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**Author**

Terrasi, S. Kye

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**Gerd Gemünden: *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder's American Films*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008.**

Prefacing Gerd Gemünden's book *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder's American Films* is Wilder's own quote: "I am a mélange." The reader will soon discover that this cryptic statement characterizes the essence of Gemünden's analysis of Wilder's films. The aforementioned work is only one facet of the author's contribution to the topic of German/Austrian exile and artistic productions. Gemünden is currently conducting an examination of exiled artists in 1933-1948 Hollywood and also functioned as a consultant for the film *Cinema's Exiles From Hitler to Hollywood*, which aired on PBS. In *A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder's American Films* Gemünden refrains from taking a broader look at the topic of the *émigrés* and their creative production during World War II and instead chooses a close study of the works of one particular exiled artist, Billy Wilder.

Although Wilder is often strongly associated with American cinema, Gemünden underscores the significance and influence of Wilder's Austrian background, his perspective as a Jew and even more, his experience of exile, on his American films. Tracing Wilder's career from his early work in Vienna and Berlin to his vastly popular American cinematic oeuvre, Gemünden emphasizes and strives to demonstrate the nuanced presence of Wilder's complex personal and artistic background, as well as the social critique and trenchant observations of modern life in America generated from his position as an outsider, all embedded within the glossy surface and commercial appeal of his most famous American films.

Throughout the text Gemünden highlights the influence of Wilder's unique and often conflicted perspective as an exile and outsider on his films. He explains that Wilder's approach to Hollywood cinema was a synthesis of elements resulting from his multi-faceted background. In one chapter he cites the modernity of the iconic film *Some Like It Hot* as the influence of Weimar Germany through its upheaval of all societal expectations concerning gender identity and sexual roles. At the same time he highlights Wilder's frequent use of masquerade, which he links back to Habsburg Vienna and the concepts of "Sein" and "Schein" in which the elegant artistic and cultural atmosphere of Vienna served to conceal the social and political instability. In *Some Like It Hot*, masquerade functions in the same manner with appearance and pretense veiling truth, sometimes to the extent that it begins to replace reality all together for some of the characters in the film. All of these influences fused with Wilder's own sense as an outsider provided him with the means to confront the American lifestyle with a language of critique not available to many of his contemporaries.

Central to Gemünden's examination of Wilder as a film director is the notion that his perspective as an outsider was heightened through his Jewish background. Gemünden points out that Wilder's own experiences as a Jew, whether in National Socialist Germany or in Hollywood, undeniably shaped the landscape of

his films and compelled him to deal with topics dealing with Jewishness and the Holocaust. Gemünden acknowledges that while the majority of Wilder's films do not directly represent Jews, they do embody traits often connected with Jewishness. In one chapter Gemünden writes: "However, in a more general sense Wilder's films are distinctly Jewish- from their lack of sentimentality, through their emphasis on the power of gab, to their celebration of the survivor figure" (141). For example, the nuanced presence of Jewishness in Wilder's films is exemplified by *The Apartment*, in which Wilder incorporates a great deal of Yiddish and Jack Lemmon's character suffers misfortune in his part as the "schlemiel." Through this interweaving of subtle references from his Jewish roots, Wilder offers a more hopeful model to approach the problem of alienation, utilizing the Yiddish concept of "mensch" in order to mitigate the isolation of the exile and the outsider.

In his analysis of Wilder's film *Double Indemnity*, Gemünden further illustrates the subtlety with which Wilder embedded issues related to his understanding of Jewishness into his films. Gemünden situates *Double Indemnity* within the tradition of *film noir* and its portrayal of the individual forced to the side, crisis of identity and the struggle against incomprehensible social and political factors. Gemünden establishes that the film makes a critique of capitalism and the Hollywood industry, but goes on to explain that while the film does not aggressively seek to dispute the way in which issues of race were ignored in Hollywood at the time, there is a cognizance stemming from Wilder's experiences as a Jew that injects a heightened awareness of race issues into the film. "Thus *Double Indemnity* not only highlights the presence of minorities in Los Angeles, but also aligns their marginalization with the outsider status and alienation [of the main character]" (47). In this way Wilder was able to examine the issue of race in America from the standpoint of someone who experienced a much harsher form of persecution due to his ethnic background.

In his text Gemünden sets out to explore Wilder's Hollywood films within the context of the diverse cultural and intellectual influences that converged to give Wilder his unique perspective and the means to confront "the American way of life- its myths, its ideologies, and its double standards in the realm of sexuality, the family and the culture industry" (4). Rather than gloss over the multitude of factors that composed Wilder's identity and influenced his filmmaking, Gemünden instead underscores the conflicting and complicated nature of his development as a filmmaker, demonstrating how it contributed to and enriched his body of American films by subtly embedding and critiquing issues dealing with sexuality, race and the struggle of the individual in modern society within his films.

Gemünden's examination of Wilder's life and artistic output succeeds in mirroring Wilder's films: on the surface, vastly entertaining and accessible, but containing sharp and incisive observations. Although Gemünden allows his text to finish rather abruptly and provides no concluding comments for an otherwise thoroughly

researched book, *A Foreign Affair* is a valuable source of information for students of film and film theory, exile studies and German studies in general. Moving back and forth between Wilder's films and discussions of perspectives from writers such as Adorno and Krakauer, Gemünden builds a theoretical basis to discuss many of his ideas on Wilder and modernity, exile and mass culture. While examining all of the "contradictions" and "complexities" (4) associated with Wilder, Gemünden adeptly proves that Wilder was indisputably a *mélange*, and this quality provided the artist with tools to make such rich and densely layered films packed with both pleasure as well as unparalleled insights into American culture.

S. Kye Terrasi *University of California, Los Angeles*