

= Sweet Smell of Success =

Sweet Smell of Success is a 1957 American film noir drama film made by Hecht @-@ Hill @-@ Lancaster Productions and released by United Artists . It was directed by Alexander Mackendrick and stars Burt Lancaster , Tony Curtis , Susan Harrison and Martin Milner . The screenplay was written by Clifford Odets , Ernest Lehman and Mackendrick from the novelette by Lehman . Mary Grant designed the film 's costumes .

The film tells the story of powerful newspaper columnist J.J. Hunsecker (portrayed by Lancaster and based on Walter Winchell) who uses his connections to ruin his sister 's relationship with a man he deems unworthy of her .

Despite a poorly received preview screening , Sweet Smell of Success has greatly improved in stature over the years . It is now highly acclaimed by film critics , particularly for its cinematography and screenplay . In 1993 , the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being " culturally , historically , or aesthetically significant . "

Sweet Smell of Success : The Musical was created by Marvin Hamlisch , Craig Carnelia and John Guare in 2002 .

= = Plot = =

Manhattan press agent Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) has been unable to gain mentions for his clients in J.J. Hunsecker 's (Burt Lancaster) influential , nationally syndicated newspaper column of late because of Falco 's failure to make good on a promise to break up the romance between Hunsecker 's younger sister Susan (Susan Harrison) and musician Steve Dallas (Martin Milner) , an up @-@ and @-@ coming jazz guitarist .

Falco is losing money and clients . Given one last chance by the bullying , intimidating Hunsecker , he schemes to plant a false rumor in a rival column that Dallas is a dope @-@ smoking Communist , then encourages Hunsecker to rescue Dallas 's reputation , certain that the headstrong boyfriend will reject Hunsecker 's favor and end up looking bad to Susan .

The plan works , in a way ? Dallas can 't resist insulting Hunsecker 's methods , and , forced to choose between them , the timid Susan breaks up with Dallas in order to protect him from her brother . Hunsecker , however , is enraged by Dallas 's insults to him after a brief confrontation . He decides to ruin the boy after all (against Falco 's advice) and wants to have marijuana planted on the musician , then have him arrested and roughed up by corrupt police Lt. Harry Kello (Emile Meyer) .

It is such a dirty trick that even Falco wants no part of it , at least until Hunsecker promises to take a long vacation from his powerful column and turn it over to Falco in his absence . At a nightclub , Falco slips the marijuana cigarettes into a pocket of a coat belonging to Dallas , who is accosted by Kello outside the club .

Falco is summoned to Hunsecker 's penthouse apartment , only to find Susan there by herself and about to attempt suicide . He grabs her just as her brother walks in , but Hunsecker , encouraged by Susan 's silence , accuses Falco of trying to assault Susan and begins beating the physically weaker Falco . Falco pleads that he only came to the apartment at Hunsecker 's request , prompting Hunsecker to tell Falco that he never called him . As Susan stops Hunsecker from further harming him , Falco realizes that Susan placed the call in order to bring the men to blows .

In a climactic confrontation , Falco reveals to Susan that it was her brother who ordered him to destroy Dallas 's reputation and their relationship . Hunsecker makes a call to Kello to come after Falco , who tries to flee but is caught in Times Square by the brutal cop .

Back in the penthouse , Susan , her bags packed , acknowledges to her brother that she attempted suicide , considering death preferable to living with him . She walks out on him , saying that she will go to Dallas and tells Hunsecker that she pities rather than hates him . A mortified J.J. looks at his sister from his apartment , as she walks out into the daylight .

= = Cast = =

Burt Lancaster as J. J. Hunsecker
Tony Curtis as Sidney Falco
Susan Harrison as Susan Hunsecker
Martin Milner as Steve Dallas
Sam Levene as Frank D 'Angelo
Barbara Nichols as Rita
Jeff Donnell as Sally
Joe Frisco as Herbie Temple
Emile Meyer as Lt. Harry Kello , NYPD
Edith Atwater as Rita
Chico Hamilton as Himself

= = Production = =

Faced with potential unemployment from the sale of Ealing Studios to the BBC in 1954 , director Alexander Mackendrick began entertaining offers from Hollywood . He rejected potential contracts from Cary Grant and David Selznick and signed with independent production company Hecht @-@ Hill @-@ Lancaster , enticed by their offer to adapt George Bernard Shaw ? s play The Devil 's Disciple . After the project collapsed during pre @-@ production , Mackendrick asked to be released from his commitment . Harold Hecht refused and asked him to start work on another project ? adapting Ernest Lehman ? s novellette Sweet Smell of Success into a film .

Lehman ? s story had originally appeared in a 1950 issue of Cosmopolitan , renamed " Tell Me About It Tomorrow ! " because the editor of the magazine did not want the word " smell " in the publication . It was based on his own experiences working as an assistant to Irving Hoffman , a prominent New York press agent and columnist for The Hollywood Reporter . Hoffman subsequently did not speak to Lehman for a year and a half . Hoffman then wrote a column for The Hollywood Reporter speculating that Lehman would make a good screenwriter , and within a week Paramount called Lehman , inviting him to Los Angeles for talks . Lehman went on to forge a notable screenwriting career in Hollywood , writing Executive Suite , Sabrina , North by Northwest , The Sound of Music , West Side Story , The King and I , and Who 's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? .

= = = Pre @-@ production = = =

By the time Hecht @-@ Hill @-@ Lancaster acquired Success , Lehman was in position to not only adapt his own novellette but also produce and direct the film . After scouting locations , Lehman was told by Hecht that distributor United Artists was having second thoughts about going with a first @-@ time director , so Hecht offered the film to Mackendrick . Initially the director had reservations about trying to film such a dialogue @-@ heavy screenplay , so he and Lehman worked on it for weeks to make it more cinematic . As the script neared completion , Lehman became ill and had to resign from the picture . James Hill took over and offered Paddy Chayefsky as Lehman ? s replacement . Mackendrick suggested Clifford Odets , the playwright whose reputation as a left @-@ wing hero had been tarnished after he named names before the House Un @-@ American Activities Committee .

Mackendrick assumed that Odets would need only two or three weeks to polish the script , but he took four months . The director recalled , " We started shooting with no final script at all , while Clifford reconstructed the thing from stem to stern " . The plot was largely intact , but in Mackendrick 's biography he is quoted from Notes on Sweet Smell of Success : " What Clifford did , in effect , was dismantle the structure of every single sequence in order to rebuild situations and relationships that were much more complex , had much greater tension and more dramatic energy " . This process took time , and the start date for the production could not be delayed . Odets had to accompany the production to Manhattan and continued rewriting while they shot there . Returning to the city that had shunned him for going to Hollywood made Odets very neurotic and obsessed with

all kinds of rituals as he worked at a furious pace , with pages often going straight from his typewriter to being shot the same day . Mackendrick said , " So we cut the script there on the floor , with the actors , just cutting down lines , making them more spare ? what Clifford would have done himself , really , had there been time " .

Tony Curtis had to fight for the role of Sidney Falco because Universal , the studio to which he was contracted , was worried that it would ruin his career . Tired of doing pretty @-@ boy roles and wanting to prove that he could act , Curtis got his way . Orson Welles was originally considered for the role of J. J. Hunsecker . Mackendrick wanted to cast Hume Cronyn because he felt that Cronyn closely resembled Walter Winchell , the basis for the Hunsecker character in the novelette . Lehman makes the distinction in an interview that Winchell was the inspiration for the version of the character in the novelette , and that this differs from the character in the film version . United Artists wanted Burt Lancaster in the role because of his box office appeal and his successful pairing with Curtis on Trapeze . Robert Vaughn was signed to a contract with Lancaster 's film company and was to have played the Steve Dallas role but was drafted into the Army before he could begin the film .

Hecht @-@ Hill @-@ Lancaster allowed Mackendrick to familiarize himself with New York City before shooting the movie . In Notes on Sweet Smell of Success , Mackendrick said , " One of the characteristic aspects of New York , particularly of the area between 42nd Street and 57th Street , is the neurotic energy of the crowded sidewalks . This was , I argued , essential to the story of characters driven by the uglier aspects of ambition and greed " . He took multiple photographs of the city from several fixed points and taped the pictures into a series of panoramas that he stuck on a wall and studied once he got back to Hollywood .

Cellist Fred Katz and drummer Chico Hamilton , who briefly appear in the film as themselves , wrote a score for the movie , which was ultimately rejected in favor of one by Elmer Bernstein .

= = = Principal photography = = =

Mackendrick shot the film in late 1956 , and was scared the entire time because Hecht @-@ Hill @-@ Lancaster had a reputation for firing their directors for any or even no reason at all . The filmmaker was used to extensive rehearsals before a scene was shot and often found himself shooting a script page one or two hours after Odets had written it . Lancaster 's presence proved to be intimidating for numerous individuals involved with the production ; at one point , Lehman had been approached to direct the film , but declined due to his fear of Lancaster . Mackendrick and composer Elmer Bernstein both found Lancaster difficult to work with , with Bernstein later recalling , " Burt was really scary . He was a dangerous guy . He had a short fuse . " Mackendrick decided to use Lancaster 's volatility to work for the character of JJ , asking that Lancaster wear his own browline glasses , which Mackendrick felt gave him the presence of " a scholarly brute . " Mackendrick smeared a thin layer of vaseline on the lenses , preventing Lancaster from focusing his eyes and giving him a perpetually blank gaze ; Mackendrick then intentionally filmed scenes with JJ from a low angle using a wide lens with overhead lighting directly above Lancaster , so that the frames cast shadows on his face .

Shooting on location in New York City also added to Mackendrick 's anxieties . Exteriors were shot in the busiest , noisiest areas with crowds of young Tony Curtis fans occasionally breaking through police barriers . Mackendrick remembered , " We started shooting in Times Square at rush hour , and we had high @-@ powered actors and a camera crane and police help and all the rest of it , but we didn 't have any script . We knew where we were going vaguely , but that 's all " .

= = Musical score and soundtrack = =

The film score was composed , arranged and conducted by Elmer Bernstein , but the picture also featured jazz themes performed by the Chico Hamilton Quintet , and two soundtrack albums were released on the Decca label in 1958 . Allmusic 's Blair Sanderson noted , " The soundtrack to Alexander Mackendrick 's 1957 motion picture Sweet Smell of Success combines orchestral music by the versatile Elmer Bernstein and modern jazz by the Chico Hamilton Quintet , including numbers

performed in the film 's club scenes . Both provide a moody backdrop to the cynical showbiz drama and intersect at several key points through the use of a common theme , the tune ' Goodbye Baby ' For his part , Bernstein employs richly dissonant big band sonorities and nocturnal urban blues in his score , and much of his music has the hard @-@ edged , gritty sound that was associated with big city life in the 1950s . Hamilton 's exploratory improvisations and Bernstein 's studio orchestrations make this a highly sophisticated film score " . In The Guardian , John L. Walters called the soundtrack " the sonic equivalent of a well @-@ mixed Manhattan : seven cool cues by drummer Chico Hamilton 's adventurous band , and 14 orchestral blasts by Elmer Bernstein " .

= = = Track listing = = =

= = = Personnel = = =

= = Reaction = =

A preview screening of Sweet Smell of Success was poorly received , as Tony Curtis fans were expecting him to play one of his typical nice guy roles and instead were presented with the scheming Sidney Falco . Mackendrick remembered seeing audience members " curling up , crossing their arms and legs , recoiling from the screen in disgust " . Burt Lancaster 's fans were not thrilled with their idol either , " finding the film too static and talky " . The film was a box office failure , and Hecht blamed his producing partner Hill . " The night of the preview , Harold said to me , ' You know you 've wrecked our company ? We 're going to lose over a million dollars on this picture , ' " Hill recalled . However , Lancaster blamed Lehman , who remembers a confrontation they had : " Burt threatened me at a party after the preview . He said , ' You didn 't have to leave ? you could have made this a much better picture . I ought to beat you up . ' I said , ' Go ahead ? I could use the money . ' " .

Sweet Smell of Success premiered in New York at Loew 's State in Times Square on June 27 , 1957 . Critical reaction was much more favorable . Time said that the movie was " raised to considerable dramatic heights by intense acting , taut direction ... superb camera work ... and , above all , by its whiplash dialogue " . Both it and the New York Herald included the film on their ten @-@ best lists for 1957 . The film 's reputation improved over time , with David Denby in New York magazine calling it " the most acrid , and the best " of all New York movies because it captured , " better than any film I know the atmosphere of Times Square and big @-@ city journalism " .

Sweet Smell of Success holds a 98 percent " fresh " rating based on 45 reviews at Rotten Tomatoes and a 100 metascore rating based on 5 reviews at Metacritic . Though Mackendrick 's direction of the actors and his staging of the scenes are at times extraordinary , in recent years critics have praised only the film 's dialogue , " courtesy of Ernest Lehman and Clifford Odets , a high @-@ toned street vernacular that no real New Yorker has ever spoken but that every real New Yorker wishes he could " , A. O. Scott wrote in The New York Times . Andrew Sarris in the New York Observer wrote , " the main incentive to see this movie is its witty , pungent and idiomatic dialogue , such as you never hear on the screen anymore in this age of special @-@ effects illiteracy " .

= = = Legacy = = =

In 1993 , it was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being " culturally , historically , or aesthetically significant " .

In 2002 , Sweet Smell of Success : The Musical was created by Marvin Hamlisch , Craig Carnelia and John Guare .

In its " 100 Years ... 100 Heroes and Villains " list , the American Film Institute (AFI) named J. J. Hunsecker number 35 of the top 50 movie villains of all time in 2003 .

Filmmaker Barry Levinson paid tribute to Sweet Smell of Success in his film Diner (1982) , with one character wandering around saying nothing but lines from the film .

The Law & Order : Criminal Intent episode " Contract " is an homage to the film , with Mo Rocca playing a gossip columnist who is clearly based on J.J. (in both appearance and attitude) and other characters from the episode quoting the film 's lines many times .

(*) designates unordered lists .

= = = American Film Institute recognition = = =

100 Years ... 100 Movies (10th Anniversary Edition) -- nominated100 Years ... 100 Heroes and Villains -- # 35 Villain (J.J. Hunsecker)

= = Home media = =

Sweet Smell of Success was released on DVD (Region 1) and Blu @-@ ray (Region A) as part of The Criterion Collection in February 2011 . The release includes new audio commentary featuring film scholar James Naremore , Mackendrick : The Man Who Walked Away , a 1986 documentary featuring interviews with director Alexander Mackendrick , actor Burt Lancaster , producer James Hill , and others . James Wong Howe : Cinematographer , a 1973 documentary about the film 's director of photography , featuring lighting tutorials with Howe , a new video interview with film critic and historian Neal Gabler (Winchell : Gossip , Power and the Culture of Celebrity) about legendary columnist Walter Winchell , inspiration for the character J. J. Hunsecker , and a new video interview with filmmaker James Mangold about Mackendrick , his instructor and mentor . There is also a booklet featuring an essay by critic Gary Giddins , notes about the film and two short stories introducing its characters by screenwriter Ernest Lehman , and an excerpt about Clifford Odets from Mackendrick ? s book On Film @-@ making , introduced by the book ? s editor , Paul Cronin .