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A Dialogue with Billy Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond

Question: You two have collaborated for an unusually long time, considering the high divorce rate of writer-director relationships. To put it simply, how do you two work together?

Billy Wilder: I imagine the collaboration between a director and writer varies. In the old days, some directors got a script handed to them on Friday and had to start shooting on Monday. But Mr. Diamond and I--and my former collaborators, Charles Brackett and Raymond Chandler--had a special kind of arrangement, since I myself started as a writer and still regard myself as a writer. So, don't take our way of working as something that is normal. In fact, I think it's rather abnormal, because from the day we sit down to start working on the screenplay until the time the picture is reviewed by Vincent Canby in New York, we're always together.

I.A.L. Diamond: You obviously have to differentiate among directors who are just directors, directors who are also producers, and directors who are also writers. I think a normal course of events, if you sell a story or are assigned to a story, is to work first with a producer, and only when he was satisfied would the director come in.

Wilder: I'm asked all the time: When there are two names or three names on a screenplay, does one write one scene and the other another scene, and then do you meet every Tuesday and compare? Or does one write the action and the other write the dialogue? I'm already very gratified if anybody asks that question, because most people think the actors make up the words. But in our case it’s very prosaic; it sounds very dull.

We meet at, say, 9:30 in the morning and open shop, like bank tellers, and we sit there in one room ex. We read Hollywood Reporter and Variety change the trades, and then we just stare at each other. Sometimes nothing happens. Sometimes it goes on until 12:30, and then I'll ask him, “How about a drink?" And he nods, and then we have a drink and go to lunch. Or sometimes we come full of ideas. This is not the muse coming through the windows and kissing our brows. It's very hard work, and having done both, I tell you that directing is a pleasure and writing is a drag. Directing can become difficult, but it is a pleasure because you have something to work with. You can put the camera here or there; you can interpret things this way or that way; the readings can be such or such. But writing is just an empty page. You start with nothing, absolutely nothing, and I think writers are vastly underrated and underpaid. It is totally impossible to make a great picture out of a lousy script. It is impossible, though, for a mediocre director to screw up a great script altogether.

Diamond: A writer named Hal Kanter once wrote a monologue for Groucho Marx which had the following line: "Who needs writers? Give me a competent director and two intelligent actors, and at the end of eight weeks I will show you three of the most nervous people you ever saw."

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Q: Could you take one of your original films say *The Apartment*, and trace its origins--where the idea came from, the problems in writing it?

Wilder: The genesis of *The Apartment* I remember very, very vividly. I saw David Lean's *Brief Encounter*, which was based on a one-act play by Noel Coward, and in the play Trevor Howard was the leading man. A married man has an affair with a married woman, and he uses the apartment of a chum of his for sexual purposes. I always had it in the back of my mind that the friend of Trevor Howard's, who only appears in one or two tiny scenes, who comes back home and climbs into the warm bed the lovers have just left, would make a very interesting character. I made some notes, and years later, after we had finished *Some Like It Hot*, we wanted to make another picture with Jack Lemmon. I dug out this notion, and we just sat down and started to talk about the character, started the structure, started the three acts, started the other characters, started to elaborate on the theme, and when we had enough we just suggested it to Mr. Lemmon and to Walter Mirisch and United Artists.

Diamond: We had the character and the situation, but we didn't have a plot until there was a local scandal. An agent, who was having an affair with a client, was shot by the woman's husband. But the interesting thing was that he was using the apartment of one of the underlings at the agency. That was what gave us the relationship--somebody who was using somebody lower than he in a big company, using his apartment.

Wilder: In those days it was a very, very risqué project. Today, of course, it would be considered a Disney picture.

Diamond: I also remember some construction problems. There was one point in the second act where Billy kept saying, "The construction is humpbacked." He meant that we were faced with two exposure scenes back to back. In one scene Fred MacMurray's secretary gives away to his wife that he is having an affair. This is immediately followed by a scene in which the guys who had been thrown out of the apartment give away to the girl's brother-in-law that she's staying with Lemmon. Those scenes came back to back, and Billy kept saying, "It's humpbacked. It's humpbacked." But it was the only way we could arrive economically at the third act.

Wilder: But nobody notices any more because neat constructions are out. Third acts are out. Payoffs are out. Jokes don't have toppers. They just have an interesting straight line, and let the audience write its own toppers. We come from a whole different school. A comedy like *Shampoo* I don't think was constructed at all. What makes it successful, I guess, is that it's slapped together with verve and overt language and naked behinds and God knows what. It is a kind of super gusto, sex, chutzpah--whatever you want to call it, that makes it come off. It's not constructed in the way we learned. But if you come now with any kind of experience in that direction--I've been at it for forty years and construction is frowned upon, it's not being done, it's old-fashioned. I guess it is, but that's the way we've been doing it, and that's the way we're going to do it until they take

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the cameras away. The idea that people in a picture can sit around a campfire and break wind and scream for fifteen minutes seems very strange to us.

Diamond: Everybody in this room, I am sure, can quote half a dozen good lines from *Casablanca*, from *Ninotchka*, from *The Maltese Falcon*, and any number of other pictures. Now, you know what got the two big laughs in Shampoo--I think this is hardly a substitute for wit, except among eleven-year-olds when if you say a dirty line it's considered daring. But it doesn't put very much of a premium on writing clever dialogue.

Wilder: But *Shampoo* had an absolutely marvelous idea, the ambulatory hairdresser with the penis hairdryer under his belt, chugging around Beverly Hills, and it had those couple of dirty lines. "Hey, have you seen *Shampoo*?" "Does she really say that?" "Yeah." "I've got to see that." People wait for that, and then they leave. But it did have a showmanship idea, and it did have Warren Beatty. He was just right for the part, and the movie came at the right time. But I would be embarrassed to write it. I personally would be embarrassed to go to Julie Christie and say, "Here's the dialogue for tomorrow." I would run and hide somewhere.

Q: Do you tend to have a star in mind when you're writing a script? In *The Apartment* you wanted Lemmon, and I suppose you adapted your dialogue to his personality.

Diamond: I'd say that most of the time we have known pretty early on in the script who was going to be in the picture, which of course makes it much more comfortable for the writer.

Wilder: In *Some Like It Hot* we were way into the script when we found out that Marilyn Monroe was available and wanted to do the picture. I think, as a rule, it's bad to tell the actors, "I'm doing something for you and only you can play it." They don't like that. You just say, "I know that you can do it. You can interpret it because you can play anything." They love to hear that.

Diamond: In the old studio days you would start out writing a comedy for Cary Grant, and you would wind up with Robert Hutton.

Q: You made two films with Monroe. What was your experience working with her?

Wilder: My God, I think there have been more books on Marilyn Monroe than on World War II and there's a great similarity. It was not easy. It was hell. But it was well worth it once you got in on the screen. I've forgotten the trouble I had, and the times I thought, this picture will never be finished. It's all forgotten once the picture is done. The beauty of working with actors--not just Monroe--is that you're not married to them. The whole damn thing lasts twelve, fourteen, maybe sixteen weeks That's why I admire so greatly Fellini, because he lives with actors for three years. Or Bertolucci. My God, to be with the same actor or actress for three years--it's not easy.

Diamond: I think that the most interesting trend in movies today is that they are starting

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to kill actors on the screen--the so-called snuff film. I think it's the greatest development in films. You finish the picture, finish the actor, and that's it!

Wilder: But the way it is here in Hollywood they're killing the director.

Q: Do you assume a kind of role with an actor?

Wilder: It's every kind of role. It depends what the actor or actress will respond to. I can become a masochist. I can become the Marquis de Sade or I can become a midwife. I can become Otto Preminger. I can do all sorts of things. It depends on what will work on actors. They're all very different.

Q: How do you decide what method to use?

Wilder: To begin with, I stay away as far as possible. It never gets too friendly because it's just not good: Other actors sense there's a little clique. I remember that I was once making a picture with Marlene Dietrich and Jean Arthur, *A Foreign Affair*. I had known Marlene from Germany before I ever came to this country, when I was a newspaperman in Berlin, and we were very friendly. In the middle of shooting, one midnight, the doorbell rang, and there was Jean Arthur, absolutely frenzied, with eyes bulging, and in back of her was her husband, Frank Ross. I said, "What is it, Jean?"

She said, "What did you do with my close-up?"

I said, "What close-up?"

She said, "The close-up where I look so beautiful."

I said, "What do you mean, what did I do with it?"

She said, "You burned it. Marlene told you to burn that close-up. She does not want me to look good." This is typical. It's a little insane asylum, and they are all inmates.

Q: To get back to your collaboration, how detailed is your treatment before you start writing the dialogue?

Wilder: The treatment? There is no treatment. We just start right off. There is no outline, no first treatment, which has to be done very often, I imagine, if you need financing. We just start right off with scene one, and since we are on the film set all the time, there is no "Slow fade-in, camera tiptoes"--none of that. Just "day" or "night," not even "morning" or "evening." Just "day" or "night" so that the cameraman knows how to light it, because he can't light "evening" anyway. There's a minimum of those fancy descriptions.

Diamond: It's different if you're trying to sell a script. Naturally, you're going to want to try to make it as readable as possible. You will throw in a lot of camera directions. When directors tell interviewers, "The minute I get on the set I throw away the script," what

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they mean is that they pay no attention to the camera directions, because they're not going to pan when you say so.

Wilder: I find with young writers, and some of them with very, very good ideas, that they get lost, unnecessarily so, in technical descriptions of which they know very little. Nobody will say, "This is a great screenwriter because he always has the camera angles."

Just have good characters and good scenes and something that plays. The camera technique, that is secondary. Writers from the theater and directors from the theater who come from New York are very camera-conscious, and the writers will give you minute description, and directors will get on the dolly and they will swish around and up and down. They are afraid that the scene will be too stagy. There's no such thing.

Diamond: I think most young directors today, if you offered them the choice between a good script and a zoom lens, would take the zoom lens.

Wilder: Take away the zoom lens. Just don't let them have it.

Diamond: Look at an older director like Stanley Kubrick, who is no longer twenty-six years old. *Barry Lyndon* must have twenty scenes in which the camera started close and then zoomed back. If you do it twice in a picture it may be effective, but there it became monotonous. He is a marvelous still photographer, but you have to keep some dynamics of film in mind. There were scenes as beautiful as anything I've ever seen in my life, but any time you're sitting in the theater and saying, "Gee, isn't that a great shot," then you're not involved in the story. I think it was Penelope Gilliatt who said a few years ago, "Movies have now reached the same stage as sex: It's all technique and no feeling."

Wilder: She was speaking for herself, I'm sure.

Q: How involved do you get, Mr. Diamond, in casting and other matters after the script is done?

Diamond: Oh, I throw out ideas, and sometimes they're listened to and sometimes they're not.

Wilder: He is in my office at all times, except when I cast the starlets who don't wind up with the part. Now tell me, is this a seminar of various specialists? In other words, you're not all going to be cardiac. Some are going to be nose, throat, and ear. If I had a son or daughter who wanted to go into the business, I would say, "The way things are going, go into special effects or become a stunt man." Special effects--with the need for bigger and bigger fish--would be a safe field, I think. No, maybe a lawyer is better.

Q: Mr. Diamond, have you ever collaborated in any way on the direction?

Wilder: Oh, he collaborates with me all the time. He just doesn't get the credit for it.

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Diamond: No. I'll give you an example of two persons who used to direct together: Norman Panama and Melvin Frank. But they had a rule: Only one of them was allowed to talk to the actors. They might consult on the sidelines, but always it was one man in charge. No, we don't co-direct. I may sit on the sidelines, and I may make a suggestion occasionally, but I stay out.

Q: Do you have any ambition to direct a film yourself?

Diamond: Not really.

Wilder: If they give you a zoom lens? No, he is a very elegant man, and he just does not want to get that close to actors. I have to go into the cage, and he's outside.

Diamond: Speaking of zoom lenses, Billy's cutter at Paramount was an associate producer on most of his pictures, and he was once lent out to a young director who was making his first picture. He was a stage director, and he sat on the set every day, and one day he prepared the following scene: Two persons are sitting on a couch talking, and the woman is smoking a cigarette. The idea was to zoom in on the cigarette in her mouth, pan down with it as she put it in an ashtray, and then as she picks her hand up come back and continue the dialogue. The cutter watched this all morning, and finally he went to the director and said, "What is the point of this? Is the cigarette poisoned? Is she a spy and there's a secret message in the filter?" The director could not answer. The point was that he had come from the stage, and he wanted to prove to everybody that he could use a camera. Ultimately, that scene was never in the picture, and the director never talked to the cutter again because he had been caught being completely self-indulgent.

Wilder: Not only didn't it prove anything, but the power of the camera is such that if you have a moment like that audiences get curious, restless. They think that there must be a reason for it; otherwise he wouldn't show it. They're very, very sharp now. They watch everything.

Diamond: In *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, Martin Scorsese also has a very busy camera. There's one scene where two people are sitting in a booth in a restaurant talking to each other, and the camera goes 180 degrees to the right, then it comes back 135 degrees to the left, then it goes 90 degrees to the right. None of this is for any reason at all, except that he didn't trust the words in the scene. I guess he felt that unless he was engaged in some sort of busywork he wasn't directing. He didn’t have the courage to let the camera stay in one place and let the scene play.

Wilder: It's especially the curse of stage directors. They take a play and say, "Now we're going to open it up." They have a very good scene in a living room that has played six hundred times on Broadway. But for the picture they take the people out and put them on the roof garden, then they take them downstairs, then into the drugstore, and it’s still the same scene.

One of the best scenes I've ever seen in a picture was between Marlon Brando and Rod

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Steiger in *On the Waterfront*. They are sitting in a cab, not even a transparency in back to save money. Venetian blinds in a New York cab. The two brothers talking, especially Brando. The scene was beautiful and very well written, and it lasted seven minutes. No cut, no close-ups, no nothing. One of the great scenes, because you were involved. But I'm not going to like the scene any better if they suddenly got up and walked out somewhere.

Diamond: The tip-off is usually in the middle of a scene when somebody says, "Let's get some air."

Wilder: I ran into Scorsese New Year's Eve, and he had just done *Taxi Driver*. We talked about a half hour, and he was talking about simplifying. It's like with a young colt: You have to put the blinkers on him. He's going to calm down, and he's going to be fine. He's a very fine talent. There is a whole group of young directors who are just absolutely marvelous.

Q: For instance?

Wilder: I'm omitting now the established ones like Arthur Penn or Mike Nichols. But I think Harold Ashby is very, very fine. I think Bertolucci is marvelous. There are twenty I could mention quickly.

Diamond: Certainly, Francis Ford Coppola, William Friedkin and Steven Spielberg are as technically accomplished as any director in the business.

Wilder: Coppola is marvelous. I think that Coppola's *Godfather, Part II* is certainly among the five best American pictures ever made. In execution, in perception, I thought it was an absolute masterpiece. On my list of the unforgettable ones, it's way up there.

Q: What are some others?

Wilder: Oh, there are many. There's *Grand Illusion*, *Best Years of Our Lives*, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Maltese Falcon*, *The Informer*. And some of the old German pictures, some of the Murnau pictures. But for a man like Coppola, who had made only four or five pictures, it was an outstanding achievement. It was just a very mature work of a very mature man.

Q: Speaking of a busy camera, Mr. Diamond, what did you think of *Citizen Kane* the first time you saw it?

Diamond: I was very impressed, but that was not a busy camera. That was a very quiet camera. Take *Stagecoach*. I don't think John Ford moved his camera once in the whole picture. There was one pan shot, but what a hell of an effective shot it was. He's shooting down on the stagecoach on the floor of the valley, and suddenly he pans over and there's an Indian watching from a bluff. That's the only time the camera moved. Lots of action, lots of excitement, no camera movement. He made his actors come to the camera.

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Wilder: But, you see, in making pictures--I'm not talking now about directing pictures--it's not how you are photographing. It is the juxtaposition of the various shots that you make. It is the scissors that make the picture, the cut. Alfred Hitchcock is certainly a tremendous influence on picture making, but, once in a while, he indulged. He said he was going to make a picture called *Rope* and that it would have seven or nine setups in the whole picture. It was absolute, total nonsense. He would wind up on the back of somebody's dark suit, and the next reel would start. They had to rehearse and rehearse. Every ten days they would get one whole reel, and they would collapse in exhaustion. But why not cut? This is writing the Lord's Prayer on the head of a pin. What is he trying to prove? *Battleship Potemkin*, that is movies. It's what follows what. This is where we have it all over the theater.

Q: After working on a script, have you ever found yourself on a set improvising dialogue or departing from the script when something doesn't work?

Diamond: Never, never, never.

Wilder: We should have, maybe. Totally improvise, no. But sometimes we sense that it does not work, and we withdraw into a corner and rewrite a little or do something during lunchtime. But to sit there for half a day and then kind of slap it together, no, never.

Diamond: If you ever listen to actors talk, you will not improvise. When Howard Hawks was making *Man's Favorite Sport*? and *Hatari*, all the publicity said he was improvising on the set. What was happening was that he would come on the set in the morning and say to the actors, "Now you say something to her, and she says something to you, and then you try to kiss her, and she slaps your face." But in his back pocket he'd have four pages that were written by Charlie Lederer or somebody else. The actors didn't know where the scene was going, but he knew exactly where it was going. During rehearsal he'd gradually work the lines around to what was written in the script. Ingmar Bergman has said, "Before I can improvise, I have to write it." There is no such thing, despite John Cassavetes.

Wilder: The best example is *Chorus Line* in New York. They were improvising, but they had two writers there, and they were taking the words down, taping it all, and distilling it. I imagine at the first performance, the first time they started improvising, *Chorus Line* was not what it is today.

Diamond: The real improviser is the writer. By the time you've gotten to shooting a scene he may have written it fifteen different ways. Now, that's obviously much more economical than waiting until you get on the set with electricians standing around to start to improvise. Then you cannot keep all your options open, because if you shoot one scene two ways you'd have to shoot the following scene four ways and the following scene eight ways. Robert Altman is another man who has no respect for words. The critics rave about the overlapping dialogue, but the fact of the matter is that nobody has anything worth saying in the first place, which is the only time you can afford to overlap dialogue.

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He may shoot an eight-hour picture like *Nashville* and cut it down to two-and-a-half hours, but this is not the normal way to make pictures, and it's not a very feasible way. Elaine May has now worked over two years on a picture called *Mikey and Nicky*. She's exposed over a million feet of film. The studio finally had to go to court to take it away from her, because she's never going to finish.

Wilder: Maybe they could latch it on to *Casanova.*

Diamond: I'll give you another example of improvising on the set. This one happened to me in the old days. A director was shooting, and he didn't like the ending of a scene. But in a later scene in the script there was a tag line he did like, so he simply stole the tag line and put it in the early scene, figuring he'd worry about the later scene when he came to it. What he neglected to notice was that there was a plot point in that line--it's a revelation that required an immediate reaction from the characters. So, what happened on the screen was this: A revelation is made, twenty minutes go by, and nobody pays any attention to it. Then suddenly they react to it. The director had stolen a line from one part of the script and put it in another, and he hadn't stopped to think it all out.

Somebody once asked Dick Brooks, a writer-director, "The night before you shoot a scene, do you sit down with the script and figure out the angles and all that?" He said, "I sit down with the script not to figure out the angles. By now I may have written eight versions of that scene, but I look at it once more just to make sure there isn't a ninth version somewhere that I've overlooked." The stuff that goes into the wastebasket is the improvisation.

Wilder: I remember what made me decide early on that some day I should try to be a director. I had written a picture in Germany for the old UFA company. In one scene something was going on in a nightclub where undesirable elements were to be kept out. A big sign outside said, "Shoes and ties obligatory." There were two doormen looking to see that people had shoes and ties. One of the gags was that a man with a long beard appears, and the doorman stops him and looks under the beard to see if the guy has a tie. Later I went to see the picture, and I found that the director gave that actor a little goatee. There was nothing to lift and look under. But he kept that joke because he thought it was still going to be funny, but it was not.

Diamond: I once wrote a scene that took place in the Guggenheim Museum, and at the time I was writing it I had no idea what the exhibit would be when we finally got around to shooting it. I just said, "It's an op-art show, and two characters are standing in front of a geometric painting, and one says to the other, 'I bet he cheated and used a ruler.' " Just a throwaway line to get the scene started. The film crew gets to the museum six months later, and now there's a sculpture show. The scene opens and you see somebody standing in front of a piece of round sculpture, saying, "I bet he cheated and used a ruler." It occurred to nobody on the set--the director, the actor, the script girl--that somebody should have said, "Wait a minute. This line is wrong now. We either have to change it or throw it out altogether." But this is what happens when people stick too literally to the script.

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Wilder: It is respect for the written word, and you should be very proud.

Diamond: But I think today there's probably more respect for writing than any time in the history of the industry.

Wilder: Absolutely.

Diamond: Yet I see something happening: Not many people are interested in just writing any more. They see it as a stepping stone toward directing. This is as if every composer said to himself, "It's Bernstein and Previn who get the publicity. If I can just knock off a piece maybe they'll let me conduct it." But writing is a discipline in itself. It may have something to do with directing, and it may not. But today the young are primarily interested in directing, because, let's face it, there's more recognition for the director than for the writer. I hate to see that happen because there are never enough good writers.

Q: But the writer faces the obstacles of being underrated and underpaid, of not having the kind of ego support that a director has.

Diamond: I think financially the writer is in a very strong position today. In the old days you could not sell an original screenplay unless it was for a Western at Republic. It was all either books or plays or scripts written by contract writers at the studios. A good original screenplay can now command tremendous sums of money. I think it is more wide open than it ever was.

Wilder: This is illustrated by *Lucky Lady*, the follow-up to *American Graffiti.* My suggestion is that you cannot just freelance and hop around town. You have to latch on to a director with whom you work most of the time or, preferably, continuously. But it's very, very difficult to do that. It's tougher believe me, to get on in a director-writer relationship than in one's marriage. Somebody asked me one day, "Is it important for a director to know how to write?" It's not important. It's important for a director to know how to read. When you find a director who knows how to read, who asks the proper questions, who is not ashamed to say, "I don't get the meaning of this scene," instead of just going off on location and shooting something contrary to what you wanted to express in that scene, then hold on to him. And if you're good I'm sure he will hold on to you because good writers are rare.

Q: Mr. Wilder, have you found the dual role of producer and director too much for one man?

Wilder: It is too much if it's just the two of us. But within a big studio--let's say Universal with the black tower Knesset--all their executives and executive executives have to contribute, too. I'm not going to go through contracts with actors and conditions. Let them worry about that. That is not producing. There have been some creative producers--I mean Selznick, Goldwyn, Thalberg, and now, I imagine, Bob Evans. But nowadays a producer is usually a man who knew a second cousin of a reader who got

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hold of an unfinished book at Random House about a big fish off Martha's Vineyard, and for some reason or other his brother-in-law gave him $10,000, and he put it down, and now suddenly he had the rights for Jaws, and owning that he became a producer.

Q: What was your role as producer in *Some Like It Hot*?

Wilder: I had the final say on the making of the picture, the cutting, the casting, and whatever. There was one less nose sticking in my pie. I would be perfectly willing to welcome a producer who added to the picture, but there are very few. Most producers make you feel that if they weren't quite that busy and not quite that involved in six enormous projects which were going to revolutionize the cinema, they could write the movie better, they could direct it better, they could possibly act in it, they could compose. The truth is that if they can't write it, can't direct it, don't know how to write a note of music, can't act, can't do anything, then they become the overseer of it all.

Diamond: It's much easier to make six pictures at a time than just to make one picture, because you have no real responsibility. You talk to somebody for an hour and you say, "Go and develop it." Someone is left with the mess to clean up while you're busy with something else.

Wilder: And it's even easier, if you're the head of the studio, to make twenty pictures. It's as if you were standing around the roulette table, and you've got twenty chips. One or two of those chips are going to be winners. Now, we have one miserable chip, and we play it and if that doesn't come off we are just out for a year and a half. We are there with egg on our face.

I once talked to a top executive at Columbia, a friend of mine, who said, "You always look at me with a kind of peculiar glance. You always wonder how the hell I deserve $5,000 a week."

And I said, "Sam, that's right. It has crossed my mind."

He said, "Look, the trick is the following: The studio executives will send down to my office ten projects that they are planning to do. They're not quite sure whether or not to do those ten projects. And I'll say, 'No,' to every one of them. Always 'No,' because nine out of ten are going to be stinkers. One will be a big hit, but the executives will be so ecstatic about that one they will forget that I said, 'No,' to it, too. So I just go on and say, 'No,' because how wrong can I be by saying 'No,' when ninety percent of the pictures lose money?"

Q: You mentioned *Some Like It Hot*. How did the idea of dressing up two men as women develop?

Wilder: Very early in the structure of that picture my friend Mr. Diamond very rightly said, "We have to find the hammerlock. We have to find the ironclad thing so that these guys trapped in women's clothes cannot just take the wigs off and say, ' Look, I'm a guy.'

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It has to be a question of life and death." And that's where the idea for the St. Valentine's Day murder came. If they got out of the women's clothes they would be killed by the Al Capone gang. That was the important invention. When we started working on the picture I had a discussion with David O. Selznick, who was a very fine producer, and I very briefly told him the plot.

He said, "You mean there's going to be machine guns and shooting and killing and blood?"

I said, "Sure." He said, "It's not going to be funny. No comedy can survive that kind of brutal reality." But that's what made the picture. The two men were on the spot, and we kept them on the spot until the very end.

Q: Did you have problems casting those two roles?

Diamond: The first person we wanted was Jack Lemmon, but he was then under contract to Columbia, and the first actor we actually signed was Tony Curtis because we felt he could play both parts in an emergency. United Artists felt that we needed a big box-office name and that Lemmon wasn't big enough. They suggested that Mr. Wilder see Frank Sinatra. He made a lunch date with him and Sinatra never showed up, which may be one of the luckiest things that could have happened to us. At this point we got Marilyn Monroe, and the studio no longer felt the need for another big name. Then we signed Jack.

Wilder: If you hit on a thing, which works, there's that snowball effect of laughter. You get the audience in that rare mood when everything is funny, and you don't need big stars. The best example of a similar picture to *Some Like It Hot* is *M*A*S*H*. There were no big stars in *M*A*S*H* then. It's just one of those pictures that lends itself to two hours of increasing fun. The audience doesn't have a chance to sober up. The picture just keeps going and going.

Q: One critic has discussed what he called the underlying homosexual motifs in *Some Like It Hot*. Are there any?

Diamond: The whole trick in the picture is that, while the two were dressed in women's clothes, their thinking processes were at all times a hundred-percent male. When there was a slight aberration, like Lemmon getting engaged, it became twice as funny. But they were not camping it up. They never thought of themselves as women. Just for one moment Lemmon forgot himself--that was all. The rest of the time, Curtis was out to seduce Monroe, no matter what clothes he was wearing.

Wilder: But when he forgot himself it was not a homosexual relationship. It was just the idea of being engaged to a millionaire. It's very appealing. You don't have to be a homosexual. It's security.

Q: This raises a question of the handling of delicate themes. What problems did you have

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in *The Seven Year Itch*?

Wilder: It was a nothing picture, and I'll tell you why. It was a nothing picture because the picture should be done today without censorship. It was an awkward picture to make. Unless the husband, left alone in New York while the wife and kid are away for the summer, has an affair with that girl there's nothing. But you couldn't do that in those days, so I was just straitjacketed. It just didn't come off one bit, and there's nothing I can say about it except I wish I hadn't made it. I wish I had the property now.

Q: You can be more explicit today, but at what point would you part from very explicit filmmakers?

Wilder: One can tackle more daring themes, and one can write dialogue without a straitjacket whereas once if you wanted to call someone a son of a bitch you would have to say, "If he had a mother, she'd bark." But I don't think that we would ever write an out-and-out porno picture. The dialogue, for instance, in *Shampoo*--I don't think that our minds work that way.

Diamond: But it's also, especially in comedy, almost gratuitous. I think nudity hurts laughs. If you're watching somebody's boobs, you're not listening to the dialogue. I don't think that any of the Lubitsch pictures or, say, *Philadelphia Story* would be any better or funnier if you saw Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn in the nude.

Wilder: Hepburn? Big laugh.

Q: What about Avanti!? Was there a straitjacket problem?

Wilder: Yes. Too mild, too soft, too gentle. We missed on that. The picture was fifteen years too late, if it should have been done at all.

Diamond: I think if Peter Bogdanovich had done it it would have been called "A Tribute to Lubitsch," just like *What's Up, Doc?* was a tribute to Howard Hawks. But if Howard Hawks had done *What's Up, Doc?*, everyone would have said, "It's old- fashioned and predictable."

Q: Was *Ace in the Hole* too late?

Wilder: Too early. Somebody once said about showmanship: "Showmanship is to know what the audience wants before the audience knows what it wants." You can miscalculate.

Q: Was there a miscalculation with *One, Two, Three*?

Diamond: I think it was a flop because it was released after the Berlin Wall incident: I think people suddenly no longer considered that subject very funny. The problem we ran into was that right in the middle of shooting the picture, the border was suddenly closed.

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Wilder: The Communists started shooting people who wanted to get in and out of East Berlin, and it all ceased to be funny.

Q: Was there any consideration of scrapping the picture?

Wilder: None at all. The studio had to recoup some of the money. There was no such thing as scrapping. Now there is. They ran into trouble with Robert De Niro on Bogart Slept Here, and they just walked away from it.

Q: You worked for Lubitsch. Were you influenced by his style?

Wilder: Certainly I was. But he died so young, and I only worked for him on two pictures. I wish I had had more time and that I could have studied under him for a longer period because he was a great director. He took the secret with him to his grave. People keep saying, not about me, but about other directors, "This is just like Lubitsch," but it's not Lubitsch.

Q: In your visual style, you very often seem to concentrate on one particular object. For example, the filing cabinets in *A Foreign Affair* or the whiskey bottle and the light in *The Lost Weekend*. Is that element there from the very inception?

Wilder: Sure, sure. When we constructed *The Apartment*, we knew we needed a scene in which Jack Lemmon realizes that Shirley MacLaine is the dame his boss, Fred MacMurray, does it to in his apartment. So, we go back and plant the little makeup mirror that he finds. When he has the promotion and buys himself the young executive black bowler hat, she lets him see himself in the mirror, and he suddenly realizes that's the girl. But surely none of those things are improvised. It's all calculated and planted.

Q: Is there a source you care to pinpoint for your humor--your families?

Diamond: No. My children are funny. I don't think my parents were particularly funny.

Wilder: And my brother is a dull son of a bitch.

Q: When you worked in Germany, was the studio arrangement at UFA the same as its American counterparts at the time?

Wilder: No, it was very different. The studio itself was about ten miles outside of Berlin in what is now the eastern side of Berlin. But they had some smaller studios around town. The big company was UFA, but there were twelve other companies. There was no such thing as writers or directors under contract. There was no such thing as being on the set as a writer while it was happening. It was too far out of town, and you didn't have a car in those days. It was all quite different. It was all in the hands of Erich Pommer, who was the Thalberg of the UFA company, and there were some outstanding directors: Murnau, Fritz Lang, Robert Wiene, and G. W. Pabst. It was a director's medium there.

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Q: Since 1950, not a great deal has been happening with German films. Do you have any explanation?

Wilder: I understand that they are on their way back, but I haven't seen many of the new films. But before it was just a desert. The decline started in 1933 when Hitler came to power, and later people got out of the habit of seeing movies. There was very little money there except for some big American pictures and some French pictures. Then they got into the porno rut. I understand that one company made millions doing pornographic versions of all the Grimm Brothers fairy tales. You can imagine what the dwarfs were doing to Snow White. But now I understand that there are three or four young directors who do pictures on a much higher level. But no matter what, the German audiences are going to be standing around forty blocks to see *Jaws.* They used to go first to the German pictures, but now they're waiting for the American pictures.

Q: Closer to home, how did the script of *Sunset Boulevard* come about?

Wilder: I was working with Mr. Brackett then, and he had an idea of doing a picture with a Hollywood background. I think originally we wanted Pola Negri or Mary Pickford. Once we got hold of a character of the silent picture glamour star who had had it, a kind of female John Gilbert, whose career is finished with the advent of talkies but she still has the oil wells pumping and the house on Sunset Boulevard, then we started rolling. The characters of the writer and the director came after. Soon we had Gloria Swanson and Erich von Stroheim, and we had a whole slew of the old stars, H. B. Warner and Buster Keaton.

The part of the writer, Joe Gillis, who becomes the gigolo there, was written for Montgomery Clift. But about two weeks before we started shooting, he sent his agent in, who said, "Mr. Montgomery Clift, the great New York actor, will not do the picture, because what would his fans think if he had an affair with a woman twice his age?" You would expect that from a Hollywood actor but not a serious actor. We were then confronted with what to do. It was too late to shelve the picture. So we took William Holden, who was playing second lieutenants in comedies at that time.

It had also been difficult to find stars to play in *Double Indemnity*--especially to find a leading man who would play a murderer. We went all the way down, actor after actor, until I finally wound up with Fred MacMurray, who told me, "For Christ's sake, you're making the mistake of your life. I'm a saxophone player. I can't do it."

Q: Were you concerned in *Sunset Boulevard* about having a dead narrator?

Wilder: Yes, but that was the only way out. I shot a whole prologue, a whole reel--that and another reel of the ending to *Double Indemnity* have never been shown. The prologue was very well shot and quite effective. A corpse is brought into the morgue downtown--and I shot it there, too--and it's the corpse of Holden. There are about six other corpses there under sheets. Through a trick we see through the sheets to the faces, and they are

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telling each other the events leading to their deaths. Then Holden starts telling his story.

We previewed the picture, with the original first reel, in Evanston, Illinois, right where Northwestern University is. The picture started. The corpse is brought in on a slab, a name tape is put on the big toe of the corpse, and once the tag went on the toe, the audience broke into the biggest laugh I ever heard in my life. I said, "Oh, my God," and the picture just went straight down. It was a disaster. So that whole sequence went out, but we kept the notion of a man telling of the events, which led to his demise.

In *Double Indemnity* I had a final scene with the character in the gas chamber. There are pellets dropping and the bucket and the fumes, and outside is Eddie Robinson watching. They are two great friends, and there is something going on between them, an exchange or whatever. It was very good but just unnecessary. The picture is over when he tells him, "You can't even make the elevator," and he tries and collapses. In the distance you hear the siren of the police, and you know what's going to happen. That was the end of it. I added a postscript, which was totally unnecessary.

Q: Have you seen the made-for-TV version of *Double Indemnity*?

Wilder: Yes.

Q: What did you think of it?

Wilder: I threw up. Universal bought out all the old Paramount pictures, of which this was one. They own *Double Indemnity*, just as they took another picture I directed, *Stalag 17*, and made a whole series, "Hogan's Heroes." They took the script of *Double Indemnity*--and the movie itself represented the height of censorship--and shot exactly that script. The TV picture was terrible. It was miscast. The sets were wrong. Everything was bad.

Q: Are the blockbuster pictures, the disaster pictures that are popular now, affecting the direction you want to go in?

Wilder: If you want to make a picture in that direction, but we don't think in that direction. Also, we are old hands at disasters. But those pictures compete with each other.

Q: Is there an audience for just a good movie, without a $9 or $10 million budget?

Wilder: Certainly there is. One thing for sure is that you can do a lot of things on the screen that you still cannot do on television. Let us say that somebody were to make *Dog Day Afternoon* for $1 million or $2 million. You couldn't do that on television because the subject is taboo. But you can do it in pictures.

American Graffiti is another example of a picture that can be done without competing in size. You know, the peculiar thing about movies is that you're going to be charged just as much at a theater to see *American Graffiti* as you would be to see, let us say, *The*

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Poseidon Adventure. One picture cost $700,000 and the other cost $11 million, but you still pay $2.50 or whatever.

Diamond: It is getting tougher now to approach a studio with a project, which seems either small or mild. Naturally, everybody is looking for the blockbuster. It's human nature. Before *The Exorcist* opened, William Blatty, the author of the novel, was going around making speeches that this was a picture about the persistence of evil in modern society. But when the picture opened people were not going around saying to each other, "Hey, let's go see that picture about the persistence of evil." They were saying, "Hey, there's a picture where the girl throws up green and masturbates with a crucifix." That's what the picture was about from the audience's point of view, not what Blatty may have thought it was about.

Wilder: And the audience went for the 360-degree turn of the head and the goddamned sound effects. All the osteopaths must have cringed. But it was very effective. People had to see it. It was totally impossible to go to a picnic or a dinner party in Albany without having seen certain pictures: *The Exorcist, Jaws.* Now, those pictures are, technically, beautifully done. I think Spielberg's picture was just phenomenal, really beautifully engineered. But as long as we know that this is *Grand Guignol*, that we know what kind of merchandise we're getting, it's fine. It's just a very effective piece of celluloid, and it keeps you there. You may get up and say, "Well, I didn't like it," but you certainly paid attention to what was happening.

Q: You think there was a difference in the author's intention and the director's?

Wilder: I think the direction was rather subtle. The book was just a real smack on the nose--very effective, too, but not a great novel.

Diamond: People have forgotten, because the picture was such a big success, but before it opened Blatty was about to sue Friedkin because had thrown him off the set because of the disagreements about what was going to be cut out and what was going to be left in. I think Blatty wanted the more signficant talk stuff left in, and Friedkin realized what kind of picture he was making. He just cut all that out and stuck to where the money was. Now they're great friends.

Wilder: But I do respect a director such as Friedkin who suddenly is confronted with a scene of a party going on and an eight-year-old girl joins the party and pees on the carpet. That's what you have to shoot. That's just a day's work. Where do you put the camera? It is not easy. I can do a chase sequence. I can do any goddamned thing. But an eight-year-old girl peeing during a party, that's a new one. It requires a different technique. It is this kind of never-seen-before that makes for this kind of enormous box office.

But I think *The Exorcist* is good, riveting picturemaking. I also think that once you make up your mind to make a picture like this you've got to give it both knees, because it is not going to be in great taste or very subtle. I you do it, then do it. That's Sam Peckinpah's technique, the man who gives it three knees.

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Q: What film are you working on now?

Wilder: We very probably will retire, like Secretariat, to stud. No, we've just come back from a location-scouting trip to France and Greece, though we may be shooting in Italy because we didn't find what we wanted elsewhere. We're doing the first novella in Tom Tryon' s new book, *Crowned Heads*. It's called *Fedora*. We had been kicking around Hollywood picture ideas when along came the galleys of this book.

Diamond: It's about a retired old film star who lives in Europe, but except for one flashback it has nothing to do with moviemaking.

Q: What's the schedule for the film?

Wilder: It's eighty percent plotted and thirty percent in screenplay form. We'll be through in plenty of time to fiddle with it and manicure it. I think we'll start shooting some time at the beginning of next year, and the picture will be out some time in the middle of next year.

Q: Does the film present any special writing problems?

Diamond: It's a departure for me in that I've never really done a serious picture before. It's a picture with no jokes, or few jokes.

Wilder: It's very *Grand Guignol*. It's a mystery but it's not a Hitchcock picture. Actually first serious picture I've been connected with since *Sunset Boulevard*.

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