



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Sweet Smell of Success

Franc Roddam on 'Sweet Smell of Success'

Sweet Smell of Success is a film that is sympathetic to the anger that I feel about the way in which the public is bamboozled into believing half-truths and downright lies by politicians and the press and the narrow artistic confines that Hollywood imposes on filmmakers.

The hero changing destiny is the major simple utopian notion behind most American cinema. You don't have to have much insight and socio-political experience to realise that more often than not, the opposite is true: the corrupt are in control of destiny. But it takes a great amount of courage to make this your theme as Alexander Mackendrick did in his sensational film, *Sweet Smell of Success*.

The film was made in 1957, in the wake of the McCarthy witchhunt. From a short story by Ernest Lehman, *Sweet Smell of Success* is a valiant attempt to stand up to the corrupt and jealous, striking a blow for artists and filmmakers alike whose lives were forever changed by McCarthyism.

Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) is a starving publicity agent who is being shunned by the all-powerful Broadway columnist, J.J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster). In order to get his publicity handouts into J.J.'s column, Falco becomes Hunsecker's whipping boy, prepared to carry out any task, no matter how dastardly. Hunsecker demands that Falco breaks up a relationship between his younger sister and a young jazz guitarist by accusing him of being a marijuana smoker and a card-carrying Communist. When this fails, Falco agrees to plant drugs on the musician and then inform the police.

Hunsecker's abuse of power and Falco's willing complicity bring together two of the main themes of film noir – alienation and obsession. Unlike the early noir films, where the protagonists are moved on through some notion of a realisation of their flaws, Falco and Hunsecker are readily absorbed and consciously at ease in their corrupt and morally bereft world. That the corrupt change destiny and not the hero is the film's sad reflection on American social and political life.

When I first saw the film in 1970, at the end of my years at film school, I was blown away by how superbly it was made. It has so many outstanding qualities that it is difficult to rate them in any order. The dialogue, written by Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman, is exceptional – perhaps the wittiest and most cutting speech in any film ever made. It rattles along with such speed and insult that sometimes you almost can't believe what you have just heard. The setting is Broadway at night – black and white: glittering with light and menacing with chiaroscuro contrasts. The streets are packed with people and cars. The clubs are full of punters, petty gangsters, goodtime girls and crooked politicians. The wardrobe is sharp, flashy and urbane. The camera work by James Wong Howe is magnificent – low-key lighting, fast-moving camera, powerful framing and distinctive angles. Most of the film takes place at night, and even in the daytime you sense the oppression of the city and the alienation of the citizens.

The editing is as fast and as pacy as the dialogue. From the very first frame, with its wide shot over Broadway and the magnificent Elmer Bernstein score,

you are immediately thrust into the world of the film's habitués. Editor and composer work brilliantly well together. The mostly jazz score serves many functions: to put you in the world of showbiz and night life; to give you the emotional swing of the big city; and to pace up the film and accentuate a plot point. The combination of camera-work, editing, music, and direction and dialogue all serve completely to immerse you in the characters' world.

Burt Lancaster was never better as the sinister, monomaniacal Hunsecker. Even though we don't see him for the first 15 minutes, he dominates the film through the other characters' preoccupation with him. In a brilliant touch, when we first come into contact with him, we hear his voice on the telephone dismissing Falco's desperate request to be included in his column: 'You're dead, son – get yourself buried.' Hunsecker sees himself as almost God-like. He actually does say at one point (to a bent politician): 'Go now and sin no more.' He controls the hearts and minds of his 60 million readers; he is the most powerful man on Broadway and wants to control everything that comes into his path, including his younger sister. Their dark relationship with its hints of incest is truly chilling. It is a great relief when the young guitarist, Steve Dallas (Marty Milner), reminds him and us that Hunsecker is no more than a parasite; a morally corrupt parasite feeding on the artistic world.

Tony Curtis is equally brilliant – pretty, dishonest, ambitious and desperate, he will go to any lengths to survive. He is both smart and pathetic at the same time. As gutless as he is, he is not afraid to trade verbal punches with Hunsecker. All the minor characters are wonderfully cast and portrayed. The corrupt and dangerous cop, Kello, is particularly frightening.

All this has been put together with a magnificent objectivity by Mackendrick. He is smart enough to walk us through this corrupt world, leading us towards some moral clarity and yet still make these dark and dangerous characters entertaining, human and familiar. 'I love this dirty town' says Hunsecker to Falco. And we can see his point.

Mackendrick's defence of the artist and the individual, against a corrupt and malevolent press and its metaphor for corrupt government, remains ever pertinent. It's a bold film, made by a bold filmmaker. Mackendrick was briefly my teacher at the London Film School. I had not yet seen his film and remember him as a rather attractive, self-possessed and distracted man. Little did I know then that he had made one of the greatest films in the greatest era of cinema.

Franc Roddam, *Sight & Sound*, January 1997

SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

Directed by: Alexander Mackendrick
©/Production Companies: Norma Productions, Curtleigh Productions
Production Company: Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Productions
Produced by: James Hill
Production Manager: Richard McWhorter
Assistant Director: Richard Maybery
Screenplay by: Clifford Odets, Ernest Lehman
From the novelette by: Ernest Lehman
Photographed by: James Wong Howe
Editorial Supervision: Alan Crosland Jr
Art Director: Edward Carrere
Set Decorator: Edward Boyle
Costumes Designed by: Mary Grant
Make-up: Robert Schiffer
Music Scored and Conducted by: Elmer Bernstein
Songs by: Chico Hamilton, Fred Katz
Music Editor: Lloyd Young
Sound Recording: Jack Solomon
Effects Editor: Robert Carlisle

USA 1957©
97 mins

Cast

Burt Lancaster (*J.J. Hunsecker*)
Tony Curtis (*Sidney Falco*)
Susan Harrison (*Susan Hunsecker*)
Marty Milner (*Steve Dallas*)
Sam Levene (*Frank D'Angelo*)
Barbara Nichols (*Rita*)
Jeff Donnell (*Sally*)
Joe Frisco (*Herbie Temple*)
Emile Meyer (*Harry Kello*)
Edith Atwater (*Mary*)
The Chico Hamilton Quintet (*themselves*)
Joseph Leon (*Joe Robard*)*
David White (*Otis Elwell*)*
Lawrence Dobkin (*Leo Bartha*)*
Lurene Tuttle (*Laurie Bartha*)*
Queenie Smith (*Mildred Tam*)*
Autumn Russell (*Linda James*)*
Jay Adler (*Manny Davis*)*
Lewis Charles (*Al Evans*)*
John Fiedler (*barman*)*
Fred Katz (*himself*)*

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Killers

Tue 25 May 20:30; Tue 8 Jun 14:30; Wed 23 Jun 17:50
(+ pre-recorded intro by Imogen Sara Smith, author of 'In Lonely Places: Film Noir beyond the City')

Alice in the Cities (Alice in den Städten)

Wed 26 May 17:50; Tue 1 Jun 14:30; Fri 25 Jun 20:45

Eraserhead

Thu 27 May 18:20; Mon 14 Jun 21:00; Thu 24 Jun 21:10

Man Hunt

Fri 28 May 18:10; Sat 12 Jun 16:00; Tue 29 Jun 14:15

Persona

Fri 28 May 21:00; Wed 2 Jun 18:10 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Mon 28 Jun 21:00

La Haine

Sat 29 May 21:00; Wed 16 Jun 21:00; Fri 18 Jun 20:40

Citizen Kane

Sun 30 May 12:40; Mon 21 Jun 20:45

Touch of Evil

Mon 31 May 12:45; Sat 5 Jun 17:50; Sun 20 Jun 18:15

The Last Picture Show (Director's Cut)

Mon 31 May 12:50; Mon 7 Jun 17:45

Steamboat Bill, Jr.

Thu 3 Jun 14:30; Tue 22 Jun 18:30

Sweet Smell of Success

Fri 4 Jun 15:00; Sun 13 Jun 15:45; Sat 26 Jun 11:40

The Man Who Wasn't There

Fri 4 Jun 17:50; Sun 27 Jun 18:20

L'eclisse (The Eclipse)

Sat 5 Jun 12:10; Tue 15 Jun 17:50

The White Ribbon (Das weisse Band)

Sun 6 Jun 18:10; Sat 26 Jun 16:30

Le Doulos + pre-recorded intro by Professor Ginette Vincendeau, King's College London

Mon 7 Jun 14:15; Thu 17 Jun 20:45; Wed 30 Jun 17:45

The Night of the Hunter

Tue 8 Jun 20:50; Wed 16 Jun 18:15 (+ pre-recorded intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large)

The Tango Lesson

Wed 9 Jun 17:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by So Mayer, author of 'The Cinema of Sally Potter')

Cleo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

Thu 10 Jun 21:00; Mon 21 Jun 14:30

Bitter Victory

Sun 20 Jun 13:00; Mon 28 Jun 17:55

The Big City (Mahanagar)

Wed 23 Jun 17:40

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Thu 24 Jun 17:40

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