations. Paramount hoped to shut him up, but they got a star director instead. Ginger Rogers, who was always great in movies where her character has to act wildly different from that character's true personality, is the film's heroine, short on cash, who dresses up like a very tall eleven-year old because that is the only way she can pay for her train fare out of New York. On the train, she meets an especially gullible military officer, played by Ray Milland (Gary Cooper might have worked better, but Milland pulls it off well enough), who takes an avuncular interest in her well being. When there are problems with the train, he brings her to the military academy where he teaches, a position that his fiancée wants him to continue holding while he pines to enter the war. The way that Wilder achieves his suspension of disbelief is that there are plenty of characters who recognize immediately that Rogers' character is a grownup, but there is always a valid reason why they don't share that knowledge with the people who are fooled by it. Meanwhile, the humor is accelerated by her presence in the all-boys school, as every student wants to make time with her, and she gradually but believably falls for the nobility and purity of Milland's character. Running 100 minutes, the film's final moments, an explosion of romance and patriotism, is tear-inducing precisely because the film has worked up such good will to reach that end.

The full screen black-and-white picture looks terrific, with sharp contrasts and a smooth, clean image. The monophonic sound is fine and there are optional English subtitles, a trailer, a brief montage of promotional materials, and a good 60-minute *Lux Radio Hour* adaptation from 1943 featuring Rogers and Milland (as well as Rogers' mother, Lela Rogers, who was also in the film as the mother of Rogers' character). Broadcast in front of an audience, the best lines get hearty laughs and they can be infectious. Unfortunately, this is one of the worst *Lux* recordings we've heard on a DVD or Blu-ray, with innumerable scratches, pops and audio dropouts.

The commentary track, by historian Adrian Martin, supplies a thorough and satisfying analysis of the film, examining both the dynamics of the script and of how Wilder staged it. He does talk about the cast ("You must never underestimate the cinematic quality of an actor's voice, and Ray Milland had a wonderful voice for cinema. It recorded well, it mixed well.") and how all of the artists in front of and behind the camera contributed to the film's success, but it is presented from the perspective that Wilder was the center of command, making the decisions and choosing what to use. "Wilder, as a director, was never into ostentatious angles. He didn't want to use that kind of camera work. He stayed within certain conventions of Hollywood cinema of his time, but within those, he did very, very precise, very exact work. The work is always on what to emphasize, what to play down, what to underline, what to just let go, fleetingly. It's a question of finding the right tone."

Additionally, there is an excellent 30-minute audio-only interview with Milland from 1975, who talks about his career, the various directors he worked with, and about the art of acting. "After having learned the lines, because that you must do anyway, because if you're working in a scene with someone else, you must rehearse the lines together, usually off the set, in back of the camera while they're lighting, and once you've got the lines set, then you have to rearrange your mind so that the physical positions, the movements you make, don't interrupt the flow of the words. It's really a very contrived and difficult process."

Finally, there is another outstanding 31-minute deconstruction of the film's artistry by Neil Sinyard, who points out that many of Wilder's films have protagonists who must participate in a masquerade. He analyzes the film's brilliant story turns and talks a lot about Wilder's themes and interests. He suggests that the film is one of the only Wilder efforts with a happy ending, but that is quite arguable in both directions—that a number of his other films have upbeat conclusions, and that the fact Milland's character is going off to war is hardly an assurance that he and Rogers' character will have a full life together. As a message for America in 1942, however, it was perfection.

Wilder's final two films, **Fedora** (Jan 93) and **Buddy Buddy**, contained technical errors (**Fedora** was still good despite the mistakes, **Buddy**, **Buddy** not so much) that suggested he no longer had the directorial prowess to oversee a feature film, and he did retire after the latter (although he continued to lead an active life offering his wisdom about motion pictures for another couple of decades). The two films he made previous to those final two, however, while not strong boxoffice performers, are outstanding and superbly executed masterpieces.

Avanti!, a 1972 United Artists production, available on Blu-ray from Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment and Kino Lorber Incorporated as a *KL Studio Classics* title (UPC#738329224813, \$30), stars

Jack Lemmon as a business executive who has gone to Italy to retrieve the corpse of his father after the father passed away on a holiday. Set at a resort on an island off the Amalfi coast, and shot on location, the film runs a hefty 140 minutes, but every moment is exquisite (as Martin says on the **Major and the Minor** commentary, every choice Wilder makes is precise). Juliet Mills plays a shop clerk from London who is essentially on the same mission. As the two continually bump into one another while they attempt to manage the Italian bureaucracy, they begin to fall in love. Yes, since it deals with corpses, the film is a touch dark, but that is mitigated by the bright Italian sunshine. It is sometimes laughably funny, but not to the detriment of its romance. And it is at times frantic, but only for brief, invigorating moments, since it is also relaxed and deliberate as it spins its lovely, gradual and inevitable romance.

Both Lemmon and Mills deliver terrific performances, as does Clive Revill as the hotel manager who must juggle their needs and desires. All three deserved much greater attention than they received for their efforts. Structurally, the narrative, based upon a Samuel Taylor stageplay and written by Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond, is superbly designed, with each event and circumstance forcing the next event and circumstance, even though the characters believe they are acting of their own free will. Meanwhile, the dialog is a perfection of wit. Had the film been made a decade earlier (not that it could have gotten away with its frisky nature then) it would have been heralded as a masterpiece—it is a richer and more satisfying accomplishment than **Irma La Douce** (Dec 18), and it is more cheerfully optimistic than **The Apartment** (Mar 18)—and garnered many awards, but by the time it came out, tastes had sadly moved on. Lemmon finally won an Oscar a couple of years later in the sort of brooding middle age-stricken drama that tastemakers were looking for, but they missed his better work. Similarly, the musical score is a joyful pastiche of Italian pop tunes that would have fit right in during the early Sixties but were utterly passé by the time the film came out. That no longer matters, however. The movie takes you for a pleasant, stimulating adventure, just as a movie is supposed to do, and it never misses a heartbeat, from start to finish.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Except for a couple of stray speckles, the color transfer is exquisite, adding to the captivating nature of every frame. The image is sharp and flesh-tones are finely detailed. The monophonic sound is smooth and strong. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer, a lovely 11-minute interview with Mills about making the film, and a charming 15-minute interview with Revill about his career (he effortlessly starts riffing on Fagin) and also about making the film.

As you get older, not only does time pass more quickly, but, as a result, your sense of the zeitgeist becomes distorted. Universal backed Wilder's remake of **The Front Page** in 1974, which has been released on Blu-ray by Universal and Kino as another *KL Studio Classics* title (UPC# 738329238285, \$30), because of its recent success with the period comedy, **The Sting** (they also had the sets, props and costumes available), but Wilder's motivation was the opportunity to utilize the original Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur stageplay, without the restrictions placed on the scatological content even in the Pre-Code era (we reviewed Kino and Criterion's releases of the earlier film and Criterion's release of Howard Hawks' gender switch version, **His Girl Friday**, in Apr 17), and he also saw an opportunity to re-team Lemmon and Walter Matthau, who had demonstrated such engaging charisma with one another in Wilder's **The Fortune Cookie** (Nov 91). Indeed, that casting is inspired. Lemmon delivers a solid, professional, highly satisfying performance as the reporter, and Matthau is exceptional and glorious as the scheming editor who doesn't want to let him go. So what Wilder delivered was in essence an art film, the resurrection of an antique stage and screen comedy, done to perfection. It's funny, it's meticulously executed, it has a marvelous cast, and Seventies audiences couldn't have cared less.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, and aided by an absolutely gorgeous and exact color picture transfer, Wilder's direction is stunningly good. The background business in every scene that has more than a couple of people in it is both elaborate and exhilarating, while the foreground activity is constantly energized and exquisitely timed. Charles Durning and David Wayne are ideal as the most prominent members of the press corps, Austin Pendleton is the escaped Death Row convict that Lemmon's character hides in the press room, Carol Burnett, who probably disappointed people by giving a good performance instead of her usual shtick, is the hooker who wants to help Pendleton's character, Susan Sarandon is the fiancée of Lemmon's character and Vincent Gardenia is the rather dunderheaded police chief. Wilder even enlists one of our favorite Warner Bros. character actors from the early sound era, Allen Jenkins, who had been in the original stage production, for a brief appearance in the film's very last scene (he's so aged you can barely recognize him, but it is clearly his voice), although, once again, who would care but diehard film fanatics?

Wilder's effort is clearly a labor of love, moving through the wonderful mechanics of the story with a gleeful deviousness while, in scene after scene, everything comes together just as it is supposed to. The period décor is gorgeous and delightful, the gags, however predictable, are utterly satisfying for their clownishness, and the repartee is invigorating. Running