

# The Producers

By Brian Scott Mednick

The partnership between Mel Brooks and Gene Wilder is responsible for a comic trifecta of films that are considered among the funniest ever made: “Blazing Saddles” and “Young Frankenstein” (both from 1974) and the one that started it all, “The Producers” (1968).

Wilder’s big break came while he was on Broadway in the original 1963 production of “Mother Courage and Her Children.” The show was not a success but its star was Anne Bancroft. Bancroft was then dating future husband Mel Brooks, who often hung out backstage. He and Wilder quickly became friends.

“He had written thirty pages of a screenplay called ‘Springtime for Hitler,’” Wilder recalled, “and he read it to his girlfriend Anne Bancroft and me one Saturday evening out at Fire Island. And he said, ‘Do you want to play this part? As I go on writing it, I’ll write it for you.’”

Wilder said yes to Brooks’ offer, but it would be years before he would hear from him, so during most of the 1960s, Wilder occupied himself with a lot of Broadway and television roles before being cast in a small part in “Bonnie and Clyde” (1967). Despite adding a huge dose of comic relief to a film that was otherwise somber and downbeat, it was not the kind of role destined to make him a star. For that he would have to wait until the following year when Brooks would finally make good on his promise.

“I didn’t hear from him for three years,” Wilder said. “I thought he’d forgotten me, but it took him that long to raise the money to do it.”

While Wilder was appearing on Broadway in “Luv,” Brooks and producer Sidney Glazier visited him backstage. Brooks already had Zero Mostel committed to do the film and told Wilder, “The only thing is, Gene, Zero doesn’t know you at all. I’m sorry to put you through this, but you’re going to have to do a reading for him.”



*Gene Wilder looks on as Zero Mostel counts the money they’ve scammed from little old ladies. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

Wilder assumed he had the part wrapped up. After all, Brooks specifically wrote it for him and the thought of having to audition never entered his mind. “My heart was pounding as I walked to Sidney Glazier’s office,” Wilder said. “I went up the elevator and my heart was pounding harder. I knock at the door. There’s Mel and Sidney and Zero. Zero gets up and walks towards me and I’m thinking, ‘Oh, God, why do I have to go through this again? I hate auditions, I hate them.’ Zero reached out his hand as if to shake hands and then put it around my waist and pulled me up to him and kissed me on the lips. He gave me a big kiss on the lips. And all my fear dissolved. We sat down and read a scene from the script.”

A half hour after Wilder left his meeting with Mostel, Brooks called him and told him that Mostel liked him. The role was his.

“Springtime for Hitler” was retitled “The Producers” because, according to Wilder, “Joseph E. Levine said, ‘You can’t say ‘Springtime for Hitler’ – the Jews in the Midwest won’t accept that.’”

Filmed in eight weeks on a budget of \$946,000, “The Producers” tells the story of Max Bialystock (Mostel), a once-great theatrical producer now reduced to scamming money off of little old ladies. One day, a hapless young accountant named Leo Bloom (Wilder) walks into Max’s office to find him cavorting

with one of his admiring grannies.

“It was right out of my own life experience,” Brooks said of “The Producers.” “I once worked with a man who did make serious love to very old ladies late at night on an old leather office couch. They would give him blank checks, and he would produce phony plays. I can’t mention his name because he would go to jail. Just for the old ladies alone he would go to jail.”

As Leo goes over Max’s books, he comes to the realization that a producer could actually make more money with a play that’s a flop than a hit if, certain that the show would bomb, he raises more money than he actually needs to produce the show.

This starts the wheels turning in Max’s head as he convinces Leo to become his partner as they go in search of the worst play ever written. They find “fool’s gold” in “Springtime for Hitler,” “a gay romp with Adolf and Eva in Berchtesgarden,” written by a crazed Fuehrer-worshipping Nazi named Franz Liebkind (Kenneth Mars).

On opening night, Max and Leo watch as the audience looks on in shock at their opening production number in which Nazi storm troopers sing the praises of der Fuehrer.

After audience members begin leaving the theater stupefied, Max and Leo repair to the bar down the street and celebrate what they are certain will be the biggest flop ever to hit Broadway. But at intermission, as droves of theatergoers rush in for a drink, they overhear conversations in which “Springtime for Hitler” is being lauded as the funniest show in years.

Though early test screenings proved negative and at one point the film was going to be shelved, sneak previews in New York started a word-of-mouth campaign that ultimately resulted in lines around the block. The picture slowly opened up in other cities and eventually became a moneymaker.

Despite varying reports that Brooks and Mostel’s personalities would often clash during the making of “The Producers,” Wilder claims not to have noticed any friction and found the entire experience extremely re-

warding. A lot of that had to do with how Zero Mostel took the young actor under his wing. “You may have heard stories about how bombastic, aggressive, and dictatorial Zero might be,” Wilder said. “It didn’t happen with me. He always took care of me. I loved him. He looked after me as if I were a baby sparrow.”

At the time of release, “The Producers” received mixed reviews, but it is now an undisputed classic that Roger Ebert called “the single funniest movie I’ve seen since I’ve been a film critic.”

Despite negative notices from many critics of the time, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences was tickled enough by Brooks’ bawdy humor that they awarded him the Oscar for his screenplay. Wilder did not go unnoticed either, receiving a nomination for Best Supporting Actor (he lost to Jack Albertson for “The Subject Was Roses”).

“The Producers” was a breakthrough film for both Gene Wilder and Mel Brooks. Already known for being a master funnyman, Brooks now showed he could be a first-rate film director. And now Wilder was able to show off his talents in a role that was tailor-made for him in a medium that reached a much larger number of people than your average Broadway audience. Leo Bloom was a star-making role, not unlike what Benjamin Braddock was for Dustin Hoffman in “The Graduate” a year earlier.

Brooks maintains that “The Producers” “would have been a very good comedy with Zero Mostel and another comic... But Gene Wilder made it a classic.”

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

*Brian Scott Mednick is a graduate of NYU film school. He is an author, critic, and filmmaker whose writing has appeared in many magazines and newspapers. He spent fifteen years writing and researching the biography Gene Wilder: Funny and Sad, which was released in December 2010 to rave reviews. His other books are the short story collection Drinking Games...and Other Stories (2011) and the novel Unnecessary Headaches (2013). He lives in New York City. Visit him online at [brianscottmednick.com](http://brianscottmednick.com).*