

Sweet Smell of Success

By Andrea Alsberg

Close your eyes and let a century and a half of cinema drift through your imagination. When you land in the 1950s, do you smile with recollection of the biblical epics, sweeping musicals, big chested men and women, casts of thousands, kitsch? The very largeness of it all: movies were trying to capture your attention in order to stay afloat. The recently invented television set enticed cash-strapped post-war Americans to stay home in newly developed suburbs. Consequently, the studios needed commercial hits more than ever, and although frequently titillating, the films were often innocuous, politically neutral, and dull.

Problems entangled the studios after World War II: diminished audience, the Anti-Trust Law of 1948 (which ostensibly separated the studios from their stranglehold on distribution) and the debilitating witch hunt held by the House for Un-American Activities (HUAC), advantageously allowed for smaller, independent films to foment. These are the mid-century films that have captivated film lovers: films that take risks and explore previously taboo subjects made by intelligent visionary artists who created a road map for the better known "indies" of the 60s and 70s.

"Sweet Smell of Success" is one such film. It could never have been made under the auspices of the old studio system. There is cynicism and blistering satire, and there is marijuana, black and white co-mingling, and suggested incest! Sacred cows be damned!

The plot is fairly simple (God is in the details.) Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) is an unctuous press agent eager to get any of his two-bit clients into the column penned by monstrously famous New York gossip columnist, J.J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster). Hunsecker leans on Falco for one favor: break-up the relationship between Hunsecker's sister (whom Hunsecker has a creepy affection for) Susan (Susan Harrison) and the jazz musician (Martin Milner) she is earnestly in love with. Until Falco can complete this, Hunsecker will make his life a living hell. J.J. and Falco ultimately get their comeuppance and



Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) eyes his boss and mentor J.J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Susan sees the light of day.

How this film ever saw the light of day is worthy of exploration. After stints in the circus, the army and Broadway, Burt Lancaster became a star with his first film role in "The Killers" (1946). Soon after, he and literary agent Harold Hecht (credited with bringing Mr. Lancaster to Hollywood) formed Hecht-Lancaster Productions, one of the first independent film production companies. Working with United Artists, they were quite successful, winning an Academy Award for the film production of "Marty" (1955). The two were then joined by writer/producer James Hill.

Paramount brought writer Ernest Lehman out from New York to Hollywood in 1952. Lehman began his career as a press agent and his scathing novella of that world, centered upon the man who seemed to control it all, Walter Winchell, became "Sweet Smell of Success." Bought by Hecht-Hill-Lancaster in 1956, Lehman was hired by the company to write the screenplay. After writing several drafts, and just before the film was to begin shooting, Lehman fell ill and left the project.

Alexander Mackendrick, having made his reputation at Ealing Studios directing "The Ladykillers" and "The Man in The White Suit," became the director of the film. Mackendrick was eager to shed his reputation as a master of small British comedies, and shooting a gritty Manhattan tale appealed to him, as did the writer hired to replace Lehman: Clifford Odets.

Odets today seems to be remembered for two things: his left-leaning days with The Group Theater (scribing the plays "Waiting for Lefty" and "Awake and Sing") and his less than heroic testimony for HUAC in the early '50s which labeled him as a "friendly witnesses." In the intervening years, Odets' screenwriting (he was frank about leaving the stage in order to make money in Hollywood) has been re-visited and appreciated. "Sweet Smell of Success" may be the finest example of Odets' capabilities.

The film began shooting on a wintry Manhattan morning in December 1956. Odets, hired just a week before shooting, camped out in one of the prop trucks, trying to stay warm while typing the day's pages. Mackendrick and Lancaster were at odds with how the film and some of the characters should develop. Mackendrick was a stylist who didn't mind challenging Lancaster's strong personality and ideas, and the two would not work together again. (In fact, Lancaster would both fire re-hire Mackendrick at the end of "Sweet Smell of Success" shooting.)

James Wong Howe, master of chiaroscuro cinematography, was perhaps the most prepared when filming started, having scouted all the locations for exterior dawn and twilight scenes and having adjusted his lenses to create the claustrophobic feeling that Mackendrick wanted. Preparation for the film's look of gritty urban confinement gave the actors inspiration for the interior design of their characters.

Looking at Lancaster's roles prior to "Sweet Smell," it was clear he was not to be pigeonholed. He played killers, athletes, pirates, lovers, but he always played handsome. In J.J. Hunsecker, Lancaster shed any trace of hunky athleticism in his portrait of this coiled, nocturnal demi-god. Tony Curtis, on the other hand, was groomed by Universal to be a matinee idol and fought hard for the role of the pathetic Sidney Falco. It is difficult to envision the film without these two actors, one-upping each other with blistering (Lehman-Odets) lines ("You're dead, son. Get yourself buried.") The Curtis/Falco-Lancaster/Hunsecker relationship is the heart of the film. It is their sado-masochistic work/marriage that turned the studio driven Hope/Crosby, Abbot/Costello buddy film on its head in favor of the new anti-hero illuminating the underside of post-war America: unbridled ambition and greed.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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