



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Ace in the Hole

Ace in the Hole (aka The Big Carnival)

Director: Billy Wilder

©/Production Company:

Paramount Pictures Corporation

Producer: Billy Wilder

Associate Producer: William Schorr

Auditor: Kenny Miner *

Production Manager: Hugh Brown *

Assistant Production Manager:

Richard A. Blaydon *

Assistant Unit Production Manager: Don Robb *

Locations Casting: William Poole *

Assistant Directors: C.C. Coleman Jr, Chico Day,

Jason Rosenberger, Al Mann *

Dialogue Director: Harry F. Hogan *

Screenplay Supervisor: Lupe Hall *

Casting Director: Bert McKay *

Screenplay: Billy Wilder, Lesser Samuels,
Walter Newman

Director of Photography: Charles B. Lang Jr

Camera Operators: Guy Bennett, Bill Rand

Assistant Camera: Kenny Meade *

Grips: Frank Carroll, Dominic Semerino,

William Collins, Al Lipsey, George Sherman,

Cliff Hartley

Electrical: Jess Miller *

Cableman: A.D. Cook *

Stills: Don English *

Process Photography: Farciot Edouart

Transparency Camera: Irmin Roberts *

Editorial Supervisor: Doane Harrison

Editor: Arthur Schmidt

Art Directors: Hal Pereira, Earl Hedrick

Set Decorations: Sam Comer, Ray Moyer

Set Dressers: Maurice Goodman, Martin Pendleton

Props Maker: Cline Jones *

Props: Tom Plews, Harold Worthington *

Costumes: Edith Head

Wardrobe: Hazel Hagarty, Ed Fitzharris

Make-up Supervisor: Wally Westmore

Make-up: Hal Lierley *

Music Score: Hugo Friedhofer

Sound Recording: Harold Lewis, Gene Garvin

Sound: Bob Carr, John Cope *

Medical Technical Adviser: Dr Francis J. Abdo *

Teletype Technical Advisers: Sally Hunt,

Henry Giles *

Stand-in: Irene Martin *

Cast:

Kirk Douglas (*Charles 'Chuck' Tatum*)

Jan Sterling (*Lorraine Minosa*)

Bob Arthur (*Herbie Cook*)

Porter Hall (*Jacob Q. Boot*)

Frank Cady (*Mr Al Federber*)

Richard Benedict (*Leo Minosa*)

Ray Teal (*Sheriff Gus Kretzer*)

Lewis Martin (*McCardle*)

John Berkes (*Papa Minosa*)

Frances Dominguez (*Mama Minosa*)

Gene Evans (*deputy sheriff*)

Frank Jaquet (*Sam Smollett*)

Harry Harvey (*Dr Hilton*)

Bob Bumpas (*himself, radio announcer*)

Geraldine Hall (*Mrs Nellie Federber*)

Richard Gaines (*Nagel*)

Paul D. Merrill, Stewart Kirk Clawson

(*Federber boys*) *

John Stuart Fulton (*boy*) *

Robert Kortman, Joe J. Merrill (*diggers*) *

Edith Evanson (*Miss Deverich*) *

Ralph Moody (*Kusac, miner*) *

Claire DuBrey (*spinster*) *

William Fawcett (*sad-faced man*) *

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Billy Wilder was often called cynical but compared to *Ace in the Hole* the rest of his output is a mush-pot of human kindness. Possibly the sourest movie ever to come out of Hollywood, it stars Kirk Douglas at his most abrasive as Chuck Tatum, a reptilian Albuquerque reporter who happens across a guy trapped in an underground crevice and deliberately slows the rescue bid to make himself a bigger story. But it's not just Tatum – everyone furthers their own ends at the expense of the poor dying bozo. Perhaps the script's choicest line – which Wilder always credited to his wife Audrey – comes when the newsman suggests to the victim's wife (trash-blondie Jan Sterling) that it might look good were she to invoke divine help. 'I don't go to church,' she snarls. 'Kneeling bags my nylons.'

Ace was Wilder's first film as his own producer, and his first major flop, with the critics and at the box office. Not surprisingly, perhaps; it savages not only the press but also the audience – depicting reporters as callous, mercenary fixers and the public as gullible sensation-seekers. Time has caught up with the movie: nowadays Tatum's tactics would be seen as all too credible but at the time, as Wilder later acknowledged, 'They didn't believe me that when somebody's a newspaperman, they are capable of that behaviour.' Paramount, to Wilder's annoyance, tried to salvage the film by retitling it *The Big Carnival*. It didn't help. Wilder is rarely thought of as a strongly visual director but, alongside its caustic human dynamic, *Ace* impresses as spectacle. As the story, shrewdly manipulated by Tatum, spreads across the country, cars, trucks, trailers and specially laid-on trains disgorge hordes of rubberneckers. A carnival outfit – rather too nudgingly called the Great S&M Amusement Corporation – sets up shop and a glutinous theme song dedicated to the victim ('We're coming, we're coming, Leo') is endlessly blared out. From the high perspective of the cave entrance, Wilder's camera surveys an ever-expanding ocean of morbid sentimentality.

Phillip Kemp, *Sight and Sound*, June 2014

A contemporary review

In *Sunset Boulevard* the Brackett-Wilder team took an outsize, legendary character, examined her coldly and ironically – but did not destroy her legendary quality. Billy Wilder, now on his own, does rather the same, in a very different setting, in the hard and brilliant *Ace in the Hole*. The larger-than-life character is Tatum; a rough, ruthless, hard-drinking, unscrupulous journalist reduced by a series of dismissals to the local paper in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he waits in growing desperation for the story which will restore his reputation.

It comes: Tatum is on the spot when a man is trapped in an old Indian mine after a cliff cave-in. With brutal precision the film examines the technique and apparatus of sensationalism. To spin out his story, Tatum bribes the corrupt, indolent sheriff into demanding a rescue method certain to take a week; he persuades the victim's wife, Lorraine, a sullen, discontented blonde who has been waiting for a chance to escape, to play the sorrowing wife; he abandons his own paper for a New York daily. The crowds arrive; the ramshackle garage

Frank Keith (*fireman*) *
Basil Chester (*Indian*) *
Bert Moorhouse (*Josh Morgan*) *
Kenneth Christy (*Mickey Jessop*) *
Lester Dorr (*priest*) *
Larry Hogan (*television announcer*) *
John 'Bud' Sweeney, Stanley McKay, Bert Stevens,
Frank Andrew Parker (*reporters*) *
Iron Eyes Cody (*Indian copy boy*) *
Charles Griffin (*Mr Wendel*) *
Jack Roberts (*newspaper man*) *
Oscar Belinda, Martin Pendleton (*barkers*) *
William N. Peters, Chico Day (*photographers*) *
B. Ballarl (*singer*) *
Bill Sheehan (*man*) *
Martha Maryman *
USA 1951©
111 mins

* Uncredited

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in the desert becomes the centre of an encampment of cars and tents; with them come the loudspeakers, endlessly playing a special song for the trapped man, the souvenir sellers, the carnival. The mood of the sensation seekers shifts from restless apathy to a more horrible vicarious excitement. Ironic and bitter contrasts are pointed between the dignity of the victim's parents, his own acceptance of Tatum as a friend, and the shifty opportunism of the sheriff, Lorraine's vicious boredom. The technique, in contrast to the leisurely, personal style of *Sunset Boulevard*, is one of impersonal, direct observation. The handling of the crowd compares interestingly with that employed on the rather similar occasion in *Fourteen Hours*. Wilder isolates individuals not in distracting asides from the main theme, but to provide an added, sharpened comment on the mass.

Parallel with this investigation runs that of Tatum himself, in his relations with the sheriff, with his editors, with Lorraine, who is played strikingly by Jan Sterling. Kirk Douglas' brilliant performance, a more mature and harsh variation on the part played in *The Champion*, establishes Tatum's driving force, his immense energy, his concentration. Neither it nor the script prepares us for the film's conclusion.

After almost a week, with the drills still pounding at the rock, Tatum finds that the trapped man is dying, that the easy way of rescue has become impossible. In revulsion against what they have done he turns on Lorraine: there is a struggle in which she stabs him with her scissors. Tatum makes a last, futile effort at rescue; the man dies, and he dismisses the crowds. Then, the New York plans abandoned, he returns to the Albuquerque office, staggers in to tell his story, and falls dead. The ending is cleverly managed, and there is no surrender to sentiment (Wilder, indeed, is probably incapable of it) but it lacks the force of the logical, cruel conclusion, which demands that Tatum go through with his scheme.

The relative failure of the ending is an illustration of Wilder's limitations. His is a talent which one respects rather than likes. This is not the result of his choice of subject, nor of his occasional tendency to vulgarity (*A Foreign Affair*) or to sensationalism for its own sake (*The Lost Weekend*); it is because he seems to lack the powers of analysis which his cold, observant style demands. It is the technique of a reporter, brilliantly conveying the immediate impact of a character or situation, less successful in developing it. A more human director, or a more skilful analyst, could have made more out of Tatum's clash of conscience; Wilder is content to report it, as he reported Norma Desmond's tragedy, and Tatum is credible as a character in the sense that Norma Desmond is credible – a gigantic figure who catches the imagination, so that one accepts him at his own valuation. But as writer (*Ace in the Hole* is scripted by Wilder, Lesser Samuels and Walter Newman) and director Wilder has developed an exact, sardonic, objective style whose technical assurance carries him over passages where the quality of thought is unduly superficial. In *Ace in the Hole* style and purpose achieve for the most part a fusion more impressive even than in *Sunset Boulevard*, and the result is perhaps his most remarkable film.

Penelope Houston, *Sight and Sound*, June 1951