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Executive suite, Wise, Robert, 1954

The set-up, Wise, Robert, 1949

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## **A Tribute to Robert Wise**

**Robert Wise in Person, February 27 and 28**

**It is with particular pleasure that we celebrate the distinguished career of Robert Wise, a Hollywood director, producer, and former editor who has provided us with decades of wonderful films, many of which are perennial PFA favorites. Film noir, horror, Western, science fiction, social drama, musical: Robert Wise is a man for all genres.**

**Wise started out as a messenger in the RKO editing department and before long was an editor himself, and nominated for an Academy Award for *Citizen Kane*. As a director of stylish B-horror films for producer Val Lewton, Wise already showed an affinity for eerie subtleties and expressive settings; in order to gain the actor's perspective, he also studied acting. A craftsman who knew his way around a low-budget picture, he applied that acumen to the many major motion pictures in his diverse career: you can get bigger and bigger budgets, but it's hard to top a film noir like *The Set-Up*, which won the Cannes Critics Prize in 1948. *The Day the Earth Stood Still* remains the most profoundly anti-nuclear of science fiction films, while *I Want to Live*, probably the most outspoken indictment of capital punishment on film, already had the kind of savage realism for which Wise would become known in *Odds Against Tomorrow*. Our tribute to Robert Wise provides an opportunity to revisit these excellent films as well as some rediscoveries.**

**Wise is no stranger to Oscar—*West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music* are among his Academy Award-winning titles, and he was given a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Academy in 1966. An artist who gives back to the community that has so honored him, he has served as president of both the Directors Guild of America and the Motion Picture Academy, and is a renowned philanthropist and mentor. Wise is a recipient of the Presidential National Medal of the Arts.**

**Special thanks to Zoe Elton and the Mill Valley Film Festival for kind assistance.**

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**FRIDAY FEBRUARY 13**

**Citizen Kane 7:00**

*Orson Welles (U.S., 1941)*

Robert Wise's most famous editing assignment. Rosebud may be the cinema's beloved red herring, but the mystery of Charles Foster Kane is solved very early on, and that is Welles's devilish coup. The gothic, labyrinthine aesthetic of *Citizen Kane* is its great mystery. Stylistically, the film is as distanced and inaccessible as Kane himself, protected in his perverse loneliness by a No Trespassing sign. The narrative



is like the jigsaw puzzle with which Susan Alexander Kane vaguely amuses and tortures herself in the dark “theater” of the Kane castle. Welles didn’t invent chiaroscuro lighting, deep focus cinematography, oblique camera angles, and lightning flashbacks, but he used them in a Brechtian way to alienate us from the monster he created. The hollowness of his American success story played out in full is captured in a magnificent overhead shot of Kane’s art collection, crated for auction, looking everything like the naked city of film noir.

• Written by Herman J. Mankiewicz, Welles. Photographed by Gregg Toland. Edited by Robert Wise. With Orson Welles, Joseph Cotten, Dorothy Comingore, Everett Sloane, Agnes Moorehead, Ray Collins. (120 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

## **The Magnificent Ambersons 9:15**

*Orson Welles (U.S., 1942)*

A family portrait set in the deep spaces of a nineteenth-century home: as in a portrait, its setting becomes its era. An ingenious narrative structure spans many years, following the fate of one of those families whose self-made riches waned, rather than doubled, with the advent of the technological age. They are viewed through the prism of an outsider, the young Eugene Morgan (Joseph Cotten), who loses his true love, Isabel Amberson (Dolores Costello) to a loveless marriage of status. It is a film filled with regret—regret for frustrated love and regret for the coming industrial age which “darkened our town into a city.” Delicately rendered, like the strawberry shortcake devoured in a key scene it is almost sinfully rich and layered in image and sound. Incorporating a Greek chorus of townspeople, a circular perspective and a cubist one, still-lives and silence, repetitions and non-sequiturs, it has a dreamlike quality with a dream’s wicked comeuppance.

• Written by Welles, based on the novel by Booth Tarkington. Photographed by Stanley Cortez. Edited by Robert Wise. With Joseph Cotten, Dolores Costello, Anne Baxter, Tim Holt, Agnes Moorehead. (88 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

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### **SATURDAY FEBRUARY 14**

## **The Body Snatcher 5:30**

*Robert Wise (U.S., 1945)*

The last film directed by Robert Wise for the Val Lewton unit, *The Body Snatcher* is a philosophical horror film that boldly lifts the shroud of Victorian decency to examine the lurid contradictions of Enlightenment scientific inquiry. Based on a Robert Louis Stevenson story inspired in turn by the real-life exploits of nineteenth-century corpse mongers Burke and Hare, *The Body Snatcher* features Boris Karloff as the perfidious John Gray, an Edinburgh cabman who supplements his income by providing fresh cadavers to Dr. “Toddy” MacFarlane (Henry Daniell), the proprietor of a medical school. When their scheme is threatened by MacFarlane’s bumbling assistant Joseph (the near-comatose Bela Lugosi), doctor and grave robber become locked in a struggle that culminates in a chilling finale. As with all of Lewton’s films, *The Body Snatcher* evinces a well-crafted screenplay, atmospheric sets, and menacing chiaroscuro lighting. The result is a thoroughly enjoyable if mannered entertainment with a terrific performance from Karloff.—Albert Kilchesty

• Produced by Val Lewton. Written by Philip MacDonald, Carlos Keith [pseud. Lewton], from a story by Robert Louis Stevenson. With Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, Henry Daniell, Edith Atwater. (77 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

## The Day the Earth Stood Still 7:05

Robert Wise (U.S., 1951)

One of the most enduring and influential science fiction films ever made, and among the first produced by a major studio, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is arguably the first sci-fi film that eschewed juvenile whiz-bang shenanigans (even though every kid in the country could proclaim, with appropriate urgency, "Klaatu barada nikto!") in favor of a message directed toward a post-atomic adult audience. Klaatu, an emissary from a "neighboring" planet, travels to earth (Washington, D.C., naturally) to alert its citizens to the threat nuclear weapons pose to the safety of the universe. Acted with ascetic aplomb by Michael Rennie, the Christ-like Klaatu, variously supported by Gort, his golem/robot enforcer; astro-physicist Dr. Barnhardt (Sam Jaffe as a delightfully wide-eyed ersatz Einstein); and a sympathetic human (Patricia Neal), manages to defy Cold War animosities to deliver The Word. A classic.—Albert Kilchesty

**Repeated February 15 in the Children's Film Festival.**

• Written by Edmund H. North from the story "Farewell to the Master" by Harry Bates. Photographed by Leo Tover. Music by Bernard Herrmann. With Michael Rennie, Patricia Neal, Hugh Marlowe, Sam Jaffe. (92 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Criterion Pictures)

## The Haunting 8:55

Robert Wise (U.S., 1963)

Bring a friend because you won't want to go home alone after seeing *The Haunting*, one of the most frightening films ever made. Julie Harris gives an otherworldly performance as a saintly spinster with a supernatural past. With Claire Bloom (an urbane lesbian with ESP) and Russ Tamblyn (the wise-cracking heir to the estate), she is invited to Hill House to participate in an experiment by psycho-anthropologist Richard Johnson. Throbbing walls, deafening noises, and the plangent weeping of a little girl soon convince the quartet that they are indeed in the house that Beelzebub built. But what, or more precisely, *who* does the house want? Fantastic deep-focus cinematography by Davis Boulton adds more than a touch of Val Lewton to *The Haunting*, Robert Wise's last black-and-white film, based on a novel by Shirley Jackson.

• Written by Nelson Gidding, based on the novel *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson. Photographed by David Boulton. With Julie Harris, Claire Bloom, Richard Johnson, Russ Tamblyn. (112 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

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### FRIDAY FEBRUARY 20

## Born to Kill 7:30

Robert Wise (U.S., 1947)

A complicated noir-melodrama about a morose, murderous kind of guy (Lawrence Tierney) who marries an insecure woman for her money but can't keep his thoughts off her sister (Claire Trevor). The feeling is mutual. One of Wise's most admired noirs, *Born to Kill* found a place in critic Manny Farber's book *Negative Space*, among the "Underground Films": "The terrorizing of a dowdy, middle-aged, frog-faced woman that starts in a decrepit hotel and ends in a bumbling, screeching, crawling murder at midnight on the shore. For his big shock effect, director Robert Wise...uses the angle going down to the water to create a middle-class mediocrity that out-horrors anything Graham Greene attempted in his early books on small-time gunsels." And Andrew Sarris called the film "a revelation...the most Nietzschean of all American film noir. The unyieldingly malevolent character played by Lawrence Tierney makes no sense except as a projection of Claire Trevor's evil desires."



• Written by Eve Greene, Richard Macaulay, based on the novel *Deadlier than the Male* by James Gunn. Photographed by Robert de Grasse. With Claire Trevor, Lawrence Tierney, Audrey Long, Elisha Cook, Jr. (92 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

## **Blood on the Moon 9:20**

*Robert Wise (U.S., 1948)*

Wise's critically acclaimed Western predicted by two decades the darkly existential swing the genre would take in the late 1960s. Wise used his Val Lewton sensibilities to create the closest thing to film noir the Western had seen yet: terse, realistic, moody, and moonlit. (Cinematography is by the great noir cameraman Nicholas Musuraca.) Robert Mitchum stars as a taciturn would-be cattleman who wanders into a struggle between homesteaders and ranchers, a battle manipulated by ruthless cattle rustler Robert Preston. Barbara Bel Geddes is the wildcat defender of the range (and not the kitchen kind), who steers cowpoke Mitchum toward his conscience. Mitchum gives one of his better if little known performances, and Wise creates an action film that, like its hero, is deceptively laconic. Memorable scenes include a long chase across snow-covered mountains, and a climactic barroom confrontation that outdoes itself for menacing effect.

• Written by Lillie Hayward, based on the novel *Gunman's Chance* by Luke Short, adapted by Short, Harold Shumate. Photographed by Nicholas Musuraca. With Robert Mitchum, Barbara Bel Geddes, Robert Preston, Walter Brennan. (88 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

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### **SATURDAY FEBRUARY 21**

## **Executive Suite 7:00**

*Robert Wise (U.S., 1954)*

A sparkling ensemble cast illuminates the drama of boardroom politics in *Executive Suite*, one of Wise's most intelligent and formally daring films. When the chairman of the board of a manufacturing company dies before appointing a successor, the ensuing scramble for power triggers a series of events which reveal the darkest chambers of the gray flannel heart. While the outcome of this clash among corporate Asgardians is never much in doubt—in cinema the artist/visionary always vanquishes the scheming opportunist—the brilliant performances by William Holden and Frederic March, the use of disarmingly effective subjective camera shots, and the sheer force of the drama (played out with no enhancements from a music score), launch *Executive Suite* to a spot near the top of film history's Fortune 500.—Albert Kilchesty

• Written by Ernest Lehman, based on the novel by Cameron Hawley. Photographed by George Folsey. With William Holden, June Allyson, Barbara Stanwyck, Fredric March, Walter Pigeon, Shelley Winters. (104 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

## **Two for the Seesaw 9:00**

*Robert Wise (U.S., 1962)*

Two vaguely miscast actors play two vaguely outcast characters making *Two for the Seesaw* a delightfully offbeat sixties film. Shirley MacLaine's a nice Jewish girl—too nice, and to the wrong people. Her Gittel Mosca, née Moscowitz, is a would-be modern dancer who can't dance because she's busy being a doormat for every wastrel in Greenwich Village. Robert Mitchum, as an Omaha lawyer far from the heartland in New York City, fell out of some film noir into a William Holden role—straight-man to a loony lover. But he's the real loony here, and watching him struggle with emotions-capital E is the more interesting for his poker face and the long shadow of the Mitchum swagger. He picks Gittel up off the floor but doesn't know where to put her. Bright, unrelenting psycho-dialogue and a camera that slyly pretends the screen's a stage help retain the "seesaw" effect of the original Broadway play.

• Written by Isobel Lennart, based on the play by William Gibson. Photographed by Ted McCord. With Robert Mitchum, Shirley MacLaine, Edmond Ryan, Elisabeth Fraser. (119 mins, B&W, 35mm, From MGM/United Artists Repertory)

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## THURSDAY FEBRUARY 26

Presented with support from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative.

### West Side Story 7:00

*Robert Wise, Jerome Robbins (U.S., 1961)*

It has become difficult to imagine Jerome Robbins's choreography for *West Side Story* without Wise's widescreen interpretation that, like the dances, continually reinvents and reinterprets the standoff between the Sharks and the Jets. This is a universe of repetitive movements across unbridgeable distances, like the gaps between youthful love and adult prejudice, and between the American dream and the New York reality that inform the film's central Romeo and Juliet plot. Only the cameraman's boom reaches the heights inspired by Manhattan's architecture; for those urban guerrillas (admittedly, like the Technicolor visuals, rather more *urbane*), the world is definitely horizontal.

• Written by Ernest Lehman, based on the musical by Leonard Bernstein, book by Arthur Laurents. Photographed by Daniel L. Fapp. Choreography by Jerome Robbins. Music by Leonard Bernstein. Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. With Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer, Russ Tamblyn, Rita Moreno, George Chakiris, voices of Marnie Nixon, Jimmy Bryant. (155 mins, Technicolor, 'Scope, 35mm, PFA Collection, permission MGM/United Artists Repertory)

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## FRIDAY FEBRUARY 27

Robert Wise in Person

### Odds Against Tomorrow 7:30

*Robert Wise (U.S., 1959)*

This exciting caper is film noir on the cusp of two decades. Shot at night in black and white and set to a gritty jazz track, it delves into the depths of human greed and self-destruction that laced the fifties crime melodrama with despair. But it also plays the odds on tomorrow by predicting the intensified brutality of the sixties films, and the socially conscious variants on the crime drama that the decade would produce—films about racial conflicts, psychopathic killers, etc. Robert Ryan, one of film noir's dark giants, for better or for worse is often at his best when playing the bigot (as in *Crossfire*). Here, he is a southern drifter whose hatred of blacks is focused on his partner-in-crime, Harry Belafonte, a Harlem musician. Shelley Winters is in her element as Ryan's girlfriend, but it is Gloria Grahame who culminates a decade of fatalistic *femmes* when she asks Ryan to excite her by describing what it's like to kill a man.

• Written by John O. Killens, Nelson Gidding, based on the novel by William P. McGivern. Photographed by Joseph Brun. With Harry Belafonte, Robert Ryan, Gloria Grahame, Shelley Winters, Ed Begley. (95 mins, B&W, 35mm, From MGM/United Artists Repertory)



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## SATURDAY FEBRUARY 28

Robert Wise in Person

### The Set-Up 7:00

*Robert Wise (U.S., 1949)*

A superb film noir and one of the great boxing films of all time. Robert Ryan (who was an amateur boxer himself) gives a canny performance as an aging middleweight who spoils a racketeer's arrangement for a fix by insisting on a win despite fierce punishment in the ring from his younger opponent. Audrey Totter is his wife, as desperate for an end to the boxing life as her husband is for redemption in the ring. Inspired by a jazz-age poem by Joseph Moncure March ("Cheap seats, the crowd was rough/ None of your high-hat Gershwin stuff"), the film itself is a bruising bit of American poetry, from the bleak town with its Cozy Hotel and I Dream Cafe, to the vicious gangster named Little Boy and the spectator who constantly shouts "Kill him! Kill him!"

• Written by Art Cohn, based on the poem by Joseph Moncure March. Photographed by Milton Krasner. With Robert Ryan, Audrey Totter, George Tobias, Allan Baxter. (72 mins, B&W, 35mm, From Warner Bros. Classics)

### I Want to Live 9:00

*Robert Wise (U.S., 1958)*

Party girl Barbara Graham [was] a fairly small-time grifter who did what she could for a buck, including prostitution and aiding her boyfriends in robberies and various hustles. She went to the chair for a murder she vehemently denied having committed...leaving her small child motherless and Susan Hayward the opportunity to tear up the screen in a highly sympathetic performance. The movie captures the spirit of the 1950s...in vivid black-and-white with which director Robert Wise was a master... Hayward reflected perfectly the glamorous but shaky character of a woman in transition, not knowing quite what she's doing or where she's going, behaving alternately tough and vulnerable while retaining the vanities expected of a good-looking gal. As Barbara Graham, the necessity of a another lifetime in order to get it right fits the Hayward profile. If ever there was a woman's movie made in the fifties, this is it.—Barry Gifford, *The Devil Thumbs a Ride and Other Unforgettable Films*

• Written by Nelson Gidding, Don M. Mankiewicz, based on articles by Ed Montgomery and letters of Barbara Graham. Photographed by Lionel Lindon. With Susan Hayward, Simon Oakland, Virginia Vincent, Theodore Bikel. (120 mins, B&W, 35mm, From MGM/United Artists Repertory)