

ON SUNSET BOULEVARD

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
BILLY WILDER

by ED SIKOV

 HYPERION

NEW YORK

Billy's involved a death mask he supposedly saw at the Louvre—*la inconnue de la Seine*. The tragic story he wove concerned an unknown girl who drowns in the river and goes on to narrate the story of her life in flashback. She was the wife of a banker, Wilder said, and . . . Garbo dismissed the idea by saying that she didn't want to play the wife of a banker. At that point Audrey offered drinks. Reisch took over. He pitched an idea about the Empress Elizabeth of Austria, whose only dream is to run away from her life as an empress, and . . . Garbo reminded Reisch that she'd already done *Queen Christina*. Reisch drove her home. On the way, she told him that the only role she would be at all interested in playing was that of a male clown—actually a woman *playing* a male clown. "And all the admiring girls in the audience who write him letters are wondering why he does not respond. They do not understand." Wilder explained many years later that all Garbo really wanted to do was "to hide behind greasepaint. She could play the clown in white makeup so no one would be able to see her face."

A much more extreme career collapse was on Billy's mind when he and Brackett were writing *Sunset Boulevard*. In an effort to earn some kind of living in Hollywood, Joe May decided to open a restaurant. His wife, Mia, once one of Germany's leading stars, was the cook. The restaurant had a Hungarian theme; it was called the Blue Danube. Some of the Mays' old friends, including Billy and Joe Mankiewicz, invested in the fledgling operation and did what they could to bring in the crowds. Billy himself contributed \$3,000 to the effort. The Blue Danube opened during the first week of April 1949. It closed two weeks later, an utter failure. The Mays became so dispondent that they rarely left their house.

17. SUNSET BOULEVARD

JOE GILLIS (William Holden): Wait a minute—haven't I seen you before? I know your face.

NORMA DESMOND (Gloria Swanson): Get out! Or shall I call my servant?

JOE GILLIS: You're Norma Desmond. You used to be in silent pictures—you used to be big.

NORMA DESMOND: I *am* big. It's the pictures that got small.

JOE GILLIS: Uh-huh—I knew there was something wrong with them.

—*Sunset Boulevard*

On December 21, 1948, Brackett and Wilder turned in the first sixty-one pages of their new screenplay. It began with a curt notation: "This is the first act of *Sunset Boulevard*. Due to the peculiar nature of the project, we ask all our co-workers to regard it as top secret." What was peculiar about the film was its central female character, a batty silent screen star who'd passed her prime. Its narrative structure was also strange. *Sunset Boulevard* began in a morgue. Its leading man, the film's narrator, was a cadaver:

An attendant wheels the dead Gillis into the huge, bare, windowless room. Along the walls are twenty or so sheet-covered corpses lying in an orderly row of wheeled slabs with large numbers painted on the walls above each slab. The attendant pushes Gillis into a vacant space. Beyond him, the feet of other corpses stretch from under their sheets: men's feet, women's feet, children's, two or three Negroes—with a linen tag dangling from each left big toe. The attendant exits, switching off the light. For a moment the room is semi-dark, then as the music takes on a more astral phase, a curious glow emanates from the sheeted corpses.

A MAN'S VOICE: Don't be scared. There's a lot of us here. It's all right. GILLIS: I'm not scared.

(His head doesn't move, but his eyes slowly wander to the slab next to him. There, under a partially transparent sheet, lies a fat man aged 60 or so. His eyes are open, too, and directed at Gillis.)

FAT MAN: How did you happen to die?

GILLIS: What difference does it make? [...] It'll be a good joke, lying here like a jigsaw puzzle all scrambled up, with the cops and the Hollywood columnists trying to fit in the wrong pieces.

FAT MAN: Hollywood? You in the movies?

GILLIS: Yeah. Came out in forty-five, to catch me a swimming pool. And, by gosh, in the end I got myself one. Only there turned out to be blood in it.

FAT MAN: Were you an actor?

GILLIS: No. A writer. Never had my name on anything big, though. Just a couple of B pictures. One stinker, and the other one—well, that wasn't so hot either. I was having a tough time making a living.

FAT MAN: It's your dying I was asking about.

(*Gillis chuckles.*)

GILLIS: Well, I drove down Sunset Boulevard one afternoon. That was my mistake. Maybe I'd better start off with the morning of that day. I'd been out of work for six months. I had a couple of stories out that wouldn't sell, and an apartment right above Hollywood and Vine that wasn't paid for. . . .

Brackett and Wilder listed their cast of characters along with "the actors we hope to get" to play the roles. For Dan Gillis they wanted a bright young star—Montgomery Clift. Gloria Swanson, herself a silent star who hadn't made any movies in a while, would be the demented Norma Desmond. Erich von Stroheim would appear as her butler, Max. The character of Betty, a Paramount script reader, would be played by "a new face," and Brackett and Wilder hoped that the role of Kaufman, a Paramount producer, would be taken by Joseph Calleia. There would also be a number of smaller roles—"movie people, cops, and corpses."

Magnificently handsome and charismatic, Montgomery Clift had appeared in only two films—Howard Hawks's *Red River* and Fred Zinnemann's *The Search*—when Wilder approached him for the lead in *Sunset Boulevard*. His third picture, Paramount's *The Heiress* (costarring Olivia de Havilland) hadn't finished filming yet, but the buzz surrounding him was extraordinary. He was a studied, upper-crust twenty-eight-year-old who assiduously played the role of a relaxed bohemian in his public life. The combination was dazzling. Billy gave him the first section of the screenplay, Clift loved what he read, and he agreed to play the role. Paramount's contract with Clift for *The Heiress* included options on future films, so all Paramount had to do was exercise the first of these options for *Sunset Boulevard* and Monty was ready to go. He'd get \$5,000 per week for a guaranteed twelve weeks on the film. Clift agreed to report for work in

early April—about six weeks after he officially signed on. In the meantime, Billy and Charlie wanted him to stay in Hollywood for story conferences, as did Clift's protective agent, Herman Citron. But Clift, having finished work on *The Heiress*, was in the mood for a nice vacation, so he flew to Switzerland and went skiing.

Clift was a fine match for Gloria Swanson. Hollywood's hottest young man would play beautifully opposite the Jazz Age's flashiest, most glamorous woman. Swanson had been a genuine sensation in the 1920s. "You must remember," said Wilder, "that this was a star who at one time was carried in a sedan chair from her dressing room to the soundstage. When she married the Marquis de la Falaise and came by boat from Europe to New York and by train from there to Hollywood, people were strewing rose petals on the railroad tracks in her direction. She'd been one of the all-time stars, but when she returned to the screen in *Sunset* she worked like a dog." In the film, Wilder gives Norma's butler a punchline that plays on Swanson's own erotic allure: "She was the greatest of them all. You wouldn't know, you're too young. In one week she received seventeen thousand fan letters. Men bribed her hairdresser to get a lock of her hair. There was a maharaja who came all the way from India to beg one of her silk stockings. Later he strangled himself with it."

When he described Swanson's dedication to her performance, Wilder makes an important point: she was not the crazy diva she played on-screen but a tough and hard-working actress. But then nobody had ever called Gloria Swanson either lazy or dizzy. Swanson's movie career appeared to be over, but she never stopped working. By the late 1940s, Swanson was acting in summer stock productions, doing radio shows, and trying to keep her company, Multiprises, from going bankrupt. Still, Swanson continued to consider herself one of the greatest film stars in the world; she'd earned the title in the 1920s, and in the late 1940s she saw no need to give it up. As one contemporary account explained, Gloria was "keeping up appearances by spending \$7,000 a year on clothes, which, in her special instance, she regarded as more of a professional expense than an extravagance."

In June 1948, Swanson began earning \$350 a week on WPIX radio in New York City. When Paramount called her in September to see if she was interested in returning to motion pictures, Swanson naturally assumed it was a bit part and said that she might be able to leave her radio show for two weeks. No, the studio told her, it was for the lead in the picture, and she'd get somewhere in the neighborhood of \$50,000 for a ten- to twelve-week shoot. Swanson said she could be in Hollywood by the first of the year (though *Sunset Boulevard* didn't start to roll until April). She promptly divorced her fifth husband, to whom she had been married less than twelve months, and—according to Swanson, anyway—flew to Hollywood and ar-

rived on the set having no idea of the plot of the picture or the role she was to play.

On the day Swanson returned to Paramount Pictures, the studio she had indeed helped to build, she found a huge likeness of herself on a billboard near the gate. Paramount's publicity department was working on a self-promotional campaign to tie the studio in, decidedly obscurely, with the centennial celebration of the 1849 gold rush. The billboard featured a huge comet blazing through the sky leaving pictures of past and present Paramount stars behind it. The size of the picture and its position relative to the comet's tail was determined by the star's perceived importance to the studio. At the head of the tail was Gloria Swanson. According to her, the chief casting director, Bill Meiklejohn, explained why: "Baby, am I glad to see you. You took me off a helluva spot! If I'd put Crosby's picture on the front end of that comet, Hope would have blown his top, and Crosby would have had a fit if Hope was up there. Stanwyck or Hutton would've scratched my eyes out if one got top billing over the other. You turned out to be a real lifesaver." "That's when I knew I was home," Miss Swanson told the press. "Right back in the jungle, up to my ears in the rat race." A more likely rationale is that the studio had already begun its publicity campaign for *Sunset Boulevard*. They also wanted Swanson to feel the way Norma Desmond feels when *she* returns to Paramount in the film, except of course that Norma Desmond is delusional.

Brackett reported that he and Billy had never considered anybody else for the part: "We knew no time would be wasted getting into the story as soon as Swanson appeared on the screen. Youngsters who never saw her would immediately accept her as an old-time movie queen. Older fans would identify her with the characterization and get a bigger emotional wallop from the story." To the degree that the extended comedy routine that served as Billy's memory can be trusted, however, Brackett and Wilder originally wanted another old-time star. "For a long time I wanted to do a comedy about Hollywood," Wilder claimed. "God forgive me, I wanted to have Mae West and Marlon Brando." He also said they tried Pola Negri: "We called her on the phone, and there was too much Polish accent." Then they went up to Pickfair, Mary Pickford's immense estate high in the hills. "Brackett began to tell her the story, because he was the more serious one. I stopped him. 'No, don't do it.' I waved him off. She was going to be insulted if we told her she was to play a woman who begins a love affair with a man half her age. I said to her, 'We're sorry, but it's no use. The story gets very vulgar.'"

Frustrated at his lack of success in casting this most particular, most peculiar role, Wilder turned to his colleague and friend George Cukor for help. They were sitting in Cukor's expansive garden drinking tea when

Cukor mentioned Swanson. Wilder probably hadn't thought very much about her since *Music in the Air*. He'd predicted in the pages of *Der Querschnitt* that *Queen Kelly*, the film Swanson made for Erich von Stroheim, would be a huge hit. Little did he know at the time that Swanson, on the other side of the world, was becoming increasingly horrified at such Stroheimian touches as her costar (Tully Marshall) drooling brown tobacco juice on her delicate hand while slipping a wedding ring on her finger. *Queen Kelly* died before completion; Swanson's producer/lover, Joseph Kennedy, pulled the plug, and Swanson's fame began a protracted collapse as well. *Music in the Air* all but finished her off. In Cukor's garden, Billy saw several reasons why Gloria Swanson was the ideal Norma Desmond.

One of these reasons served doubly as the solution to another problem—the casting of Max, the servile butler who used to be a famous film director. Erich von Stroheim came naturally to mind. Von Stroheim did not become a butler; he became an actor and, at times at least, a good one. Before playing Rommel in *Five Graves to Cairo*, von Stroheim played the gentleman soldier von Rauffenstein in Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*. After *Five Graves*, though, von Stroheim descended into drastic self-parody. The only two film roles he landed in the mid-1940s were in cheapies, and, humiliatingly, each required him to play a ruined artiste—a mad Hun on the skids. In Anthony Mann's *The Great Flamarion* (the first of Willie Wilder's film productions for Republic), von Stroheim played a pathetic vaudevilian sharpshooter who comes to a depressing end, thanks to a woman. In *The Mask of Dijon* (1946) von Stroheim was a third-rate hypnotist whose end was even worse. He trips over a guillotine and beholds himself. But even in decline, Erich von Stroheim had no equal as an arrogant Teutonic grotesque. "There was something great in him," Billy said. "When he made an error, it was grandiose, and when it was good, it had class." He would be perfect as Max von Mayerling.

Von Stroheim was living in France at the time. Wilder approached him through Paul Kohner, von Stroheim's agent. Von Stroheim responded in a letter to Kohner: "I don't have to tell you that I would not mind at all working again with 'witty-Billy.' His last endeavor with me had a tremendous success here in France, or was it my extraordinary popularity here that made his picture go over big? Ask him."

Von Stroheim already knew the nature of the role Wilder wanted him to play in *Sunset Boulevard*: "I read in the old bitch Parsons' column that Billy wants me to play the role of a crazy motion-picture director. . . . He likes his actors true to type, does not he? Tell him for me that if he were as smart as he likes to be considered he would play the part himself! But even in craziness I prefer to be the first and therefore I would accept his proposition."

With the three major roles cast, Brackett and Wilder continued to pull *Sunset Boulevard* together in preproduction. As was their practice by this point, they had already brought a third cowriter onto the project—a former Time-Life reporter named D. M. Marshman Jr., whom they'd gotten to know as an affable card-playing partner. After an early screening of *The Emperor Waltz*, Marshman critiqued the film so extensively and so intelligently that Brackett and Wilder told him they'd ask him to collaborate on something in the future. When they found themselves stumped on how to proceed with *Sunset Boulevard*, they made good on their promise. Jacques Théry, Robert Harari, Richard Breen, and now Marshman—in the mid- and late 1940s, Brackett and Wilder did their best work together when there was someone else there with them.

Montgomery Clift, meanwhile, had had time to think. Abruptly, he decided he didn't want to do the picture after all. He called Herman Citron and told him what the problem was. He'd just gotten through with *The Heiress* and didn't want to play any more love scenes with yet another older woman. What Clift specifically said was that he didn't think he could be convincing. So he quit. Citron tried to talk him out of it, but Monty was adamant. Wilder was enraged. "Bullshit!" Billy yelled. "If he's any kind of an actor, he could be convincing making love to *any* woman."

Sunset Boulevard was getting ready to roll, and Clift's sudden departure caused a crisis. Under great pressure, Wilder and Brackett were forced to debate the merits of various available Paramount stars, someone who could step into a difficult, high-profile part very quickly. The most promising was William Holden, who had been kicking around the studio for years. Holden was a solid professional who took the roles they gave him but had never quite connected with audiences. He was tall, handsome, muscular—a classic all-American guy with a bright smile and the slightest suggestion of trouble underneath. There was a problem, however. Holden had been great in *Golden Boy*, but that film was already ten years old. *Sunset Boulevard* wouldn't make much sense if one has-been simply hooked up with another. On the other hand, the fact that he'd never really delivered on his *Golden Boy* promise actually worked to his advantage for *Sunset Boulevard*. Even though he'd been in pictures for over a decade, audiences still didn't know William Holden.

Wilder invited him for drinks. They talked about the film for a while, and Billy began to see some of the depth and intelligence that hadn't come across to him before. He decided that Holden's lack of stardom wasn't Holden's fault at all—it was the lackluster films he'd starred in, and the men who made them. Wilder gave Holden the portion of the screenplay that had been written, and Holden took it back home to read. He phoned back quickly and enthusiastically, beginning what would be a long friend-

ship with Billy—one of Wilder's most intimate—with a typically gung ho and efficient message: "I like it, I'll do it, let's go." But at home, with his wife, Holden was a lot shakier. "Jesus, I'm scared," he told her. "I'm not sure I can deliver."

Brackett and Wilder were happy with Holden, and so was the front office. Replacing Clift saved Paramount \$39,000.

By the middle of February, Brackett, Wilder, and Marshman had made various changes to the still-incomplete script. Dan Gillis's name became Dick Gillis. Kaufman's name became Millman. Norma Desmond's mansion, once described as being an enormous hovel with tattered wall hangings and a lot of litter, was no longer quite so dilapidated. Her car, once a Rolls, turned into a Hispano-Suiza, if only for the sound of the name. ("Parlez-vous français? Do you speak English? Hispano-Suiza?") And Norma herself was no longer engaged in the endless writing and rewriting of her own pompous, semiliterate memoirs. Early on, Gillis had said, in voice-over, "I was feeling a little sick at my stomach. It wasn't just that sweet champagne. It was that Sunday supplement trash of hers. The memoirs of an egomaniac, not even spelled correctly." But now Norma would be writing an endless screenplay—a mess of a Salome epic that would serve, for lack of a better word, as her comeback.

The original idea for *Sunset Boulevard* has been credited variously to Brackett and to Wilder. Brackett, according to one popular account, had wanted to make a comedy about a silent-screen star for a number of years, but neither Brackett nor Wilder knew what to do with the idea until they met Marshman, who offered the idea of having the star get involved with a young man. Wilder then came up with the idea of killing him: "Suppose the old dame shoots the boy." Brackett is said to have favored a lighter-humored comedy, while Wilder pushed for the film's bleaker, more sardonic tone. On the other hand, Wilder's friend Armand Deutsch claims that the whole idea had been Billy's all along: "Billy once showed [George] Axelrod a scrap of paper which he had saved on which he had scribbled the words, 'Silent picture star commits murder. When they arrest her she sees the newsreel cameras and thinks she is back in the movies.' This note had been made almost ten years before *Sunset Boulevard*." Whatever its genesis, though, the three screenwriters produced a script that twists comedy into something quite disturbing but never stops being bitterly funny, as long as one doesn't take their jokes personally.

If Paramount's accounting figures bear any relation to the work performed, the actual composition of the screenplay for *Sunset Boulevard* was done almost entirely by Marshman and Wilder. By the time they made *Sunset Boulevard*, Brackett and Wilder had been describing themselves as "executive writers" for years, and the string of collaborators with whom

they produced scripts testifies to their working methods after 1945. The authorship of *Sunset Boulevard* is not in doubt; the film was written by Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, and D. M. Marshman Jr. Whether or not Charlie and Billy were still sitting, pacing, napping, and squabbling in their office suite while laying down precise dialogue is another matter entirely. Curiously, Paramount paid Brackett handsomely for producing *Sunset Boulevard*—about \$70,000—but *only* for producing it; Wilder and Marshman earned all the money for writing the film. Marshman was officially assigned to the project on August 9, 1948. By February 1949, he'd worked on the screenplay for 182 days and received \$11,600. Billy, meanwhile, was paid for 306 days of screenwriting and earned \$211,416; this was in addition to his directing fee of about \$90,000.

In March and early April, the writer-producer, the writer-director, and their for-hire script writer jointly worked out more of the details of their "peculiar" Hollywood project. Since this was a film about an industry they knew and loved, they wanted to suffuse it with familiar people and places. In this spirit Brackett and Wilder hired the nudgy Hollywood gossip columnist Sidney Skolsky to appear in a sequence set at Schwab's Drugstore in the heart of downtown Hollywood. Enticing Skolsky to play himself wasn't difficult; as Brackett told him, "It won't be Schwab's without Skolsky. And the whole picture won't be typically Hollywood without you and the Schwabadero." This is the scene: Skolsky is seated at a stool at the counter. He asks Gillis, who has failed to land any scriptwriting work and is now completely broke, whether he has anything juicy for Skolsky's column. Gillis responds, "Sure. Just sold an original for a hundred grand—to the King Brothers. The Life of the Warner Brothers. Starring the Ritz Brothers. Playing opposite the Andrews Sisters. But don't get me wrong—I love Hollywood."

Sunset Boulevard's script also contained lots of references to real people, each of whom had to agree to the use of their names. Some didn't. Darryl Zanuck's refusal might have precluded references to himself and Twentieth Century-Fox. Tyrone Power declined as well, as did Olivia de Havilland and Samuel Goldwyn, but Brackett and Wilder decided to use Zanuck's and Power's names anyway. For the scene in which Norma Desmond returns to the Paramount lot in the deluded belief that she is being hired to make another movie, the writers wanted her to recognize one of the juicers (industry slang for an electrician) and greet him like long-lost friend. "Hog-Eye!" Norma cries. In fact, "Hog-Eye" was real—it was the nickname of a former Paramount electrician named John Herman, who didn't mind the reference. Oddly enough, the reclusive Greta Garbo also granted permission, though when she saw the film itself she was sorry she had done so. She felt that Wilder used her name in a past-tense context, and she was

offended. "I thought Billy Wilder was a friend of mine," Garbo told a friend.

Billy and Charlie also tried to get *two* town criers for the film's operatic final scenes, not just one: "I wanted two gossip columnists—Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons—each on the phone, one upstairs, one down, neither of them giving up the phone and saying 'Get off the line, you bitch! I was here first!'" Hedda I got easily, but Louella knew quite well she would lose that duel because Hedda was a former actress and she would wipe the floor with her."

The starting date grew closer, and the usual tensions and egos of Hollywood filmmaking continued to surface. Swanson was miffed at having to do a screen test, but she was reassured that it wasn't really to test *her* but rather her makeup. Told by Brackett that she might need to be artificially aged for the role, Swanson countered by asking, "Can't you put the makeup on Mr. Holden instead, to make him look younger?" They did, though they also added subtle touches of gray to Swanson's hair and a few extra wrinkles on her fifty-two-year-old face. For his part, Holden's worries escalated. He told Wilder nervously that he didn't know who Gillis (now Joe, not Dick) really was—he couldn't get a fix on the character. "Do you know Bill Holden?" Billy asked. "Of course," said Holden. "Then you know Joe Gillis."

Paramount's location scouts were busily finding excellent examples of the way Hollywood's citizens variously lived. The Alko-Nido Apartments, at 1851 North Ivar at the top of the hill at Franklin, would work well for the drab barracks of an unemployed screenwriter. For Norma Desmond's mansion, they had to look farther afield than the 10,000 block of Sunset Boulevard, on which the fictitious house is situated in the script. They found it, about six miles away, at the northwest corner of Wilshire and Irving Boulevards. The immense heap of a house, built in 1924 for the then-astronomical figure of \$250,000, currently belonged to J. Paul Getty's ex-wife, who hadn't lived there for several years. More ghostly than derelict, the building itself fit the filmmakers' description superbly, as did the vaguely seedy-looking yard and garage:

I had landed myself in the driveway of some big mansion that looked rundown and deserted. At the end of the drive was a lovely sight indeed—a great big empty garage, just standing there going to waste. . . .

It was a great big white elephant of a place. The kind crazy movie people built in the crazy twenties. A neglected house gets an unhappy look. This one had it in spades. It was like that old woman in *Great Expectations*—that Miss Havisham in her rotting wedding dress and her torn veil, taking it out on the world because she'd been given the go-by.

There was no pool, so Paramount built one. (The ex-Mrs. Getty was said to be thrilled to get a free swimming pool, but the pool the studio built had next to no plumbing and was never used for swimming once filming was completed.) Paramount also sweetened the mansion's interior by adding stained glass windows to the front hall, heavy draperies and a pipe organ in the living room, and palm trees in the conservatory.

The script was undergoing modifications as well. For the morgue scene they gave a drowned boy's corpse a grim little joke: "I drowned. Right off the pier at Ocean Park. I bet Pinky Evans I could stay under water longer than two minutes, and I did, too." Gillis was now skirting obscenity in a line to Kaufman, the producer: "You trying to be funny? Because I'm all out of laughs. I'm up that creek and I need a job." Max was given a limp. Gillis comments on it in his room over the garage: "I figured he was a little crazy. Maybe it was that stroke—he'd had a stroke a while back—part of his brain was limping too. Come to think of it, the whole place was like that—half paralyzed—withering away in slow motion." Finally, the producer Kaufman became Sheldrake, and he was given a new clincher at the end of his speech about his many debts and financial obligations: "Now if Dewey had been elected," Sheldrake begins, whereupon Gillis leaves the office in disgust.

The PCA was unusually restrained in its response to the script drafts Paramount submitted. The "up that creek" line had to be cut—that was one of Breen's few specific demands. A larger issue remained, but it was one over which the PCA had little direct control, namely the "sex affair" between Gillis and Norma. "It seems to us at this point that there is no indication of a voice for morality by which the sex affair would be condemned, nor does there appear to be compensating moral values for the sin." The protagonist's grim end made no difference to the PCA: "We are quite aware that the story is told in flashback and the leading man is shown to be dead when the story opens."

Costuming Gloria Swanson for the role of Norma Desmond presented designer Edith Head with a tricky set of problems. Here was a woman who was a throwback to a bygone era, but she was a very rich, very stylish throwback who could buy whatever she wanted in the best stores in Beverly Hills. Moreover, Norma had to remain blissfully unaware that she *was* a throwback. Thus her clothes had to be both in style and out-of-date, all at once. Head's ingenious solution was to combine Jazz Age materials with so-called New Look styling. (Dior brought out the New Look in 1947, and it dominated women's fashions through much of the 1950s: an hourglass form and tightly cinched waists that created a kind of rigid femininity that postwar culture found attractive.) She employed current fashion trends but added the odd element here and there—for instance, a 1949 hat trimmed

in peacock feathers. For the film's final scene, though, Head abandoned the New Look entirely in favor of a barely defined waistline; when Norma is ready for her last close-up she looks just that much more out of time. Ironically, Head was already familiar with Gloria Swanson from her earliest days at Paramount. As a young costumer's assistant she used to wash Swanson's hosiery.

On March 26, 1949, shooting began at dawn with preproduction shots of the L.A. County morgue and its exterior courtyard; they were filmed at the Hall of Justice itself. Preproduction shooting continued through April 16, with shots of the Sunset Strip, the Alto-Nido exteriors, and various other locations around Hollywood and Beverly Hills. The script was still incomplete when the production of *Sunset Boulevard* officially opened on April 18. Wilder began that morning by shooting scenes of Gillis in the apartment, which had been constructed on the lot. Von Stroheim was called to Soundstage 9 in the afternoon to film the scene in which Max welcomes Gillis into the Desmond mansion, and Swanson appeared the following day to film various shots of Norma in her bedroom.

"Johnny," Billy told cinematographer John Seitz, "keep it out of focus—I want to win the foreign picture award." For the scene in which Swanson lies in bed with her wrists slashed, Seitz asked Billy how he wanted to film it. "Johnny, it's the usual slashed-wrist shot." For the mon-key scene, Seitz was told, "Johnny, it's the usual dead chimpanzee setup." For the New Year's Eve tango sequence, Seitz employed a dance dolly—a platform on wheels hooked onto the camera, which itself was mounted on a movable platform, thereby enabling Seitz to take a shot of Swanson and Holden making a smooth, vertiginous sweep of the room. It wasn't an innovation; Seitz first used the technique to shoot Rudolph Valentino and Alice Terry tangoing in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921).

On April 21, the company was called to the mansion location at Wilshire and Irving for exterior shooting, but the quality of light deteriorated and Billy had to call off shooting early. Holden, Billy, and the crew spent the next day rushing from location to location: from Stone Canyon Road to the Bel-Air golf course, from North Vine Street (for Rudy's shoeshine parlor: "Rudy never asked any questions about your finances—he'd just look at your heels and know the score") to Paramount's ornate entrance gate—not the imposing main gate on Melrose, but the smaller, more beautiful one set back from the corner of Melrose and Bronson.

It is through the Bronson gate that Gillis walks on his way to see Sheldrake, the "smart producer." The scene is one to which Billy related, if not because of his recent past, then certainly because of his earliest days at Ufa and at Columbia, Fox, and Paramount itself. "All right, Gillis, you've got five minutes, what's your story about?" Sheldrake snaps. Wilder's camera

tracks back from Sheldrake distractedly lighting a cigar to Gillis hunched forward in his chair, his hands waving around in a gesture that seems more Billy than Holden:

GILLIS: It's about a baseball player, a rookie shortstop that's batting

-347. Poor kid was once mixed up in a holdup but he's tryin' a go straight, except that there are a bunch'a gamblers that won't let him!

SHELDRAKE: (*bored*) So they tell the poor kid he's got to throw the World Series or else, huh?

GILLIS: More or less, except for the end. I've got a gimmick that's *real* good.

SHELDRAKE: You got a title?

GILLIS: *Bases Loaded*. There's a forty-page outline. . . . They're pretty hot about it over at Twentieth, except I think Zanuck's all wet. Can you see Ty Power as a shortstop? You got the best man for it right here on this lot—Alan Ladd! Be a good change of pace for Ladd. And another thing—it's pretty simple to shoot. Lots'a outdoor stuff. You could make the whole thing for under a million.

Sheldrake burps loudly from the bicarbonate he has been belting back while Gillis goes on and on about Ladd and the outdoor stuff. Gillis pretends not to notice.

At this, Betty Schaefer enters and rips *Bases Loaded* to shreds. She describes it with throwaway cruelty: "It's from hunger." Sheldrake then comes up with a possibility:

SHELDRAKE: Of course, we're always looking for a Betty Hutton. Do you see it as a Betty Hutton?

GILLIS: Frankly, no.

SHELDRAKE: Now wait a minute—if we made it a girls' softball team, put in a few numbers. . . . Might make a cute musical. "*It Happened in the Bull-Pen*—the story of a woman."

GILLIS: Are you trying to be funny? Because I'm all out of laughs. I'm over a barrel. I need a job!

Gillis heads desperately to the pay phone at Schwab's. First he puts the bite on his friend Artie Green, but Green can only offer \$20. "Then I talked to a couple of yes men at Metro. To me they said no. Finally I located that agent of mine. The big faker. Was he out digging up a job for poor Joe Gillis? Huh-uh. He was hard at work in Bel-Air, making with the golf sticks." This is where the Bel-Air golf course location came in. On the green, Gillis's agent does him a big favor:

AGENT: So you need three hundred dollars. Of course I could give you three hundred dollars. Only I'm not going to!

GILLIS: (*apprehensively*) No?

AGENT: Gillis, get this through your head. I'm not just your agent. It's not the ten percent! I'm your *friend*!

GILLIS: You are?

AGENT: Don't you know the finest things in the world are written on an empty stomach? Once a talent like yours gets in that Mocambo-Romanoff rut, you're through!

Gillis responds to this helpful suggestion by glaring at him and snarling "*I need three hundred dollars.*" He does so with much the same vocal tone and facial expression Don Birnam has when he holds up the liquor store for a bottle.

Location shooting continued for the next two weeks, all of which were taken up with filming sequences at the Desmond mansion, including, on May 3, the scene in which Norma invites a few old friends to her house to play a rubber or two of bridge. Gillis nicknames them "the waxworks," and they look and act accordingly. In one of the film's crueler touches, the waxworks are played by three old, washed-up movie stars: H. B. Warner, Anna Q. Nilsson, and the greatest silent comedian of all, Buster Keaton. According to Billy, Keaton was actually an excellent bridge player, no small compliment coming from Billy. He was also a severe alcoholic whose once-handsome face had turned puffy and sagging. Brackett and Wilder had approached another former star, William Haines, but Haines turned them down; he was content with his second career as one of Hollywood's most successful interior designers. "It's clean," he told Brackett and Wilder—"no mascara on the face."

The three silent screen stars who did agree to caricature themselves in *Sunset Boulevard* worked for precisely one day. Nilsson was called at 7:00 A.M., the others at 9:00 A.M. They performed diligently like the professionals they had once been, needing only two or three takes per setup. By 5:15 P.M. Wilder was done with them and they were has-beens again.

For his part, von Stroheim was happy to be back on a top-notch production after his forays into B-picture purgatory, and he came up with several of his own ideas about the relationship between Max von Mayerling and the woman he serves. It was von Stroheim's idea to have Max write all of Norma's fan letters. According to Wilder, von Stroheim also suggested a scene in which Max washed Norma's underwear, but Wilder nixed that one. One von Stroheim element Wilder did add was a piece of the ruined *Queen Kelly* itself. For \$1,000 Paramount purchased 122 feet of its footage for Norma Desmond to project in her own living room as evidence

of her greatness. She is luminous indeed, her face, in close-up, surrounded by bright candles that still fail to draw attention away from her. When Wilder reveals that Max von Mayerling is himself a ruined film director reduced to servitude, the joke that is Norma Desmond becomes all the more bitter. Wilder acknowledged that the idea to use the *Queen Kelly* footage was von Stroheim's.

The shooting of *Sunset Boulevard* continued smoothly through May. The important chase sequence—in which Gillis escapes from the repo men, blows a tire, and ends up by pure chance at Norma Desmond's house—was delayed by some bad weather and complicated traffic problems, but the production stayed more or less on schedule. Sidney Skolsky appeared at Schwab's according to plan on May 16. An even more recognizable Hollywood figure, hired for the sake of his name and reputation, showed up on May 23, when the scenes of Norma's return to the Paramount lot went before the cameras. Paramount's most famous director, Cecil B. DeMille, was going to play himself. "He was shooting *Samson and Delilah*," Billy remembered. "We used his sets when Norma visits. We had him for one day. Ten thousand dollars." The gossip around town was that DeMille had trouble doing his scene and required seven takes before he got it right. DeMille also demanded and received the right to change one of his lines. Originally, he was to have said to Norma, "I haven't seen you since Lindbergh landed in Paris and we danced on the nightclub table." DeMille refused to say it. "I never go to nightclubs," he declared. "And if I did, I wouldn't dance on a table, even if Lindbergh flew to Paris twice. And if I did dance, it would be with Mrs. DeMille." If Wilder had a problem with C.B., he didn't broadcast it; he told the press, "Mr. DeMille was too courteous to make suggestions, and I was too afraid."

Originally, Wilder wanted DeMille to ask Delilah (Hedy Lamarr) to get out of her chair so that he could give it to Norma Desmond. Lamarr, with whom Billy either had or hadn't had an affair (depending on whether one trusts Louella Parsons), agreed to do it—"for twenty-five thousand dollars," according to Billy. "I said that it would be enough for Norma to sit in a chair with Hedy Lamarr's name on it. That was ten thousand dollars. So I put her in DeMille's chair." It cost nothing to do so, since DeMille had already been well paid for his efforts. After filming DeMille's scenes, Wilder is said to have patted C.B. on the back and said, "Very good, my boy. Leave your name with my secretary. I may have a small part for you in my next picture."

As it turned out, Wilder hadn't finished dealing with DeMille about his appearance in *Sunset Boulevard*—and would not until the studio anted up a new black Cadillac limousine and a billing order revised in DeMille's favor. DeMille demanded and received not only higher listing in the credits,

but also a crediting order in which his illustrious name did not appear immediately (and, to DeMille, insultingly) next to Franklyn Farnum's; Farnum played the monkey mortician.

In *Sunset Boulevard*, Joe Gillis learns to make a good living by endlessly rewriting Norma's ghastly *Salome*. He's a kept man who survives by smoothly humoring his patron, first by writing a part for her in a movie that will never be made, and then by making love to her. In each case he has to hold his nose a little to be able to go through with it.

But Gillis doesn't give up his own writing career. He meets Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olson), an attractive story editor, and launches a new script with her. They work together in the evenings and at night, once their day jobs have been put to bed. Billy worked a personal reference into the scene: "The night shot where Holden and Nancy Olson walk on the lot, she tells how she grew up there, at Paramount. How she wanted to be in movies. That's my wife's background we used. Audrey's mother worked in wardrobe. And grew up like that." (Audrey, meanwhile, was getting used to being married to Billy. One night during the production of *Sunset Boulevard* Billy woke up and told her, "Darling, it's late, and I have a hard day at the studio tomorrow. Would you be so kind as to take a cab home?" "You idiot," Audrey informed him—"we're married already.")

In an effort to get his actors to live their roles as fully as possible, Wilder actually scheduled the filming of Gillis's scenes with Betty in the late evening and well into the night. Holden, Olson, Billy, and the crew worked from 7:30 P.M. to 12:10 A.M., and after a break for supper, they continued filming the readers' office scenes until 4:30 in the morning. For the shot of Gillis and Betty kissing on the balcony of the Writers Building, Billy knew that Olson was feeling some discomfort at performing the scene in such a semipublic place, so he arranged only a brief rehearsal for them, after which they performed the kiss very well on the first take. "Cut! Print!" Billy yelled. But just to be on the safe side, he asked them to do it a second time. This time he didn't call cut. After an extended period of time, the crew began snickering. Finally, someone else yelled "Cut!" It was Mrs. Holden, who had appeared in the meantime and didn't find the joke very funny.

By the end of the first week of June, the need for retakes as well as generally slow progress brought the production five days behind schedule, a manageable delay. One problem was the weather; Los Angeles was plagued by unusually foggy days, so whenever a little sun came out they would drop what they were doing and film outdoor scenes. They weren't looking for the characteristically brilliant sun of Los Angeles, however—not for *Sunset Boulevard*. The film may have been set under the cruel sun of Hollywood, but both Wilder and Seitz preferred more gray than Southern California's sky tended to provide.

The grimly amusing morgue interiors were shot on June 10. The lead cadavers and all the extras were laid out on their metal slabs and covered with sheets from head to ankle; their feet stuck out. Filming went smoothly until a strange rumbling disturbed a take. Amid snickering from the crew, Wilder's assistant rushed down the rows of covered corpses until he found the one who was snoring.

Norma's descent down the staircase—equally funny, though in a more Grand-Guignol manner—was shot six days later. Finally, at 3:00 A.M. on June 19, *Sunset Boulevard* wrapped after Holden and von Stroheim completed their work at the Desmond mansion location.

Nobody believed the film was actually finished. The need for retakes, special-effects photography, pickups, and the filming of added scenes meant that the production would simply reopen the following week. Some of these scenes involved Max serving as Norma's chauffeur. The car had become an Isotta Fraschini, not a Hispano-Suiza. Von Stroheim was helpless. "Er-ich didn't know how to drive," Swanson later reported, "which humiliated him, but he acted the scene, and the action of driving, so completely that he was exhausted after each take, even though the car was being towed by ropes the whole while." Wilder was blunter, and probably more inventive as well: "He still crashed it into the Bronson gate." According to Swanson, she and von Stroheim suffered no tensions left over from their disastrous past. They were no longer close, of course, but they'd reconciled long before being cast in *Sunset Boulevard*.

Wilder had also come up with an idea for a spectacularly unnerving low-angle shot of Joe Gillis's dead body floating in the swimming pool, taken from underwater. The shot proved to be so central to Wilder's vision of the film, and so difficult to achieve, that several whole days in late June were spent solving the problem of how to do it. The script was quite clear: "we see blood flowing from chest wound," and in addition, the shot had to include a group of policemen and a photographer staring down at the body from the side of the pool. The photographer would be snapping pictures, so flashbulbs had to be popping behind Gillis's floating corpse.

Billy was insistent. "Baby," he said to John Meehan, the film's associate art director, "the shot I want is a fish's viewpoint." This rang a bell with Meehan. While waiting at the barbershop earlier that week, he had read a magazine article on the subject of the way fishermen look to the fish they are trying to catch. He returned to the barber's the following morning and frantically searched for the article, but he couldn't find it. He proceeded to the studio in defeat, but the germ of an idea had been planted. He got an aquarium, a mirror, and a few plastic dolls from the props department and performed some trial setups. At a certain angle, the objects in the water were as clear as the objects above the water.

There was a water tank on Soundstage 9. Holden was summoned, along with the men playing the police. With Holden in the pool and the other actors surrounding him looking down, the shot was actually taken from above the water, the camera pointing down toward a mirror on the floor of the tank. Behind the policemen was a large piece of sky-colored muslin. Holden was quite chilly by the time the shot was successfully filmed; the water couldn't be warmed for his comfort. The effect is spectacularly macabre. A dimly recognizable body floats slowly across the screen as the cops look down and flashbulbs fire. The audience is unnerved not only by the ghastliness of the corpse but also by the position we are asked to assume. At least Joe Gillis floats. We, on the other hand, have sunk to the bottom. There is no inconsistency between Wilder's refusal to film a shot looking down from a catwalk and his demand for "a fish's viewpoint." Wilder chooses his shots to express emotions—his own as well as his characters'. Looking down on his characters from an isolated perch isn't his style. Sinking to the bottom and staring up at them in disbelief is.

One more crucial scene needed to be reshot. On June 23, the cast and crew gathered at the stairway of the Desmond mansion, where Norma would prepare for the close-up of a lifetime. Wilder filmed the scene as he planned it; Norma came down the stairs not toward an actual close-up but toward a final fade-out. The production reopened one more time on the 25th for shots of rain and fog at the mansion location, after which *Sunset Boulevard*'s production closed again. The film's budget of \$1,572,000 was still essentially on target.

Billy and Charlie weren't satisfied with some of the rushes. The tone was off; something was missing. More retakes were necessary. The scene in Norma's bedroom, in which Gillis assures the suicidal star that he loves her, was reshot on July 7. On July 9, Holden and Swanson reworked their first scene together—the one in which Norma leads Gillis toward a small dead body draped with a satin coverlet and set upon a kind of altar. Norma announces: "I put him on the massage table in front of the fire. He always liked fires—and poking at them with a stick. . . . I want the coffin to be white, and I want it specially lined with satin—white, or a deep pink . . . !" (at this moment Norma draws the coverlet back partway and a tiny, very hairy dead arm falls down.) ". . . maybe red! Bright flaming red—let's make it gay!" Wilder then tracks forward to the monkey's face.

Sunset Boulevard wrapped once more. August, September, and October were taken up by editing. By October 10, Sidney Skolsky was on the cutting room floor. Looking at the footage again and again, especially with a preview audience or two, Wilder concluded that other scenes weren't quite right either, and the production was forced to reopen yet again on October 20 for location shooting—in particular, the beginning of the film and the

chase sequence. The corner of Sunset and Rexford, Billy's own block of North Beverly Drive, and a driveway on the actual 10,000 block of Sunset Boulevard—all were shot that day just after dawn with two identical sets of cops and reporters—one set proceeding on Rexford, the other turning into the driveway on Sunset.

More retakes of Gillis's body in the pool followed, along with interiors of the Desmond mansion and a revised scene with DeMille. "We required one more close-up," Wilder reports. "I asked him to come back and do it. He understood. It was the shot outside the stage where he says good-bye. He came back. For another ten thousand dollars." (Wilder is slightly mistaken on this point. Instead of \$10,000, DeMille got his \$6,600 Cadillac limo and an extra bonus of \$3,000.) *Sunset Boulevard* wrapped once more.

Reviewing footage in November and December, Billy and Charlie decided that a certain scene *still* wasn't right. The tone was *still* off; the mood was wrong; it just didn't play well enough. They had to redo it. So on January 5, 1950, more than six months after it was supposed to have closed for good, the production of *Sunset Boulevard* reopened again. It would be the last time. The scene was Norma's. Gillis was dead, Norma having shot him in the back. (She explains her action by noting, "No one ever leaves a star. That's what makes one a star. The stars are ageless, aren't they?") The homicide squad has arrived at her mansion, along with Hedda Hopper. The butler, Max, Norma's former director, must convince her to come down the stairs, and he does so by telling the madwoman that she is filming her new movie's climactic scene. She descends the staircase.

Holden was long gone from the production; so were von Stroheim and Hedda Hopper. This would indeed be Norma Desmond's final scene, and she wouldn't have to share it with any of her costars. To start the day, Wilder ordered a total of nine different takes of the dialogue between the two homicide detectives, with slight changes from take to take. He then called for ten different takes of Norma's descent down the staircase, all accompanied by music, just as filmmakers used to do in the days of silent pictures. The music: the "Dance of the Seven Veils" from *Salome*, Richard Strauss's opera. ("Strauss for the rehearsal," Wilder said; "Then we got better than Strauss. Waxman!")

They tried various effects with Swanson. Take two, for instance, featured a wild, demented look on her face as she descended, after which she raised her arms at the foot of the steps. For take four she was asked to effect a relaxed, pleasant look and to raise her arms at the end. A pleasant look without the raised arms was the point of take six. The first six takes were in medium long shot, after which Wilder moved the camera farther away for the following four. The pleasant look and the wild look were

each filmed again with alternating arm postures. Finally, on the last take of the day, Gloria Swanson as Norma Desmond descended the stairway from a long distance with a deranged look in her eyes and her arms raised in a bizarre, inimitable gesture—a mad, contorted dance, her hands waving invisible veils. She walked toward the camera, her image went briefly out of focus, Wilder yelled "Cut!" and the filming of *Sunset Boulevard* was truly completed.

With all of this reshooting, *Sunset Boulevard* was now about \$180,000 over budget. But Paramount was not terribly concerned. *The Emperor Waltz* had been the exception, not the rule; Billy and Charlie had a good, solid financial track record. Their stars, too, were happy. Holden sent Wilder a special walking stick from Japan with a collapsible fishing rod tucked inside. Swanson gave no gift; she got one, though—a plaque with this inscription: "To proclaim that Gloria Swanson is the greatest star of them all and the idol of cast, staff, and crew of *Sunset Boulevard*."

In consultation with the front office, Brackett and Wilder had decided to preview the film somewhere other than Los Angeles. It was a matter of self-protection. "We didn't want Hollywood people to see the picture because it was about Hollywood," Wilder explained. So they took it to Evanston, Illinois, just north of Chicago. The lights went down and the film began. The camera rolled down Sunset Boulevard and into the morgue, the corpses started talking, and the audience erupted into peals of laughter. Wilder was shocked: "I just sat there for a few minutes, and then I left the theater. There were some steps leading down to the toilet. I sat there on the third step—that was one of the black moments of my life. And a lady came down the steps who had also left the theater. As she passed me, she said, 'Have you ever seen shit like this in your life?' And I said, 'Never.'"

They tried another preview—this time in Poughkeepsie: "Same god-damn reaction." The Great Neck, Long Island, preview began badly as well. "The public wasn't interested in the other cadavers," said Billy. "They wanted to hear Holden, and they found the atmosphere of the morgue depressing." Preview audiences weren't alone in their response. According to John Seitz, Barney Balaban, the head of the studio, also took a particular dislike to the opening morgue scene. Balaban, who had so steadfastly defended *The Lost Weekend* against the naysayers, was now asking that the scene be cut and that *Sunset Boulevard* be given a new opening.

Wilder was forced to agree. He cut the whole morgue scene out of the picture and filmed a new traveling camera shot of the Sunset Boulevard pavement (and a tilt up to the police cars) and a shot of the cops arriving at the Sunset driveway. Finally, he added a new voice-over narration by Joe Gillis. The last element, at least, preserved the film's crucial talking

corpse setup, though the revision disguised the fact from the audience until the end, at which point they could appreciate the sour humor of it. Even if they didn't, at that point in the film it was too late for them to rebel.

The final element to be added to *Sunset Boulevard* was its musical score. The songwriting team of Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, fresh from receiving an Oscar for the song "Buttons and Bows" (from Paramount's *The Paleface*) had been hired to appear as themselves for Artie Green's New Year's Eve party; they led the guests in a good-natured sing-along rendition of none other than "Buttons and Bows." Wilder and Brackett also commissioned Livingston and Evans to write a new song especially for *Sunset Boulevard*—"The Paramount-Don't-Want-Me Blues." The song was cut.

For the film's score, Wilder turned to his old friend Franz Waxman. Since moving to Hollywood, Waxman had become one of the industry's most dependable and original composers. After writing the moody, eminently apt score for James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein*, Waxman took over as the head of Universal's music department. In the late 1930s he moved over to MGM. He scored *Rebecca* for Hitchcock and Selznick, *Suspicion* for Hitchcock and RKO, and moved to Warner Bros. in 1943. In each case, Waxman's rich German Romanticism enhanced the dark psychology and unsettling emotional tension of the films. Inspired by Wagner, Strauss, and Korngold, Waxman's compositions were elegant, full, and slightly tortured. Even more than Miklós Rózsa, Franz Waxman was quite the man for the job of scoring *Sunset Boulevard*.

Even in the opening moments, as the movie-music historian Christopher Palmer points out, Waxman's nervous, percussive music suggests the tenor of the film in microcosm; one key note, "trilled, jabbed, and pecked out, heavily accented, syncopated, or merely repeated in fast notes" foretells Norma's obsessive lunacy. And Palmer notes, her own theme begins here as well, "as if incidentally, beneath the racket of roaring, screeching brass and motoric rhythms." For Gillis's theme, Waxman composed what Palmer calls "an aimless, nonchalantly syncopated melody—deliberately flat in tone, gray in color (it is usually given to the piano)," it reflects his "ingrained hopelessness." As a musical joke, Waxman took the familiar, ridiculously jumpy theme from old Paramount newsreels and slowed it down drastically to accompany Gillis and Betty Schaefer as they walk on the Paramount lot at night. For the climactic murder, a tango theme reappears (Waxman introduces it during Norma's distressed New Year's Eve celebration), but now it's "twisted and tortured." And for Norma's ghastly descent down the staircase, "a bevy of unseen trumpeters, as if in the far distance, sound a muted fanfare, always over the sustained trills." The tango reappears, along with a vague echo of Strauss's own "*Tanz der sieben Schleier*," to sweep her "in an ecstasy of madness down the stairs. . . ."

No stars' names appear over the title of *Sunset Boulevard*, nor does Billy Wilder's, though such high billing for a director wasn't unheard of at Paramount. Cecil B. DeMille, William Wyler, and Frank Capra all demanded and received above-the-title billings, with their names printed at fully 75 percent of the size of the title itself. Brackett and Wilder were important enough to merit inclusion in the film's ad campaign, however. The studio's ads for *Song of Surrender* omitted the name of Mitchell Leisen, and the ads for *Copper Canyon* didn't mention John Farrow, but Paramount sold *Sunset Boulevard* specifically as a film "from Brackett and Wilder." This, Paramount reminded audiences, was the same team who had made the Oscar-winning *The Lost Weekend*.

Paramount launched *Sunset Boulevard* with a series of twenty-one private screenings for various taste-making leaders of the Hollywood community. Publicity chief Norman Siegel played the movie colony expertly by setting up a waiting list; only when the list reached seventy-five to a hundred names was a screening arranged. Almost everyone loved the film. At one of the particularly large screenings, most of the three hundred honchos in the audience burst into applause at the final fade-out. Barbara Stanwyck was so impressed that she reportedly knelt down and kissed the hem of Gloria Swanson's silver lamé gown.

But one member of the audience was not very happy with the film. Louis B. Mayer left the screening room in a rage. The other movie people may have loved watching Hollywood shoot itself in the back on-screen, but MGM's in-house emperor apparently took it personally. Storming out of the theater, Mayer is said to have shrieked at Wilder, "You bastard! You have disgraced the industry that made and fed you! You should be tarred and feathered and run out of Hollywood!" Mayer may also have employed phrases having to do with coming over to this country, biting hands that feed you, and horsewhipping, but there were no tape recorders present.

"Fuck you," said Billy.

Or: "Go shit in your hat."

Onlookers are said to have gasped. But however the crowd may have responded, Billy wasn't playing to them. He was speaking to L. B. Mayer. And he had a point. When Mayer attacked the creators of *Sunset Boulevard*, he did appear to be taking his ire out on the immigrant, not the native-born Republican. Charlie Brackett, still president of the Academy, appears to have escaped the incident unscathed.

As *Sunset Boulevard* neared its release, the trade papers issued their appraisals. *Variety* liked the movie well enough but found it disturbing. The *Motion Picture Herald* applauded as well. The *Hollywood Reporter*, on the other hand, was ecstatic: "That this completely original work is so

marvelous, satisfying, dramatically perfect, and technically brilliant is no haphazard Hollywood miracle but the inevitable consequence of the collaboration of Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder. . . . You want to applaud *Sunset Boulevard* frame by frame." The *Reporter* mentioned admiringly that Paramount's publicity department had already been pushing Swanson and her performance "for months" before the film's opening. "Parts like this come once in a lifetime," the *Reporter* declared; "personalities like Gloria Swanson come once in a generation." This was an observation Paramount hoped the public would make as well. The studio sent Swanson on a national promotional tour. Swanson, only too glad to be back in the public eye after an almost unbroken sixteen-year absence, seized on the chance to shill for an industry that had once tossed her aside. For her efforts, Paramount paid her \$1,000 per week as she gamely trooped around the nation on the dual mission of convincing the public that Hollywood was a healthy, thriving, trustworthy place and simultaneously promoting *Sunset Boulevard*, which still ranks as one of the nastiest and most derisive films about Hollywood ever made.

Sunset Boulevard's world premiere occurred in August at Radio City Music Hall, where the critic Andrew Sarris claims to have seen it at least twenty-five times during its run. The film was a hit, and Paramount was already banking on Academy Award nominations. The film's pressbook, written and printed before the film even opened, heralded it as a major Oscar contender. Indeed, when the nominations were announced in February 1951, *Sunset Boulevard* was named in eleven separate categories, including Best Picture and Best Director. Erich von Stroheim was nominated as Best Supporting Actor and responded angrily. He was too big for that category, he told the press, and he even threatened a lawsuit.

For Wilder and Brackett, the problem was much more clearly defined. Its name was *All About Eve*. Joseph Mankiewicz's highly polished backstage drama, starring Bette Davis, had featured more than its share of bitterness about show business, but it still wasn't as nasty as *Sunset Boulevard*. The two films seemed to have equal support among Academy members in the weeks between nominations and the ceremony itself, but when the Oscar for Best Picture was announced it was Mankiewicz who accepted it, not Billy. According to Billy, Mankiewicz, with his Oscar in his hand, then told Wilder that Wilder would certainly win the directing award, at which point Mankiewicz's name was called for that award and he scurried away from Billy's side to accept his second statuette. (Mankiewicz himself denied the incident, saying that it was just another one of Billy's fabrications.)

After the ceremony, the disappointed *Sunset Boulevard* partisans moved to the party Paramount arranged at the Mocambo on Sunset Strip. Holden,

having lost the Best Actor award, was morose. Trying to cheer him up, Wilder told him, "It was a miscarriage of justice, Bill. You should have won tonight." At that point Holden's wife, Ardis, responded, "Oh, I don't think so. Jose Ferrer was much better than Bill." [Ferrer won for *Cyrano de Bergerac*.] The grim mood didn't stop Billy from providing an unprintably salty story to some reporters who happened to be hanging around looking for quotes. Billy greeted Barbara Stanwyck warmly at the party and proceeded to tell the reporters what Stanwyck said to an aging star who'd complained that her youthful lover was spending a hundred thousand dollars of her money on fast cars and slick outfits, all for himself. Billy claimed Stanwyck had said, "Tell me, darling, is the screwing you're getting worth the screwing you're getting?"

Billy and Audrey, meanwhile, were planning for the future. In late 1949, while *Sunset Boulevard* was still in production, they commissioned their friends Charles and Ray Eames to design a house for them for a hilltop property in Beverly Hills—on Sunset Boulevard, in fact. The design the Eameses produced was classically industrial—a 4,600-square-foot rectangle constructed in prefabricated steel and glass panels and surrounded by concrete. Filled with the sharp light of Southern California, the interior was to include a two-story living room, several dining areas, three bedrooms and bathrooms, a study, dressing areas, and a functional, easy-upkeep utility room. Boldly colored panels separated these areas from one another—sky blue upper walls in the living room, a bold red panel here, a sunny yellow one there. From the Sächsischen Palais in Berlin to the new house he planned to build in Beverly Hills, Billy never lost his taste for Bauhaus simplicity; the Eames commission was a natural step. The Wilders' house would have been as sleek, contemporary, and hard as its owners, providing great freedom of movement and a kind of steely grace. It was never built. Audrey talked Billy out of it on the grounds that it would require too much maintenance. "Are you crazy?" she said to Billy finally. "It's completely idiotic."

Billy and Audrey's marriage was thriving, but Billy and Charlie's was not. In the summer of 1949, before *Sunset Boulevard* had even finished shooting, Brackett and Wilder made a stunning announcement. They were splitting up.

The men themselves had actually decided to split up the previous autumn. They signed new contracts during the writing of *Sunset Boulevard*, and this time their contracts specified independence from each other, though their deals only became effective after the completion of *Sunset Boulevard*.

Wilder and Brackett each ascribed to an old-fashioned code of honor—the honor of gentlemen. They fought often while working together, but

when they decided to split up they didn't air their old grievances. They parted responsibly if not entirely amicably and finished *Sunset Boulevard* in peace. This sense of courteous integrity remained in force for the rest of their lives. Neither ever stole credit from the other. Neither bit the other's back in public. When it became necessary for one to put himself on the line in defense of the other, he did. Brackett and Wilder had enjoyed a relatively acrimonious marriage, but their separation and divorce were as quiet and honorable as Hollywood could possibly have allowed.

In 1960, Brackett told *Time* simply that "Billy had outgrown his divided fame." But a few years later, when he was ailing, Brackett spoke in a little more detail about the breakup. He told the screenwriter-director-raconteur Garson Kanin that he didn't see it coming: "I never knew what happened, never understood it. We were doing so well. I always thought we brought out the best in each other, didn't you? But we met one morning, as we always did, and Billy smiled that sweet smile of his at me and said, 'You know, Charlie, after this I don't think we should work together anymore. I think it would be better for both of us if we just split up.' I could say nothing. It was shattering. And Billy—you know how he is, bright and volatile—got right into the business of the day, and we said no more about it. But it was such a blow, such an unexpected blow. I thought I'd never recover from it. And in fact I don't think I ever have."

For four years Brackett and Wilder had been bringing other writers in to keep their own joint creativity fresh; theirs was a monogamy that allowed other partners. Brackett thought the civilized way they'd worked out their relationship meant everything was fine, but he was mistaken. "It was just that I loved working with him," Brackett continued. "If he wanted to write alone and direct, I'd have been pleased to be his producer. Or even work together now and again. Maybe not every picture. But he was firm and didn't want to work with me again ever at all. I suppose it was foolish of me to think it was going to go on forever. After all, it wasn't a marriage."

Billy, who does appear to have engineered the split entirely on his own, has always been much more reticent on the subject. "It's like a box of matches," he once said. "You pick up the match and strike it against the box, and there's always fire, but then one day there is just one small corner of that abrasive paper left for you to strike the match on. It was not there anymore. The match wasn't striking." A more confessional moment occurred when Maurice Zolotow asked him to respond to what Brackett told Kanin. Billy turned, stared out the window, and said nothing at all.

PART FOUR

1951-1956