

Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory

By Brian Scott Mednick

Despite its classic status and the public's affection for it, "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory" is not a film Gene Wilder considered to be among his best. "I don't want my gravestone to say: WILLY WONKA LIES HERE," he said in 2002.

With Wilder's passing on August 29, 2016 at age 83, it was clear he had little say over his legacy. The coverage of his death, which was deservedly extensive, overwhelmingly focused on his role as Willy Wonka. Nearly every TV, online, and print obituary featured clips from the film or stills of him as the eccentric candy maker.

Mel Stuart, whose background was mainly in documentaries, directed the film. The idea for a film of Roald Dahl's 1964 children's book "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" came about when Stuart's young daughter said he should make a movie out of this book she had read. Stuart, who was vice president of David Wolper Productions, read the book, thought it had great potential, and brought it to David L. Wolper. Wolper wanted to do the film entirely in animation, but Stuart thought it could work as a live-action feature. So Wolper, well-known in Hollywood for his deftness at swiftly putting projects together, got Quaker Oats to put up the film's three million dollar budget, and Warner Bros. released it in the summer of 1971.

Before casting the lead, Stuart filled the roles of the children and parents. When it came time to audition potential Wonkas, Stuart and Wolper held their casting session in New York's Plaza Hotel. Joel Grey came in and auditioned. They liked him, they knew he could sing, and physically he was suited to the part since in Dahl's book Wonka is described as a diminutive man. The next actor to come in was Wilder.

As soon as he looked at him, Stuart turned to Wolper and said, "Dave, this is Willy Wonka! This is fantastic! There can't be anybody else."

"Shhh!" Wolper shot back. "Don't tell him! Don't tell him! If he knows it'll cost us more money."



Top-hatted Willy Wonka (Gene Wilder) amazes his golden-ticket guests with a world of pure imagination. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

After Wilder finished his reading and was about to leave, Stuart just couldn't restrain himself. He ran after him as he was about to get on the elevator and told Wilder, "You've got it. I don't care. We'll make a deal. You got the part."

With the title role now cast, Stuart then went on to fill some of the film's lesser parts, including hiring an array of little people, most of whom couldn't speak a word of English, to play the workers in Wonka's factory known as Oompa-Loompas, who more or less serve as the film's Greek chorus as they comment in song about the children's bad behavior.

"Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory" is, in the strictest sense, a children's movie, yet its appeal is so much greater. Refreshingly, it is not sugary sweet. It treats the rotten kids in a darkly humorous way that most adults can savor. In fact, Stuart insisted that he wasn't making a children's movie at all. "I was making an adult picture and the little brats can come along and laugh," he said. "I have a tremendous respect for children...as far as their capacity to 'get it.'"

Stuart found working with Wilder to be an incredibly positive experience. "It's no mystery," he said, "there are actors in Hollywood you don't want to direct because it's not worth your life. I can name a few, but I won't. But with Gene there was none of that... It was a very smooth set because everybody was excited

by what was going on.”

According to Wilder, however, Stuart “was a maniac who screamed and yelled, not at me, but at the crew, not realizing that you can’t yell at one person on the crew without having it affect every actor who’s going to act in that scene.”

Stuart was impressed with Wilder’s attention to detail in playing Wonka, such as how he deliberately made his hair appear frizzier and more out of control as the picture progressed. “He really thought that out and worked on that to slowly make the guy seem more demented as he was going along,” Stuart said.

Wilder also impressed everyone when he wasn’t in character. The movie was shot in Munich, Germany, and when Thanksgiving came, Wilder paid for an elaborate turkey dinner for the entire cast and crew. And though he got along with his young co-stars, according to Stuart, he never really stopped being Willy Wonka during the five weeks they were in Munich. “I have found that the very good actors become their persona off the set,” Stuart said, “so Gene was always slightly aloof.”

Despite its iconic standing, “Willy Wonka” actually didn’t make a great deal of money when it opened. Thanks to home video, however, the film became a favorite of millions growing up in the 1980s and still to this day.

Even though “Willy Wonka” is one of his best loved films, Wilder was disappointed in it. “It was a film that could have been a great picture, but there would have had to be another director,” Wilder said. “At the time they were so worried about the NAACP and offending blacks so they changed the Oompa-Loompas into orange-faced, green-haired men that I guess were supposed to be something like the munchkins and that wasn’t the point at all. It was the relationship that Willy Wonka had with the people from another country whom he’d saved. You know, they missed the whole point. It was about love. So they said, well let’s not take a chance on offending anybody.”

Showing how beloved Wilder was, the weekend after his death, AMC Theatres rereleased “Willy Wonka” and “Blazing Saddles” in select theaters in the United States, charging only \$5.00 to see both, an unprecedented move following an actor’s passing.

Roger Ebert characterized “Willy Wonka’s” greatness by comparing it with another film that is a sentimental childhood favorite for many, writing it is “probably the best film of its sort since ‘The Wizard of Oz.’ It is everything that family movies usually claim to be, but aren’t: Delightful, funny, scary, exciting, and, most of all, a genuine work of imagination.”

Wilder made no secret of his disapproval of Tim Burton’s 2005 version of Dahl’s book. Prior to that film’s release, Wilder said the new adaptation was “all about money” and that there was no need to make a new movie adaptation of the book.

Substantiating Wilder’s point about new incarnations of the film being used to turn a profit, a Broadway musical of the film is set to open in April 2017, and less than two months after Wilder’s death, Warner Bros. infuriated Wilder/Wonka fans by announcing they were planning a prequel of sorts focusing on the adventures of Wonka as a young man.

Gene Wilder wanted to be remembered most for “Young Frankenstein,” which he considered his best film. And though he will be remembered for many roles, in the public’s hearts and minds, he was the original, the best, and the *only* Willy Wonka. It’s hard to imagine anyone else in the role or the movie being the enduring landmark it is without him.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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