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News, Obituaries

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2011

Max Wilk, Author, Music Impresario, Dies at 90



UPDATE (adds additional details, memorial service information) Max Wilk, author, playwright, film and television writer, and music impresario who produced Westport Arts Center jazz and live musical shows for almost 20 years, died Saturday at his Saugatuck Shores home in Westport, his son David said today. He was 90.

Many Westporters regarded Wilk as one of the town's living treasures. He took delight in regaling his fellow residents with insider tales of show business and the musical world – whether it was a large audience or an acquaintance he met at the deli.



Max Wilk addresses a Westport Public Library audience in 2008. (CLICK TO ENLARGE) *Phyllis Groner for WestportNow.com*

In 2008, he appeared at the Westport Public Library to promote an updated edition of his best known nonfiction work, "They're Playing Our Song: Conversations With America's Classic Songwriters"

When talking about the people he interviewed and had associations with over the years, he said, "I think I should have paid for the privilege of interviewing the people in my book." He added: "Stephen Sondheim and I are the only two left who are in my original book."

Wilk also explored the history of screenwriting, the name of his 2004 book drawing laughs without reading beyond its cover. The title: "Schmucks with

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Underwoods: Conversations with America's Classic Screenwriters."

In a 1997 New York Times interview at the age of 77, Wilk said he was in "this next-to-closing era, my A.A.R.P. years" and considered it his particular gift to look back and remember.

"My mind," he said, "is a repository of memories, of cameos and anecdotes. Nightly, I entertain a cast of thousands. Usually, at about 4 a.m., they arrive."

Wilk, who wrote mostly comedy in almost every form imaginable, was stage struck as a young man and studied drama at Yale, graduating in 1941.

During World War II, he served in the Army Air Force Motion Picture Unit, whose captain was Ronald Reagan. He worked on Irving Berlin's famous "This is the Army" show, and wrote and even appeared in Army training films.

After the war, living in New York City, and later, Ridgefield, Conn., he wrote plays (including "Small Wonder" with George Axelrod), was a founding member of the 52nd Street Players group, and also wrote for many magazines.

Soon after, he turned to the then new medium of television, writing live TV shows and later sitcoms and comedy specials through the 1970s to make his living as a writer.

He won a Peabody Award for the 1960 special "The Fabulous Fifties." He wrote screenplays for "Raggedy Ann and Andy" and "They Said it With Music," among many other television and film properties.

His original play, "Cloud 7" ran briefly on Broadway, and a later play, "Mr. Williams and Miss Wood" about Tennessee Williams, has been widely produced in recent years.



Max Wilk told stories, sang bits from various musicals and generally had his audience laughing, smiling and just enjoying themselves in a 2008 Westport Public Library appearance. Fellow Westporter Susan Terry (l) belted out some show tunes with the accompaniment of pianist Mark Cherry (r). (CLICK TO ENLARGE) *Phyllis Groner for WestportNow.com*

By 1960, he began publishing humorous novels, often set in the contemporary New York areas suburbia he knew so well. One of his novels, "Don't Raise the Bridge, Lower the Water" was made into a Jerry Lewis film whose screenplay he wrote.

During a few years spent living in London in the 1960s, he became involved with the Beatles Yellow Submarine project and was commissioned to write the novel based on the film. He wrote comedy specials for

such stars as Melina Mercouri and Jonathan Winters.

His "They're Playing Our Song," a collection of interviews with and stories about the great Tin Pan Alley and Broadway songwriters of the 20th century, has been in print for almost 40 years. It is widely quoted as an important source for many other writers.

The songwriter Jule Styne, in the preface to "They're Playing Our Song," points out that Wilk is no "johnny-come-lately outsider assembling old newspaper clippings. Max knows us, warts and all."

Other books include "The Golden Age of Television," "The Wit and Wisdom of Hollywood," "Schmucks with Underwoods," and "OK! The Story of Oklahoma."

In all, the ever funny and entertaining Wilk was the author of 19 books, four

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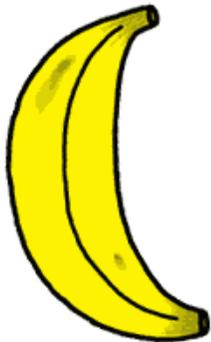
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films, three produced plays and innumerable television shows and magazine articles.

In later years, Wilk became a local music impresario, successfully producing scores of jazz and live shows for the Westport Arts Center during a run of almost 20 years.

In addition, for more than 20 years, he served as Dramaturge at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwright's Conference (NPC), working closely with many emerging and established playwrights, including Pulitzer winners August Wilson and David Lindsay-Abaire.

Skip Mercier, longtime friend of Wilk's, and scenic and costume designer for NPC, and instructor at the National Theater Institute, shared this story with broadwayworld.com upon learning of his friend's death:

"In typical Max form, plagued with growing dementia for his last week, he told me how hard it was not to have any ideas. Then his eyes got wide and he said: 'You know all the pictures on the wall in my study?' (Many friends covered his walls; most deceased & famous) I nodded. 'Well they are all in train windows - there's a train just behind the walls you know. It's waiting for me but I don't know where it's going! I hope it's fun.' Then we sang "Minnie the Mermaid." To the end, he was creative, funny, and with a unique take on life and whatever is beyond."

Wilk was pre-deceased by his beloved wife, artist Barbara Wilk, and is survived by his three children, seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

A memorial service is being planned by the family in Westport for April and the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center is planning a gathering in his memory during its 2011 summer season.

Phyllis Groner contributed reporting for this article.

Posted 02/21 at 07:01 PM

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We have lost another of the treasures of Westport. Max offered so much to his profession and the community. He will be greatly missed. When I listen to the music he loved, I shall always remember.

A. Beasley, M.D.

Posted by **Albert S. Beasley, M.D.** on February 21, 2011 at 08:50 PM | #

We were fortunate that for years Max brought us such great music. I will miss seeing him on one of his many walks, or at Doc's in the morning, and the funny things that he would say. He will surely be missed by many people.

Posted by **Judy Starr** on February 23, 2011 at 01:13 PM | #

Sorry to hear of the passing of Max Wilk. Through his great interest in and championing of jazz, Max and I got to be good friends. I remember the jazz concerts he emceed, bringing some fine musicians to play. I'll miss his wit and friendship.

Posted by **bob lasprogato** on February 23, 2011 at 03:53 PM | #

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