

= Gene Wilder =

Jerome Silberman (born June 11 , 1933) , known professionally as Gene Wilder , is an American stage and screen comic actor , screenwriter , and author .

Wilder began his career on stage , and made his screen debut in the TV @-@ series Armstrong Circle Theatre in 1962 . Although his first film role was portraying a hostage in the 1967 motion picture Bonnie and Clyde , Wilder 's first major role was as Leopold Bloom in the 1968 film The Producers for which he was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor . This was the first in a series of collaborations with writer / director Mel Brooks , including 1974 's Blazing Saddles and Young Frankenstein , which Wilder co @-@ wrote , garnering the pair an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay . Wilder is known for his portrayal of Willy Wonka in Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory (1971) and for his four films with Richard Pryor : Silver Streak (1976) , Stir Crazy (1980) , See No Evil , Hear No Evil (1989) , and Another You (1991) . Wilder has directed and written several of his films , including The Woman in Red (1984) .

His third wife was actress Gilda Radner , with whom he starred in three films . Her death from ovarian cancer led to his active involvement in promoting cancer awareness and treatment , helping found the Gilda Radner Ovarian Cancer Detection Center in Los Angeles and co @-@ founding Gilda 's Club .

Since his most recent contribution to acting in 2003 , Wilder has turned his attention to writing . He has produced a memoir in 2005 , Kiss Me Like a Stranger : My Search for Love and Art ; a collection of stories , What Is This Thing Called Love ? (2010) ; and the novels My French Whore (2007) , The Woman Who Wouldn 't (2008) and Something to Remember You By (2013) .

= = Early life and education = =

Born Jerome Silberman in Milwaukee , Wisconsin , on June 11 , 1933 , Wilder is the son of William J. and Jeanne (Baer) Silberman . He adopted " Gene Wilder " for his professional name at the age of 26 , later explaining , " I had always liked Gene because of Thomas Wolfe 's character Eugene Gant in Look Homeward , Angel and Of Time and the River . And I was always a great admirer of Thornton Wilder . " Wilder first became interested in acting at age 8 , when his mother was diagnosed with rheumatic fever and the doctor told him to " try and make her laugh . "

At the age of 11 , he saw his sister , who was studying acting , performing onstage , and was enthralled by the experience . He asked her teacher if he could become his student , and the teacher said that if he were still interested at age 13 , he would take Wilder on as a student . The day after Wilder turned 13 , he called the teacher , who accepted him ; Wilder studied with him for two years .

When Jeanne Silberman felt that her son 's potential was not being fully realized in Wisconsin , she sent him to Black @-@ Foxe , a military institute in Hollywood , where he wrote that he was bullied and sexually assaulted , primarily because he was the only Jewish boy in the school . After an unsuccessful short stay at Black @-@ Foxe , Wilder returned home and became increasingly involved with the local theatre community . At age 15 , he performed for the first time in front of a paying audience , as Balthasar (Romeo 's manservant) in a production of Shakespeare 's Romeo and Juliet . Gene Wilder graduated from Washington High School in Milwaukee in 1951 .

Wilder was raised Jewish , but holds only the Golden Rule as his philosophy . He described himself as a " Jewish @-@ Buddhist @-@ Atheist " in an interview published in 2005 .

= = Acting career = =

= = = Early starts : Old Vic and Army = = =

Wilder studied Communication and Theatre Arts at the University of Iowa , where he was a member of the Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity . Following his 1955 graduation from Iowa , he was accepted at

the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School in Bristol , England . After six months of studying fencing , Wilder became the first freshman to win the All @-@ School Fencing Championship . Desiring to study Stanislavski 's system , he returned to the U.S. , living with his sister and her family in Queens . Wilder enrolled at the HB Studio .

Wilder was drafted into the Army on September 10 , 1956 . At the end of recruit training , he was assigned to the medical corps and sent to Fort Sam Houston for training . He was then given the opportunity to choose any post that was open , and wanting to stay near New York City to attend acting classes at the HB Studio , he chose to serve as paramedic in the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology at Valley Forge Army Hospital , in Phoenixville , Pennsylvania . In November 1957 , his mother died from ovarian cancer . He was discharged from the army a year later and returned to New York . A scholarship to the HB Studio allowed him to become a full @-@ time student . At first living on unemployment insurance and some savings , he later supported himself with odd jobs such as a limousine driver and fencing instructor . Wilder 's first professional acting job was in Cambridge , Massachusetts , where he played the Second Officer in Herbert Berghof 's production of Twelfth Night . He also served as a fencing choreographer .

After three years of study with Berghof and Uta Hagen at the HB Studio , Charles Grodin told Wilder about Lee Strasberg 's method acting . Grodin persuaded him to leave the studio and begin studying with Strasberg in his private class . Several months later , Wilder was accepted into the Actors Studio . Feeling that " Jerry Silberman in Macbeth " did not have the right ring to it , he adopted a stage name . He chose " Wilder " because it reminded him of Our Town author Thornton Wilder , while " Gene " came from Thomas Wolfe 's first novel , Look Homeward , Angel . He also liked " Gene " because as a boy , he was impressed by a distant relative , a World War II bomber navigator who was " handsome and looked great in his leather flight jacket . " He later said that he could not see Gene Wilder playing Macbeth , either . After joining the Actors Studio , he slowly began to be noticed in the off @-@ Broadway scene , thanks to performances in Sir Arnold Wesker 's Roots and in Graham Greene 's The Compliant Lover , for which Wilder received the Clarence Derwent Award for " Best Performance by an Actor in a Nonfeatured Role . "

= = = Mel Brooks = = =

In 1963 , Wilder was cast in a leading role in Mother Courage and Her Children , a production starring Anne Bancroft , who introduced Wilder to her boyfriend Mel Brooks . A few months later , Brooks mentioned that he was working on a screenplay called Springtime for Hitler , for which he thought Wilder would be perfect in the role of Leo Bloom . Brooks elicited a promise from Wilder that he would check with him before making any long @-@ term commitments . Months went by , and Wilder toured the country with different theatre productions , participated in a televised CBS presentation of Death of a Salesman , and was cast for his first role in a film ? a minor role in Arthur Penn 's 1967 Bonnie and Clyde . After three years of not hearing from Brooks , Wilder was called for a reading with Zero Mostel , who was to be the star of Springtime for Hitler and had approval of his co @-@ star . Mostel approved , and Wilder was cast for his first leading role in a feature film , 1968 's The Producers .

The Producers eventually became a cult comedy classic , with Mel Brooks winning an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay and Wilder being nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor . Nevertheless , Brooks ' first directorial effort did not do well at the box office and was not well received by all critics ; New York Times critic Renata Adler reviewed the film and described it as " black college humor " .

In 1969 , Wilder relocated to Paris , accepting a leading role in Bud Yorkin 's Start the Revolution Without Me , a comedy that took place during the French Revolution . After shooting ended , Wilder returned to New York , where he read the script for Quackser Fortune Has a Cousin in the Bronx and immediately called Sidney Glazier , who produced The Producers . Both men began searching for the perfect director for the film . Jean Renoir was the first candidate , but he would not be able to do the film for at least a year , so British @-@ Indian director Waris Hussein was hired .

= = = Willy Wonka , Young Frankenstein , and Richard Pryor = = =

In 1971 , Wilder auditioned to play Willy Wonka in Mel Stuart 's film adaptation of Roald Dahl 's Charlie and the Chocolate Factory . After reciting some lines , Wilder prepared to leave the auditioning station , but Mel Stuart (who was a Gene Wilder fan) ran after him , offering the role to Wilder immediately . Wilder was initially hesitant when he learned more on the role , but finally accepted the role under one condition :

When I make my first entrance , I 'd like to come out of the door carrying a cane and then walk toward the crowd with a limp . After the crowd sees Willy Wonka is a cripple , they all whisper to themselves and then become deathly quiet . As I walk toward them , my cane sinks into one of the cobblestones I 'm walking on and stands straight up , by itself ... but I keep on walking , until I realize that I no longer have my cane . I start to fall forward , and just before I hit the ground , I do a beautiful forward somersault and bounce back up , to great applause .

When Stuart asked why , Wilder replied , " Because from that time on , no one will know if I 'm lying or telling the truth . "

All three films Wilder did after The Producers were box office failures : Start the Revolution and Quackser seemed to audiences poor copies of Mel Brooks films , while Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory was not a commercial success , seeming , to some parents , a moral story " too cruel " for children to understand , thus failing to attract family audiences . Willy Wonka did gain a cult following and an Oscar nomination for Best Score , as well as a Golden Globe award nomination for Wilder . When Woody Allen offered him a role in one segment of Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex * (* But Were Afraid to Ask) , Wilder accepted , hoping this would be the hit to put an end to his series of flops . Everything ... was a hit , grossing over \$ 18 million in the United States alone against a \$ 2 @-@ million budget .

After Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex * (* But Were Afraid to Ask) , Wilder began working on a script he called Young Frankenstein . After he wrote a two @-@ page scenario , and called Mel Brooks , who told him that it seemed like a " cute " idea , but showed little interest . A few months later , Wilder received a call from his agent , Mike Medavoy , who asked if he had anything where he could include Peter Boyle and Marty Feldman , his two new clients . Having just seen Feldman on television , Wilder was inspired to write a scene that takes place at Transylvania Station , where Igor and Frederick meet for the first time . The scene was later included in the film almost verbatim . Medavoy liked the idea and called Brooks , asking him to direct . Brooks was not convinced , but having spent four years working on two box @-@ office failures , he decided to accept . While working on the Young Frankenstein script , Wilder was offered the part of the Fox in the musical film adaptation of Saint Exupéry 's classic book , The Little Prince . When filming was about to begin in London , Wilder received an urgent call from Brooks , who was filming Blazing Saddles , offering Wilder the role of the " Waco Kid " after Dan Dailey dropped out at the last minute , while Gig Young became too ill to continue . Wilder shot his scenes for Blazing Saddles and immediately afterwards filmed The Little Prince .

After Young Frankenstein was written , the rights were to be sold to Columbia Pictures , but after having trouble agreeing on the budget , Wilder , Brooks , and producer Michael Gruskoff went with 20th Century Fox , where both Brooks and Wilder had to sign five @-@ year contracts . Young Frankenstein was a commercial success , with Wilder and Brooks receiving Best Adapted Screenplay nominations at the 1975 Oscars , losing to Francis Coppola and Mario Puzo for their adaptation of The Godfather Part II . While filming Young Frankenstein , Wilder had an idea for a romantic musical comedy about a brother of Sherlock Holmes . Marty Feldman and Madeline Kahn agreed to participate in the project , and Wilder began writing what became his directorial début , 1975 's The Adventure of Sherlock Holmes ' Smarter Brother .

In 1975 , Wilder 's agent sent him a script for a film called Super Chief . Wilder accepted , but told the film 's producers that he thought the only person who could keep the film from being offensive was Richard Pryor . Pryor accepted the role in the film , which had been renamed Silver Streak , the first film to team Wilder and Pryor . While filming Silver Streak , Wilder began working on a script for The World 's Greatest Lover , inspired by Fellini 's The White Sheik . Wilder wrote , produced , and

directed *The World's Greatest Lover* , which premièred in 1977 , but was a critical failure . The *Frisco Kid* (1979) was Wilder 's next project . The film was to star John Wayne , but he dropped out when the Warner Brothers executives tried to dissuade him from charging the studio his usual \$ 1 @-@ million fee . Wayne also was ill for many years and died in June 1979 . Harrison Ford , then an up @-@ and @-@ coming actor , was hired for the role .

= = = Sidney Poitier and Gilda Radner = = =

In 1980 , Sidney Poitier and producer Hannah Weinstein persuaded Wilder and Richard Pryor to do another film together . Bruce Jay Friedman wrote the script for *Stir Crazy* , with Poitier directing , for Columbia Pictures . Pryor was struggling with a severe cocaine addiction , and filming became difficult , but once the film premiered , it became an international success . New York magazine listed " Skip Donahue " (Wilder) and " Harry Monroe " (Pryor) as number nine on their 2007 list of " The Fifteen Most Dynamic Duos in Pop Culture History " , and the film has often appeared in " best comedy " lists and rankings .

Poitier and Wilder became friends , with the pair working together on a script called *Traces* ? which became 1982 's *Hanky Panky* , the film where Wilder met comedian Gilda Radner . Through the remainder of the decade , Wilder and Radner worked in several projects together . After *Hanky Panky* , Wilder directed his third film , 1984 's *The Woman in Red* , which starred Wilder , Radner , and Kelly Le Brock . *The Woman in Red* was not well received by the critics , nor was their next project , 1986 's *Haunted Honeymoon* , which failed to attract audiences . *The Woman in Red* did win an Academy Award for Best Original Song for Stevie Wonder 's song " I Just Called to Say I Love You " .

TriStar Pictures wanted to produce another film starring Wilder and Pryor , and Wilder agreed to do *See No Evil , Hear No Evil* only if he were allowed to rewrite the script . The studio agreed , and *See No Evil , Hear No Evil* premiered on May 1989 to mostly negative reviews . Many critics praised Wilder and Pryor , as well as Kevin Spacey 's performance , but they mostly agreed that the script was terrible . Roger Ebert called it " a real dud " ; the *Deseret Morning News* described the film as " stupid " , with an " idiotic script " that had a " contrived story " and too many " juvenile gags " , while Vincent Canby called it " by far the most successful co @-@ starring vehicle for Mr. Pryor and Mr. Wilder " , also acknowledging that " this is not elegant movie making , and not all of the gags are equally clever " .

= = = 1990s ? 2000s = = =

After starring as a political cartoonist who falls in love in the 1990 film *Funny About Love* , Wilder did one final movie with Pryor , the 1991 feature *Another You* , in which Pryor 's physical deterioration from multiple sclerosis was clearly noticeable . It was Pryor 's last starring role in a film (he appeared in a few cameos before his death in 2005) and also marked Wilder 's last appearance to date in a feature film . Neither of his last two movies was financially successful . His remaining work has consisted of television movies and guest appearances in TV shows .

In 1994 , Wilder starred in the NBC sitcom *Something Wilder* . The show received poor reviews and lasted only one season . He went back to the small screen in 1999 , appearing in three television movies , one of which was the NBC adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* . The other two , *Murder in a Small Town* and *The Lady in Question* , were mystery movies for A & E TV that were cowritten by Wilder , in which he played a theatre director turned amateur detective . Three years later , Wilder guest @-@ starred on two episodes of NBC 's *Will & Grace* , winning a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Guest Actor on a Comedy Series for his role as Mr. Stein , Will Truman 's boss .

= = Personal life = =

= = = Relationships = = =

Wilder met his first wife , Mary Mercier , while studying at the HB Studio in New York . Although the couple had not been together long , they married on July 22 , 1960 . They spent long periods of time apart , eventually divorcing in 1965 . A few months later , Wilder began dating Mary Joan Schutz , a friend of his sister . Schutz had a daughter , Katharine , from a previous marriage . When Katharine started calling Wilder " Dad , " he decided to do what he felt was " the right thing to do , " marrying Schutz on October 27 , 1967 , and adopting Katharine that same year . Schutz and Wilder separated after seven years of marriage , with Katharine thinking that Wilder was having an affair with his Young Frankenstein co @-@ star , Madeline Kahn . After the divorce , he briefly dated his other Frankenstein co @-@ star , Teri Garr . Wilder eventually became estranged from Katharine .

Wilder met Saturday Night Live actress Gilda Radner on August 13 , 1981 , while filming Sidney Poitier 's Hanky Panky . Radner was married to guitarist G. E. Smith at the time , but Wilder and she became inseparable friends . When the filming of Hanky Panky ended , Wilder found himself missing Radner , so he called her . The relationship grew , and Radner eventually divorced Smith in 1982 . She moved in with Wilder , and the couple married on September 14 , 1984 , in the south of France . The couple wanted to have children , but Radner suffered miscarriages , and doctors could not determine the problem . After experiencing severe fatigue and suffering from pain in her upper legs on the set of Haunted Honeymoon , Radner sought medical treatment . Following a number of false diagnoses , she was found to have ovarian cancer in October 1986 . Over the next year and a half , Radner battled the disease , receiving chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments . The disease finally went into remission , giving the pair a respite , during which time Wilder filmed See No Evil , Hear No Evil . By May 1989 , the cancer returned and had metastasized . Radner died on May 20 , 1989 . Wilder later stated , " I always thought she 'd pull through . "

Following Radner 's death , Wilder became active in promoting cancer awareness and treatment , helping found the Gilda Radner Ovarian Cancer Detection Center in Los Angeles and co @-@ founding Gilda 's Club , a support group to raise awareness of cancer that began in New York City and now has branches throughout the country .

While preparing for his role as a deaf man in See No Evil , Hear No Evil , Wilder met Karen Webb (née Boyer) , who was a clinical supervisor for the New York League for the Hard of Hearing . Webb coached him in lip reading . Following Gilda Radner 's death , Wilder and Webb reconnected , and on September 8 , 1991 , they married . The two live in Stamford , Connecticut , in the 1734 Colonial home that he shared with Radner .

= = = Political views = = =

Wilder is a supporter of the Democratic Party , and has staunchly opposed U.S. actions in the Vietnam War and the Iraq War . He supported Eugene McCarthy in the 1968 presidential election . In terms of being politically active himself , Wilder stated , " I 'm quietly political . I don 't like advertising . Giving money to someone or support , but not getting on a bandstand . I don 't want to run for president in 2008 . I will write another book instead . "

= = = Semiretirement and authorship = = =

The Wilders spend most of their time painting watercolors , writing , and participating in charitable efforts .

In 1998 , Wilder collaborated on the book Gilda 's Disease with oncologist Steven Piver , sharing personal experiences of Radner 's struggle with ovarian cancer . Wilder himself was hospitalized with non @-@ Hodgkin lymphoma in 1999 , but confirmed in March 2005 that the cancer was in complete remission following chemotherapy and a stem cell transplant .

In October 2001 , he read from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory as part of a special benefit performance held at the Westport Country Playhouse to aid families affected by the September 11 attacks . Also in 2001 , Wilder donated a collection of scripts , correspondences , documents , photographs , and clipped images to the University of Iowa Libraries .

On March 1 , 2005 , Wilder released his highly personal memoir , Kiss Me Like a Stranger : My Search for Love and Art , an account of his life covering everything from his childhood up to Radner 's death . Two years later , in March 2007 , Wilder released his first novel , My French Whore , which is set during World War I. His second novel , The Woman Who Wouldn 't , was released in March 2008 .

In a 2008 Turner Classic Movies special , Role Model : Gene Wilder , where Alec Baldwin interviewed Wilder about his career , Wilder said that he was basically retired from acting for good . " I don 't like show business , I realized , " he explained . " I like show , but I don 't like the business . "

In 2010 , Wilder released a collection of stories called What Is This Thing Called Love ? . His third novel , Something to Remember You By : A Perilous Romance , was released in April 2013 .

When asked in a 2013 Time Out New York magazine interview whether he would act again if a suitable film project came his way , Wilder responded , " I ' m tired of watching the bombing , shooting , killing , swearing and 3 @-@ D. I get 52 movies a year sent to me , and maybe there are three good [ones] . That ' s why I went into writing . It ' s not that I wouldn ' t act again . I ' d say , ' Give me the script . If it ' s something wonderful , I ' ll do it . ' But I don ' t get anything like that . "

= = Work = =

= = = Film = = =

= = = Television = = =

Voice for The Electric Company 's segment The Adventures of Letterman (60 episodes , 1972 ? 1977)

Something Wilder (1994 ? 1995)

Will & Grace Episodes " Boardroom and a Parked Place " (2002) and " Sex , Losers & Videotape " (2003) ; (Guest Star ? Mr. Stein)

= = = Stage = = =

The Complaisant Lover (Broadway , 1962)

Mother Courage and Her Children (Broadway , 1963)

One Flew Over the Cuckoo 's Nest (Broadway , 1963)

The White House (Broadway , 1964)

Luv (Broadway , 1966)

Laughter on the 23rd Floor (London , 1996)

= = = Documentaries = = =

" Expo : Magic of the White City " (2005)

= = = Publications = = =

Piver , M. Steven and Gene Wilder . Gilda 's Disease : Sharing Personal Experiences and a Medical Perspective on Ovarian Cancer . Broadway Books , 1998 . ISBN 0 @-@ 7679 @-@ 0138 @-@ X

Wilder , Gene . Kiss Me Like a Stranger : My Search for Love and Art . St. Martin 's Press , 2005 . ISBN 0 @-@ 312 @-@ 33706 @-@ X

Wilder , Gene . My French Whore . St. Martin 's Press , 2007 . ISBN 0 @-@ 312 @-@ 36057 @-@ 6

Wilder , Gene . The Woman Who Wouldn 't . St. Martin 's Press , 2008 . ISBN 0 @-@ 312 @-@

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Wilder , Gene . What Is This Thing Called Love ? . St. Martin 's Press , 2010 . ISBN 978 @-@ 0
@-@ 312 @-@ 59890 @-@ 7

Wilder , Gene . Something to Remember You By . St. Martin 's Press , 2013 . ISBN
9780312598914