

Some Like It Hot

By David Eldridge

"I couldn't aspire to anything higher..."

So sings Marilyn Monroe as Sugar Kane, putting heat into "Some Like It Hot." Producer, writer and director Billy Wilder would have likely concurred, given his 1959 movie is often rated the greatest American comedy of all time. As the two hapless musicians who have to disguise themselves as women and join an all-girl band to escape from murderous mobsters, Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis also regarded it as their most memorable work (Curtis even writing his own book about the film on its fiftieth anniversary).

Not that everyone applauded it on release: the censorious National Catholic Legion of Decency thought it "seriously offensive" to "traditional standards of morality," and one contemporary reviewer believed its cross-dressing antics would "titillate sex perverts."¹ One might blithely suggest that this is perhaps exactly the reason the film is still so well-loved, but the innuendo-laden comedy is far smarter, goofier and wittier than the "outright smut" that the Legion read into it. Its humour maintains the blissful duality of being sexy *and* innocent. Is it really a joke about oral sex when Sugar complains of getting the "fuzzy end of the lollipop" when contemplating her cycle of failed relationships? Who knows for sure: more importantly, the potential suggestiveness of the line is finely balanced with the vulnerability in Monroe's character which it exposes.

"Some Like It Hot" certainly challenged the conservatism of the Eisenhower era. Monroe gets one of the steamiest kissing scenes in film history, literally fogging up the spectacles of her supposedly impotent partner as she tries to seduce him. She is herself a spectacle, from the moment she enters "like Jello on springs," to the final torch song delivered in a clinging dress which covered her breasts with only a fine gauze, the neckline (designed by Orry-Kelly) "scooping to a censor's eyebrow north of trouble."² Curtis and Lemmon's cross-dressing, as Joe and Jerry become Josephine and Daphne, generates innuendo around castration; and while it never tackles homosexuality head on, "Some Like It Hot" makes some of its best jokes on the subject. Lesbianism is implied, at least visually, when Joe kisses



This is one of several promotional ads that appeared a special advertising supplement of the March 2, 1959 issue of Film Bulletin. Courtesy Media History Digital Library.

Sugar while still dressed as Josephine, telling her "No guy is worth it". Most joyously Jerry, as Daphne, adopts his feminine persona so thoroughly that a sultry tango, with millionaire Osgood Fielding III, leads to him giddily accepting a marriage proposal from the lecherous old man. "Why would a guy want to marry a guy?" asks Joe in incredulous response to his friend's news. Yet the film does not judge. Joe's objections to the union are based on "laws and conventions," not homophobia; and in the film's final, legendary reveal, Osgood cares not one jot that the person he plans to marry is a man.

Wilder and his co-writer, I.A.L. Diamond knew they needed to make both audiences and censors feel more at ease with the risqué humour and its implications. The inspiration for the comedy had come from the 1936 French film "Fanfare d'Amour" and its 1951 German remake, "Fanfaren der Liebe," both concerning two male musicians who don drag into order to find work. Wilder and Diamond, however, were convinced that they needed a better reason than unemployment to motivate two heterosexual American men to dress up as women. Diamond hit upon the

idea of having Joe and Jerry witness the St Valentine's Day Massacre of October 1929. Despite warnings that "no comedy could survive" the "brutal reality" of the Prohibition era's most notorious mass murder, it was precisely that callous viciousness which Wilder needed to justify the cross-dressing.³ The success of Joe and Jerry's masquerade becomes a matter of life and death as the Al Capone-inspired Spats Colombo (George Raft) seeks to hunt them down.

"Once we had the idea of making it period," noted Wilder, the setting opened up "a wealth of material to work with – speakeasies, bootleggers, Florida millionaires."⁴ Indeed, the fact that Capone had his summer retreat in Florida helps explain why the musicians are not safe even when they have escaped from Chicago to the sunshine state. The period enabled them to exploit the iconic image of the flapper. With bobbed hair and boyish physiques the height of sophistication for young women in the Roaring Twenties, Curtis and Lemmon could be dressed in drag costumes that were true to history, but which were far less eroticised than the outfits which accentuated Monroe's 'sex bomb' figure. The filmmakers capitalized on the popular notion of the Twenties as an era when social and moral laws were upended and young 'moderns' challenged convention. Almost every character is flaunting the laws of Prohibition, from Sugar's hip-flask hidden in her garter-belt to the sexually precocious hotel bellboy who offers to share with Josephine the bottle of gin he has stashed away. Wilder thus had a setting for "Some Like It Hot" in which all forms of transgression seemed entirely appropriate, including the gender and sex role transgressions of his 'leading ladies.'

Even before production began, Wilder emphasized that he was not simply treating "Some Like It Hot" as a farce. "Unless some real emotion emerges from all this comedy," he wrote, "we will have failed."⁵ That emotional quality emerges from how the characters, through their masquerades, actually get to know themselves and each other more honestly. As Brandon French notes, although Joe initially exploits his female guise to discover clues to help him seduce Sugar, it's "as a 'woman' friend [that] Joe gets to know the *real* Sugar... a vulnerable and lovable human being. As Josephine, he becomes "privy to a side of relationships that he never before witnessed" and eventually becomes almost disgusted with the way his own sex (himself included) treats women.⁶ Moreover, when Joe plays the impotent millionaire as a passive milquetoast it forces Sugar to become the aggressor in the relationship; "gaining some knowledge of her own power and competence that she never before experienced."⁷

Jerry, by contrast, loses his identity almost completely in Daphne. But instead of creating uneasiness in 1950s American audiences accustomed to fixed gender roles and fearing "the decline of the American male," Wilder encouraged filmgoers to laugh it off and accept the radical idea that "nobody's perfect."⁸ If nobody is perfect, and gender roles are fluid and flexible, then maybe every man can overcome his limitations by embracing his feminine side. Indeed, rather than making even conservative audiences anxious about sexual identity, "Some Like It Hot" encourages viewers to have as great a time as Lemmon evidently does as Daphne, revelling in its liberating qualities. In this, it remains refreshingly relevant today.

¹ See David Eldridge, "Some Like It Hot and the Virtues of Not Taking History Too Seriously" in J.E. Smyth (ed.)

Hollywood and the American Historical Film (Palgrave, 2011) 108; *Films in Review*, April 1959, 240.

² Roger Ebert review, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-some-like-it-hot-1959>.

³ Ed Sikov, *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder* (Hyperion, 1999), 415.

⁴ Cameron Crowe, *Conversations with Wilder* (Faber & Faber, 1999), 137.

⁵ Billy Wilder to Marilyn Monroe, March 17, 1958, Billy Wilder Papers, f.78, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

⁶ Brandon French, *On the Verge of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties* (Ungar, 1978), 148-9.

⁷ Marjorie Baumgarten, *Cinema Texas*, 20.3 (April 1981), 51.

See K.A. Cuordileone, "Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity," *Journal of American History* 87.2 (2000), 529.

⁸ See K.A. Cuordileone, "Politics in an Age of Anxiety: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity," *Journal of American History* 87.2 (2000), 529.

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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