



NOIR...OR NOT?

THE LOST WEEKEND

Vince Keenan

On the final pages of Charles Jackson's 1944 novel *The Lost Weekend*, Don Birnam ends his marathon drinking binge by preparing for his next one. He slinks home with six pints of rye. One he'll enjoy now. One will serve as a decoy for his brother to find. The other four he hides, hanging two outside the window of their shared apartment, a cord extending from the neck of each bottle "to a tiny cleat that was used for the awning in summer." Fortified for the future, he downs a slug, goes to his bed, "and crawled in, feeling like a million dollars."

Adaptation is a ruthless art, screenwriters often performing radical surgery so a story can live in a new medium. Still, it's startling to see Jackson's closing image—a sign of how far Birnam has yet to fall before striking bottom—transformed into the opening shot of Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder's script as a camera pans across "the man-made mountain peaks of Manhattan." But then this storied partnership excelled at such deft cinematic shorthand. More shocking is the entry from Brackett's diary of March 8, 1946, the day after *Weekend's* triumph at the Academy Awards, where it claimed prizes for Best Picture, Director, Actor, and Adapted Script: he arrived to find the windows of the Paramount writers' building "garlanded ... delightfully with a row of whiskey bottles suspended from every one." A harbinger of doom becomes a slick character intro, then an elaborate joke. Such a strange journey befits *The Lost Weekend*. This trailblazing addiction drama may not seem like noir, but it looks and ultimately plays like one. And its production is as steeped in darkness as the cherry at the bottom of a rye Manhattan.

Wilder randomly picked up Jackson's book before a train trip to New York City. Choosing to make it the next Brackett/Wilder project was tempting fate, given the subject matter. Charles Brackett's wife Elizabeth was an alcoholic, her addiction and mental illness requiring frequent hospitalization before her death in 1948. But as his grandson Jim Moore notes in the foreword to Anthony Slide's compendium of Brackett's journals, *It's the Pictures That Got Small*, "Nowhere in the diaries is the word *alcoholism* used to describe her condition." Booze also



Don Birnam (Ray Milland) tries his best not to spill a drop as bartender Nat (Howard Da Silva) looks on

affected the marriage of his eldest daughter, likely contributing to her death and her husband's in separate incidents. Throughout his life Brackett would provide comfort to many bibulous colleagues, offering emotional and financial support to the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dorothy Parker, and Dashiell Hammett.

As for Wilder, he had recently completed adapting James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* with Raymond Chandler in a break from his partnership with Brackett, who looked down on Cain's novel. Ignore the Paramount-issued biography claiming "unlike his detective, Chandler rarely touches alcohol at any time, and never while working. When at his work, Chandler stimulates himself continually, and exclusively, with tea." The creator of Philip Marlowe arrived at the studio every day with a bottle of bourbon in his briefcase. Chandler's stealth imbibing irritated Wilder, much as Wilder's quirky mannerisms and chronic womanizing fueled Chandler's disdain. Wilder would later call his contribution to keeping Chandler off the wagon "the small revenge I had" for their stormy collaboration. His biographer Maurice Zolotow claimed Wilder made *The Lost Weekend* "to explain Raymond Chandler to himself."

Jackson's novel is largely autobiographical, including material about living as a closeted gay man that would, out of Production Code necessity, be stripped from the film. The author also omitted the most noir episode of his life: his role as a suspect in the 1936

murder of his friend, writer Nancy Titterton. Jackson's biographer Blake Bailey notes that Jackson's drinking didn't account for the brief period the NYPD viewed him askance—blame an affectionate dedication in a book Titterton gave to him at their last meeting—but that didn't stop the *Hollywood Reporter* from hyping the incident into the stuff of Cornell Woolrich nightmares, larding on erroneous lurid details and suggesting Jackson couldn't alibi himself because he was coming off a real-life lost weekend. What Jackson resented most about becoming gossip-column fodder, according to Brackett's diary, was the notion that this brush with the law scared him out of drinking: "I stopped because I made up my mind to. I hate that story. It's discreditable." Brackett and Jackson had a strained relationship, with Brackett at one point severing all contact with the novelist. When Wilder recounted Jackson's ensuing emotional turmoil, Brackett wrote in his diary that he felt "deep regret that I'd upset the nasty little neurotic so much, and a horrid smugness that I'd been able to do so."

In the novel, Jackson places the reader in uncomfortably close proximity to Don Birnam as he jettisons everyone close to him and debases himself to secure liquor as his sole companion for the title stretch. "It wasn't because he was thirsty that he drank, and he didn't drink because he liked the taste. ... He drank for what it did to him." What it chiefly does is ease Birnam's despair at his failure as

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There's no one in the place 'cept you and me: Birnam and the only company he wants to keep over the title stretch

a writer and so much else in life. (“All the things that had never happened yet were never going to happen after all. It was a mug’s game and there ought to be a law.”) Years of addiction have made Birnam skilled at deception. Upon receiving his first cocktail of the weekend, he doesn’t down it right away. “Instead, he permitted himself the luxury of ignoring it for a while ... When he finally did get around to raising the glass to his lips, it was with an air of boredom that said, Oh well, I suppose I might as well drink it, now that I’ve ordered it.” On another night in another bar, he relishes “a sense of elevation and excellence that was almost god-like” provided by his solitary drinking—then swipes a woman’s handbag to pay for the cocktails that bestow this hollow confidence.

Ray Milland played Birnam after Paramount nixed Wilder’s choice of Ferrer and Cary Grant passed. In his memoir *Wide-Eyed in Babylon*, Milland blithely admits dozing off the first time he read the book. Upon finishing it, he pronounces it “beautifully written ... but depressing and unrelieved. Damned interesting, though.” His biggest fear wasn’t the depth the role demanded but the risk of appearing foolish in the drunk scenes: “I was afraid I would overdo them and be amateurish.” The actor had starred in Wilder’s 1942 directorial debut *The Major and the Minor* and that familiarity bred its standard ration of contempt; Brackett visited *Major*’s set and wrote in his diary that he found “Ray Milland giving a dry, wooden performance (his usual performance to speak the truth),” while Wilder churlishly told Cameron Crowe in *Conversations with Wilder* that Milland was “surely not an Academy Award-worthy actor. ... He’s dead now, so I can say it,” adding that Milland helped *The Lost Weekend* because “he had no comedy in him.”

Other casting choices would have a more lasting impact on the director. Doris Dowling impresses as the hard-bitten “bar hostess” with a penchant for abbreviating words, punctuating her conversation with “natch” and “don’t be ridick.” She was also Wilder’s mistress, cast over Brackett’s objections, with Brackett certain this state of affairs would end Wilder’s other key partnership with wife Judith.

Instead, during filming of the scene when Birnam steals the handbag, Wilder found himself bewitched by the actress playing the woman who wordlessly hands Milland his hat before he’s bounced from the joint. “I fell in love with her arm first,” Wilder said. He and Audrey Young would be married from 1949 until his death in 2002.

Location shooting in New York provided its share of challenges. Wilder filmed Birnam’s pitiful stagger along Third Avenue in search of an open pawn shop where he can hock his typewriter with cameras so discreetly placed that gossip columns reported actor Ray Milland was on an epic Big Apple bender. To prepare for a critical scene, Milland made a research trip to Bellevue Hospital. In a case of life mirroring art, bedlam broke out in the ward and a panicked Milland fled outside, where he was intercepted by a police officer who recognized the hospital’s robe. Milland explained he was a movie star staying at the Waldorf Towers. The cop sure-buddied him and led him back inside. Filming then shifted to the Paramount lot, where the New York bar P.J. Clarke’s was re-created so meticulously that, according to Milland, a man presented himself every afternoon at five o’clock and asked for a bourbon. A bottle of the hard stuff had been placed on set for verisimilitude and Howard Da Silva, in character as Nat the bartender, would pour one. The lone customer would quaff half of it “and with a long exhale of pleasure look around and make some inane remark about the weather.” Then Robert Benchley, another of the dipsomaniacal writers in Brackett’s care, would finish the drink, slap down fifty cents, and leave. Milland, ever oblivious, assumed he was homesick for New York.

For a film about the dangers of John Barleycorn, odd references to alcohol surround *The Lost Weekend*. After an early screening, Milland was so discomfited by his performance he fled to a nearby bar for “the largest Scotch and soda I could get,” likely the last drink he would ever enjoy in peace. Brackett and Wilder distributed booze on set for crew Christmas gifts. Distilleries fearful the film would be “the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of Prohibition” offered Paramount five million dollars to buy the negative, with gangster Frank Costello serving as go-between. Brackett cheerily responded that he and Wilder “are highly bribable persons who, if we receive a case of Scotch a week in perpetuity, will manage to make the spectators lick their lips.”

The Lost Weekend may bear the trappings of an Oscar®-bait issue film, but Wilder, fresh off *Double Indemnity*, used much of the same production team, chiefly cinematographer John F. Seitz, to re-create its noir palette. Suspenseful moments abound, like Birnam’s ill-advised foray into theft and his humiliating comeuppance, or his frantic flight from Bellevue, aided by slipping on a doctor’s coat (which in actuality was Charles Brackett’s). His desperate bid to chain his door before his girlfriend Helen (Jane Wyman) can gain entry with a pass key is as nerve-jangling as any heist sequence.

At least superficially, *The Lost Weekend* may not appear to be noir. There’s no real crime to speak of, no femme fatale tempting our protagonist to ruin. But who needs a crime when there’s a raw, insatiable thirst? Noir is fundamentally about the self-destructive impulse. *The Lost Weekend* strips that story down to the studs, doing away with external enticements in favor of an incessant internal one. Don Birnam doesn’t require accomplices or enemies, not when with a few belts in him he’s abundantly capable of playing those roles himself. He’s a one-man show of obliteration, the only supporting players needed are a couple of bottles of rotgut—with a few prominently placed so they’ll be easily discovered by those foolish souls looking to help, natch. ■