



## **Ace In the Hole (1951): Noir in Broad Daylight**

**By Molly Haskell**

Billy Wilder's "Ace in the Hole" almost requires an honorary expansion of the term film noir. There are no private eyes in seedy offices or femmes fatales lurking in the shadows of neon-lit doorways, no forces of evil arrayed against a relatively honorable hero. This emotional snake pit, the darkest of Wilder's dark meditations on American folkways, takes place under the relentless sun of the flat New Mexican desert. The noir is interior—inside a mountain tunnel where a man is trapped and suffocating, and inside the mind of a reporter rotting from accumulated layers of self-induced moral grime.

The 1951 movie, fascinating in the sweep and savagery of its indictment, and a flop when it opened (and again when it was released as "The Big Carnival"), points to the direction noir would take in the fifties, hiding in broad daylight in the films of Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk. But if Hitchcock diabolically upended our expectations of the leading man, Wilder went much, much further. This satire of the media circus that would envelop us all goes beyond noir into *saeva indignatio*, and beyond Swift into something more intensely and disturbingly personal. Rarely, if ever, have there been such brutally antipathetic leads in a mainstream film as Kirk Douglas's scoop-or-die reporter and Jan Sterling's breathtakingly callous victim's wife. However prophetic Wilder's vision of a press and a public drunk on sensation, this issue ends up seeming almost peripheral to two main characters so monstrous in their mutual, and mutually despising, selfishness that it's astonishing the movie got released at all.

## **Bent Reporter, Desperate for a Scoop**

Fresh from his star-making turn as the self-promoting prizefighter in “Champion” (1949), a ferociously determined Douglas gives one of his great over-the-top, sadomasochistic performances as Chuck Tatum, bent reporter (that he’s a liar, a fabricator, and an adulterer just begins to count the ways), desperate for a scoop, a ticket back to a big-city newspaper, who winds up in the hick town of Albuquerque. Before landing him in the newspaper office, an extended opening scene features one of cinema’s great entrances: Douglas’s convertible, having broken down in the desert, is being towed in to the local shop as he sits like a catbird in the driver’s seat, reading a newspaper, with the camera tracking alongside. The image is that of a man both crippled and defiant: to be carless—see “Sunset Boulevard” (1950)—is to be emasculated, but this born opportunist and exploiter has turned the truck driver into his charioteer. Having now acquainted himself with the local paper, Tatum strides into its storefront office and, with characteristic chutzpah, condescends to the locals—“How,” he says to a Native American, and sneers at the secretary’s handmade sampler (“Tell the Truth”)—before penetrating the office of the kindly editor-publisher, played by Porter Hall. In an outrageous Wilderian aria of simultaneous self-promotion and self-contempt, he makes his pitch: “I can handle big news,” he boasts; all he needs is “just one good beat,” as he comes down in price—“Fifty dollars . . . Forty-five dollars.”

There is something already frightening, if funny, in the mixture of self-abasement and aggression. It’s the self-abasement that is the aggression, as if he’s getting the jump on you by saying the very worst, bragging about what a liar he is, even as he confesses each sordid detail of his firings from various newspapers. He talks himself into and out of a job several times over and is finally hired for sixty bucks.

As he settles in, we can’t help but respond in some degree to his abject down-and-outness, his hunger and desperation, not to mention the New York hustler vibe he brings to this white-bread environment, where there are no pickles, no chopped liver (a sly reference to Douglas’s—and Wilder’s—Jewishness?), no Yogi Berra, where never is heard a discouraging word and the “Tell the Truth” sampler reeks of small-town naïveté.

## **Gives Floozies a Bad Name**

Then the “big story” arrives, or rather the little story that Tatum, practicing journalism as extreme sport, manipulates into a national scoop. Leo Minosa (Richard Benedict), the man trapped in the mountain tunnel, was digging for relics to sell at the trading post/café he runs with his wife, Lorraine, the sort of bottle blonde who gives floozies a bad name. The script, written by Wilder, Walter Newman, and Lesser Samuels and nominated for an Academy Award, was the first that Wilder directed after his official breakup with his longtime co-scenarist, Charles Brackett (somehow one can’t imagine the writer who withdrew from “Double Indemnity” because it was too lurid and unpleasant engaging enthusiastically in this project). The story, inspired by a 1925 incident in which a Kentucky man, trapped in a mine, was turned by reporters into a nationwide sensation, was given to Wilder in the form of a treatment by radio writer Newman. Samuels, a playwright who’d shared an Oscar nomination with Joe Mankiewicz the previous year for the script of “No Way Out,” was brought in for a polish. But Wilder, now his own producer, upped the ante exponentially. And to make the story even juicier—or more ominous—the mountain becomes a sacred Native American site

whose offended spirits may be visiting retribution on poor Leo, or, as Tatum's headline has it, "The Curse of the Seven Vultures." To add to the sense of desecration of a native shrine, an indigenous woman, virtually faceless and voiceless, periodically appears, hunched in prayer.

Leo's wife, the coarse and chillingly indifferent Lorraine, wants only to flee this dump and the husband who "rescued" her from her dubious past, but she is persuaded to stay—more accurately, battered into submission—by the even greedier and more single-minded Tatum. In a scene that makes Jimmy Cagney's grapefruit assault on Mae Clarke look like friendly teasing, Douglas slaps her, hard, on both cheeks. Her later response? "Don't ever slap me again." He convinces her not only to stay on as the concerned wife but to go to church and pray, overriding her objection. "I don't go to church," she says, in one of the movie's greatest one-liners. "Kneeling bags my nylons."

As a result of the front-page stories Tatum is putting out and the wire services are picking up, the excavation project turns into a carnivalesque free-for-all, as tourists, then politicians, then reporters, then sundry performers all gravitate to the site for their own varied and unsavory purposes. A fee is charged, a Ferris wheel set up, with Wilder gleefully orchestrating what would only later be called a "media frenzy." Tatum has bribed the local sheriff (an excellently slimy Ray Teal) into making sure he, Tatum, has exclusive rights to the story. The reporters who arrive are no better, it's intimated, than Tatum; he just got there first. So far so bad, in an ordinary, predictable, corrupt, commonplace display of greed and sensation-mongering. But then Tatum does the unforgivable. He is presented by the contractor with two alternative rescue plans, and he opts for the one that will take six days rather than a few hours, letting the sheriff lean on the reluctant contractor, who owes his position to him.

### **Grubby, Postwar America**

Wilder's vision of corruption seems to take in the whole spectrum of grubby, postwar America, with its loss of moral imperatives, its return to normalcy after the excitement of the war years. He plants his finger firmly and prophetically on the pulse of the new excitement, an addiction to the breaking story that television would create and feed to a nation of adrenaline junkies. Already in the squawking, hawking opportunists are our own telegenic communicators in embryonic form, the self-promoting reporters donning bedouin robes or Muslim chadors or hurricane slickers to provide twenty-four-hour coverage of themselves at the ego-center of hot spots and sleazy "human interest" tabloid stories. Stories whose staying power is manufactured, stories stretched out beyond any "human interest" at all, simply because they are scary, scandalous, sordid, or just bad, and fill the airspace until the next bad story arrives—or until the anniversary of an old one. Bad news, as Tatum points out, sells, and the no news that is good news to most people is bad news for the reporter. Forty-five people trapped in a mine isn't as good as one individual, who can be probed and dramatized and identified with; on the other hand, death is a bummer. So, the reporter is genuinely horrified when it looks like Leo may actually die.

In a harrowing scene in the mine's interior, Leo asks for a priest, wails for his Lorraine, while still trusting Tatum, who, eyes blazing in the darkness with zeal and fear, promises he'll be out in twelve hours. He asks the contractor to switch to the faster rescue option, but it is too late. It's at this point that Tatum degenerates from a rattlesnake into a murderer, and the movie takes on a Grand Guignol aspect, with Tatum's self-loathing turning both homicidal and suicidal.

The cynical hero who's ready to sell his soul is, of course, trademark Wilder. Protagonists who "do what they have to do" in difficult circumstances, most notably William Holden's screenwriter/kept man in "Sunset Boulevard" and his black-marketeer war prisoner in "Stalag 17" (1953), draw on Wilder's own experience as a dance-hall gigolo in twenties Berlin. But these antiheroes are a mixture of corruption and decency, never quite as cynical as they seem; light generally shines through in the form of empathy, even a final act of remorse and redemption. Douglas would go on to have a long and colorful career but was often, as his role in "Ace in the Hole" may indicate, more interesting as a heavy than as a hero. Rarely has a star played as thoroughly nasty a specimen with such relish. What makes Douglas's Chuck Tatum so unusual is this absence of any redeeming gesture. His ultimate fetching of the priest doesn't feel noble, only desperate. Yes, there's a small self-sacrificial moment at the end, when he puts the young photographer on the right track, confesses, and insists that the newspaper tell the whole story. But the awareness is nothing new: he's always known what he was. It's part of the self-loathing that seems almost to have propelled Tatum from the beginning, and of which his death-wish plea to report the truth is a kind of final spasm.

Also, even in Wilder movies, there are usually other characters who elicit our sympathy. With the exception of Leo's parents, the honorable editor, and Tatum's reporter-sidekick (Bob Arthur)—all minor characters—there's no one in the gathering of vultures who comes off with a shred of humanity.

For once, it's hard to quarrel with Bosley Crowther's original assessment, that Wilder's "yarn . . . presents not only a distortion of journalistic practice but something of a dramatic grotesque." It's just that we've caught up with and adapted to the grotesque, may even find something perversely satisfying in a film so resolutely uncommercial. Yes, Wilder risks drowning in his own cynicism, choking on his own bile, but we are now the rubberneckers at a spectacle only too ready to go down in flames of self-destruction. However rancid the taste left by the movie's exceptionally ghoulish portrait of America, there is a kind of awesome, irresistibly noxious power in the relationship between Tatum and Lorraine. Have any movie couple ever hated each other so much? The mounting intensity gives rise to a loathing so fierce it takes on erotic overtones. Jan Sterling's jaded Lorraine is about as uncompromisingly bad and unlikable as a woman in a major role can be, and Sterling plays her with tremendous nervy gusto. She's funny, as monomaniacal as Tatum, and relentlessly tawdry. A smart cookie playing dumb, she's even colder and more self-centered than Tatum, remembering years by the color of her hair ("In '45, I was a redhead"), and shameless to the bitter end in her scorn and indifference toward her suffering husband.

Wilder's women, no less than his men, are alter egos, often taking the fall for the guilt or anxiety that men are loath to acknowledge. The strain of misogyny that runs through many of Wilder's films can be a conduit and a cover for self-contempt. A director's anxiety about his own waning powers feeds and colors the coruscating portrait of the aging diva played by Gloria Swanson in "Sunset Boulevard." The sleazy image of the dance-hall prostitute infuses Sterling's coarse Lorraine. The prize for infamy goes to Chuck Tatum, but both characters bear the brunt of Wilder's angst—not just corruption, anxiety, but the survivor's guilt of a man whose family died in Auschwitz.

Here, as an innocent man is snuffed in a cave that bears a metaphoric resemblance to a concentration camp, the survivors look at each other with the venom of self-hatred, mirroring too closely each other's venality.

“Ace in the Hole (aka “The Big Carnival) (1951) was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2017.

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