

# The Daredevil Reporter (Der Teufelsreporter) (1929): Billy/Billie Wilder

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Before Wilder considered his own career as a filmmaker as having begun, and then reached movie fame on the other side of the Atlantic, he left behind a stumbling career as a reporter and a small action movie. Although *The Daredevil Reporter* (1929) possesses a few explosions that are purely Wilder's, it is far removed from the style that brought him both commercial success and artistic acknowledgment during Hollywood's Golden Age. But it continues to remind us that before "Billie" became Billy, Wilder was also a daredevil reporter.

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In the late 1920s, young Samuel "Billie" Wilder (he changed his name to Billy when he emigrated to the United States) gradually left his first calling as an intrepid journalist to begin working as a screenwriter. This leap from one profession to another was natural for someone who, throughout his entire life, considered himself above all else to be a writer (Chandler, 2002:324).

Film and journalism were closely linked throughout his entire professional career. As a journalist, young Billie never hid his fascination for celluloid in his journalistic texts. As a filmmaker, Billy dedicated two of his movies to portraying his old colleagues: the

corrosive *Ace in the Hole* (1951) and the satirical-yet-nostalgic adaptation of *The Front Page* (1974).

In the Viennese movie theaters of his youth the restless “Billie” found the model for his first career:

On American news, I had seen young men. They wore Burberry coats, and stuck a card in the band on their hat that said “Press,” and they conducted interviews with a brilliant star actress or a Rockefeller on a luxurious steamship. Journalist! That’s what I wanted to be! The idea was swell. I was cheeky, extraordinarily fiery, I had a gift for exaggeration, and I was sure I would soon learn how to ask the most brazen questions openly and frankly.  
(Karasek, 1993:37)

After a brief but eventful period as a reporter in Vienna, which he began right after finishing high school at 18, Wilder moved to Berlin in June 1926. In the motley atmosphere of the cafes of the Weimar Republic’s capital, especially in the Kranzler and Romanisches, Wilder met many other artists and struck up friendships with well-established screenwriters, such as Adolf Lantz and Carl Mayer. Old journalist friends of his, such as Anton Kuh and Walter Reisch, had already taken the leap into film with greater or lesser success (Sikov, 1998). It was here that he discovered a way to earn extra income to augment his precarious freelance journalist wages, and it also opened the back door into the world of film for him: he worked as a ghostwriter on other authors’ scripts.

During this period, Wilder calculated that he had collaborated as a ghostwriter on 501 silent films (at the time, the scripts were about 30 pages) with no mention of his name in the credits. Along with others, Wilder worked for Curt J. Braun, whom he called a “walking script factory,”<sup>2</sup> and Franz Schulz: “They really took advantage. At the time, they were paid fifty thousand marks per script, and they gave me two hundred fifty per week. But if it had ever occurred to me to mouth off about it, I would have been sacked” (Karasek, 1993:43).

### *First Credit as Screenwriter*

In 1928, while juggling press collaborations with scripts he was writing for others, Wilder landed his first job as a credited screenwriter. The result was a fantastic comedy starring a journalist: *Der teufelsreporter: Im nebel der grosstad*. There are several variations on its translation to English – *Hell of a Reporter*, *The Devil’s Reporter*, *The Demon Reporter* (Saltzman, 2020) – but the one that best fits the film’s plot (Everson, 1982), and by extension the screenwriter, is *The Daredevil Reporter*.<sup>3</sup>



*Daredevil Reporter*: Billy Wilder in a rare cameo

The film was designed as an unpretentious genre product, a *sensation film* to show off Eddie Polo, faded action movie star on the tail-end of his career who had come back to Germany after a fleeting but successful career in Hollywood (Katchmer, 2000). These action dramas, chock-full of chases and dangerous scenes, were very popular in Germany in the 1920s. Studios produced a large number of such films, with those starring Harry Piel being of particular note (Everson, 1982).

The film producer, the German division of Universal Studios, probably thought of *The Daredevil Reporter* as a “quota” movie (Toeplitz, 1979), caused by the regulation implemented in 1921 to defend the German film industry from the strength of Hollywood film in the tough postwar economy. Initially, only the equivalent of 15% of the number of films produced in Germany could be imported. In 1925, the regulation established a ratio of 1:1 between national and foreign production, and in 1928, a maximum number of importation certificates was set (Fehrenbach, 1995). The result was a dynamic rights market, leading large American studios to produce their own movies in Germany to import their international hits. Eddie Polo starred in five of these productions by Universal Studios in Germany.

The lead producers were Joe Pasternak and Paul Kohner, while Carl Laemmle travelled from the United States to manage direction. They contacted young Billie Wilder for the script. In later years, Pasternak and Kohner both claimed credit for recruiting Wilder for *The Daredevil Reporter*. Kohner stated that he hired him for the script because he liked the young writer’s energy and sense of humor. On the other hand, Joe Pasternak alleged more mundane reasons, stating that he put Wilder on the film to get back the \$1,000 Billie owed him from a poker game (Zolotow, 1996).

Although Eddie Polo, a former circus artist who began acting in films in 1913, was ending his career as an action hero at 54 years of age, Wilder wrote a rapid-fire script as a showcase for him. Wilder drew his inspiration from an event he read about in his old newspaper, *Die stunde*, while having breakfast at the Berlin Café Kranzler, near the Zoo

station, where the trains from Vienna unloaded press from the capital of the former empire. The news piece reported that upon their arrival to the Austrian capital, the Tiller Girls, a famous group of dancers on tour, were horrified to discover that instead of 16, there were only 15 of them. One of them was missing. They immediately feared her disappearance was an accident or a kidnapping. The reality, the newspaper recounted with delight, was that actor Igo Sym, who had starred alongside Marlene Dietrich in the Austrian film *Café Elektrik* (Gustav Ucicky, 1927), had known the young missing dancer for a year, and had “kidnapped” her when the train passed the Czech border. The article in *Die stunde* failed to mention that it was actually a setup to promote the Berlin Haller-Revue’s show, staged by their press agent. Wilder couldn’t help but take notice of the story, especially considering his romantic relationship at the time with one of the Tiller Girls, Olive Victoria (Hutter and Kamolz, 1998).

### *Reporter Hopeful*

In *The Daredevil Reporter*, we see Eddie Polo working as a typist in the newsroom at the *Rapid Journal*, with the hope of becoming a star reporter. Given the actor’s age at the time the movie was shot, the premise pushed one to suspend realism and let their imagination take rein.



Eddie Polo in the newsroom

One day, when left alone in the newsroom with a boy named Maxe (the rest of the staff was attending the boss’s wedding), he takes his shot when a group of young American millionaire girls arrive to interview them on his own. Even though he does not arrive on time to the train station to welcome them, the intrepid (though not youthful) reporter hopeful is not willing to let his story go. He manages to interview them from the outside footboard of the bus they are travelling on.

But the group of young women is also the target of a gang of kidnappers. Even though the girls' chaperone, Miss Bessie (Gritta Ley), tries to warn him of the danger with a note, Eddie Polo falls into the hands of the gangsters. They manage to rid themselves of his bothersome presence by sticking him in an insane asylum. "Oh, you're the king of journalists? Well, I'm the emperor of silence. We'll get along swimmingly," an orderly tells him.

Of course, the padded walls don't stop him, and the reporter manages to escape. He tells his story to the chief of the *Rapid Journal*, who publishes it on the front page. While the gangsters send ransom letters to the United States, Eddie Polo investigates telephone calls made from the train and finds the address to the gangsters' headquarters, where he discovers incriminating documents. The possibility of calling from a train was one of the film's many nods to technological progress.

The end of the film consists of a constant chase in all kinds of motorized vehicles, where Eddie Polo showcases his wavering acrobatic skills, jumping from walls and moving vehicles. At the happy ending, the intrepid reporter frees the young girls and lands his sought-after position as reporter at the *Rapid Journal* and wins Miss Bessie's love.

### *American-Style Entertainment*

The movie debuted June 19, 1929, at the Schauburg Theater of Hamburg. As stated by Lally, *The Daredevil Reporter* is a fairly frivolous and amusing B-film that almost screams for the viewer not to take it too seriously (Lally, 1996:36). For Aurich and Jacobsen, it is a frenetic action comedy with scant doses of realism. Its strong point is neither logic, nor the script, nor the staging (2006:36).

Reviews at the time generally praised the film's pacing, in accordance with period conventions. A contributing factor was the fact that two-thirds of the shots lasted less than five seconds (Vogt, 2014), along with the parallel staging where the plots played out. In *The Film Journal*, critic Martin Beheim-Schwarzbach declared that it was a good "sensation film," shot in Germany in the American style. He also praised its daring humor and the excitement and energy it exuded. In the same vein, Josef Aubinger highlighted in his review in the *Deutsche Film Zeitung* that the film shouldn't be viewed in terms of credibility, but rather as an effective grouping of fireworks (quoted by Vogt, 2014).

Reviews also came together in praising the images shown of Berlin. Indeed, Charles J. Stumar's photography provides a flattering, recognizable portrait of Berlin at the time, with a few licenses in locations (Spiess, 1986, quoted by Vogt, 2014). As a director, Wilder would once again show images of his adoptive city at two key moments in its history: the devastated postwar city in *A Foreign Affair* (1948), and the city divided in *One, Two, Three* (1961).

### *The Glory of Being a Journalist*

Without a doubt, *The Daredevil Reporter* did not take itself too seriously, nor did it

aspire to authentically portray the journalism trade. In the *Deutsche Film Zeitung*, Josef Aubinger (1929) criticized the fact that the film completely disregarded the actual conditions under which German media worked (quoted by Vogt, 2014). The *Berliner Morgenpost* stated that it was not a particularly fortunate film in its depiction of journalism (quoted by kinotv, 2020).



Eddie Polo, right

Indeed, the film shrinks from a realistic portrayal of the journalism trade, acting more as a pretext to support its star's chase scenes and acrobatics. Similarly, we see Eddie Polo run to catch a bus, which to his great fortune appears to be the slowest in all of Berlin (Sikov, 1998). He jumps from buildings, dons disguises to obtain clues, and drives a race car conveniently parked with the keys. But more than anything, Eddie Polo is the man who storms the bad guys' lair, pistol in hand (the weapon seems to come from the same place as the car keys), while exchanging gunfire and simultaneously phoning in his exclusive article to the newsroom. Squandered talent, clearly.

We can also see later in his other films on the profession how Wilder's journalist is never a passive observer, but is fully involved in the stories he tells, as a part of them. When he is released and sends his first article about the kidnapping, the *Rapid Journal's* headline reads "Our Reporter Eddie Polo is at the Track." It does not much matter if a group of young girls has been kidnapped, as long as our man is on their tale.

As the best example of the film's self-parodying and easy-going nature, the actor Eddie Polo even lends his name to the character, which, besides acting as a meta-cinematic nod, even helps Billy Wilder to include a joke at his expense. While the star speaks with the psychiatrist, he asks him his name: "Drôle de nom" (funny name), he exclaims upon hearing it.

In terms of portrayal of the journalistic trade, the film falls flat. There is nothing here like Wilder's cutting criticism of sensationalism in *Ace in the Hole*, which through the main character reporter's base acts indicts society – and the viewers themselves – for its heartless fascination with the suffering of others, disguised as goodwill. On the other hand, in the adaptation of *The Front Page*, Wilder humorously depicted the excesses of a profession that was ultimately portrayed as less corrupt than politics and redeemed by its unceasing work to check abuses committed by authorities (Peña-Fernández, 2014). Little of this kind of critique can be found in *The Daredevil Reporter*.

However, it is typical in some ways of films set in the world of journalism, including the work of Wilder himself. On the one hand, the plot highlights the main character's intrepid nature, which goes far beyond the mere zeal of a reporter and presents a dynamic vision of the profession, the reporter framed as a blend of detective and action hero. "Eddie Polo is truly a famous reporter!" exclaims the boy Maxe at the end of the film. Nothing could better summarize the protagonist's absolute triumph.



Wilder, second from left

Perhaps for this reason, since the very beginnings of cinema, journalism has been a common subject on the big screen. The nature of journalistic work, frequently portrayed as similar to police or detective work, allows filmmakers to show reporters as they fight to reveal scandals, crimes, or corruption that others have tried to cover up, which always makes for dramatic conflict (McNair, 2010).

At the movie-myth level, the journalist profession makes the reporter a truth-seeker and an idealist, a tough and moral individual who vies with detectives in their ability to investigate misdeeds and solve crimes. The journalist may seem more like a member of the audience, and is thus easier to identify with than a law enforcer. (Robards, 1990)

Moreover, the film also offers other features, insinuated yet clear, that are recurring in Wilder's portrayal of journalists throughout his entire career (Peña Fernández, 2014). On the one hand, he shows the fierce competition between colleagues as they challenge each other to be the first to obtain the information. They have no qualms mocking their colleague, just as Eddie Polo was mocked when he was late to his interview with the young girls.

The movie also shows the frenetic pace of work in the newsroom at the *Rapid-Journal*, where we see reporters frantically working while dressed in formal wear for a wedding. The boss is getting married, but current events are pressing.

He also focuses on the difficult balance between work and private life, another typical feature in Wilder's portrayal of the profession. It takes the form of a joke when Eddie Polo asks his boss for a promotion: "Remember that last time you got married, you promised me . . ." he tries to reason at the beginning of the film. When his boss gets rid of him, the boy tries to console our protagonist: "Maybe you'll have more luck at his next wedding." Wilder shoots again.

As stated by Jochen Hung, the resonance between the *Rapid Journal* in the film and the tabloid *Tempo*, with which Wilder was collaborating when he wrote the script, is unmissable (Hung, 2010). There are also clear similarities between the group of dancers whose kidnapping kicks off the film's "lot, and the text that Wilder published in *Die Stunde* on the *Tiller-Girls* in April 1926.<sup>4</sup> The scene where Eddie Polo goes to receive the girls at the train station in Berlin, where Miss Bessie warns him of the danger, has an equivalent in the interview published by "Billie," when he asks Jessie, the group's manager, if it was true that the girls were well-chaperoned, and she responded with a knowing gesture, bringing her index finger to her lips: "Shhhh."

#### *"Billie" at Tempo*

The "American" style of the protagonist and the film is clearly another of young Billie's affinities, fascinated by American jazz, film, and literature. *Tempo* was Wilder's last job as a journalist before taking the definitive leap into film. For months, he balanced his collaboration with the newspaper with screenwriting.

Publisher Ullstein's new newspaper hit the stands September 11, 1928, under Gustav Kauder's management. This tabloid targeted a younger post-war generation, with a fresh and dynamic design and large photographs and headlines. To develop its novel editorial concept, *Tempo* hired young staff. There was no one more suitable to write about jazz, film, sports and American topics than "Billie," whose name even resonated.

The newspaper was printed on sepia paper and published three daily editions between four and seven in the evening, which bears witness to the frenetic pace of work (Wentzel, 1977:34). Its detractors, in conservative circles, criticized it for being the



“epitome of Americanization in the press,” while social nationalists scornfully called it “jüdische hast” (Jewish hustle). In commercial terms, it was a failure. It published its last edition August 5, 1933 (Hung, 2010).



Watch Video At: [https://youtu.be/HMz\\_UjGXxxw](https://youtu.be/HMz_UjGXxxw)

Thanks to his relationship with Olive Victoria, the dancer from the Tiller Girls, Wilder discovered that his nickname was actually a woman’s name. This was no obstacle for the determined reporter. Starting September 19, 1928, he published almost daily tips on fashion, beauty, health, home and food, introducing himself as a woman in the section “Das Gute Aussehen – Die Gute Haltung” (Good Presence – Good Manners).

To offer women’s tips, he created another female alter ego, a Parisian named Raymonde Latour, who he introduced as a “friend” or presumed girlfriend (insinuating a lesbian relationship) who wrote advice about the *savoir-vivre* in the French capital. Beginning in October 1929 and until the beginning of 1930, “Billie” continued publishing women’s tips every two or three weeks on topics such as how to behave at the table, the color of nail polish, stockings and beauty treatments (Hutter and Kamolz, 1998).

On February 27, 1929, Wilder had his last great journalistic smash in Berlin. In this case, it was two-fold. Upon arrival of the ship *Deutschland* to the port of Cuxhaven, he interviewed two of its illustrious passengers: the boxer Max Schmeling and actor Conrad Veidt. He accompanied Schmeling, who would later become world heavyweight champion, in his triumphant reception in Hamburg, where he was welcomed by thousands of people. Similar to Eddie Polo in the film, Wilder ran to the post office to send the interview to *Tempo*, which published it only four hours later, faster than all its competitors. The interview with Veidt was published the next day as an open letter,

where Wilder shared his hope that syrupy Hollywood had not spoiled his taste for performance, and that he would be the first of many Germany artists to return from the United States (Hutter and Kamolz, 1998:119).

### *The “Not First” Film*

In many ways, *The Daredevil Reporter* was a milestone in Wilder’s career, since it embodies his transition from journalism to film. It is also unique in his career as the only time we see him on screen in a small role as an extra: the first time reading the sensational headlines of the *Rapid Journal*, and the second chatting with a group of journalists.

But *The Daredevil Reporter* was Wilder’s first credit as a screenwriter, though he had previously written many other films uncredited, for pay. Later he would disclaim it. At the end of his career, he expressed his regret to historian Kevin Brownlow for writing it: “You don’t do us any favour by finding this crap. You should bury it!” (Chandler, 2002). For him, his first film was a different one: “Oh, it was bullshit, absolute bullshit. [...] Then after that, the first picture I really count as having done was *Menschen am Sonntag*.”<sup>5</sup>



Watch Video At: [https://youtu.be/1hg\\_vL6lQ6I](https://youtu.be/1hg_vL6lQ6I)

At the end of his career, Wilder had surprisingly low regard for the scripts he wrote during his German period (Sikov, 1998). But in 1929, at the same time *The Daredevil Reporter* was being screened in German theaters, five regulars at the Romanisches Café embarked on a very different film project. It was totally innovative, despite its modest approach.

Wilder, who at the time was only 23, was responsible for sharing the project with the world in an article entitled “Wir von Filmstudio 1929” (Us, from Filmstudio 1929), which was published on the pages of *Tempo* on June 23, 1929.

We work at a feverish pace. We rented a rickety cart from a baker in Nikolasse and dragged the crew through the sand. We held the camera for fourteen hours and shot everything in organized fashion. We ourselves took care of the focus, and spent the day kneeling in the water; if we felt the danger of sunstroke, we submerged our heads. I do not believe the crews from expeditions to Everest or Pamir had greater willpower or suffered more deprivation than we. My God, our resources were so rudimentary . . . ! Meanwhile, a few kilometers away, in Neue Babelsberg [headquarters of UFA studios], they may at this very moment be building the best sets for the wonderful lies of Nina Petrowna.<sup>6</sup> And here we are, with a sum entirely ridiculous, to shoot a few truths we deem to be important.  
(Wilder, 1929)

The result of this creative effort was *Menschen am Sonntag*, a movie filmed in semi-documentary style, showing the life of a group of everyday Berliners on Sunday. It premiered February 4, 1930, in the UFA theater of Kurfürstendamm, which specialized in experimental films. It remained on the billboard for six months. In the words of Jean Breschand, its critical success lay in bringing the expressive capacity of silent film to its apogee precisely at the time of the difficult transition to talking pictures, and in speaking directly of everyday life without attempting to turn it into a story: “By favoring the sensation of the moments, and not the meaning of the action, it re-encounters fiction just as each individual experiences it, with their dreams, adventures and misadventures” (Breschand, 2004).

Due to the way it portrayed German life, film historian Sigfried Kracauer put it into the group of movies called “representative,” a category inaugurated by *Die Abenteuer eines Zehnmarkscheines* (Berthold Viertel, 1926), whose indisputable role model was *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (Walter Ruttmann, 1927). Kracauer suggests that the success of *Menschen am Sonntag* may have been due to the convincing way it portrayed a sector of life rarely depicted until then, and highlights the fact that it is one of the first films drawing attention to the “small man” (Kracauer, 1985:178).



As stated by Lally, *Film Studio 1929* – the name of the manifesto of the creators of *Menschen am Sonntag*, including Eugen Schüfftan, Robert Siodmak, Edgar Ulmer, Billy Wilder, and others – heralded a new sort of film, a rebellion against melodramatic and comical conventions and UFA's sophisticated production criteria. "It was a period of emptiness in German film," declared Wilder. "The great film companies were sailing on seas of sentimentalism" (Lally, 1996).

Ironically, a few weeks later, Wilder himself was writing scripts for the large German studio's talking operettas. When asked by Andreas Hutter about this contradiction, the filmmaker replied in a straightforward fashion: "First, one must eat, then comes morality. If I had continued with experimental films, I would have died of hunger" (Hutter, 1993).

Indeed, *Menschen am Sonntag* opened the doors of the German film industry to reporter Billie Wilder, who, for the next five years, had several hits as a screenwriter in the German film industry, before the Reichstag lit a fire in 1933 and caused him to take hasty flight to Paris.

But before Wilder considered his own career as a filmmaker as having begun, and then reached movie fame on the other side of the Atlantic, he left behind a stumbling career as a reporter and a small action movie. Although *The Daredevil Reporter* possesses a few explosions that are purely Wilder's, it is far removed from the style that brought him both commercial success and artistic acknowledgment during Hollywood's Golden Age. But it continues to remind us that before "Billie" became Billy, Wilder was also a daredevil reporter.

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*Unless otherwise noted, all images are screenshots of the film.*