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TCM THIS MONTH

role model:
Gene
WILDER

SPECIAL EVENT

Start the Revolution Without Me

ADDITIONAL ARTICLES

Role Model: Gene Wilder

Featured Films

The Producers

Blazing Saddles

Start the Revolution Without Me



The historical farce, **Start the Revolution Without Me** (1970), starring Gene Wilder fresh off *The Producers* (1968) and Donald Sutherland just off *MASH* (1970), helped set the tone for a decade of American slapstick comedies. The film was executive produced by television giant Norman Lear (*The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *All in the Family*) and produced and directed by his longtime collaborator Bud Yorkin.

The story works off of accidentally switched newborns, mistaken identity and the French Revolution. A count and a commoner both visit the same country doctor with their very pregnant wives. Two sets of identical twins later, the doctor and midwife can't remember which belonged to whom, so one of each set goes home with its birth parents. Decades later, the Corsican brothers (Wilder and Sutherland) have grown up wealthy and spoiled, and the Coupe brothers (Wilder and Sutherland) have grown up poor and goofy.

On the eve of the French Revolution, the Corsican brothers, famed for their swordsmanship, are called upon by Louis XVI to protect him from the mob, while the Coupes are part of the ragtag team staging the overthrow. When one set of twins is mistaken for the other, mayhem erupts, with plenty of palace intrigue and shifting alliances. It feels like a Mel Brooks movie, without Mel Brooks, and indeed that filmmaker would carry on the torch (first set ablaze in *The Producers*) through the '70s with a number of films, including *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and *Young Frankenstein* (1974), both starring Gene Wilder.

In 1968 Wilder was in talks with Mike Nichols to do *Catch-22*

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(1970) when Norman Lear called with **Start the Revolution Without Me**. The film was going to be shot in Czechoslovakia, which was enjoying the political freedoms of the Prague Spring. After comparing both scripts, he went with Lear's project, feeling that Milo Minderbender, the role he'd been offered by Nichols, hadn't translated well into the *Catch-22* screenplay. A few weeks later, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia and **Start the Revolution Without Me** would be filmed in Paris instead.

The film is full of great character actors, including Hugh Griffith (*How to Steal a Million*, 1966) as Louis XVI and Billie Whitelaw (*The Omen*, 1976) as Marie Antoinette. Orson Welles is the film's narrator, appearing in opening and closing scenes. Though *Start the Revolution Without Me* took three months to film, Welles did his scenes in a day and a half. In his biography *Kiss Me Like a Stranger*, Wilder explains why Welles was already gone when he showed up to meet him on the second day: 'Well,' Bud said, 'we'd start a scene, and after a little while Orson would call 'Cut!' He'd look at me and say, 'Now you don't honestly want any more of that shot, do you, Bud?...And I'd say, Yes...well...I suppose so.' So we finished...an hour ago."

Warner Bros. didn't have much faith in **Start the Revolution Without Me**, perhaps unsure of both its comedic style and period story, and gave it a small release and little publicity. Not surprisingly, box-office receipts weren't impressive either. It wasn't until 16mm prints of the film began to circulate college campuses and an initial 1982 video release that it began to develop a cult audience.

Writers Fred Freeman and Lawrence Cohen were nominated for a WGA Award for best comedy written directly for the screen.

Producer: Norman Lear, Bud Yorkin, Edward Stephenson

Director: Bud Yorkin

Screenplay: Lawrence J. Cohen, Fred Freeman

Cinematography: Jean Tournier

Art Direction: Francoise de Lamothe

Music: John Addison

Film Editing: Ferris Webster

Cast: Gene Wilder (Claude/Philippe), Donald Sutherland (Charles/Pierre), Hugh Griffith (King Louis XVI), Jack MacGowran (Jacques), Billie Whitelaw (Queen Marie Antoinette), Victor Spinetti (Duke d'Escargot), Ewa Aulin (Christina of Belgium), Helen Fraser (Mimi Montage), Orson Welles (narrator).

C-90m.

by Emily Soares



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