

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Sweet Smell of Success*

USA, 1957. Not Rated. 96 min.
Cast: Burt Lancaster, Tony Curtis, Susan Harrison, Martin Milner; Writer: Ernest Lehman; Cinematographer: James Wong Howe; Producer: Tony Curtis, Harold Hecht; Director: Alexander Mackendrick

There are movies we watch for their acting, movies we watch for their cinematography, even movies we watch for their costumes. And then there's *Sweet Smell of Success*. To say we watch it for its writing is to understate the matter. In fact, its writing is what makes it impossible to stop watching, much as we might sometimes like to. It is as hard, taut and mean a screenplay as you'll ever encounter.

Unfolding in the filthy little nighttime world of 1950s Manhattan, it gives us sleazy press agent Sidney Falco (Curtis), who's made megalomaniacal columnist J.J. Hunsecker's (Lancaster) blacklist. For a man reliant on getting his stable of entertainers and club owners mentioned in Hunsecker's national column, this is death. But it's a predictable response from J.J., who uses this most powerful and blunt tool of manipulation as a way of punishing those who disappoint or defy him. Sidney's offense was his failure to break up the romance between J.J.'s timid kid sister Suzy (Nichols) and straight-arrow jazz guitarist Steve (Milner). With creditors and angry clients hounding him at every turn, the ambitious Sidney (so broke he leaves his topcoat home on chilly New York nights to save tip money at coat checks) begs for another chance to make good. J.J. agrees but when he warns ominously, "Don't be a two-time loser, son," there is little question of the professional obliteration that will follow a second disappointment.

Much has been made over the years of the film's dialogue, and the commonly used words "corrosive," "caustic" and "venomous" couldn't be more appropriate. But the acid tone of the overall film owes just as much to the ruthlessness of the leads, and a great deal of its distinctiveness is in its willingness to make bit players of the only redeemable characters in its cast. This world of shadows and grit is not without integrity, but it is ruled by those for whom the very idea is foreign,

unfathomable. "What does this mean, 'integrity?'" J. J. asks Sidney with unusual earnestness, and for Sidney, the answer is easy. He understands integrity the way a reptile understands the mother bird's need to leave the nest; integrity is nothing but a vulnerability to be exploited. "A pocket full of firecrackers waiting for a match," he answers, all too ready to light it. But for those with integrity, like Steve (a man with so much integrity, in fact, he leaves a dime for a phone call he makes at Sidney's office) and Suzy, there is a sort of heightened vision that makes all the lies and tricks ring as hollow as they are. They see J.J. and Sidney as from a distance. The details of the con might not be clear, but the general idea is plain. The brilliant



Curtis, in a scene of angry denial when he's accused (correctly) of planting a libelous gossip item about Steve's political leanings and recreational drug use, gives Sidney just the right touch of overly frantic outrage. It's as though, living in a vacuum of conniving and chicanery, Sidney doesn't quite know what genuine emotions look like anymore.

Sidney: manipulator, sycophant, pimp, sell-out, "dog" (as Steve calls him), "trained poodle" (as Suzy puts it), and "cookie full of arsenic" (J.J. himself, speaking with palpable disgust, but perhaps some measure of admiration, as well). Sidney smiles through it all with slippery charm, evidently taking the insults more as matter-of-fact descriptions than put-downs, or perhaps sim-

ply too busy thinking about his next lie to notice or care. And why is he J.J.'s trained poodle, anyway? Why does he jump through such hoops, crawl through such sewage? Because J.J., as he tells his secretary, is his "golden ladder to the places I want to get," namely, "way up high where it's always balmy."

At a glance, that's where J.J. sits. But we begin to see that this success is the only thing separating the two men, who are at heart the same: both hungry for power, both adept at concealing their true purposes, both unable, whether by nature or experience, to give the slightest consideration to anything that doesn't further their concerns. As J.J.'s secretary says of Sidney, "An amusing boy, but you haven't got a drop of respect in you for anything alive." And while their schemes are dazzling, they are also at least a little pathetic. It's easy to see how so many people fall prey to their masterful and subtle blend of fast-talk, bullying and buttery charm, but beneath it the tone of shrill desperation is undeniable. Why, after all, does J.J. need Sidney to do his dirty work? Because while he takes a teeth-baring delight in publicly dressing others down, while he considers it his right and his privilege to do so, in fact, his highest goal is concealing his monstrosity from Suzy. We can't help but wonder if her thinking well of him is somehow essential to him thinking well of himself. In a way it is the last shred of humanity left in Hunsecker.

Unlike many films of the time, *Sweet Smell of Success* doesn't bother to punish J.J. and Sidney's sins as much as reward Suzy and Steve for their goodness. True, when we last see Sidney, who by this time is wretched with his own emptiness but unable to choose any other path, he has been beaten down in the gutter by a corrupt cop, while J.J.'s final moment has him alone, staring bleakly down at the cold lights of the city he rules. But redemption, we feel sure, is not in the cards for these two. And that might be the film's harshest comment of all.

- Lawrence Fahey