



TIME OUT

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THE MOVIE BIZ

THE WONDERFUL MR. WILDER

He was Willy Wonka and the Waco Kid.

Richard Pryor’s partner and Zero Mostel’s punching bag.

He was Gene Wilder and he was an utter original.

Wilder, who passed away last weekend, specialized in a kind of slyly calibrated hyper-hysteria that fed on itself until it reached meltdown. Think, the hissy-fit raised to the level of high comedic art.

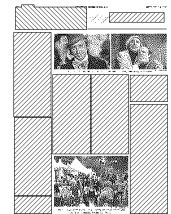
Audiences got their first full dose in 1967’s “The Producers” in which he played a mild-mannered accountant pummeled by a crooked Broadway impresario (Mostel) into co-producing a guaranteed flop – a musical called “Springtime for Hitler,” which, against all expectations, became a hit.

The film itself wasn’t a hit, but the role earned Wilder an Oscar nomination and a kind of cult admiration that exploded into full-fledged stardom when he appeared in such films as “Blazing Saddles,” “Young Frankenstein” and, perhaps most memorably, as the tittle character in “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.” (So superior to the Johnny Depp version they may as well have been based on different books.)

“Blazing Saddles’ and “Young Frankenstein” were part of his early and hugely successful collaborations with Mel Brooks. The two met when Wilder co-starred with Anne Bancroft (Brooks’ wife-to-be) in “Mother Courage and Her Children” on Broadway. Brooks showed him an early script for “The Producers” and promised he’d get back to Wilder. He did – three years later. “You don’t think I forgot, do you?” Brooks reportedly asked.

Around the same time, Wilder also worked with Woody Allen. In “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* But Were Afraid to Ask,” Wilder played a doctor who was deeply in love – and having an affair – with a sheep named Daisy. He’s last seen swigging from a bottle of Woolite in a futile attempt to get over her.

After receiving his second Oscar nomination (for co-writing “Young Frankenstein”) Wilder began to branch out on his own. The movies – “The World’s Greatest Lover” and “The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes’ Smarter Brother” – gave him more range creatively; he wrote, directed and starred in both. In the ‘80s, he pulled off the same triple-play with “Haunted Honeymoon” and “The Women in Red”.



But audiences were far more enthusiastic about the pictures that paired him with Richard Pryor – “Silver Streak,” “Stir Crazy,” “See No Evil, Hear No Evil,” etc. However, whatever chemistry they generated on-screen was singularly lacking off-screen. In his autobiography,

“Kiss Me Like a Stranger,” Wilder writes “As close as we were on film, it didn’t carry over to our private lives... You could count on one hand the times we saw each other when we weren’t working.”

The title of his memoir came from something his third wife, Gilda Radner, once said to him. They met on the set of “The Woman in Red” and were married until her tragic death from ovarian cancer at age 42. In the book, Wilder is characteristically no-frills honest about their relationship. Her neediness drove him nuts, but he was crazy about her and oversaw the creation of Gilda’s Club in her honor.

Born Jerome Silberman, he took his last name from Thornton Wilder and his first from Eugene Gant, Thomas Wolfe’s alter ego in “Look Homeward, Angel.” He told me in a past interview that he just couldn’t see “Jerry Silberman in ‘Hamlet.’” His stage name was probably the only deceitful thing about him.

It was that unique blend of bare-bones honesty, vulnerability and comic lunacy that was so immediately appealing. Check him out in his film debut as an undertaker briefly picked up by Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway in “Bonnie and Clyde.” Or in some other of his lesser-known (yet brilliant) movies:

“Start the Revolution Without Me” and “The Frisco Kid” (featuring a still-struggling young actor named Harrison Ford).

Wilder was a romantic clown in the tradition of Charlie Chaplin. With his carrot-colored curls, prominent nose and bulging baby blues, he looked like a child’s drawing of a person, all bright colors and funny lines. Yet he had an unpredictable wit and intelligent charm that made him undeniably sexy. He told me, “I want the audience to laugh and laugh and laugh and then, if there’s a moment when they’re touched, it doesn’t mean it’s not a comedy.”

Though a master of the neurotic’s escalating slow burn, there was always something oddly romantic about him. And oddly invincible. After all, this is someone who survived Brooks, Mostel and Pryor. And Bonnie and Clyde.

Perhaps the best way to sum up Wilder’s gifts is to repeat a story he liked to tell about himself. Before he signed on the dotted line for “Willy Wonka,” he had a very specific, non-negotiable idea about his first entrance. He wanted to come in leaning heavily on a cane, as if he were crippled. Then he loses the cane, seems about to fall on his face and, instead, executes a perfect somersault.

“Why?” his director wondered (understandably).

“Because from that time on, no one will know if I’m lying or telling the truth.”

That was the showman in him, the consummate performer. He never wanted an audience to take anything for granted. Least of all, Gene Wilder.

We didn’t.

GET OUTTA THE HOUSE

TRY THIS –It’s not “Hamilton,” but it’s as close as Atlanta is going to get until 2017 (when, reportedly, the national tour stops by the Fox). “In the Heights,” Lin-Manuel Miranda’s first hit – and quite the hit it was, garnering four Tonys – is being presented as a co-production of the Aurora and the Theatrical Outfit. The show takes place in New York’s multi-ethnic Washington Heights neighborhood. The current production just ended its run at the Aurora and moves to the Rialto (the Theatrical Outfit part) on September 8. It runs through September 18. And if you like a little salsa with your theatre, on Sept. 15, from 5:30-7:30 p.m., the company is hosting a between-show fiesta (Yep, there’s a 2:30 Thursday matinee). Mingle with the cast while enjoying bites from Buena Gente Cuban Bakery and Tex’s Tacos (They’re food trucks, kids).

AND THESE – This weekend, the AJC Decatur Book Festival returns to celebrate all things literary. The event kicks off with a Friday night tribute to the late, irreplaceable, fabulous Pat Conroy. That’s sold out, but otherwise, there are a thousand and one things on offer. This is the festival’s 11th year and it just gets bigger and better. But it’s a mere youngster compared to The Book Festival of the Marcus Jewish Community Center, which is turning 25 this year. Get a pre-fest taste next Wednesday when Steve Spurrier signs his book, “Head Ball Coach: My Life in Football” at the MJCC. A word of advice: Spurrier is signing only his book, so leave the memorabilia at home.