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"Lubitsch touch" even in a more somber context, The Man I Killed was a commercial failure and after it Lubitsch never again risked unpopularity by departing from the comic vein in which he was most comfortable.

Late in 1931 Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier were teamed again for One Hour with You (1932), a sound remake of Lubitsch's The Marriage Circle. George Cukor was named director, under Lubitsch's supervision. (Lubitsch's contract called for him occasionally to supervise the productions of other directors.) After shooting had begun in December from a script prepared by Lubitsch and Raphaelson, Lubitsch felt that Cukor was incorrectly interpreting the comic values of the script and he gradually took over the direction, though Cukor remained on the set. At a preview, Lubitsch demanded that either his name or Cukor's be removed. Cukor's credit was eliminated and he retaliated by filing an injunction against the exhibition of the film. Eventually, however, a compromise was worked out whereby Cukor was billed as dialogue director and was also allowed to go to RKO to direct Constance Bennett in her next film.

Lubitsch's contract with Paramount was scheduled to expire in March 1932 and the studio did not hold an option on him. He had been receiving $125,000 for each film he directed. Early in the year Paramount began discussing possible terms for a new contract, such as eliminating his supervising duties or expanding them by making him an associate producer or giving him his own production unit. Columbia and United Artists also made bids for his services. Lubitsch was undecided. For one thing, he was considering the possibility of making his debut as a Broadway director. He was in New York for a time reading scripts and making preliminary plans. Several different projects were discussed, including the possibility of starring Maria Jeritza in an operetta version of The Czarina, which had been the source play for Forbidden Paradise and would be again later for A Royal Scandal. Finally in March he signed a new contract with Paramount to direct three pictures in the coming year.

Lubitsch's first film under his new contract was Trouble in Paradise (1932), his first non-musical sound comedy. It was in this genre that he excelled during his remaining years at Paramount. Lubitsch's sound comedies typified the elegance usually associated with that studio. They were high-society domestic farces set in European capitals, and they had sparkling dialogue, well-constructed plots, shimmering sets and costumes, and an air of Continental suavity. Lubitsch always regarded Trouble in Paradise as his most stylish film. Most critics have agreed with him. After Trouble in Paradise he quickly prepared an added sequence for the multi-director Paramount studio omnibus, If I Had a Million (1932). Lubitsch's sequence featured Charles Laughton as a clerk taking unceremonious leave of his boss after he receives a check for a million dollars, and it was singled out by most reviewers for its terse comic effect. Then in April 1933 Lubitsch went to New York to work with Ben Hecht on the screenplay for Design for Living (1933), from Noel Coward's Broadway hit about a free-living ménage à trois in Paris. For the second time in his Hollywood career Lubitsch was working from a well-known play. In both cases he stamped his own personality on the screen adaptations by dispensing with most of the original dialogue. Just as he had eliminated most of the famous Wilde epigrams from the intertitles in Lady Windermere's Fan, in Design for Living he retained only one line from the stage play--"good for our immortal souls."

Lubitsch's Paramount contract permitted him to direct one outside picture. After Design for Living he went to MGM to make his last musical of the thirties--The Merry Widow (1934), Franz Lehár's risque operetta featuring a hero who is a sexual favorite of all the girls at Maxim's. As early as 1930 MGM had wanted to reunite the Love Parade trio of Lubitsch, MacDonald, and Chevalier in a lavish sound production of the operetta. After years of complex legal negotiations, numerous draftings of treatments and scripts, and a prolonged and well-publicized search for a star, MGM finally settled on its original choice of director and stars in mid-February 1934. Producer Irving Thalberg intended for his Merry Widow to be one of MGM's most lavish productions in its history. Four versions were filmed simultaneously, for domestic, English, French, and Belgian audiences. The total projected budget was $1,640,000. Lubitsch was not able to exercise complete control over the production of The Merry Widow. He had not been involved in the film's inception and although a final script was shaped by him with Raphaelson and Vajda, it had been developed by the MGM assembly line of writers and script doctors. He was forced to work under Thalberg, who almost always had his own way in the end even with the most strong-willed of directors. In addition, a drive toward more strict enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code began in the late stages of production of The Merry Widow. There were Hays Office objections to certain parts of the film, and accommodations had to be made. For instance, Jeanette MacDonald told of one particular scene that had to be reshot because of the Code's rule that it could not be played with her in a horizontal position. Finally Lubitsch was permitted to shoot the scene by having her keep both feet planted firmly on the floor while she was lying on the couch. (He got around the censors by showing her feet only in establishing the scene.) After thirteen weeks of shooting, The Merry Widow was completed on July 17, 1934. Although it met with acclaim from the critics, audiences found The Merry Widow very disappointing.

Lubitsch returned to Paramount and began to make plans for a new film. Then, on February 4, 1935, Hollywood was astonished to learn that Lubitsch, at the height of his career as a director, had been named head of production at Paramount. The studio was in the throes of reorganization. Emanuel Cohen, production chief since 1932, was suddenly relieved of his duties, and Henry Herzbrun, the studio attorney, and Lubitsch were jointly named to replace him. Under this arrangement Lubitsch was to have full creative control over all