

Welcome to the New Books Network.

**Marshall Poe**

Hello, everybody. This is Marshall Poe.

I'm the editor of the New Books Network, and your listening to an episode in the Princeton University Press Ideas podcast, which we produce at the NBN with our friends at Princeton University Press. Today I'm very pleased to say we have Noah Isenberg on the show, and we'll be discussing a book that he edited called *Billy Wilder on Assignment: Dispatches from Weimar Berlin and Interwar Vienna*. I should say that these pieces in the book were translated by Shelley Frisch—she was unable to be with us today, but it's appropriate that we remember her and her good work. Noah, welcome to the show.

**Noah Isenberg**

Thank you, Marshall. Good to be here.

**Marshall Poe**

Absolutely. Could you begin the podcast by telling us a little bit about yourself?

**Noah Isenberg**

Sure. Well, as you said, my name is Noah Isenberg. I am a professor. I hold the George Christian Centennial Professor and Chair—God, it's a mouthful—of the Department of Radio-Television-Film here at The University of Texas at Austin, which is where I'm speaking to you from, Austin, Texas. And I'm a film historian by training. I am the author most recently of a book called *We'll Always Have Casablanca: The Life, Legend, and Afterlife of Hollywood's Most Beloved Movie*, that Norton published back in 2017, and I'm currently writing a book for Norton and for Faber in the UK—same editors as the Casablanca project—on *Some Like It Hot*, on Billy Wilder's Great American sex comedy. So, that's in the works. And I'm writing, at the same time, a short interpretive biography of Wilder for the Yale Jewish Lives series. The Yale University Press.

**Marshall Poe**

I noticed that the appearance of the Yale Jewish Lives series—and we're trying to get as many of those on the New Books Network as we can—I think they're terrific.

**Noah Isenberg**

Yeah. I feel very lucky, but the order in which I need to finish these projects—I need to finish the *Some Like It Hot* book first, and then these short interpretive biographies that you've noted at the Yale Jewish Lives series. Then I get to the little one on Billy Wilder.

**Marshall Poe**

Well, let's talk about the one that you have in the can. [inaudible] And that is *Billy Wilder on Assignment*. How did this book come about?

**Noah Isenberg**

So, we need to go back in time a good 30 years, when I was a graduate student at UC Berkeley and was doing dissertation research. So, this is in the mid-90s. I stumbled upon a number of these early writings by Wilder, and it was soon after I finished up that degree and started teaching at Wesleyan University up in Middletown, Connecticut, that a volume of those writings appeared in German. It was called [inaudible], *The Prince of Wales Goes on Holiday*, one of the pieces that's included here in

this collection, and I was just—I couldn't believe that these just gems of early Wilder were unavailable at English. And I am not a terribly talented translator, and so flash forward a couple decades. By the time we actually embarked upon this project with the great editorial team at Princeton University Press, helmed by Anne Savarese, I was just thrilled that Shelley Frisch—who is an enormously talented translator—was able to take on this job and to do it with such aplomb. So, that's essentially—there are two separate volumes: the one I mentioned is *The Prince of Wales Goes on Holiday*. There's another one that was just called "Billie"—spelled in the original way in which he spelled his name was, an "ie" rather than the "y." And it's on his Viennese—you know, his work as a reporter of Vienna. So, the first one was largely his Berlin writings, and the other his—you know, what we've done is we've coupled the two here. That's what I've done as editor, and speak a bit about that in the editor's introduction as well.

There were a couple pieces we didn't choose to include for a variety of reasons, but it's a pretty comprehensive, and I think representative, selection of Wilder's writings as a freelance journalist. As a—well, he's a dancer for hire in the opening, and one of the most famous pieces, but he was also a writer for higher. And as he once said about that, dancer piece, you know, he didn't have the best dance moves, but he had the best dialogue.

#### Marshall Poe

So, before we get to Wilder's life, I want to ask a question as a historian. This is always of interest to me: Was there a complete, I guess, bibliography of Wilder's early writing?

#### Noah Isenberg

No, no. No.

#### Marshall Poe

Are they all known? Do you have to go hunt them out?

#### Noah Isenberg

What we did is we called these two volumes—there probably are a few stray pieces. I mean, there's one, for instance—I mean, I did my best. I did due diligence. And there were some other scholars who were even ahead of me on the hunt, you know. Wilder claims that in a single day, he interviewed Alfred Adler, Adler Schnitzler, Sigmund Freud, etc. etc. There are no extant pieces that they corroborate those outlandish claims, so we don't have those. But I suspect there probably are a few stray pieces that are filed away in, you know, Vienna, in an archive. I did not do archival research for this project. Rather, I took the two extant volumes, the German as well as the Viennese, and kind of did my best to select the greatest hits there.

This was done pre-pandemic for the most part. So it wasn't that the pandemic—which in the meantime, it's done for me several times over—it wasn't that it precluded archival visits, but that we just felt we had what we wanted with these two collections. And so that was sort of the impetus for the project, was to take these two collections. And again, going back to my disappointment as a grad student, and then as a young assistant professor, that these pieces don't exist in English translation, that too was part of the, you know, the prime impetus behind the project.

#### Marshall Poe

Well, without resorting to national stereotypes, Germans are very good at this kind of thing.

#### Noah Isenberg

Absolutely. No, no in fact, and I'm enormously grateful to them. Thankfully they do—better than me—thankfully, they put together these very meticulously prepared volumes from which I can then poach my favorite pieces. Yeah, so and that's essentially what happened here.

### Marshall Poe

Okay. So, gives us a [inaudible], is the German saying, a brief [inaudible] of Wilder. Where'd he come from? And I think that most people, listening to this will know that he is the director or producer of some famous movies that we'll talk about later. But yeah, where'd he come from?

### Noah Isenberg

So, he was born in the—like a lot of famous directors of his generation who migrated to Hollywood—he was born in the outer reaches of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and that the province of Galicia in a town of Suja, which is about 35 miles, southwest of Krakow.

He was born in June of 1906. He moved with his family almost immediately afterwards to Krakow. They were—he was in Krakow until he was young boy. It's not totally clear what age he left Krakow, but by the time he went to secondary school, he and his family were located in the 1st District of Vienna.

This is where the hub of commerce and culture, and the heart of Vienna directly opposite the Danube from the the second district, which is known as the Leopoldstadt, or the *Mazzesinsel*, as they sometimes called because of its high density of East European or Central European Jews, who flooded Vienna in the wake of the Great War—the he first world war. Wilder, his family were already in Vienna at the time of the outbreak of the first meal after, you know, Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo Wildman. His family were already living in Vienna. He did his secondary education there. He claims in certain interviews that he started university, started what would have been law school at the University of Vienna. I don't have any records of that, and I think that was another one of those somewhat hyperbolic claims.

These filmmakers—and I give you, you know, Otto Preminger, Edgar Ulmer, whose life, I chronicled in a critical biography, they all started out together—they often late in life, when giving interviews would say—you know, this is before you could Google things to find—you know, they would embroider their memories with all sorts of yes, outlandish claims. Edgar Ulmer was especially famous for this. Wilder and Omer began their film careers together, as fate would have it, in the summer of 1929 when they worked on this wonderful and highly acclaimed late silent film *Menschen am Sonntag—People on Sunday*—that was done on a lemonade stand budget, and with it, you have Fred Zinneman was involved as well.

As Wilder said of him, he basically held the reflectors for the DP, for the cinematographer, [inaudible], and Wilder wrote the script—if you can dignify it with such a term. It was basically scraps of paper that they, you know, jotted down ideas on at the [inaudible]. This was a famous cafe that was frequent advice by Bohemian Times, by writers, by dancers, by playwrights, theater people, film people of that moment.

They used all non-actors. So, non-professional actors, five of them. And it was a colossal hit. It was very much a, you know, kind of presages the work of the Italian neo-realist directors. And even you know, the Danish, the Dogma 95, in terms of its, you know, it's the principle of less is more, and you know, no major embellishment. So, it is naturalism pure and simple, down on a shoestring budget, and it dazzled audiences. It premiered in February of 1930. Within a few years, Wilder—after, you know, Hitler's ascent to power in January '33—Wilder, and many of the people I just mentioned,

were hightailing it for Hollywood. In Wilder's case, it was via Paris. He ends up holed up at a down-and-out hotel, called the Hotel [inaudible]. Among his roommates there, Peter Lorre—the great actor Peter Lorre who was a Hollander, who was a wonderful composer with whom Wilder collaborated on a number of films. Franz Wachsmann, who went by Franz Waxman in Hollywood, was another person living in that hotel, and several other writers and future Hollywood transplants.

So, he was there for roughly a year and then made his way to America. He had a short-term contract at—was it Universal? Columbia? One of them, one of the major ones. After that short-term contract ran up, he tells a great story that he delivered on the occasion of receiving The Irving Thalberg Award is something of a Lifetime Achievement Award, The Academy of Motion Pictures, the 60th anniversary of that August gathering, and he tells how he needed to cross the border into Mexico, Cali. And once more, like the hotel, he was living in this cheap hotel with a bunch of European refugees, and how he waited his number, waited to be called up. And this was very, very strict quota system.

And finally, he's called up, and he, you know, he's sweating, and he doesn't have all of his papers because he had to leave in such a hurry from, you know, to flee Hitler. And he shows up, he's got affidavits, he's got letters of recommendation, and he tells how he gets there and there's a border official who looks somewhat like Will Rogers, and he asks him, he asks very, very innocently, 'So what is it that you do for a living?'

And Wilder says, 'I write movies.' And the man listens to that and apparently he paces for a while, you know, a long pregnant pause, comes back, stamps his passport twice, and says, 'Write some good ones.' Anyway, and that anecdote, that story, also forms the backbone of one of the many pictures that he and his initial long-term writing partner, Charles Brackett, would write for Mitchell Leisen on a movie from 1941 called *Hold Back the Dawn* starring Charles Boyer as the Romanian refugee, Georges Iscovescu, who's holed up in a hotel just like the one that Wilder experienced.

So, while Wilder continued to harken back to his, you know, the stories and the experiences that he encountered, including those stories that are chronicled in his journalistic pieces from the collection that I had the good fortune and pleasure of editing for Princeton University Press. Many of his films draw, at least obliquely, on these early writings. I'll take for example one of his best-known—because you say, you know, we trying to think what would people know of Wilder's decorated career as a writer, director producer—and among the films that are probably best known would be *Some Like It Hot*, of course.

### Marshall Poe

Yeah.

### Noah Isenberg

That great comedy co-starring Marilyn Monroe, Tony, Curtis, and Jack Lemmon. Now Wilder, before he's made his way to Berlin, he lived in Vienna, and as a 19-year-old, he starts writing. He starts contributing freelance pieces to the tabloid press in Vienna to [inaudible] and *Die Bühne*. These were the two tabloids that were part of the Hungarian media empire of [inaudible]—Hungarian, I should say, he was a Hungarian transplant to Vienna, but so Viennese. But under his ages—and he writes among other pieces two separate articles on the Manchester all-girl, dance troupe, The Tiller Girls. And the way that he describes the arrival of The Tiller Girls at the Westbahnhof railway station very much anticipates the script that, decades later, he and I. A. L. Diamond would craft for *Some Like It Hot*. There are other references throughout these, you know, interwar Viennese pieces and the [inaudible] pieces that are just taken up strands, that are taken up profiles.

For instance, of the writer of *Ariane*, the French writer *Ariane, jeune fille russe*—this is what becomes *Love In The Afternoon*. Of course, I'm blanking on the name of the writer—

**Marshall Poe**

That's okay.

**Noah Isenberg**

—but this is the Swiss writer, and he profiles this writer, very much aware of this very successful work by him that he then laid again, decades later, adapted to the screen, again collaborating with I. A. L. Diamond in *Love In The Afternoon*, starring Gary Cooper and Audrey Hepburn. Another example before I shut up is the inspired choice of pairing Erich von Stroheim with Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*, his extraordinary film of 1950.

**Marshall Poe**

That's one of my favorite movies. I recommend it to anybody.

**Noah Isenberg**

It's an amazing film. One of the greats, especially of that period. One of the great commentaries on picture-making during the Classic Hollywood period.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, it's a great movie.

**Noah Isenberg**

He profiles Erich von Stroheim, whom he also will cast in one of his earlier films, lesser known films, *Five Graves to Cairo* from 1944. But he profiles Erich von Stroheim and talks about, among other things, his film starring Gloria Swanson. Which then again, of course, bubbles up to the surface when it comes time to cast for *Sunset Boulevard*. So, Wilder is frequently returning to these early works. He is, you know, an American filmmaker to a certain extent, but he never ever left behind those European roots, and even his later works—especially, I should say, his later work, but not only his later works, but especially his later works—he'll return to, not only to the European sources, but also to Europe to film. I'm thinking, for instance, of his penultimate film *Fedora*, which is a much lesser film, which is a great double feature with *Sunset Boulevard*. It's another story of—

**Marshall Poe**

I've not seen this.

**Noah Isenberg**

Yeah, it's—you can stream it now. If you have an Amazon Prime account, it's free, meaning that of course you have to pay your Amazon subscription, but otherwise it's free. Or I guess you can pay the 2.99 if you don't have a subscription. It came out on Blu-ray last year from Olive Films, and it's a great story. It stars Hildegard Knef, who was a great German actress.

You also have William Holden, who's almost doing a reprise of Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard*, but in this case, he's playing Barry Detweiler, a producer whose name is awfully close to Billy Wilder, and Billy Wilder, who has had a succession of unsuccessful films, I imagine to myself that Detweiler could be spelled 'debt' and then debt Wilder. But anyway, that's a little pet theory of mine, but it's a great movie that again, reflects back on, as *Sunset Boulevard* reflects back to the silent era, in the case of *Fedora*, looks back at the great days of classical Hollywood cinema. William Holden plays Barry

Detweiler, this aging producer who's trying to cast this great star played by Hildegard Knef, who was the title character of the film *Fedora*.

And it has a wonderful number of kind of just biting commentaries on the new Hollywood, or as William Holden's character in that film refers to them, the young kids with beards. You know, Nick Coppola, Spielberg, Scorsese et cetera. And it's a great film, but throughout his career, he does go back to these sources, memorably in some of the films that I just mentioned but also in *A Foreign Affair* with his lifelong friend Marlene Dietrich in one of the starring roles there playing a chanteuse, as she often was cast, going back to—

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Noah Isenberg**

—going back to *The Blue Angel*. But she's Erika von Schlütow is her character's name, and she is somebody who had cozied up in the past to the Nazi regime, but here has an American GI who is serving sort of as her sugar daddy played by John Lund. It's a great movie set in Berlin. Lot of location cinematography, location footage of the rubble of Berlin immediately after the war. This is a film that came out in '48, and Wilder had already returned to Berlin in '45. He was a civilian with the US Army, and he was connected with this, attached to this film that was directed by the Czech filmmaker Hanuš Burger, *Die Todesmühlen, Death Mills*, which was a documentary, very serious documentary that aimed at re-education and denazification but aimed at showing that the German population what had occurred in their backyard. So, you have just horrific footage of piles of bodies from the camps, and Wilder was involved in that, and it was around that time too that he was getting footage of the rubble in Berlin that ultimately would make its way into *A Foreign Affair* with Marlene Dietrich.

**Marshall Poe**

*Die stunde null*.

**Noah Isenberg**

Yeah, exactly, as they called it. *Die stunde null—the zero hour*. And Wilder was, you know, he collaborated with Hanuš Burger, this Czech filmmaker on *Death Mills*, but that was not his style of filmmaking. It was very didactic, he didn't feel that that was the most effective way to reach the public. And in fact, he wrote this memorandum soon after in which he said, really what you want to do is we need to be able to sort of slip in bits of ideology, but into Hollywood pictures.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Noah Isenberg**

So, rather than hitting them over the head with a didactic documentary, you should kind of, you know, get them when you've lulled them into sort of submission, and in a sense, that's what he does in—not only in *A Foreign Affair*, where he kind of critiques this half-hearted denazification and also critiques the, you know, American support of the Adenauer Administration and sort of our willingness to turn a blind eye to Nazis in our midst or in their midst—but he does so as well in another Berlin film of his, if you look at the Berlin Trilogy and I mentioned [inaudible] before, *People on Sunday*, but then you have *A Foreign Affair*, and then finally have *One, Two, Three* that that he did in 1961, which is a great critique. This is a, you know, the Coca-Cola colonialism. This is a film that

shows Berlin just as the Berlin Wall is being erected and shows the ease with which people are willing to kind of move between the two zones just before the wall goes up.

**Marshall Poe**

Yup.

**Noah Isenberg**

And you have a great kind of critique. Not only of capitalism as well as communism, but of sort of global, you know, the export of Coca-Cola, and sort of globalism before we even spoke of globalism.

**Marshall Poe**

Right.

**Noah Isenberg**

James Cagney plays the Coca-Cola executive who's there to make inroads into the Soviets—

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, I've not seen this one either, but—

**Noah Isenberg**

It's really, really—it was not one of his best-known films. Nor did it do quite as well at the box office as some of his other films. But it's a wrong. It's a kind of, you know, you have all of his mordant with on full display, and it's a kind of zany, right. And it's got—in a way too it shows Wilder's love of early, you know, silent slap stick. And *Ninotchka*, which he co-wrote with his been writing partner, Charles Brackett. This was his first year-long stretch of writing screenplays with Charles Brackett that leads all the way up to *Sunset Boulevard*.

So, for me—this is Paramount initially around '36 through '50, when Wilder is not only initially, you know, a contract writer for Paramount, but then a director at Paramount. Brackett and Wilder contributed the script to Lubitsch's film *Ninotchka* with Greta Garbo, which has another kind of trio of Russian, sort of [inaudible], and he returned in *One, Two, Three*, which is a great film and definitely worthy of, for people who haven't seen it, it's definitely worth watching. It's a good laugh. Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

Let's take just a moment to step back a little bit because what I understand is that Wilder was from the *mittelstand*, or at least people that wanted to be in the *mittelstand*, middle class.

**Noah Isenberg**

Yes.

**Marshall Poe**

And so it was a—he was a simulated Jew.

**Noah Isenberg**

Correct.

**Marshall Poe**

And it was—I think it was an unusual choice of career, if you want to call it that, and I'm kind of wondering how he convinced his parents—



### Noah Isenberg

Well, he was beside his parents' wishes in this respect. So, his father Max was a, he ran a chain of railway cafes on the Vienna to Lemberg line, and his mother came from a family that had different hotels. They were kind of—managed hotels. And Max ends up in Krakow running a hotel when Billy Wilder is just a little boy, and then they finally make it to Vienna, where he—Max, the father—bounces around. The dreamer takes—I mean, at one point he's I think attached to a trout hatchery that he's seeing whether that might work. But they were definitely upwardly mobile. They were German speakers, and the German speakers definitely, you know, not only did they think of themselves as a different breed from the Yiddish speakers, but there was a certain haughtiness usually that was described to them.

As for this sort of nice Jewish boys of middle Europe, a German-speaking middle Europe, *Mitteleuropa*, Central Europe, they were expected to be, as Wilder said in a number of interviews, doctors and lawyers.

### Marshall Poe

Yeah.

### Noah Isenberg

And he snubbed his, you know, his parents and their wish for him to be a lawyer. Otto Preminger, again whom—you mentioned *Stalag 17*, we were just chatting before we began today's conversation—and Preminger who, you know, will be cast as Otto von Scherbach, you know, the commandant of the prisoner of war camp in *Stalag 17*, he'd actually gone to study law at Vienna. So, he didn't defy them until later.

But Fred Zinneman defied his parents, which there was an attraction. So, you have—I guess I'll do my best in kind of thumbnail sketch to chart the course of this.

### Marshall Poe

Let's do it, yeah.

### Noah Isenberg

It begins with Max Reinhardt, who these days is no longer a household name but was a theater impresario of, you know, [inaudible] or whatever. Unparalleled. Who ran in the Yosef shot, that the [inaudible] in the Yosef shot, so in the 8th District of Vienna, where Wilder went to *gymnasium*. He ran a theater there, and everybody passed through Max Reinhardt, and including Wilder. They became a part of the Reinhardt Circle. And from Reinhardt then the next stop for most of these people, especially in the infancy of motion pictures, was to make your way to the studio—whether it was in Vienna, where they began, or ultimately to Berlin, and to UFA in particular, which was the reigning studio of the day.

### Marshall Poe

[inaudible].

### Noah Isenberg

Exactly. Soon after—so with the success, sort of buoyed by the success of [inaudible], *People on Sunday*, he then became a, he was able to kind of leapfrog from there to be becoming a screenwriter at UFA. But that was really the story for so many people, including much of the people I just mentioned—Preminger, who was also a Reinhardt. In fact, they all began kind of in the theater. Wilder to a lesser extent than some of his counterparts. He didn't last too long. I think he just associated with that larger while Reinhardt Circle, and there's a wonderful photograph that's reproduced in the collection.



**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Noah Isenberg**

In the *Billy Wilder on Assignment*, where he—and I give you a bunch of the names that are there, and these were all big players.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Noah Isenberg**

Big intellectuals. And Wilder ran with that crowd. He begins with the, sort of, the coffeehouse circle of Vienna, and he finds his people. He finds his tribe in Berlin, especially at the—not only at the [inaudible] cafe and [inaudible], but also, there was another one called Cafe [inaudible], the Vienna coffee house—and he finds his circle of riders, of comics, of theater people, musicians, composers. And it was a very heady time, and Wilder, you know, in a number of documentaries and interviews that come later—in particular, there's one that one can stream now, you can stream it on the Criterion Channel in the full and all three hours of its glory. You can watch the bridge version.

This is Volker Schlöndorff and Gisela Grischow, I think was the last—they collaborate on a film that was called *Billy Wilder Speaks*, and it came out in the [inaudible], I think 08, but he did it a couple decades earlier when [inaudible], a German popular writer and film writer, and he did a book on a biography of Wilder. And Volker Schlöndorff got to tag along with [inaudible] when he was interviewing Wilder. And that's really what becomes then the basis of this documentary. In that documentary, Wilder says, quite poignantly and unambiguously, those years in the 1920s, in Vienna—excuse me, in Vienna—then especially the later in Berlin, those were clear, those were the best years of his life. I mean, that excitement was never matched, even with all the success with the eight, you know—eight, pardon me, interesting slip there—six Academy Awards, and there are other words that came as well.

But you know, Wilder didn't invest much stock in that. I mean, he joked—I quote, the thing in his life is much more important to find his name twice in the New York Times crossword puzzle, and [inaudible] he said, and he kept racking up more and more awards that, you know, he lived, he outlived so many of his contemporaries. Diamond, his main collaborator and dearest friend, died in '82. Wilder lived another two decades, and during that period, he just continued to rack up all of these are Lifetime Achievement Awards. And he said at one point, memorably said, awards are like hemorrhoids, sooner or later every asshole gets one.

And that's basically the way that I think he looked at that. I'm sure there was a certain amount of pride in winning these six Academy Awards and other awards, but I think he did, you know, that's not what it was about. And those years when he was, you know, really pretty destitute living as a freelance journalist and a part of that time as a dancer for hire, those were the exciting times for him.

**Marshall Poe**

Would it be fair to say that he had no intention of becoming a journalist of any sort, and this was kind of a vehicle that he was using to—?

**Noah Isenberg**

Possibly, yeah, I think there—Yes. He was always just born an entertainer, born a storyteller. This was a medium through which he could tell stories. Later it became motion pictures, but this was a

medium through which he could tell stories, and you know, he can embroider in any which way he wanted. It was never—one of the great pieces in the collection, I think, is *The Art of Little Ruses*, where he argues that lying ought to be made at a mandatory subject in school.

I think, you know, it's really—once you master mendacity, then you've got, that's your ticket to fame. But so, he could always tell a good story. It didn't matter if it resembled the truth or not. In fact, the less it resembled the truth, probably the better in many instances. But he does use this, I think, as a springboard for other forms of entertainment. And you know, certainly leading him to the world of, to the dream factories, the world of motion pictures, which makes a great deal of sense.

I mentioned before Marlene Dietrich's memorable performance in *A Foreign Affair*. She played in two Wilder pictures. She plays in *A Foreign Affair* in '48, and then a decade plus later, she's in *Witness for the Prosecution*. But in *A Foreign Affair*, she sings one of her songs, as you know, playing this chanteuse Erika von Schlütow, one of the songs that she sings is called "Black Market." And she begins by "Illusions, illusions for sale. I'm selling black market on every illusion." And this is precisely—I mean I look at Marlene Dietrich, I mean I don't know how much I'll make of this in the biography, but she's very much a stand-in for the director, and that's precisely what Wilder is doing.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Noah Isenberg**

And what he managed to do was to sell these illusions and to sell them for a very high premium. Enormously successful—commercially as well as critically—and a career in Hollywood that really has very few competitors or rivals.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, yeah. His story reminds me of people that I knew when I was much younger who got what we call the theater bug.

**Noah Isenberg**

Yeah.

**Marshall Poe**

And it was not going to let them go. And today, they're playwrights, or they're actors, or they're writers on comedy sketch shows. They were not going to give it up. It was, it was a done deal.

**Noah Isenberg**

Yeah, and, you know, always Wilder—and among the other things that he did alongside though his work as a writer and then later writer, director, and producer, was he collected art.

**Marshall Poe**

Oh really? Huh.

**Noah Isenberg**

And that was another passion of his, and it began in Vienna. In fact, he had—he got paraded, in fact was accused of, as Sheila himself was accused of, but was accused of holding pornography, of you know possessing contraband. One of the early sketches he got from Sheila—they bought I think at bargain basement prices—was one where, you know, it's a woman who is pleasuring herself. And Wilder, he collected not only the naughty images from Sheila, but then he had Picasso's in his

collection. He had Klimt, he had Miró, he had an extraordinary art collection. And in fact, with the success of his later films in Hollywood, he would often celebrate by buying additional art. And it was late in life, it ended up selling for a princely sum. I can't even tell you how many millions, but that was another passion of his. And I think that that kind of kept him—so yes. Like one of those theater people that you maybe, you know, encountered in high school and college, he definitely remained true to his passion, but alongside that passion, he also had the passion for art collection, which I find interesting fascinating.

### Marshall Poe

Yeah. That is very interesting. I am wondering about the—career is the wrong word. But you said that when he was in Vienna, he was thinking about Berlin. Like, that was the end point. Was there ever any moment—where was Hollywood in this mental geography?

### Noah Isenberg

I'll give you—it's a little bit of conjecture on my part, but I think there's plenty of substance to kind of, you know, to back it up. Wilder would have gone straight to Hollywood from Vienna had he had the chance. He couldn't. He asked about becoming a—one of his dreams when he was 19 was he wanted to be a foreign correspondent. He didn't know any push and they're like, well, that kind of—well, as Fred MacMurray will say in another great art, I think near-perfect Wilder film *Double Indemnity* playing the hard-boiled insurance salesman Walter Neff, that tears it. Like that tears it. That's in the commit dialogue with Barbara Stanwyck, but that tore it for him. He couldn't do that. And so, he ends up following the great American Jazz band leader Paul Whiteman to Berlin in the summer of 1926.

Just as he turns 20 years old, and he follows him to Berlin. And by the way, I mean look, I mentioned *Some Like It Hot* but the choice to set *Some Like It Hot* in 1929 not only brings us back to bootleggers and mafiosi and you know, the mob, but also kind of takes Wilder back to the happiest time in his life. And you kind of get that Roaring Twenties of Berlin setting as well even though it's Chicago 1929. But he follows Paul Whiteman—and sorry, you get, I'm trying now to pivot between these two—but you get, you know, you get that hot jazz as well, which is another first love of his. I mentioned, you know, art collection. I mentioned that the gift of gab and telling these great stories, but also jazz, and just started that popular music of his day. I mean, he may as well have been listening to hip-hop—I'm sure he'd be rolling over in his grave as I said that—but he was following what was then popular and what was taking, you know, Europe by storm. And in the piece on Paul Whiteman in the collection—there are two in the volume—but one ends with the statement about how jazz is a means of preventing Europe from being kind of ossified. You know, jazz is a chance for rebirth.

And Wilder really saw it, I think, as this opportunity to kind of explore a whole new—and by the way, again, in terms of the kind of America-philia—Americana-philia, whatever the word is—

### Marshall Poe

Yeah.

### Noah Isenberg

His mother was a great lover of all things American. That's how we got the name Billy in the first place.

### Marshall Poe

Right.

### Noah Isenberg

Named after the Buffalo Bill's Wild West show that she saw in New York. But jazz was another example of his love, and kind of in a way it anticipates that ultimate move across the Atlantic to America and then onward to Hollywood, of course. But I think that had he been given the chance to just hightail it out of Vienna and get to Hollywood at the time when, you know, there were European filmmakers, who were there in '26. [inaudible] was about to make his way across the Atlantic; Lubitsch was already working there at the time; Stroheim was as well. He would have done it, but he didn't—not only did not have the language, look, he didn't have the filmography. And he didn't have the CV, so to speak, and he didn't have the credits that those other filmmakers had.

So, he had to kind of build up his credits—which he did in Berlin, especially as we get later into the 20s and into the early 30s—writing these screenplays for UFA. When he gets to Paris and is living in that hotel, he also co-directs a film called *Mauvaise Graine*, which is a story of thieves, of car thieves.

And, you know, Wilder tells that he too was even something above a firebrand and a, you know, and a bit of a delinquent. Again, whether that's embellished or not, I don't know. For me, it seems to anticipate even more, you know, the French New Wave *Breathless*, and even Truffaut's work was famous, you know, you think of *The 400 Blows*. It definitely is—there's a kind of youthful zeal and excitement, I think, of these writings from the 1920s and early 30s, but also even the films that—including the French one I just mentioned—that he ends up finding himself attached to.

Let me just give you one example, if I may, besides *People on Sunday* and then that French picture, and I'm not sure if I'm mispronouncing it, *Mauvaise Graine* I think it's pronounced. But there was a film called *Der Teufelsreporter*, that's *Hell of a Reporter* or *Devil's Reporter*, which is a script that he provided. It was directed by Ernst Laemmle—who, Carl Laemmle, the head of Universal Studios, it was his nephew—and the story is a story of a journalist.

Eddie Polo, who plays this—who was an American actor—plays this character, and the character is, you know, it's Wilder. Is Wilder as a freelancer. In fact, Wilder even has, as you see, reprinted this image that I managed to get for the *Billy Wilder on Assignment*, where you see a cameo by young Billy wearing his, you know, fedora hat and—

#### Marshall Poe

Yeah, he's very rakish.

#### Noah Isenberg

Exactly, exactly. Or as Charles Brackett said in his diaries—Charles Brackett again is his main collaborator in the first stretch of his period as a screenwriter in Hollywood—he said he has the face of a naughty Cupid. I like that.

You can see that as well. Brackett was very different from Wilder, and Wilder seemed to choose, in general, he wanted—first of all, he needed somebody whose command of English was vastly superior to his. So Brackett, you know, was born in in Saratoga Springs. His father was a Republican state senator. He went to Williams College and on to Harvard to do a law degree. He was a member of the Algonquin round table and was a theater critic for a stretch of time at *The New Yorker* magazine. So, Brackett arrives in Hollywood, like a lot of, you know, writers of that era, hoping to kind of ace his way into pictures, and he has a few novels as well, and they find each other at Paramount, and they're a great pair in the sense that they are so vastly different from—

#### Marshall Poe

Yeah, a very unlikely pair but—

### Noah Isenberg

Yeah, very unlikely. But Wilder needed—he was known, you know, he's an inveterate pacer and you know, was extremely restless, always on the move. And Brackett was a bit more sedentary, and like his later main collaborator Diamond would sit at that typewriter as well, Wilder would sort of flit around the room with yellow legal pad, jotting down notes, and you know, ripping up paper, you know, he needed somebody who was a calming presence. And they work together very well up until *Sunset Boulevard*.

And then you get, from *Love in the Afternoon* that I mentioned before, you get the collaboration that the—almost quarter-century long collaboration with I. A. L. Diamond, who was Romanian born, born to parents who came directly from the old country, so to speak in a Yiddish speakers. But he came at the age of nine, and he mastered English and went on to Columbia University, wrote for the newspaper there, but also for good comedy, you know, kind of comic magazines, and had that—they shared more in terms of just general attributes, but once more, it was I. A. L. Diamond who would sit at that typewriter, very patiently, man of few words. And Wilder would again flit around the room, you know, shouting off different ideas, and that collaboration worked very, you know, magically, as Jack Lemmon would always say before they would shoot a scene beginning with *Some Like It Hot*. It's magic time, and I think they achieve that magic time together.

### Marshall Poe

Um, I want to go back to Berlin—just I don't want to think too much of your time, you've been very generous already—but I'm very interested in the way that this group of people, these thespians and writers and so on and so forth, thought about American culture, these people in the late 20s and early 30s. Because if you look at the way many Europeans think of American culture today, it's not terribly favorable. Did they think of it as a kind of high art in creation? Do they think these Americans are really doing something special?

### Noah Isenberg

Yeah, I'm not sure they would have said high art necessarily, even high culture with a capital K. But they definitely were intrigued, especially Wilder's generation. There were older, and if you don't mind my saying, stodgier, Germans who saw America as, you know, a place lacking—devoid—of culture, and, you know, something of a desert. But a lot of the younger Germans, Austrians, Central Europeans—Europeans more broadly. I mean, from France, let's not leave out the French. But they look to America as, not only a chance for reinvention for those who fled, you know, not only the Hitler regime in Germany and Austria and later, you know, Czechoslovakia, but also after the fall of all of France. They looked at America as a chance for rebirth and a place where culture was not ossified, where culture was still evolving, and where they could become arbiters of taste in that culture. Arbiters of, you know, kind of, new movements, new ideas, new stories.

And Wilder, so he had a couple of mentors. He had [inaudible], who already had pioneered that. Who really, for an American audience, created a certain air of European sophistication. The way in which you would deal with sexual innuendo, all of that with a light or even a Lubitsch touch, as they called it. Wilder was definitely drawn to Lubitsch and watched him direct *Ninotchka*, had to sort of sneak on the set there. But even *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife*, which he and Brackett, they help to furnish the script for that, another screwball comedy just a couple—a year prior.

But then Howard Hawks, he was on the set for *Ball of Fire*, another great screwball comedy starring Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck, and a wonderful supporting cast, including [inaudible], including S. Z. Sakall, a Hungarian-born cabaret actor, who plays, you know, Carl the waiter in *Casablanca*, among other films. But Hawks served also as something of a mentor.

And I think that Wilder learned from them and then kind of went his own path. I mean, he always was under the spell of Lubitsch, and in his office in Beverly Hills, he had that sign that very prominently displayed 'What would Lubitsch do?' Which he would always ask himself. He would say—oh God, he said a lot of things about Lubitsch, but I love the story when—this is around, this an interview must be from around the seventies when suddenly, you know, graphic depictions of sex or left right center, and he said about Lubitsch, he said, Lubitsch could do much more with a closed-door than most directors can do with an open fly these days.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah.

**Noah Isenberg**

And Wilder, who really, really locked horns with the production code administration, with the Hays Code, with the censors, once they were gone, I think in a strange way, he had a little bit of sentimental or nostalgic attachment to the censors. I mean, once they were gone, it was sort of anything goes, and I think that in a strange way, he lost that enemy. You know, that sparring partner. The Hays Code, and you know, Joseph Greene in his office, but he also, I think, was a little bit—I mean, he was not in any way prudish by any, you know, on the contrary not at all. But I think when pictures started to get overly graphic and lost that subtlety, I think he was not happy with that at all. And in fact, he goes on record several interviews saying as much. And in fact, that film that I mentioned to you, the penultimate film that he wrote and directed *Fedora*, is a wonderful meditation on that and definitely worth seeing. Again, my plug for *Fedora*.

**Marshall Poe**

I'll put it on the list. I'll absolutely put it on the list. Well, I want to thank you very much for spending time. We have a traditional final question on the New Books Network, and you've already touched on it, but maybe you can again, and that is: what are you working on now. You've already mentioned it, but yeah, what can we see coming? What's forthcoming?

**Noah Isenberg**

That's an aspirational term for me at this point. I like it, and I'll get there eventually. But so, for my same editor and publisher for the *Casablanca* book—so Norton in the US and Faber and the UK—I'm writing a cultural history of *Some Like It Hot*, the great American sex comedy, that will examine, among other things, the Weimar roots of that—Weimar Viennese, I should say. So, the European roots of that film.

But we'll also look for a little connect—there's a wonderful texting connection. And that is that the famous drag artist, who really kind of cast her spell on young Billy in Weimar, Berlin, and then was brought in to coach Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis, is the Texan born barrette who was born Vander Clyde Broadway. He was a Round Rock native, just outside just where I was actually dropping off one of my kids earlier today, just outside of Austin. And Barrette was brought inside—I'm going to be at the Harry Ransom Center here on campus at UT Austin. I'll be of a faculty fellow doing work on Barrette. So, that will be one of the strands of the narrative that I tell. But it's still very inchoate. The Germans would say [inaudible]. It's a construction site at this point, but that's definitely on its way to fruition and then this short interpretive biography of Wilder. So, as my wife sometimes says, these are my Wilder years. With the Princeton book, it's Wilder three ways, which almost sounds like a naughty Wilder title.

**Marshall Poe**

Yeah, it does actually. I don't remember think Wilder would approve. Well, thank you very much for spending time. So, let me tell everybody we've been talking to Noah Isenberg about his book he's edited, *Billy Wilder on Assignment: Dispatches from Weimar Berlin and Interwar Vienna*, and would

say again that Shelley Frisch did the translations of these texts. My name is Marshall Poe, and I'm the editor of the New Books Network, and you've been listening to the Princeton University Press Ideas podcast. Thanks for listening. Noah, thanks for being on the show.

**Noah Isenberg**

Thank you so much, Marshall. I really appreciate it. Thank you.