

Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* (1948)

Abstract

Billy Wilder, the director of *A Foreign Affair*, was an Austrian-American Jewish filmmaker who lived and worked in Berlin until the rise of the Nazi party. When the antisemitism and discrimination against Jews became ever more flagrant, he moved to Paris and then Hollywood in 1933. His mother, grandmother, and stepfather were all victims of the Holocaust. Shortly after the end of the Second World War, the Office of War Information sent Wilder back to Berlin to oversee the denazification of the German film industry. His impressions of a war-damaged Berlin and its denizens' mode of survival inspired his 1948 film *A Foreign Affair*, which starred his fellow émigré Marlene Dietrich and was partially shot on location in Berlin. The film considers the legacy of the Third Reich and questions of collective guilt. It also interrogates the purpose of U.S. occupation, especially when it comes to questions of re-education and denazification. The film's choice to do this through the lens of a sexual comedy made it controversial, but as this review in the West German magazine *Der Spiegel* shows, many critics thought very highly of the film, and it is now thought of as one of Wilder's classic films.

Source

Lady with a Blot Brought Back from Berlin

Marlene Dietrich and Billy Wilder present New Yorkers with what they brought back from Berlin. More than a year ago, they visited the extremely dilapidated site of their previous endeavors.

They not only celebrated various reunions—between Marlene and her mother, Billy and the Ullstein Building and the torso of the Romanisches Café, once his local. They also filmed a segment for *A Foreign Affair*, which has just opened in New York.

Viewed from an airplane and from street level, we see the ruinously weathered Berlin. It is the backdrop for an amusing game from a time when fraternizing was still frowned upon.

Marlene Dietrich appears as both a woman born Maria Magdalena von Losch and as a certain von Schlütow. With three songs, notorious sex appeal and a blot on her past. Once the girlfriend of a powerful Nazi, as a nightclub singer she now cheerfully fraternizes with an American officer (the appealingly gangling John Lund).

From the air arrives a Congressional delegation from Washington, charged with investigating the morale of the occupying troops. The crisp Jean Arthur, a representative from Iowa in the rural provinces, is dissatisfied with the chief of staff's curt answer that there will be no fraternizing and decides to test it herself.

She meets John Lund, and he pretends a romantic interest in her to spare Miss von Losch any unpleasant repercussions. Until the Congresswoman awakens from her faux love affair and everything ends happily, the audience has laughed itself silly and the author and director Billy Wilder has strewn a few scraps of wisdom.

Billy Wilder has managed another great hit in Hollywood after the boozy *Lost Weekend*. In New York, at least, critics and audiences alike agree that Marlene Dietrich and Billy Wilder have brought something

delightful back from Berlin.

Source of original German text: “Dame mit Klecks,” *Der Spiegel*, July 17, 1948, pp. 24–5. Accessible online at: <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-44417790.html>

Translation: Pam Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Billy Wilder’s *A Foreign Affair* (1948), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/occupation-and-the-emergence-of-two-states-1945-1961/ghdi:document-5247>> [May 20, 2024].