Cultural Daily

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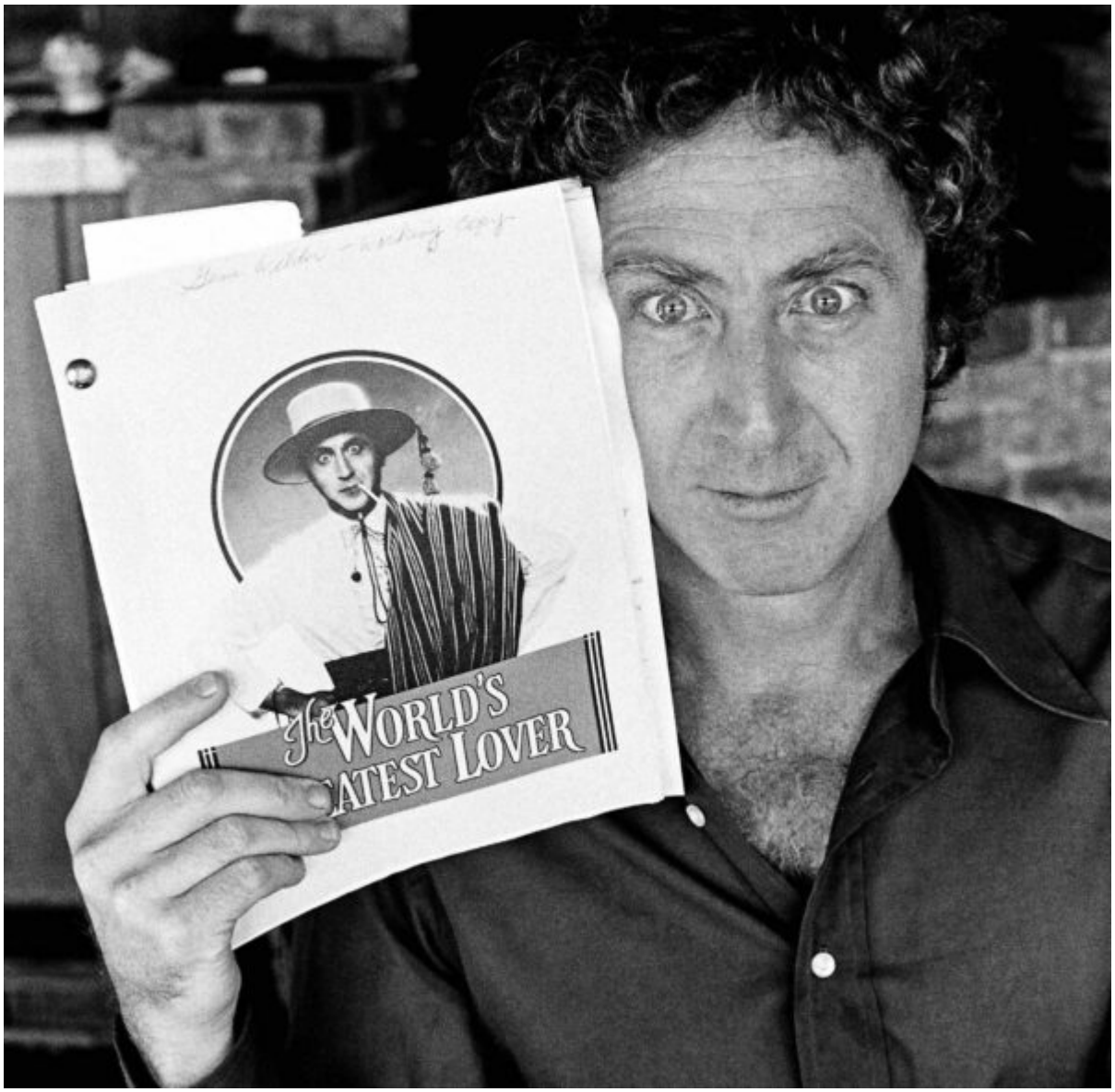
Wild and Crazy Gene Wilder

Elisa Leonelli · Monday, August 29th, 2016



Gene Wilder (c) Elisa Leonelli

I had been a fan in Gene Wilder since I first arrived in the US from Italy in 1972 and saw him as a man in love with his sheep in Woody Allen's *Everything you Always wanted to Know about Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask).* So when I became a photo-journalist in 1976, and learned how to deal with studio publicists, I asked to photograph him for a home layout, that was published in the Italian magazine *Grazia*. Not only did he agree, but he was game to my unusual request. I had

been reading a book about glamour photography in classic Hollywood and thought it would be fun to do a role-reversal, portray a man, not a woman, in a bathtub full of bubbles. Gene thought the idea was funny and he went for it. He was not naked, of course, he wore bathing trunks, and there was no *Hanky Panky*, I assure you, but it was fun and exciting. I did not use strobe lights at the time, only incandescent lamps, so the color tone is warm and the images not razor sharp; but they catch the twinkle in the eye of this amazing comedian. At the time Wilder was writing the script for *The World's Greatest Lover* (1977), that he would also direct and star in, a spoof of silent movies with Rudolph Valentino inspired by Federico Fellini's *Lo sceicco bianco* (*The White Sheik*, 1952). He said: "I want everyone to pee in their pants laughing, but I like to write about love and romance, and the emotions are autobiographical."

Gene Wilder, photo (c) Elisa Leonelli 1976

Gene Wilder was a romantic man, he married three women, and each one disappointed him, even his beloved Gilda Radner, who died of cancer in 1989, until he met his fourth wife, Karen, and married her in 1991. He wrote in great detail about these love stories in his 2005 memoir, *Kiss Me Like a Stranger: My Search for Love and Art*. If you get this as an audio book, you will be treated to the author's voice.
Wilder did star in a movie called *Hanky Panky* (1982) directed by Sidney Poitier, and that's where he fell in love with Gilda, his costar.
His best performance for me is in *Young Frankenstein* (1974), a movie he co-wrote with its director, Mel Brooks. Wilder said: "I had Mary Shelley's book as a guideline, because it's a wonderful legend, and I distorted the characters, from how I remembered them from childhood, but the basic story is the creation of a monster and a sane man who goes crazy, which is what I like to do."

Recently, as an avid lover of TCM, I watched a 2008 Turner Classic Movies documentary, *Role Model: Gene Wilder*. It was great to see this man alive and well, before Alzheimer clouded his mind and caused his death, August 28, 2016, at age 83. He was born Jerome Silberman in Milwaukee, Wisconsin on June 11, 1933. We will miss him.

Read more quotes from Gene Wilder in Elisa Leonelli's article on the Golden Globes website.

Gene Wilder (c) Elisa Leonelli 1976

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