



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 Manchurian Candidate

Mon 1 Aug 14:40; Fri 5 Aug 18:00; Sun 14 Aug 14:40

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Tue 2 Aug 18:15; Wed 10 Aug 20:45; Tue 23 Aug 20:50;
Mon 29 Aug 12:00

Sweet Smell of Success

Tue 2 Aug 20:50; Sat 13 Aug 18:10; Mon 29 Aug 18:30

Dance, Girl, Dance

Wed 3 Aug 18:00 (+ intro by Pamela Hutchinson, Film Critic and
Historian); Thu 18 Aug 20:45

Gaslight

Thu 4 Aug 18:15; Mon 8 Aug 20:45

Persona

Fri 5 Aug 20:50; Thu 11 Aug 21:00; Wed 31 Aug 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff
Andrew, Programmer at Large)

Raging Bull

Sat 6 Aug 20:30; Thu 11 Aug 20:30; Fri 26 Aug 20:30

La Haine

Sat 6 Aug 21:00; Fri 19 Aug 20:50; Wed 24 Aug 18:10 (+ intro by Ginette
Vincendeau, Professor of film studies at King's College London)

Citizen Kane

Sun 7 Aug 14:30; Tue 16 Aug 18:15; Wed 24 Aug 20:40

The White Ribbon (Das weiße Band)

Tue 9 Aug 17:50; Sat 27 Aug 17:50

Kes

Tue 9 Aug 20:45; Mon 15 Aug 18:15; Tue 30 Aug 20:40

The Night of the Hunter

Wed 10 Aug 18:10 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Director of Public
Programme and Audiences); Mon 22 Aug 20:45; Sun 28 Aug 12:20

Notorious

Thu 11 Aug 18:10; Wed 17 Aug 20:45; Sun 21 Aug 12:20; Thu 25 Aug
18:15

Bigger Than Life

Fri 12 Aug 20:40; Wed 17 Aug 18:20 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew,
Programmer at Large)

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goes down.