



Sunset Blvd.

Gloria Swanson on 'Sunset Blvd.'

When we started *Sunset Blvd.* we had only 26 pages of script. [Screenwriter Charles] Brackett and Wilder were determined I should do it. I didn't want to. Because in the original script they showed me there were things they wanted me to say about people who were still living – true things – and I said, no, I would generalise but I would not be so cruel, that it was unnecessary. Billy Wilder said, 'Just do it for the test,' so I did. They had me talking about people who were still around, and there didn't seem any point. I could generalise, say things like 'Look at them in the front office, the master minds. They took the idols and smashed them.' But to talk specifically about this person and that... it didn't seem right. They pointed out that I would be Norma Desmond, not myself. But I said, look, even if I put a sign on me this big, a lot of people are going to say – a lot of people have said – that this was my biography. Which is silly. First of all, I did make some talking pictures, and if people don't remember them that's unfortunate because I thought they were good pictures. And secondly I do not live in the past, I have no longing to recapture any of it, I am much more a woman of the present and the future and of dreams of tomorrow. I am not a recluse, I certainly haven't shot anybody, and they're not floating face down in my bathtub. When you remind people of this, then they realise how silly it is of them to say this.... It was true that I hadn't made a picture in a long time. And the only other thing in the film that had any reality to my career was that Mr DeMille used to call me 'Young fellow' and I always called him 'Mr DeMille'.

I must tell you that *Sunset Blvd.* was a very easy picture to do, because it had a something about it from the moment it started. It had a spark, and that spark never went out. We were 12 weeks on that picture, and each day was a day of joy for me. Each day that I came to work I was singing all the way to the studio, singing like the birds. On the last scene of the picture, when I come down the stairs, I cried.... I wished I could start it all over again, because these had been 12 of the happiest weeks I'd known. Something very curious: my mother, who was never very close to my career, was living with me at the time, and three or four days after it was over, she said to me, 'You know, Gloria, I feel as if somebody had left this apartment.' And that person was Desmond. I am not an actor who carries the personality I'm doing with me. Usually when I take the clothes and the make-up off, it stays in the clothes. Just as if a murder happened in this room, it would be in the walls. However, at home, at night, since Norma had another voice, my mother would sometimes cue me, and that probably brought her into focus, this other character. I don't know enough about the medical term schizophrenia, but I do know that you can have two characters and go from one to the other. And it would seem to me that you consciously create an illusion which becomes almost... not a solid thing, but it is certainly there.

Interview by Rui Nogueira, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1969

A contemporary review

Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder have a long and honourable record in bucking tradition, breaking rules, and taking risks, according to their lights, and limits. Nobody thought they could get away with *Double Indemnity*, but they did; nobody thought they could get away with *The Lost Weekend*, but they did; apparently nobody thought they could get away with *Sunset Blvd.*, but they did; and now, one gathers, the industry is proud of them. There are

plenty of good reasons why *Sunset Blvd.* (a beautiful title) is, I think, their best movie yet. It is Hollywood craftsmanship at its smartest and at just about its best, and it is hard to find better craftsmanship than that, at this time, in any art or country.

It is also, in terms of movie tradition a very courageous picture. A sexual affair between a rich woman of fifty and a kept man half her age is not exactly a usual version of boy meets girl; nor is it customary for the hero and his best friend's fiancée to fall in love and like it; nor, as a rule, is a movie hero so weak and so morally imperfect that he can less properly be called a 'Hero' than an authentic, unlucky and unadmirable human being. 'Unhappy endings' are not so rare, by now, but it is rare to find one as skilful, spectacular and appropriate as this one. Besides all that, *Sunset Blvd.* is much the most ambitious movie about Hollywood ever done, and is the best of several good ones into the bargain.

There is no use pretending to discuss all the virtues, or even all the limitations, of this picture: it is one of those rare movies which are so full of exactness, cleverness, mastery, pleasure, and arguable and unarguable choice and judgment, that they can be talked about, almost shot for shot and line for line for hours on end. The people of the present and their world are handled with a grimly controlled, mock-easy exactness which seems about as good as a certain kind of modified movie naturalism can get; this exactness is also imposed on the obsoletes and their world, but within that exactness they are treated always, with fine imaginativeness and eloquence, as heroic grotesques. Mr Holden and his girl (Nancy Olson) and their friend (Jack Webb), not to mention Fred Clark acting a producer, are microscopically right in casting, direction and performance. Miss Swanson, required to play a hundred per cent grotesque, plays it not just to the hilt but right up to the armpit, by which I mean magnificently. Mr von Stroheim, with the one thoroughly sympathetic role, takes every advantage of that which is permissible to an artist's honour, and is probably the best single thing in the show. Miss Swanson's lonely New Year's Eve party, and the loud, happy little party to which Mr Holden escapes, are two of dozens of smashing proofs of mastery in conveying and evoking the living and the posthumous Hollywood.

Much of the detail is marvellously effective and clever, Miss Swanson watching her young face in an old movie and standing up into the murderous glare of the projector to cry: 'They don't make faces like that any more!' (they certainly don't and it is our loss); or the lighted swimming pool, so nicely calculated for the ultimate catastrophe. Sometimes the picture is a shade too clever for its own good: von Stroheim playing Bach on the organ, with gloves on, is wonderful in a way but possibly too weird, even for the context; and now and then a camera set-up or a bit of business or a line is so over-calculated, so obviously cherished, that it goes a little sour, much as the same thing can happen in prose which has gone rigid with over-training. Yet one of the oddest and most calculated moments in the picture is also one of the best: the lingering, silent, terribly close close-up in which a soft, sleek clerk whispers to the slightly nauseated kept man: 'After all, if the lady is paying...'. The intense physical and spiritual malaise of the young man's whole predicament is registered, through this brilliantly indirect shot, as it can never be, even in so bravely intransigent a movie, in a scene between him and Miss Swanson; and the clerk (and his casting) are as much to be thanked for that, as the man who conceived the shot.

Various observers have objected that the picture is 'lifeless'; that the characters are unsympathetic; that neither tragedy implicit in the story – that of the obsolete artist, or that of the obsolete woman – is sufficiently developed, or explored, or is even risen to. Some of this seems to me true, some I disagree with; most of it, I think, comes from a temperamental unwillingness to accept Messrs Brackett and Wilder as the kind of artists they

happen to be. They are evidently much more concerned to make a character interesting, than sympathetic, and the interest itself is limited by the quality of their insight, which is intelligent and exceedingly clever, rather than profound. But the interest is real, and so far as I was concerned, sympathy developed accordingly; moreover, I am deeply grateful to artists who never try to cheat, coerce or seduce me into sympathy, and such artists are particularly rare in movies.

On the charge of lifelessness I can only say that in my opinion there are two main kinds of life in art, not just one. The warmer, richer kind comes, invariably, from the kind of artist who works from far inside himself and his creatures. For the other kind, we can thank the good observer. Brackett and Wilder apparently have little if any gift for working from inside, but they are first rate observers, and their films are full of that kind of life. It is true, I think, that they fail to make much of the powerful tragic possibilities which are inherent in their story; they don't even explore much of the deep anguish and pathos which are still more richly inherent, though they often reveal it, quickly and brilliantly. But this does not seem to me a shameful kind of failure, if indeed it is proper to call it a failure at all: they are simply not the men for such a job, nor was this the kind of job they were trying to do. But they are beautifully equipped to do the cold, exact, adroit, sardonic job they have done; and artists who, consciously or unconsciously, learn to be true to their limitations as well as to their gifts, deserve a kind of gratitude and respect they much too seldom get.

James Agee, *Sight & Sound*, November 1950

SUNSET BLVD.

Directed by: Billy Wilder

©/Production Company: Paramount Pictures

Produced by: Charles Brackett

Assistant Director: C.C. Coleman Jr

Screenplay: Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, D.M. Marshman Jr

Director of Photography: John F. Seitz

Special Photographic Effects: Gordon Jennings

Process Photography: Farciot Edouart

Editorial Supervision: Doane Harrison

Edited by: Arthur Schmidt

Art Direction: Hans Dreier, John Meehan

Set Decorations: Sam Comer, Ray Moyer

Costumes: Edith Head

Make-up Supervision: Wally Westmore

Music Score by: Franz Waxman

Sound Recording by: Harry Lindgren, John Cope

uncredited

Production Manager: Hugh Brown

2nd Assistant Director: Gerd Oswald

Script Clerk: Lupe Hall

Camera Operator: Otto Pierce

Camera Assistant: Harlow Stengel

Grip: Fred True

Gaffer: Walter Taylor

Stills: Glen E. Richardson

Assistant Editor: Frank Bracht

Props: Tom Plews

Props Assistant: Jack Golconda

Wardrobe: Ed Fitzharris, Hazel Hegarty

Make-up Artists: Frank Thayer, Carl Silvera

Hairdressers: Nellie Manley, Vera Tomei

Technical Adviser: Norris Stensland

Dialogue Coach: A. Ronald Lubin

Cast

William Holden (*Joe C. Gillis*)

Gloria Swanson (*Norma Desmond*)

Erich von Stroheim (*Max von Mayerling*)

Nancy Olson (*Betty Schaefer*)

Fred Clark (*Sheldrake*)

Lloyd Gough (*Morino*)

Jack Webb (*Artie Green*)

Cecil B. DeMille (*himself*)

Hedda Hopper (*herself*)

Buster Keaton (*himself*)

Anna Q. Nilsson (*herself*)

H.B. Warner (*himself*)

Franklyn Farnum (*undertaker/courtier*)

Ray Evans (*himself*)

Jay Livingston (*himself*)

Larry Blake (*1st finance man*)

Charles Dayton (*2nd finance man*)

uncredited

Roy Thompson (*Rudy, shoeshine boy*)

Ruth Clifford (*Sheldrake's secretary*)

Peter Drynan (*tailor*)

Kenneth Gibson (*salesman*)

Archie Twitchell (*vicuña salesman*)

E. Mason Hopper (*doctor/courtier*)

John Cortay (*young Paramount gateman*)

Robert Emmett O'Connor (*Jonesy, old Paramount gateman*)

Stan Johnson, Bill Sheehan (*assistant directors*)

John Skins Miller (*Hog Lye, electrician*)

Bert Moorhouse (*Gordon Cole*)

Julia Faye (*Hisham*)

Virginia Randolph, Gertrude Astor, Frank O'Connor, Eva Novak (*courtiers*)

Ralph Montgomery, Joel Allen (*prop men*)

Gertrude Messinger (*hairstylist*)

Gerry Ganzer (*Connie*)

Howard Negley (*captain of police*)

Kenneth Christy (*captain of homicide*)

Len Hendry (*police sergeant*)

Sidney Skolsky (*himself*)

Eddie Dew (*assistant coroner*)

Yvette Vodder (*girl on telephone*)

Al Ferguson (*phone stand-by*)

Berenice Mosk (*herself*)

Tommy Ivo (*boy*)

Emmett Smith (*black man*)

Jay Morley (*fat man*)

Art Lane, Arch R. Dalzell (*camera operators*)

James Hawley, Edward Wahrman (*camera assistants*)

Sanford E. Greenwald (*newsreel cameraman*)

Howard Joslin (*police lieutenant/body in pool*)

Ottola Nesmith

USA 1950©

110 mins

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Metropolis

Sun 1 Jan 17:55 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator); Sun 15 Jan 14:40; Mon 30 Jan 16:30 BFI IMAX

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A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s'est échappé)

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Black Girl (La Noire de...)

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Ugetsu Monogatari

Tue 3 Jan 20:50; Tue 17 Jan 20:30

Madame de...

Wed 4 Jan 14:30; Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural Programme Manager)

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Sat 7 Jan 16:30

Blue Velvet

Sat 7 Jan 20:30; Fri 20 Jan 20:35; Tue 24 Jan 21:00 BFI IMAX

Sátántangó

Sun 8 Jan 11:15; Sat 21 Jan 13:30

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Sun 8 Jan 14:45; Sat 21 Jan 17:00

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Sun 8 Jan 18:20; Mon 23 Jan 14:30; Fri 27 Jan 20:50

Parasite (Gisaengchung)

Mon 9 Jan 17:50; Wed 18 Jan 17:30 BFI IMAX

The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + La Jetée

Wed 11 Jan 20:30; Mon 23 Jan 18:10

A Matter of Life and Death

Thu 12 Jan 20:40; Sun 22 Jan 11:30

Chungking Express (Chung Him sam lam)

Thu 12 Jan 20:45; Tue 17 Jan 20:50; Sat 21 Jan 14:15

Modern Times

Fri 13 Jan 17:45; Sun 22 Jan 13:10

A Brighter Summer Day (Guling jie shaonian sha ren shijian)

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Imitation of Life

Wed 18 Jan 20:30; Wed 25 Jan 14:30; Sun 29 Jan 12:30

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Thu 19 Jan 18:00; Sat 28 Jan 13:50

Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)

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Andrei Rublev

Thu 26 Jan 18:40; Sun 29 Jan 17:20

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