

SUNSET BOULEVARD

Directed by Billy Wilder
Produced by Charles Brackett
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1950

Screenwriter Joe Gillis, down on his luck and fleeing the repo men, pulls into the decaying estate of a decaying star, Norma Desmond. He concocts a plan that will allow him to stay at the estate while he touches up an original screenplay Desmond has written to catapult her back to the top. He chafes at the control she wields over him, and finds no comfort in the circumspect butler, Max von Mayerling. Joe tries to leave but is guilt-stricken by Norma's suicide attempt. He becomes a gigolo.

He finds a temporary escape from his gilded cage in the person of comely Betty Schaffer, a script reader. Together they hope to turn one of Joe's story ideas into a successful screenplay, all the while inexorably falling in love. Norma tries to stop it, but it is Joe who gets rid of Nancy. He then resolves to leave but is shot dead by Norma. She slips into insanity as the law finally punctures her carefully-ordered world.

Joe thought he would use Norma. Acting like he gave a rip about the script, he felt he could earn some dough and get back on his feet. But she fools him. He doesn't get money. And he doesn't leave the estate either. What he gets is Norma's attention, her embarrassing devotion, and expensive, worthless gifts. But Joe says she has treated him better than anyone else in all of Hollywood. Indeed, without her, he'd be back in Ohio. But he soon realizes that he can earn his keep on his own—maybe—with a new script, aided by the beguiling Betty Schaffer.

He knows he is no good, living the life of a locked-up playboy, and probably wants to protect Betty from that ugliness. He also doesn't want to hurt Artie, one of his best friends, engaged to this same girl. But with his emerging hopes for the new screen story, so grows his attraction to Betty. (Of course—their script is 'Untitled Love Story.')

They constantly joke with each other to manage the sexual tension, but finally, one night, she gives in to her feelings.

And yet there is still Norma to deal with.

With Norma harassing Betty by telephone, Joe decides to invite Betty over to see how he lives. Surprisingly, he acts like he enjoys his decadent lifestyle. Betty is willing to forgive him. Yet Joe dismisses her; we think that maybe he does like it, after all. But with Betty escorted out of the house and out of his life, Joe takes his leave. He must think he is just not good enough for the innocent Betty. Maybe she'll always keep that spark of vitality, but it may be lost regardless. She thought she had learned some sense when she was rejected by the studio as an actress, saying there's nothing wrong with being on the other side of the cameras—that it's even more fun. Yes, well...truth *is* stranger than fiction—especially in fiction.

Sunset Boulevard sports interlocking love triangles: Max-Norma-Joe and Betty-Joe-Norma. This is one of those twisted love stories where nobody ends up happy. Betty's spirit has been broken, Joe is dead, Norma is in prison, and Max...Max is the most tragic figure of all. We find out late in the picture that he was the first of Norma's three husbands. He directed her

early films and made her a star. He married her, but she divorced him. So he sacrificed his career, offering himself as a butler and manservant. Life without her was "unendurable." He preserved the illusion of stardom for Norma, committing his entire life to her fulfillment. And in the end, as Norma is lost to delusion, she mistakes him for Cecil B. DeMille. Norma is close to nobody, living her life like it is a movie, always acting, with exaggerated behavior not out of place in a silent picture. Max just wants to have a front-row seat for the show.

Through the picture, Joe becomes as delusional as Norma. He thinks he'll use her, but she uses him, eager for any man to make love to her, even if she has to buy him off to do it. When that doesn't work, she goes for the suicide route. He hates her gifts, but makes use of his share. He knows she's playing on his guilt to keep him around, but she is kind of nice, and a little entertaining, too. He does not see where it all will lead, and speaks with a much clearer mind once he is dead. One time, huffy and flustered, he asks, "What right do you have to take me for granted?" Norma replies, "What right?...do you want me to tell you?"

But even when the truth confronts him so plainly, Joe still cannot say no. The siren call of Hollywood is just too attractive. He can't return to that newspaper job in Dayton, he can't endure the derision of his jealous, petty colleagues. And he cannot deal with his guilt. He must stay with Norma, there in Fantasyland.

The film that Norma tries to put together, an epic telling of *Salome*, is quite appropriate. *Salome* is a princess, in love with a holy man. She dances the dance of the seven veils. He rejects her. She kills him, and kisses the lips of the corpse. She is *Salome*, obviously, and both Joe and the public at large serve as the holy man. She will have her revenge. (It would have been revenge enough to foist *Salome* on the public!)

At the film's climax, Joe does not take the gun from Norma. He tries once more to set the record straight, to pull her out of her fantasy world, but Max will be of no assistance. How can he admit to Norma that her life is nothing? Then his life is nothing, too. So Joe leaves, methodically, incautiously, and in the wrong direction. The way out is not by the swimming pool, but at the other end of the property, the driveway. He is shot once, but keeps moving. Shot twice, he turns for one last look of sadness. Shot a third time, he nosedives straight into watery oblivion. He wanted to die, to be free from his guilt, free from future pain, and to put Norma away, where she belongs.

It's a tragic, funny tale, and few places in the world have seen so much of both as Hollywood, California.