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Going Wilder with art

Director to sell part of collection

By Meg Sullivan
Daily News Staff Writer

In "Sunset Boulevard," the faded star of silent screen Norma Desmond protests when she is told that she used to be big.

"It's the pictures that got small," she deadpans in what is arguably Billy Wilder's best line.



But such was never Wilder the fate for the legendary writer and director, who is almost as famous for his collecting abilities as his cinematic feats, which include "Double Indemnity," "The Seven Year Itch" and, of course, the 1950 classic that serves as the basis for the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical that arrived last week in Los Angeles from London.

In what he jokingly compares to an addiction, the noted col-

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Wilder sings the praises of theater's Lloyd Webber

By Meg Sullivan
 Daily News Staff Writer

Andrew Lloyd Webber, the creator of popular but not universally acclaimed musicals including "Cats," "Evita" and "The Phantom of the Opera," may have his detractors, but Billy Wilder isn't one of them.

Wilder, who wrote and directed the 1950 cinematic classic "Sunset Blvd.," on which the musical is based, said in an inter-

view Monday that he wishes the English director well during the play's Los Angeles run.

"I hope he makes lots and lots of money," Wilder said in his characteristic pull-no-punches style.

Wilder, who saw "Sunset Boulevard" when it debuted in London, offered only praise for the Los Angeles production, which opened last week at the Shubert Theatre in Century City.

"It's gotten better and better," said Wilder, who attended opening night and a charity preview

by multimillionaire Marvin Davis and his wife, Barbara.

Wilder, who acknowledges having given pointers to the play's producers after seeing the London production, refused to take credit for any improvements or elaborate on any of the suggestions.

"My contribution was close to zero," he said. "I just talked to them like a normal theatergoer. Maybe they took one or two suggestions. I don't know."

Wilder praised Glenn Close, who stars as the faded silent film

star Norma Desmond.

"She was sensational," he said of the actress, who is new to the production. Patti LuPone, formerly Evita on Broadway and recently star of ABC's drama series "Life Goes On," played the dangerously deluded actress in London.

"Her voice is an opera voice," Wilder said of Close. "Everything is clean and clear."

He was less enthusiastic about Alan Campbell in the role of Joe Gillis, the screenwriter who falls into Desmond's web.

"They're all good," Wilder said. "But you're used to (William) Holden. You long for him."

He also expressed nostalgia for the other casting coups that have been credited for the movie's success.

"We were lucky to have (the silent-movie director) Erich von Stroheim, (director Cecil B.) DeMille, (silent-screen actors) Buster Keaton and H.B. Warner," he said.

"But it's all gone now."

Wilder

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lector — over six decades — "went from buttons to Boteros," the Columbian modernist known for portraits of rotund people, particularly women.

For Wilder, who is now 87, the pictures have not only gotten bigger and bigger, but also more and more abundant. Same with the sculpture, assemblages and general what-have-yous that pack the Westwood apartment that he shares with his wife, Audrey Young, and two storage units.

"Buy stuff that you like, that brings joy into your life, that will make you want to get up in the morning," he said, offering as advice his own view of collecting.

The six-time Oscar winner has decided to sell off some of his collection. To that end, he has mounted an exhibit of 40 paintings, sculptures and assemblages — some created by Wilder himself — at the Louis Stern Gallery in Beverly Hills. In a tip of the hat to the famed Paris flea market where he acquired some of the pieces, he's calling it "Billy Wilder's Marche Aux Puce."

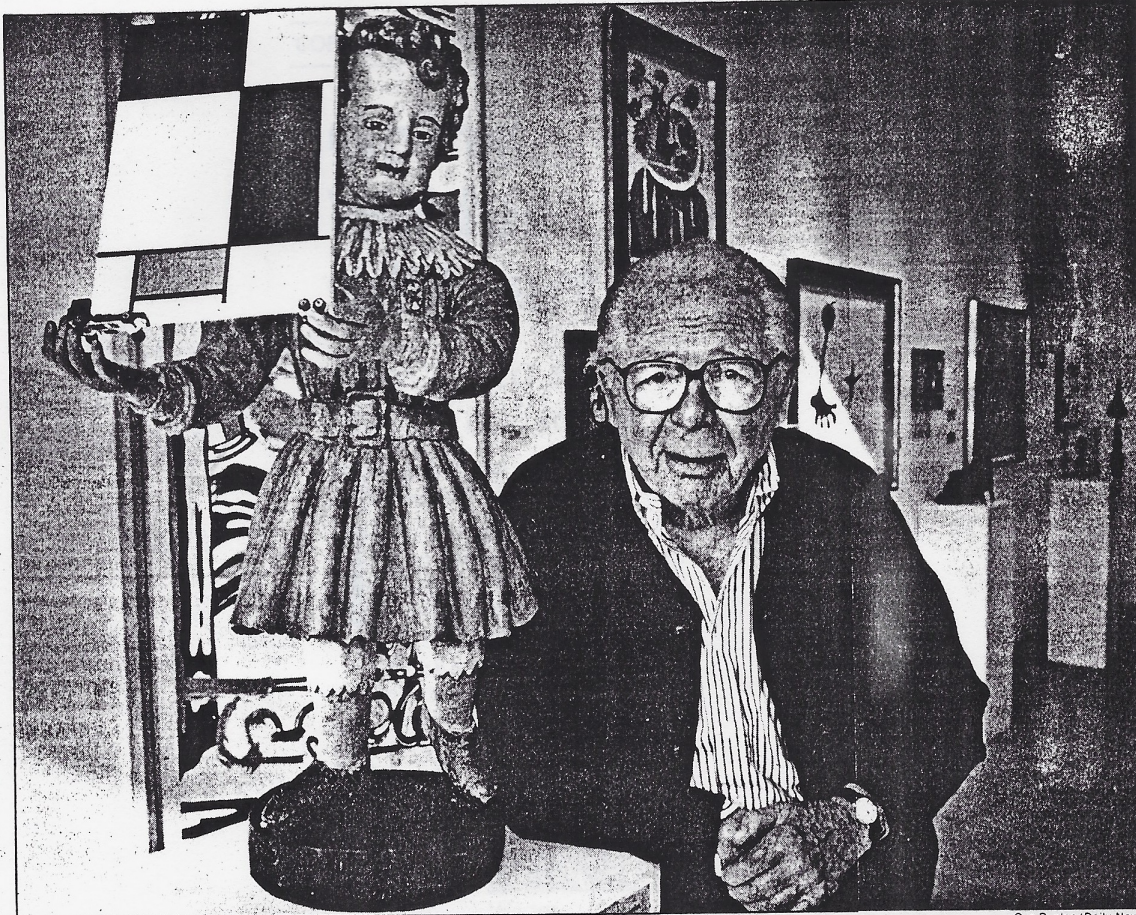
Anyone familiar with Wilder's track record in the collecting department knows to expect high jinx. In 1989, Christie's in New York auctioned a portion of his collection for a whopping \$32.6 million. That was \$2 million more than the auction house expected, making the art world sit up at attention.

Wilder maintains his objectives for the original sale were more modest. He said he had read about the "fantastic sums" that art was fetching at the time.

"I thought they were exaggerating, and I wanted to call their bluff," he said, a twinkle in his eyes. He also hoped the sale would put the skids on his collecting career, but it didn't work out that way.

"I promised myself I'm going to live like a Jesuit monk without even a postcard," he said. "It was like I'd gone through AA. But then I fell off the wagon."

Within two months of the sale, Wilder said he was collecting again. Now the refugee from Hitler's Germany makes no bones about reformation. He said he only hopes "to make room to buy new pieces."



Gus Ruelas / Daily News

"Buy stuff that you like, that brings joy into your life, that will make you want to get up in the morning," advises director Billy Wilder.

With approximately 40 items, the Beverly Hills sale contains less than half the number of the Christie's sale that nabbed headlines four years ago.

But Wilder fans will find much to amuse themselves. Among mementos for sale is a caricature of Wilder said to be drawn by Saul Steinberg in the Venice studio of the late architect Charles Eames. Another gem is a leather chaise-lounge designed especially for Wilder by Eames so that he could nap on the set between takes. So narrow that Wilder had to fold his hands on his chest, the chair had a built in alarm clock because the director's arms would slip from

their perch whenever he feel deep asleep and smack onto the floor, awakening him.

There's even a poster marking the original release of "Sunset Boulevard" in Poland. "Poland makes the best posters in the world," Wilder said. "We don't know why; it's just grows that way — like the Bordeaux of Bordeaux."

There are actually a couple of pieces that Wilder, a fan of assemblage or sculpture created of found objects, has created himself. An example is "Kinderspiel," a delicate assemblage that balances a hand-carved wooden tightrope walker on the head of a doll that

Wilder said he bought at the Parisian flea market.

But most of the pieces in which Wilder had a hand were created in collaboration with Los Angeles sculptor Bruce Houston. Mostly art gags, these pieces are every bit as irreverent as one would expect from the man who gave the world "Some Like It Hot."

There's "Fresh Mondrians for Sale," an assemblage with a 19th-century French doll carrying a replica of a Mondrian painting or wheels; "Merry Christo," a toy truck carrying a shrouded pint tree; and a whole series based on the 14th-century B.C. bust of the ravishing Queen Nefertiti, which

Wilder remembers admiring in Berlin's State Museum.

Each is designed to evoke the style of a famous artist. So, for instance, the Botero Nefertiti, wife of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaton, has puffed cheeks, and the Warhol version, a Campbell soup label around her turban.

"I don't pick up a brush," Wilder said of his collaboration with Houston. "I'm kind of an idea man."

Mostly the exhibit is being billed as an occasion to look at art in the same way as the man who maintains his guiding principle is "when you put good next to good, it only gets better."