

## **Ace in the Hole / The Big Carnival (1951) Wilder**

P Michell, 2017

See below for title change reason.

### **Synopsis:**

Charles Tatum, a down-on-his-luck reporter, takes a job with a small New Mexico newspaper. The job is pretty boring until he finds a man trapped in an old Indian dwelling. He jumps at the chance to make a name for himself by taking over and prolonging the rescue effort, and feeding stories to major newspapers. He creates a national media sensation and milks it for all it is worth - until things go terribly wrong. *Written by John Oswalt*

**Prod Co:** Paramount **Prod:** Billy Wilder **Dir:** Billy Wilder **Scr:** Billy Wilder, Lesser Samuels, Walter Newman from Newman's story idea **Phot:** Charles Lang Jr. **Ed:** Arthur P. Schmidt **Art Dir:** Hal Pereira, Earl Hedrick **Mus:** Hugo Friedhofer  
**Cast:** Kirk Douglas, Jan Sterling, Robert Arthur, Porter Hall, Frank Cady, Richard Benedict.

First film script made after end of collaboration with Charles Brackett.

### **Billy Wilder** – Writer (78 films) & Director (26 films)

Significant other films as director – *Lost Weekend* (1945), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *Ace in the Hole* (1951), *Stalag 17* (1953), *Seven Year Itch* (1959), *Witness for the Prosecution* (1957), *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *The Apartment* (1960),

Wilder's first significant success was *Ninotchka* in 1939, a collaboration with fellow German immigrant [Ernst Lubitsch](#). This [screwball comedy](#) starred [Greta Garbo](#) (generally known as a [tragic](#) heroine in film [melodramas](#)), and was popularly and critically acclaimed. With the byline, "Garbo Laughs!", it also took Garbo's career in a new direction. The film also marked Wilder's first [Academy Award](#) nomination. For twelve years Wilder co-wrote many of his films with Charles Brackett, from 1938 through 1950. He followed *Ninotchka* with a series of box office hits.

His third film as director, *Double Indemnity* (1944) was a major hit. A *film noir*, nominated for Best Director and Screenplay, it was co-written with mystery novelist [Raymond Chandler](#), although the two men did not get along. *Double Indemnity* not only set conventions for the *noir* genre (such as "venetian blind" lighting and voice-over narration), but was also a landmark in the battle against Hollywood censorship. The original [James M. Cain](#) novel *Double Indemnity* featured two love triangles and a murder plotted for insurance money. While the book was highly popular with the reading public, it had been considered unfilmable under the [Hays Code](#), because adultery was central to its plot. *Double Indemnity* is credited by some as the first true film noir, combining the stylistic elements of *Citizen Kane* with the narrative elements of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).

Spanish filmmaker [Fernando Trueba](#) said in his acceptance speech for the 1993 Best Non-English Speaking Film [Oscar](#): "I would like to believe in God in order to thank him. But I just believe in Billy Wilder... so, thank you Mr. Wilder." According to Trueba, Wilder called him the day after and told him: "Fernando, it's God." French filmmaker [Michel Hazanavicius](#) also thanked Billy Wilder in the 2012 Best Picture [Oscar](#) acceptance speech for *The Artist* by saying "I would like to thank the following three people, I would like to thank Billy Wilder, I would like to thank Billy Wilder, and I would like to thank Billy Wilder." Wilder's 12 [Academy Award](#) nominations for screenwriting were a record until 1997 when [Woody Allen](#) received a 13th nomination for *Deconstructing Harry*.

### **Billy Wilder Quotes:**

Making movies is little like walking into a dark room. Some people stumble across furniture, others break their legs but some of us see better in the dark than others. The ultimate trick is to convince, persuade.

Trust your own instinct. Your mistakes might as well be your own, instead of someone else's.

The best director is the one you don't see.

[asked if it was important for a director to know how to write] No, but it helps if he knows how to read.

I was not a guy writing deep-dish revelations. If people see a picture of mine and then sit down and talk about it for 15 minutes, that is a very fine reward, I think.

My English is a mixture between Arnold Schwarzenegger and Archbishop Tutu.

[upon seeing Sigmund Freud's therapy couch] It was a very tiny little thing. All his theories were based on the analysis of very short people!

A bad play folds and is forgotten, but in pictures we don't bury our dead. When you think it's out of your system, your daughter sees it on television and says, "My father is an idiot."

The Wilder message is don't bore - don't bore people.

I just made pictures I would've liked to see.

"He has Van Gogh's ear for music."

“A director must be a policeman, a midwife, a psychoanalyst, a sycophant and a bastard.”

### **Interviews:**

Review of Volker Schlöndorff's documentary *Billy Wilder Speaks* (2006) –  
<http://aurorasginjoint.com/2012/06/21/billy-wilder-speaks/>

Interview with Wilder about screenwriting experiences in *Paris Review* – 1996

<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1432/the-art-of-screenwriting-no-1-billy-wilder>

### **Trivia:**

When the film was released, it got bad reviews and lost money. The studio, without **Billy Wilder's** permission, changed the title to "The Big Carnival" to increase the box office take of the film. It didn't work. On top of that, Wilder's next picture, *Stalag 17* (1953), was a hit and he expected a share of the picture's profits. Paramount accountants told him that since this picture lost money, the money it lost would be subtracted from the profits of "Stalag 17".

The second Billy Wilder film to feature a character who works for the fictitious 'Pacific All-Risk Insurance Company'. The first being 'Double Indemnity' (1944).

In 1930 a seminal silent film – *People on Sunday* was made with screenplay by Billie Wilder. Made in Berlin over a series of Sundays. It shows ordinary people in the city of Berlin. The stellar (non-acting) talent – had– Robert & Curt Siodmak, Edward G Ulmer, Fred Zinnemann (also cinematography) and Rochus Gilese as directors /writers. Eugen Schufftan – principal cinematography (filmed Meltropolis!). Many of these would become later famous in Hollywood where they migrated to.

See the Wikipedia link here:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People\\_on\\_Sunday](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People_on_Sunday)

In a recent two part documentary on Jews who immigrated before the war to Hollywood, Wilder had to learn English there. Fascinating to think of two great writers in English coming from another language – the other being Joseph Conrad.

### **Critical response**

At the time of its release, critics found little to admire. In his review in *The New York*

*Times*, Bosley Crowther called it "a masterly film" but added, "Mr. Wilder has let imagination so fully take command of his yarn that it presents not only a distortion of journalistic practice but something of a dramatic grotesque . . . [it] is badly weakened by a poorly constructed plot, which depends for its strength upon assumptions that are not only naïve but absurd. There isn't any denying that there are vicious newspaper men and that one might conceivably take advantage of a disaster for his own private gain. But to reckon that one could so tie up and maneuver a story of any size, while other reporters chew their fingers, is simply incredible."<sup>[11]</sup>

*The Hollywood Reporter* called it "ruthless and cynical...a distorted study of corruption and mob psychology that...is nothing more than a brazen, uncalled-for slap in the face of two respected and frequently effective American institutions - democratic government and the free press."<sup>[12]</sup> *Variety* was more positive, noting "the performances are fine. Douglas enacts the heel reporter ably, giving it color to balance its unsympathetic character. Jan Sterling also is good in a role that has no softening touches, and Benedict's victim portrayal is first-rate. Billy Wilder's direction captures the feel of morbid expectancy that always comes out in the curious that flock to scenes of tragedy."<sup>[13]</sup>

The film has found new respect among critics. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* wrote in 2007, "Although the film is 56 years old, I found while watching it again that it still has all its power. It hasn't aged because Wilder and his co-writers, Walter Newman and Lesser Samuels, were so lean and mean [with their dialogue] . . . [Kirk Douglas'] focus and energy . . . is almost scary. There is nothing dated about [his] performance. It's as right-now as a sharpened knife."<sup>[14]</sup>

Dave Kehr in the *Chicago Reader* called it "cold, lurid, and fascinating"<sup>[15]</sup> and Nathan Lee of *The Village Voice* wrote, "Here is, half a century out of the past, a movie so acidly *au courant* it stings."<sup>[16]</sup>

*Time Out London* wrote, "As a diatribe against all that is worst in human nature, it has moments dipped in pure vitriol."<sup>[17]</sup> *TV Guide* called it "a searing example of writer-director Billy Wilder at his most brilliantly misanthropic" and adds, "An uncompromising portrait of human nature at its worst, the film . . . stands as one of the great American films of the 1950s."<sup>[18]</sup>

Ed Gonzalez of *Slant Magazine* wrote that the film "... allowed Wilder to question the very nature of human interest stories and the twisted relationship between the American media and its public. More than 50 years after the film's release, when magazines compete to come up with the cattiest buzz terms and giddily celebrate the demise of celebrity relationships for buffo bucks, *Ace in the Hole* feels more relevant than ever."<sup>[19]</sup>

## Reviews:

Molly Haskell's review for the Criterion Collection:

<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/591-ace-in-the-hole-noir-in-broad-daylight>

Senses of Cinema – Richard Armstrong

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/cteq/ace/>

### **The Press as the Vehicle of Manipulation of a Nation**

[Claudio Carvalho](#) from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The cynical, unethical and unscrupulous journalist Charles 'Chuck' Tatum (Kirk Douglas) arrives in a small New Mexico newspaper asking for a chance. He was fired from famous newspapers because of drinking problem, lying and even for having an affair with the wife of one of his bosses. His real intention is to use the small newspaper as a "swimming board" to a bigger one. After one year without a bang news and totally bored, Chuck travels with a younger reporter to make the coverage of a matter about rattlesnakes. When they arrive in an isolated gas station, he is informed that a man called Leo Minosa (Richard Benedict) is trapped alive in an old Indian mine in a nearby place called Mountain of the Seven Vultures. Chuck manipulates the local corrupt sheriff, the engineer responsible for the rescue operation and Leo's wife Lorraine Minosa (Jan Sterling), and a rescue that could be made using a simple and common process in twelve hours, lasts six days using a sophisticated drilling system and creating a circus in the previously desert place. Everybody profits with the accident except the victim.

Movies about manipulation of people are usually excellent. I remember Costa-Gravas' "Mad City (1997)", Barry Levinson's "Wag the Dog (1997)", Howard Hawks' "His Girl Friday (1940)", and even the recent real case of the chemical weapons. Yesterday I saw "Ace in the Hole" for the first time and I really was impressed how this film is amazingly real and updated. There are elements present in every modern society, such as: the powerful sheriff very corrupt, like most of the worldwide members of the governments; the press, interested in selling news only; the victim used for other interests greater than rescuing him; and the people, completely manipulated and with very short memory. Kirk Douglas is amazing in the role of a nasty reporter.