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## CREW

DIRECTED BY **BILLY WILDER**

PRODUCED BY **ARTHUR HORNBLow JR.**

WRITTEN BY **CHARLES BRACKETT, BILLY WILDER**

EDITED BY **DOANE HARRISON**

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY **LEO TOVER**

COMPOSER **ROBERT EMMETT DOLAN**

ART DIRECTOR **ROLAND ANDERSON, HANS DREIER**

COSTUME DESIGNER **EDITH HEAD**





## WELCOME TO THE MASQUERADE

by Ronald Bergan

In 1942, the year in which Billy Wilder made *The Major and the Minor*, his first American movie as a director, World War II was raging in Europe and the Far East. As a gesture towards topicality, the established Hollywood genres mentioned the war to a larger or lesser extent. The war is referred to obliquely but significantly in *The Major and the Minor*, a film categorized as a romantic comedy.

Briefly, the punny title of the film refers to the relationship between Philip Kirby (Ray Milland), a major in the US army, and Susan Applegate (Ginger Rogers) who, fed up with constantly having to fight off lascivious males of all ages in New York, has decided to return to her home in Stevenson, Iowa. (She was obviously not prepared to wait for many of them to be drafted.) However, not having the money for a train ticket, she has disguised herself as a 12-year-old girl in order to get a child's half fare. The major and the dissembling minor meet cute on the train, when Susan, calling herself Sue-Sue, takes refuge in the major's compartment having been pursued by a suspicious conductor. Kirby, not realizing that Sue-Sue is really an adult, allows her to stay the night. The rest of the narrative concerns the comical consequences of this meeting. Wilder liked the theme of a character taking on a false persona, a favorite theatrical device in classical comedies of errors, as it was also a prerequisite of the plots of *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Irma La Douce* (1963), *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964) and *Fedora* (1978).

The Austrian-born Wilder had arrived in the USA in 1933 with a six-month visa, very little money and less English. Luckily, on the basis of his having co-written over a dozen German films and having co-directed *Mauvaise Graine* (1934) in France, it was not long before he was teamed up with Charles Brackett at Paramount. Together they wrote *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1938), directed by Ernst Lubitsch and starring Gary Cooper and Claudette Colbert. It was the first of 12 pictures they wrote together, including Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* (1939), Mitchell Leisen's *Midnight* (1939), Howard Hawks' *Ball of Fire* (1941) and all of the films that Wilder directed until 1950, except for *Double Indemnity* (1944), which Brackett considered too sordid a tale for him. (It led to Wilder's fertile but fractious unique collaboration with Raymond Chandler.)





Despite his enviable track record of scripts for other directors, Wilder still felt that he would like to direct his screenplays himself in order to save them from being “butchered”. (His particular *bête noire* was Leisen, for whom he and Brackett had written three films.) So, he went to Paramount with *The Major and the Minor*, based very loosely on a play called *Connie Goes Home* (1923) by Edward Childs Carpenter. “I set out to make an entertaining, commercial picture I wouldn’t be ashamed of, so my first picture as director wouldn’t be my last,” Wilder declared. He was not to know that his debut Hollywood movie would be considered transgressive in some quarters many decades later.

Hollywood, at the height of the studio system, continued to churn out an average of 30 movies a year. Broadly speaking, if Warner Bros. could be considered working class, and MGM encapsulated middle class values, then Paramount had patrician pretensions. After all, it had Lubitsch under contract. He established his own style of elegance, wit, incisiveness and cynicism which came to be known as “The Lubitsch Touch”. Wilder, whose admiration for the older director knew no bounds, had a sign, designed by graphic designer Saul Bass, on the wall of his office in Hollywood which read “What would Lubitsch have done?” What Wilder learnt from Lubitsch was the importance of dialogue and the brilliant structuring of plots. Like Lubitsch, Wilder brought European hedonism into puritan America.

Prior to the first day of shooting *The Major and the Minor*, Wilder went to Lubitsch, his mentor and fellow emigré, for advice. “I said, ‘Look, you have made 50 pictures. I have made none. This is gonna be my first picture, what can you tell me?’ And Lubitsch said, ‘All I can tell you is, after 60 pictures, I still shit my pants on the first day.’”

“When I became a director from being a writer, my technical knowledge was very meagre,” Wilder confessed. Thus he depended on the editor Doane Harrison. “I learned a great deal from him. He was much more of a help than the cameraman [Leo Tover].” In fact, Harrison worked on all Wilder’s films for the next 25 years, first as his editor and then as his associate producer. Harrison taught Wilder to pre-plan each shot, to edit in the camera, which would save money and time. Also, taking the hint from Lubitsch, Wilder shot in sequence, a habit he would continue throughout his career.

In the matter of casting, Wilder had Ginger Rogers in mind from the start. After having danced through nine RKO musicals between 1933 and 1939 with Fred Astaire, she had proven herself a star in her own right having triumphed in comedies and dramas, notably *Kitty Foyle* (1940), for which she won the Academy Award for Best Actress, and *Roxie Hart* (1942). Ginger considered *The Major and the Minor* one of her favorite films partly because “it was my story... mother and I often didn’t have enough money when we travelled, so I carried my stuffed doll named Freakus, which made me look younger... I was Sue-Sue.”



Incidentally, Ginger's real-life mother Lela Rogers plays her mother in the film. The role of Susan/Sue-Sue also gave her the chance to remind audiences of her dancing during the college ball, coupled with many of the pubescent Astaires.

As for Ginger's male co-star, Wilder wanted Cary Grant, but he was unavailable. (The closest Wilder came to working with Grant was with Tony Curtis' imitation of the star's singular accent in *Some Like It Hot*.) Ray Milland was the breezy, sophisticated leading man at Paramount, whom Wilder had already met during the making of Leisen's *Arise, My Love* (1940). Although Milland rhymes with bland, Wilder first saw a darker side of the actor (before Alfred Hitchcock and Roger Corman) by giving him his Oscar-winning role of the desperate alcoholic in *The Lost Weekend* (1945). (Actually, Wilder wanted José Ferrer for the part, but the studio refused.)

Wilder's debut film was a commercial and critical success despite his not yet having gained any audience recognition as an auteur. (Few filmgoers paid any attention to or cared who wrote screenplays.) It was the highly paid Rogers who would be the prime box-office attraction of the film. On the film's first release, Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times*, wrote: "When a full-grown young lady dons a kid's clothes to play a little girl, it makes a delightful idea for a very cunning film... mainly because Ginger Rogers is the lady who dons the clothes, and also because Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett are two fast boys with a script." It was the start of a long Hollywood career over the course of which Wilder received an incredible eight Academy Award nominations for Best Director, (second only to William Wyler who had 12). He was also nominated 12 times for his co-written screenplays.

In a chapter of his 1968 book *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions* called "Less Than Meets The Eye", The American auteurist critic Andrew Sarris described Wilder as "too cynical to believe his own cynicism." Sarris later famously recanted, upgrading Wilder to the "pantheon" and apologized for his negative remarks. Wilder was admired as an auteur by the young Turks of *Cahiers du Cinema*, who put a still from *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) on the cover of its first edition in 1951.





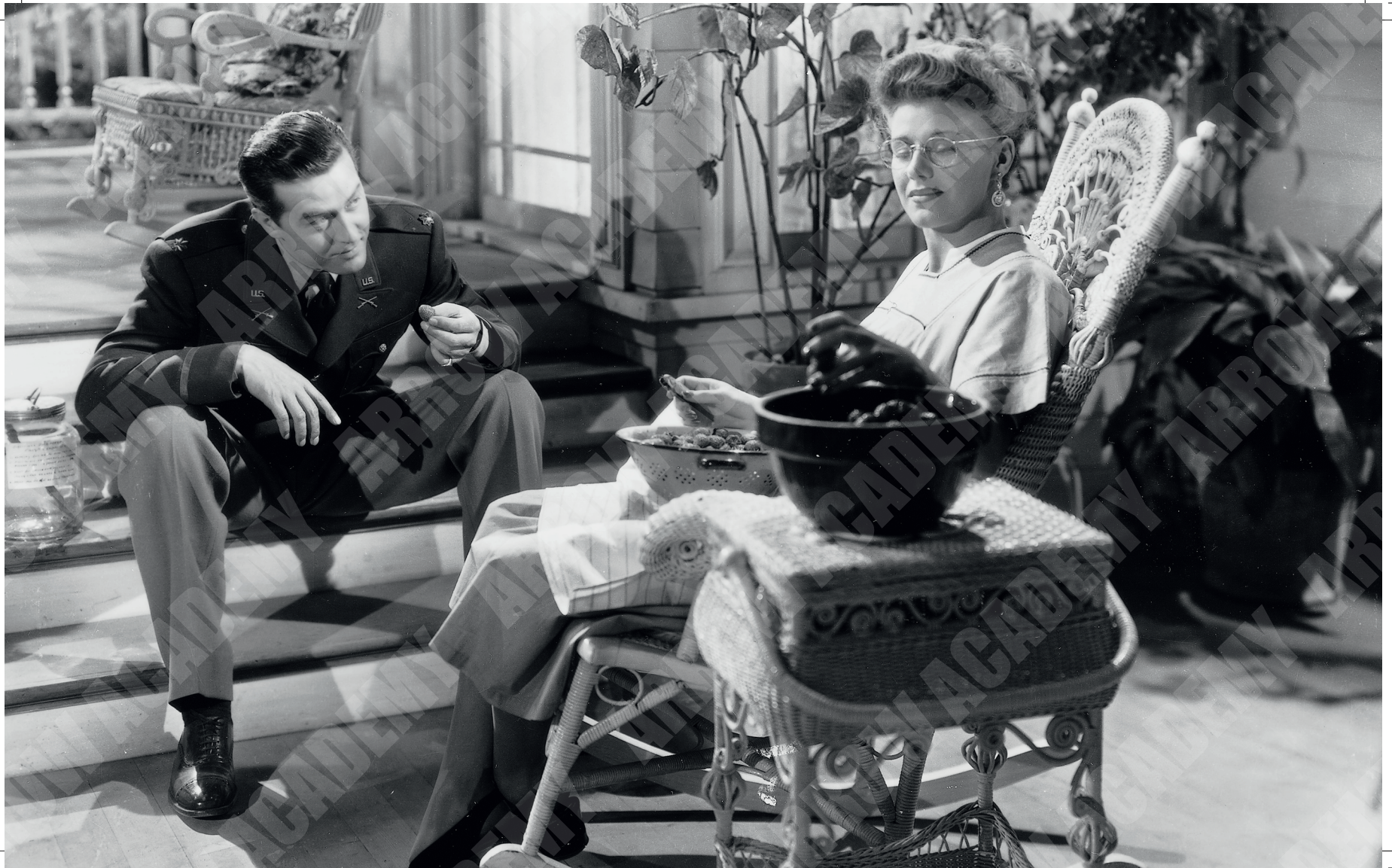
Wilder's films reveal an acidity that comes from disappointment that love is thwarted, people can be avaricious and cruel, and the world is not improving. In other words, "Nobody's perfect!" Not surprising from someone whose mother, stepfather and grandmother perished in the Holocaust. His oeuvre is full of heartless heroes such as the world-weary screenwriter, Joe Gillis (William Holden) in *Sunset Boulevard*; sensation-seeking reporter Charles Tatum (Kirk Douglas) in *Ace in the Hole* (1951); the slick insurance agent Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* and the weak, exploitative businessman JD Shelldrake in *The Apartment* (1960) (both played by Fred McMurray, cast against type); Dino, Dean Martin's self-parodic crooner in *Kiss Me, Stupid*, and Walter Matthau's crooked lawyer in *The Fortune Cookie* (1966). Wilder's attitude to them is condemnatory while reserving his tenderness for his female characters. Audrey Hepburn, representing all that is good in life, trying to choose between the vastly contrasting Larrabee brothers (William Holden and Humphrey Bogart) in *Sabrina* (1954) and painfully smitten by middle-aged playboy Gary Cooper in *Love in the Afternoon* (1957); Marilyn Monroe, alluring but innocent, saving Tom Ewell from adultery in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) and poignantly telling 'Josephine' (Tony Curtis in drag) how much she loves Joe (Curtis in a blazer and slacks) in *Some Like It Hot*, and Shirley MacLaine being rescued from suicide by the nerdish CC Baxter (Jack Lemmon) in *The Apartment*.

The two leading protagonists of *The Major and the Minor* differ greatly from the mean-spirited men and submissive women who would appear in Wilder's bittersweet comedies and dramas. Ironically, Rogers is probably the most vibrant and independent of all of Wilder's heroines, despite masquerading as a 12-year-old girl for most of the picture. Milland is warm-hearted and charming as her self-styled uncle, though discontent to be teaching at a boys' military school, anxious to fulfill his patriotic duty by returning to military activity.

The movie begins with Susan, who had started working in New York as a scalp massager, on her way to the penthouse of Mr. Osborne, her first client. With the Hays Code lurking in the background, Wilder avoided making her a masseuse which would have had erotic undertones. However, the nuance is not lost on the raunchy elevator boy who leeringly suggests that she is one of many young women who pay visits to the same man's apartment.

Her client turns out to be a lecherous, married, middle-aged soak (played by the American humorist Robert Benchley) who invites Susan to "get out of that wet coat and slip into a dry martini." This was not an original quip as it was first uttered on screen by Charles Butterworth in *Every Day's a Holiday* (1937), starring and written by Mae West. Naturally, Osborne makes a pass at Susan which she vigorously rebuffs. (Her experiences in the big city would make her a candidate for #MeToo today.) It is the last straw, making her decide to leave New York. "I got myself stared at, glanced over, passed by, slapped around, brushed off, cuddled up against... but Mr Osborne, in all that wrestling match there was one thing they didn't get out of me..." (In a coincidence worthy of Shakespeare, Osborne reappears towards the end of the movie to blow Susan's cover.)





The sexual innuendo turns out to be a reference to an envelope containing the exact amount of cash she has saved for her train fare home. Unfortunately, she did not take inflation into account, hence the juvenile disguise. At Grand Central, in order to get her half-fare ticket, she heads for the women's lounge where she rejuvenates herself by rubbing off her makeup, rolls up her skirt, cuts stockings into socks and braids her hair. From here on, Wilder demands a giant-sized suspension of disbelief from the audience. He asks us to accept that the 30-year-old Rogers could pass as a 12-year-old moppet almost throughout the entire picture. One could argue that a less voluptuous star, for example Audrey Hepburn, would have been more convincing as a child. However, that would have spoiled Wilder's edgy sex game. (Actually, Hepburn happened to be 12 at the time of the shoot.) It is a tribute to Rogers that she is able to create this ambivalence.

From the start of Rogers' transformation, there are characters who see through her masquerade, except the major, who has conveniently been given 'a bum eye' that has kept him out of active military duty. Later, by closing one eye, he sees Sue-Sue as an attractive woman, which both delights and disturbs him. When the staff on the train question Susan's half-fare ticket, the 'little girl' tells them that she is of Swedish stock and that all her family is tall. This gives Wilder the chance of an in-joke. When asked by the conductor to say something in Swedish, Sue-Sue replies "I want to be alone." The staff begrudgingly accept her explanation until they give chase after she is caught smoking in the observation car.

Having taken refuge in the nearest compartment, which happens to belong to handsome Major Kirby, she tells him that she was scared of the conductor and she couldn't sleep. Instead of contacting the authorities, he innocently, against all the rules of social propriety, allows her to stay the night. (It seems as though the Hays office was equally hoodwinked by the mischievous Wilder.) Kirby is so understanding, unlike the jerks she had to deal with as an adult, that she begins to fall for him. She tells him to call her Sue-Sue, while he asks her to call him Uncle Philip. "Just let me know if you have trouble with your buttons," he says as she changes into her nightie. They go to sleep in their separate berths until a thunderstorm wakes her up. To calm her nerves, he slips into her bed and rocks her to sleep. Viewing the movie today, a quite valid question arises: does he suspect that she is a grown woman, but continues the charade for his own perverse gratification?





The next morning, Pamela (Rita Johnson), Philip's rich fiancée, turns up on the train. It is characteristic of Wilder's plot devices that he uses the storm to wake Sue-Sue up so that she can be comforted by Philip, and also as the cause of flooding which holds up the train, allowing Pamela time to discover a woman in a berth in her fiancé's compartment. When she catches a glimpse of Susan in the berth, she immediately jumps to the wrong/right conclusion that Philip has spent the night with a woman and flees in shock. Knowing he is in deep trouble, he persuades Sue-Sue to come to the military school with him so that Pamela and the school board could see how innocent he was. When they see Sue-Sue, instead of being even more shocked, they are all relieved that she is only a child. This is a stark case of the relative naiveté of Hollywood in the 1940s and that of the more cynical 1970s when the pedophilic subtext would have been more explicit.

Pamela turns out to be the villain of the piece by attempting to use her influence to stop Philip going off to war. This is Wilder and Brackett's uncharacteristic way of saying that Pamela was being unpatriotic, even though there is the unspoken likelihood that he might never return. It was one of Wilder's rare overt references to current events apart from his two Berlin-set movies, *A Foreign Affair* (1948) and *One, Two, Three* (1961).

Sue-Sue gets installed as a guest at the military academy, sharing a room with Pamela's younger sister Lucy (16-year-old Diana Lynn). In the first few minutes of meeting Sue-Sue, Lucy sees through the disguise. "Cut the baby talk," she says. The two of them keep the secret between them for different reasons. At the same time, Philip shows signs of jealousy when several of the teenage cadets make a play for Sue-Sue, who has become quite coquettish beyond her years. Having fought off the wolves of Manhattan, Susan finds herself being pursued by the 300 wolf cubs of the school. (Today, we know that many of them might end up as cannon fodder.)

There are number of one-shots, breaking the fourth wall, with Milland seemingly communicating his emotions directly to the audience, dispelling any doubts about his closeted feelings for Sue-Sue. Philip's jealousy leads him to give his 'niece' an awkward avuncular talk on the facts of life, using moths and a lightbulb as a metaphor. This is later used visually when Susan is back home in boring Stevenson, low, staring at moths around the porch light.

The denouement sees Philip, who has stopped by in Stevenson on his way to being shipped overseas, "so that this country can be spared what happened to France", having discovered that the child has become a sexy woman, in a last (and first) guiltless embrace between the two adults.

In a 2018 *Guardian* article entitled *Time's finally up for Hollywood's Lolita Complex*, Molly Haskell writes: "It is no longer possible to rationalize as consensual certain egregious pairings, or to accept with equanimity the sexualization of underage performers." She goes on to state that "nymphetmania has a long and hoary pedigree in Hollywood" from Shirley Temple to Jodie Foster's child prostitute in *Taxi Driver* (1976). On the way, she calls Wilder "a taboo-teaser by trade... and a specialist in age disparity themes," offering *The Major and the Minor* as evidence. What she fails to mention is that Wilder constantly and farcically reminds the audience that Ginger is not a child and can look after herself. Nevertheless, many years later, Wilder claimed, no doubt with his tongue in his cheek, that *The Major and the Minor* "was the first American film about pedophilia." But Wilder's saving grace is the witty script, the cleverly wrought plot and the sparkling playing, all kept at a light-hearted pace. As Wilder once remarked in an Oscar Wildean epigram, "If there's anything I hate more than not being taken seriously, it's being taken too seriously."

*Ronald Bergan is a film historian, critic and lecturer who is presently visiting professor at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. A regular contributor to The Guardian, he has written many books including The Eyewitness Guide To Film, Sergei Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict, Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise, The Coen Brothers and Anthony Perkins: A Haunted Life.*



## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

*The Major and the Minor* has been exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.37:1, with mono audio.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 2K resolution on an Arriscan at NBC Universal. The film was graded and restored at Dragon DI, Wales. Picture grading was completed on a Pablo Rio system and restoration was completed using a combination of PFClean and Revival software.

The audio was remastered from the restored combined mono track by NBC Universal.

Restoration supervised by **James White, Arrow Films**

Dragon DI

**Mylene Bradford, Paul Wright, Owain Morgan, Khristian Hawkes**

NBC Universal

**Peter Schade, Tim Naderski, Jefferson Root, John Edell**

All materials for this restoration were made available by NBC Universal.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by **James Blackford**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
QC **Nora Mehenni, Alan Simmons**  
Production Assistant **Samuel Thiery**  
Blu-ray Mastering and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**  
Design **Obviously Creative**

## SPECIAL THANKS

**Alex Agran, Geoff Andrew, Ronald Bergan, Adrian Martin,  
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