

Ace in the Hole [1951]

by

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Ace in the Hole is one of the more curious endeavors in the career of Billy Wilder. The film was a commercial failure when first presented under its original title of "The Big Carnival" (it is rumored the name-change was done to erase memories of the box office tanking of "Ace" in order to push a re-release. It didn't work. Wilder's next picture, *Stalag 17* [1953], was a hit and the studio – apparently taking a cue in venality from *Ace in the Hole*, subtracted the losses they endured from the profits of *Stalag 17*). Wilder would later dismiss the production as his "runt." It was his first flop after a string of instant classics including *The Lost Weekend* [1945] and *Sunset Boulevard* [1950].

Yet over the years, *Ace in the Hole* has achieved a classic status in that Wilder was eons ahead of his time in this tale of venal media manipulation. Taking a cue from the infamous exploitation of the 1920s caved-in trapped miner Floyd Collins, Wilder divides the world of *Ace in the Hole* into two unequal camps: a minority of sharks who prey and exploit, and a majority of dopes who get suckered and abused.

Media frenzies were hardly rare when *Ace in the Hole* first premiered. Indeed, one could argue the depth and scope of the coverage of the Fatty Arbuckle trials, or the Lindbergh baby case would make the more modern coverage of O.J. Simpson and Monica Lewinsky look pale in comparison.

Ace in the Hole is not so much cynical as it is sour. It is the very rare film where there is a complete lack of likeable characters. Even the victim, the trapped man is something of a louse – he admits to excavating for Indian artifacts within caves that were considered sacred to the local tribe. His wife fares little better. The trapped man's wife is a sarcastic shrew who uses her husband's predicament to pack her bags and try to hop a bus out of town, finally escaping from a miserable marriage in an isolated New Mexico hell. She is brought back, however, by reporter Tatum's promise of wealth from the accident and soon begins smirking as she reels in cash from the curious onlooker who pay to camp outside the dwellings where her husband is buried.

Wilder's Charles Tatum is the epitome of the modern media: a soulless crook who is so bent on giving the public what they want that he is willing to manufacture reality whenever reality doesn't sell enough papers. His seeming change of heart when he finally

realizes the extent of the damage he has perpetrated is offset by the brilliant Billy Wilder, who does not allow him to set his crimes right. Wilder seems to be saying that the story had become bigger than the man who invented it.

Another way of looking at it is as an indictment of modern journalists, who propagate sensational news under the weak excuse that "It's just the way the media works." This film shows how much control they do have, until they lose it completely.

Ace in the Hole is not without Billy Wilder's trademark razor command of the language. Lines like "He was a good looking kid in his uniform – him and eight million other guys" brim with the Wilder malice and sarcasm. And Wilder makes other sly references: Pacific All Risk Insurance – reference to his film not masterpiece *Double Indemnity* (1944). In a lovely Biblical reference, a woman who is about to betray her husband bites an apple. A corrupt sheriff brings a snake with him. There is even a wonderfully sly sight gag when a carnival caravan from "The Great S&M Amusement Company" rolls into the ground surrounding the mountainside where the man lies buried alive. "S&M," really?

When Tatum gets the priest for Leo, it is really for his own last rites. And is the stab wound in the side a symbol of Christ? Is Tatum dying for our sins? The sin of participating in any media frenzy in any era?