Sidney Lumet, **Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead** (2007, 119 min.)

*Directed by* Sidney Lumet  
*Written by* Kelly Masterson  
*Produced by* Michael Cerenzie, William S. Gilmore, Brian Linse, Paul Parmar  
*Original Music by* Carter Burwell  
*Cinematography by* Ron Fortunato  
*Edited by* Tom Swartwout

Philip Seymour Hoffman…Andy  
Ethan Hawke…Hank  
Albert Finney…Charles  
Marisa Tomei…Gina  
Aleksa Palladino…Chris  
Michael Shannon…Dex  
Amy Ryan…Martha  
Sarah Livingston…Danielle  
Brian F. O’Byrne…Bobby  
Rosemary Harris…Nanette  
Blaine Horton …Justin  
Arija Bareikis…Katherine  
Leonardo Cimino…William  
Lee Wilkof…a*ke  
Damon Gupton…Doctor


American director and producer, born in Philadelphia, one of the two children of Polish-born parents, Baruch Lumet and the former Eugenia Wermus. Both parents were actors who had begun their career in Poland, gone to England, and then emigrated to the United States. In 1926 Baruch Lumet joined Maurice Schwartz’s Company at the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York City, subsequently appearing at other theatres on and off Broadway, until in 1939 he devised his own one-man show, “Monotheatre Varieties.” For seven years he toured with this throughout North America, and he has also appeared on television and in films, including several of his son’s. Baruch Lumet was director of the Dallas Institute of Performing Arts in 1953-1960, and in 1975 wrote and starred in a play called Autumn Fever.

The family moved from Philadelphia to New York when Baruch Lumet joined the Yiddish Art Theatre, and Sidney Lumet grew up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and in Brooklyn. He had his own acting debut at the Yiddish Art Theatre at the age of five, and other roles followed there and in radio shows. For two years during the Depression (1931-1932) he appeared in a Yiddish radio serial called The Rabbi From Brownsville. “My father wrote and directed the show and acted the leading man and the grandfather,” Lumet says. “My mother was the leading lady, and I played the son. All together, our weekly salary came to $35.”

Sidney Lumet first appeared on Broadway at the age of eleven, in Dead End (1935), by Sidney Kingsley, a family friend. He was too young and too small to play one of the Dead End Kids, and Kingsley wrote a part especially for him. Dead End was a notable example of 1930s theatrical realism—a style which, as Lumet acknowledges, permanently influenced his own work as a director.

A year or so later, Lumet had his first important role as the young Jesus Christ in Max Reinhardt’s production of The Eternal Road (1937). His performance attracted attention and other roles followed there and in experimental plays that were generally presented free except for contributions. At the same time Lumet scratched a living as a teacher of acting at the High school for Performing Arts and by taking occasional paid roles (including a well-received one in Arthur Goodman’s experimental play Seeds in the Wind).

In 1950 Lumet’s friend Yul Brynner, then a staff director with CBS-TV, invited him to join the network as an assistant director. He signed up the same day as Robert Mulligan. A year later, promoted to staff director, Lumet went to work on the Danger series, directing about 150 episodes between 1951 and 1953 and contributing to the I Remember Mama and You Are There series as well. He claims that “the split concentration it took was not as brutal as it sounds. It was a great training ground….It would take twenty films to learn what I learned from on-the-spot television.”

Beginning in 1953, Lumet also began to direct original plays for Playhouse 90, Kraft Television Theatre, and Studio One. In all, apart from the series work he continued to do, he filmed about two hundred teleplays during the “golden age” of American television, establishing himself as one of the most productive and respected directors in the business. He also took time out to direct for the theatre, staging productions of Shaw’s The Doctor’s Dilemma (1955) and Arch Oboler’s science-fiction drama Night of the Auk (1956).

By this time, the tremendous success of the motion picture Marty (1955), originally written for television by Paddy Chayefsky, and made by the television director Delbert Mann, had convinced Hollywood that there was a future in films of this sort—small scale and low-budget works of social realism, modeled on the television play. A good deal of talent was seduced away from television to the big screen in the second...
half of the 1950s, and had a powerful influence—for good and bad—on the development of the cinema.

Lumet’s own first feature was *Twelve Angry Men* (1957), based on a play by Reginald Rose that had already been filmed for television by Franklin Schaffner. The movie studies a jury of twelve men who have to decide on the guilt or innocence of a youth accused of murdering his father. At the outset, all the jurors but one believe that the boy is guilty, but in the course of a long hot day of discussion and argument this stubborn individual (Henry Fonda) brings the others around, one by one, to an acknowledgement of “reasonable doubt.” In the process, we come to know very well the qualities and prejudices of the twelve.

An exceptionally talented cast was assembled to play the jurors, among them Jack Warden, Lee J. Cobb, E.G. Marshall, Ed Begley, Martin Balsam, Jack Klugman, and Robert Webber. Lumet made no attempt to “open up” the television play and shot almost the entire film in the jury room, where he made 385 set-ups. He saw in this claustrophobic setting an added source of tension, and he has explained how he and Boris Kaufman (the cinematographer of all his early films) set out to “restrict it more and more from a visual point of view. As the film went on I used longer and longer lenses so that the ceiling became closer to the heads, the walls became closer to the chairs…. This was all achieved between the choices of the lenses and the lighting.” Made in nineteen days at a cost of $343,000 Lumet’s first movie brought him an Oscar nomination and the Directors Guild award and took the Golden Bear (the main prize) at Berlin. In his article on Lumet in *Film Quarterly* (Winter 1967-1968), Graham Petrie writes that “the ‘message’ of the play, which survives into the film, now seems to many people dated and obvious, though it is worth remembering that the film offers no assumptions either way as to the guilt of the boy on trial….The structure of the film is made up of a series of small encounters, between individuals and groups, where the clash of personalities builds up to a climax, then relapses into lethargy or muted triumph. The rhythm of these encounters is carefully correlated without increasing awareness of the spatial restrictions of the jury room, from which there is no escape until agreement is reached, and the reminders of the outside world during the pauses of slackened tension. The camera continually underlines the moral tensions of the situation, moving in to close-up as an individual is forced to come to terms with his own beliefs and prejudices, isolating the various conflicting groups in medium shot, slipping back to long-shot as the men relax in exhaustion after each encounter. It is through a brilliant manipulation of this kind of cinematic rhythm that Lumet obtains his effects, creating an unforgettable atmosphere of tension, hatred, fear, prejudice, and exhaustion.”

Discussing his transition from television to the feature film, Lumet has said that for him the adjustment was primarily an aesthetic one: “Technically I was totally prepared by the time I hit my first movie….The biggest adjustment I had to make—and it took me many years to learn this—was the adjustment of scale—the size of the picture. Moving from a seventeen-inch piece of glass to a thirty-five-foot screen meant that a story had to be told in an entirely different way….The lenses remained the same, but the frame is so much more dynamic, accomplishes so much more for you so much more quickly.” Not that Lumet had sundered his links with television. In 1958 he directed three notable and much-praised productions for Kraft Television Theatre—a trilogy of short plays by Tennessee Williams, an adaptation of Hemingway’s “Fifty Grand,” and one of Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*.

Lumet’s next feature film (produced, like his first, by Henry Fonda) was *Stage Struck* (1958), an updating of the 1933 Katharine Hepburn hit *Morning Glory* about a New England girl pursuing glory on Broadway, herself pursued by Fonda and Christopher Plummer. Most critics found Susan Strasburg an inadequate substitute for Hepburn and the movie was a flop, as was *That Kind of Woman* (1958), a romance in which Sophia Loren has to choose between handsome Tab Hunter and rich George Sanders. *That Kind of Woman* was scored and edited in Hollywood but, like most of Lumet’s films, shot in New York. Indeed, Lumet accepted a number of unpromising assignments in his early days as a director simply because they could be filmed in locations outside Hollywood, which he has frequently excoriated as “a company town…not fit for human habitation” and totally divorced from real life, where a director faces both studio interference and inflated production costs. He and Elia Kazan have both gone to considerable lengths to promote New York as an alternative filmmaking center.

*Even the Fugitive Kind* (1960) was shot in a Bronx studio and on location in upstate New York, though it is ostensibly set in a small town in Mississippi. This adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ play *Orpheus Descending* stars Marlon Brando as Val Xavier, the nightclub guitarist who drifts into Two Rivers and an ultimately disastrous affair with Lady (Anna Magnani), wife of the local storekeeper. …

The director returned for a while to the theatre and television—a spectacular Broadway production of Albert Camus’ play *Caligula*; a docu-drama for NBC-TV about Sacco
and Vanzetti; and his famous Emmy-winning four-hour television version of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh*, with Jason Robards Jr. in the lead. Jack Gould called it “A moment of enrichment and excitement unparalleled in the medium’s thirteen years.”

After four more productions for NBC’s *Play of the Week*, Lumet made another feature adapted from a stage play, Arthur Miller’s *A View From the Bridge*, scripted by Norman Rosten…As with *The Fugitive Kind*, Lumet stressed the naturalistic aspects of the story, playing down Miller’s allusions to classical tragedy. Again, the film failed to recover its costs, though it had a generally respectful critical reception. Isabel Quigley wrote that “Sidney Lumet, who was one of the white hopes of American outburst of realism in the cinema a few years ago…has done an interesting job….It could, of course, have turned into a very different sort of film, but Lumet, above all an honest and unfilmy director, has the temperament to dampen rather than fan hysteria and frightfulness, to give a feeling of enclosure and concentration to make tragedy domestic.”

Lumet repeats the trick in his screen version of Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1962), shot almost entirely in the living room of the Tyrones’ house in Connecticut. Ralph Richardson plays the fading actor James Tyrone, Katherine Hepburn, his drug-addicted wife Mary, Jason Robards Jr. his alcoholic son Edmund. This notable cast worked on a percentage basis, and the film was made for less than $500,000.

All four principals shared acting honors at Cannes. And Lumet received another Directors Guild award. Few of his films have been so hotly debated by the critics. Many of them thought it no more than “canned theatre,” and John Simon called it a work of “monumental but pedestrian veneration,” saying that “when, at the very end, Lumet permits himself some fancy, though old-fashioned camera movements, his endlessly receding camera…merely draws attention to unresolved incompatibilities between two art forms.” Lumet himself, on the other hand, regards this as the best of all his films, and he has defended it vigorously, saying of his critics that “their eyes were capable of seeing was scenery’ they didn’t know cinema technique from a hole in the wall. There was more sheer physical technique in that movie, in its editing and camerawork than anything you are likely to see for twenty years.”

Graham Petrie shares Lumet’s view of the film, and has explained why in some detail in his *Film Quarterly* article, saying that the director had “found the exact cinematic equivalent for the dramatic world created by O’Neill….The camera moves freely when required, but he is not afraid to film many of the speeches from a purely static set-up, with the result that the camera is never a distraction from…the language….Instead Lumet uses the camera to underline the emotional tone of the dialogue, isolating the characters from one another through close-ups, joining them together for brief moments of harmony and understanding, distancating them and studying them dispassionately during the pauses of drained and exhausted vitality…even without dialogue. One could follow the emotional progress of the film, and catch the emotional tone, simply from the way in which the camera moves among the characters….It is this restrained and intelligent use of cinematic resources which makes *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* Lumet’s best film, and one of the greatest films of the …decade.”

In the early 1960s, however, Lumet’s reputation was still far from secure, and his next film, *Fail Safe* (1964), about the threat of accidental nuclear war, was overwhelmed by the success of Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (perhaps unfairly-some thought *Fail Safe*, in its documentary sobriety, a more telling warning than the audaciously witty *Strangelove*). Then Lumet’s long run of misfortune and semi-failure ended (to his own astonishment) with his adaptation of a somber novel by Edward Lewis Wallant, *The Pawnbroker*, which Lumet took over only two weeks before shooting began.

The pawnbroker of the title is Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), a Jewish immigrant who is morally numbed by suffering and the guilt he feels as the only member of his family to escape death in the Nazi camps. His pawnshop in Spanish Harlem is a front for the illegal activities of a black exploiter of the poor, but Nazerman, isolated in his own misery, is beyond compassion for the “scum rejects” around him. Then gradually, long-stifled memories of the past begin to stir in him, and with them a recognition that the suffering of this “scum” is not so different from the suffering of his own wife and children in Auschwitz. The film ends with Nazerman returning painfully to life.

There were critics who greatly disliked *The Pawnbroker*, seeing it as a collection of liberal platitudes rendered dishonest by the flashiness of the film’s style. Many admired it, however, and it enjoyed great commercial success. Rod Steiger received acting awards in both Britain and Germany, and Lumet the British Film Academy’s award as best director of the year….

*The Hill* (1965) was shot partly in Spain, partly at MGM Studios in England, with an almost entirely British cast….

An at least superficially different world is explored in *The Group* (1966), based on Mary McCarthy’s novel about eight Vassar graduates, set in New York during the Depression. The movie did better commercially than it did critically….

Lumet went back to England for the filming of *The Deadly Affair* (1967), the first picture he produced as well as directed. For this adaptation of John Le Carré’s somberly
realistic spy-thriller *Call for the Dead* Lumet would have liked to shoot in black and white but bowed to the industry’s insistence that color was de rigueur for a major movie. Instead, he and his cinematographer Freddy Young worked out a technique called “pre-flashing”—muting the colors before-exposing the negative. The film was generally admired for this and for the performances of a fine cast that included James Mason, Simone Signoret, Maximilian Schell, Harriet Anderson, and Harry Andrews.

Four of the stars of *The Deadly Affair* were reunited in *The Sea Gull*—Mason, Signoret, David Warner, and Harry Andrews—but in spite of this impressive cast, most critics found it a lumbering interpretation of Chekov’s play. And again Lumet seemed to be caught in such a rigid pattern of failure that critics began to prophesy the end of his intermittently brilliant career. *The Appointment* (1969), a “flimsy love story” with Omar Sharif and Anouk Aimée, was received with derision at Cannes, and *Last of the Mobile Hot-Shots* (adapted by Gore Vidal from a plat by Tennessee Williams), was another commercial and critical flop.

*The Anderson Tapes* (1971) starring Sean Connery… [was] a brief recovery….Lumet’s reputation slumped again with *Child’s Play* (1972) and *The Offense* (1973), both adaptations of stage plays. And then came *Serpico* (1974), in which the director again demonstrated his extraordinary capacity for self-renewal.

*Serpico* was based on Peter Maas’ best-selling biography of an idealistic young New York policeman who found himself a pariah in the NYPD because he refused to take bribes, blew the whistle on corrupt colleagues and superiors, and set in motion the processes that led to the Knapp Commission and a major shake-up of the entire Department. Along the way Serpico sacrificed his career, his girl, and almost his life, ending up as an almost saint-like loner. He is played in the film by Al Pacino, and Lumet had the benefit of an excellent script by Waldo Salt and Norman Wexler.

But *Serpico*, as Kael said, was “a big, big hit” and, after the unsuccessful *Lovin’ Molly* (1974), Lumet had another one in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974), his star-studded adaptation of Agatha Christie’s 1930s thriller, with Albert Finney as Hercules Poirot. This immensely enjoyable movie, the most ambitious British production in years, was nominated for six Oscars, collected one (Ingrid Bergman as best supporting actress) and made a lot of money.

The vast majority of Lumet’s films have been literary or theatrical adaptations but he had an original script (by Frank Pierson) for *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975)…. A number of critics preferred *Dog Day Afternoon* even to *Serpico*, finding it richer both in its characterization and in its social implications. Vincent Canby thought it “not only the most accurate, most flamboyant of Sidney Lumet’s New York movies….it is the best film he has ever made, with the exception of *A Long Day’s Journey Into Night*…full of thoughts, feelings, and questions about the quality of a certain kind of urban civilization.”

The Lumet juggernaut rolled on with *Network* (1976), its greatest commercial success. Scripted by Paddy Chayefsky, it centers on Howard Beale (Peter Finch), a fading TV anchorman who leaps to fame when he threatens public suicide and goes on to become a national institution—“a latter-day denouncing the hypocrisies of our time.” So long as his ratings remain high, he is treasured by the power-hungry network executives (Faye Dunaway, Robert Duvall, Ned Beatty), but as he becomes increasingly deranged and his public ravings take an unpopular turn, he forfeits his value as a pawn in their power plays, and is thrown (almost literally) to the lions.

*Network* won Oscars for Faye Dunaway and Finch, for Beatrice Straight as best supporting actress, and for Chayefsky, as well as nominations as best film and for Lumet, William Holden (who plays Howard Beale’s decent friend and colleague), Ned Beatty, Owen Roizman (the film’s cinematographer), and Alan Heim (its editor). In spite of these triumphs, however, and its blockbusting success at the box-office, it encountered a good deal of hostility from critics who found Paddy Chayefsky’s script “crazily preposterous” and the film’s vulgarity “more pronounced than the television vulgarity it was supposed to be satirizing.”

A screen version of Peter Shaffer’s play *Equus* followed….And almost no one had a good word to say for *The Wiz* (1978), Lumet’s first musical….

Lumet’s…film, *Prince of the City* (1981), was considered one of the high points of his career. An ambitious film, two years in the making and running to nearly three hours, it was adapted for the screen by Jay Presson Allen from Robert Daly’s 1978 book about police corruption in New York City….Reviews were extraordinarily favorable. David Denby called it a tremendous movie, the culminating work of Sidney Lumet’s career,” and Andrew Sarris described it as a prodigious achievement.” “Lumet has never made a film as good,” he commented, “and it is possible that *Prince of the City* represents the high point of cinematic realism in the New York School of filmmaking.” Richard Schickel noted that *Prince of the City* is a very long film—close to three hours—but not a frame could be dispensed with.”

“The movie torments precisely because it so painfully details its protagonist’s slow, unaware descent into a nightmare of moral ambiguity that is indistinguishable from madness.”…

Lumet’s *Daniel* (1983), adapted by E. L. Doctorow from his novel *The Book of Daniel*, was controversial and drew
a number of hostile reviews. The film is loosely based on the lives of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953 for conspiring to pass atomic secrets to Russia.

By contrast, Lumet’s next film, *The Verdict* (1983), with a script by David Mamet, was widely praised. “it is difficult to remember a courtroom drama of such efficiency as *The Verdict,*” Derek Malcolm noted, “nor better performances from Newman, woozily defending Right, or James Mason, contemplating the compensating vices of Might. It is a good strong melodrama which elicits good, strong performances.”

*Garbo Talks* (1984) was a slighter film, a teary comedy about a Jewish mother (Anne Bancroft) dying of cancer whose greatest wish is to meet her idol Greta Garbo.

Sidney Lumet is a small, good-humored man of awe-inspiring vitality. He has been married [four] times—to the actress Rita Gam [1949-1955], to Gloria Vanderbilt [1956-1963], and, since 1963, to Gail Jones, daughter of Lena Horne. [They divorced in 1978 and in 1980 he married Mary Gimbel to whom he was married until his death in 2011] The filmmakers Lumet most admires include the Italian neorealists, Jean Vigo, René Clair, William Wyler, Fred Zinnemann, and, above all, Carl Dreyer. Famous for bringing his films in on schedule or ahead of it, Lumet has often been accused of working too quickly and too carelessly. His response, given in 1970, is that “if you’re a director, then you’ve got to direct….I don’t believe that you should sit back and wait until circumstances are perfect before you and it’s all gorgeous and marvelous….I never did a picture because I was hungry; I could always earn a mine in television. Every picture I did was an active, believable, passionate wish. Every picture I did wanted to do….I’m having a good time. I lead a nice life.”


“A Conversation with Sidney Lumet” Michel Ciment, 1982

MC: *The theme of informing against someone—the problem of knowing if one can or cannot “talk” and in what context, was this influenced by your own experience, since you were a witness and a contemporary of the McCarthy hearings working in the American entertainment industry?*

SL: Emotionally this became the hardest element for me because I didn’t know myself what I thought of the issue. I had no definite opinion about Bob Leusi (Daniel Ciello in the film [Prince of the City]) and what he had done before seeing the first cut. I slowly realized that I had lived through this type of situation myself, and it became painful for me. In fact, at the beginning of the 1950s, when I was working in television, it was by sheer luck that I escaped being blacklisted. While I was working at the editing table, observing the main character, slowly I arrived at some conclusions. First of all, there is a difference between informing against someone in a criminal case versus a political one. For me, having been raised in a working-class environment, my family was poor, my attitude toward a stool pigeon was automatic, going beyond any logical distinction between the criminal and the political. An informer was an informer; it was that simple. I needed to make this film in order for my attitude to change, however. But squealing on someone for political reasons is a betrayal of democracy. On the other hand, I do think that drugs are responsible for the personal destruction of a whole generation of creative artists in this country, not to mention a large segment of the black population and of young people.

MC: *This was the golden age of American television.*

SL: Yes, those were marvelous years, when you think about how many screenwriters, directors, and actors emerged then. It proves one thing: that we were not all that exceptional but their talent was always there. You just need to give them the means to express it. The work pace was incredible. I directed two half-hour dramas very week during three years! I needed to have eight shows in my head all the time. While I rehearsed the two dramas of the week, I also had to take care of the casting for the following week, and of the sets and the costumes for two weeks after that.

In my experience television was irreplaceable, because the law of optics is constant, and it gave me a very fine visual training, not to mention everything I learned about editing, rhythm and acting. And also psychologically I learned a very precious lesson. The production you’re working on right now is not everything. There is another waiting for you the following week. It’s only a movie. The ephemeral nature of television taught me that in a positive way, because I have seen so many of my colleagues become pretentious. In their conversations I hear the words “grandeur” and “masterpiece.” For me, that is the beginning of the end. Each time you get started on another film, you cannot think in terms of a masterpiece, because at the very least, chance plays a role in every production. I don’t want to sound falsely modest, and it is true that chance, luck I mean, exists for some and not for others. But basically all one can do is set the stage and hope for the best. When this happens, the film takes on a life all its own that one could never have predicted. …The “old school” did not have this pretense of making only masterpieces, to make a movie every four years. You remember thirty films by John Ford, but he made over a hundred! I love fifteen films by Cukor, but he just finished his sixty-fifth one!
LUMET: When you went from television to cinema, what was the greatest change for you?

SL: The size of the image. And one of the more depressing things for me is the disappearance of the big screen movie theaters. In the multiplexes, the audience is looking at movie screens that are almost as small as TV screens. It took me a while to get used to the bigger image, which explains why my early films had such a closed sense of staging. My dramatic style had developed on a twelve-inch screen, and suddenly I was hitting the emotions too hard on a thirty-foot screen. Also in the theater I had been trained to exaggerate the feelings in order to touch the audience seated in the second balcony. It took me years before I understood that I didn’t have to do so much. Everything becomes clearer faster on a big screen. Also time flows differently on film than on television.

“The Law According to Lumet” Terry Diggs / 1995

DIGGS: It seems as if you always come back to the subject of law, whether you’re dealing with an outlaw, a lawyer, or a police officer. Why do you find the metaphor of law to be such an expressive one?

LUMET: Let’s start with a very simple statement: if the law doesn’t work, nothing can work in a democracy. It’s the basis of everything. Then you come to that separation between law and justice. As every lawyer knows, sometimes they don’t go together. Lawyers find themselves using literal legalities to, in a sense, evade the justice of the situation. It’s that kid of complexity, where there is a separation between the law and what justice actually is that fascinates me so.

DIGGS: In your films there is sometimes a separation between finding truth and finding justice. A survey of your films suggests that our present legal system works many times to crush truth, and if truth is revealed, it’s at a really terrible kind of price, as in Prince of the City or Serpico. If we do find the truth, it’s a kind of miracle as in The Verdict—which was the answer to a prayer. Is that an accurate statement of your films?

LUMET: I think it’s completely accurate, and all of this within the framework of, as far as I know, one of the best legal systems in the world. I’ve served on a jury three times. It was a great experience, by the way. What I found was that it was a miracle that it worked as well as it did.

DIGGS: How did these jury experiences fit on a time continuum between 12 Angry Men and The Verdict?

LUMET: It was all after 12 Angry Men and all before The Verdict. Interestingly enough, I got summoned for jury duty after The Verdict, and I was turned down, because it was something that involved drugs and I said that I would have a very tough time dealing with anybody accused of pushing drugs. Just out of my own moral basis, I would presume guilt.

At that point in the voir dire where the judge says, if any of you have any internal reservations, would you stand up and articulate those now, I raised my hand and stood up and said I would find it very difficult in my own heart and mind to start with a presumption of innocence simply out of my own reaction to what drugs mean in the world.

DIGGS: One of the things that’s overwhelming in terms of watching 12 Angry Men is that jurors in that film were not as forthcoming with their biases as you were in your voir dire experience. Were you so forthcoming about what your role should be because of the extent about which you’d thought about the subject for 12 Angry Men?

LUMET: I don’t know. I just knew it was an immediate, instinctive reaction and, needless to say, I was excused right on the spot.

DIGGS: One of the key points of 12 Angry Men seems to be that the jury doesn’t really exist for the purpose of exposing the truth, what the jury system exists to do is interrogate—and to set up a scheme by which interrogation takes place—so that the biases we have in society don’t block the truth. Does that seem an accurate statement of what 12 Angry Men is about?

LUMET: Yes, it does.

DIGGS: There is a movement now in California to allow juries in criminal cases to convict on less-than-unanimous verdicts. Given the goals that you set out in terms of 12 Angry Men, what do you think are the ramifications of legislation like that?

LUMET: I think it’s very dangerous, and especially in criminal cases where you’re talking about changing a person’s life forever. I’m still for the unanimous verdict. It may spring people. I think the chances are very good that O. J. Simpson is going to get a hung jury, but my own feeling is that it’s one of those safeguards like our other constitutional safeguards of search and seizure and warrants and so on; Fourth, Fifth Amendment.

It may be a help to the criminal element. Undoubtedly people have gotten away with something because of those laws.
But it’s still better than innocent people being convicted because of the absence of those laws.

DIGGS: Your work seems to be so explicit about some very very troubling things, about the extent to which we really mask our own psychoses and neuroses, about the extent to which we tolerate racism, about our desire for expediency. You’re so conscious of all those things and how they impact criminal justice. Where does that sensibility come from?

LUMET: There’s your instinct and then there’s your life experience. I grew up very poor in the roughest sections in New York, and you simply become very interested in justice because you see an awful lot of injustice around. I just know it’s there and has been there from the beginning…..

DIGGS: I can’t talk to the director of Network and those fine films exploring the legal process without asking you about O. J. Simpson. You have really dealt with all of the components of this dog-and-pony show in one form or another: the reactionary frenzy that the media is capable of creating, the fallibility of the system when the media works on it in that particular kind of way. What’s your take on the trial of the century?

LUMET: The night of the white Bronco, that ride of the white Bronco, that night filled me with such horror. I don’t know if you’ve ever read a novel of Nathaniel West’s called The Day of the Locust, but it was The Day of the Locust come true. Because what everybody was waiting for was for him to blow his brains out. That’s what the attraction of the night was.

So I have not followed the trial. I don’t read about it in the papers. I see what I see on the 6:30 news. I’m horrified at everything about it because I also, by the way, have come to the firm conclusion that television should not be allowed in courtrooms. I think half of the madness that we are looking at has to do with the fact of cameras being there.

I don’t think cameras have left anyone’s consciousness for one second. This includes Judge Ito. This includes the defense. This includes the prosecution and the witnesses.

From the most superficial knowledge of it, it seems to me (Simpson) probably did it. It seems to me that since the defense’s job is so much simpler than the prosecution’s, the prosecution has to prove everything beyond a reasonable doubt. The defense has to just set up a reasonable doubt in the mind of one person. So my instinct tells me that he’s going to get off. And I know why people are so attracted to it. My God, it’s got everything: race, sex, dope, a national hero.

DIGGS: You seem to have a fear of the spectacle and of our love of spectacle. What does the camera do in the courtroom?

LUMET: It makes everybody show off. As simple as that. There’s a third presence there. There’s not just prosecutor or defense and witness; there’s prosecutor or defense and witness and camera. And I think it’s finally going to be a very corrupt influence, an influence that will reduce the pain, the significance, the importance of what is going on, because it’s going to become ordinary, because it’s interrupted by commercials, because it is part of your sitcom, and it’s going to trivialize it.

DIGGS: In the celebrity trials that we have had in the last couple of years, do you see any of them as containing a kind of great narrative that would actually let us learn something about ourselves or our culture if we kind of paid attention to it?

LUMET: I think that is happening, but in my view it’s all happening on the negative side. We’re debasing our processes. It’s all becoming more strident and therefore more insignificant.

DIGGS: What do you feel about our capacity as a legal system to progress?

LUMET: I feel it’s retrogressing because of the introduction of television into it, making it part and parcel of trivialization. But I wouldn’t presume to know anything about where the future of it might lie.

Peter Travers: “The King of New York” (Rolling Stone, April 9, 2011)

Eyes flashing, head up, he struts around Manhattan — all five feet six inches of him — like he owns the streets. And since he’s Sidney Lumet, he damn near does. For half a century, this native New Yorker (OK, he was born in Philly, but like he says, "I got out in a year") has directed dozens of movies in and around the city’s five boroughs, reveling in its diversity, catching the glamour, the grit, even the moral stench.

He has poked his camera into a jury room (12 Angry Men), the mind of a Holocaust survivor (The Pawnbroker), a bank heist (Dog Day Afternoon), a drug bust (Q&A), the power corridors of TV (Network) and the corrupt corners of the justice system (Serpico, Prince of the City). His latest, Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead, is a return to feisty form after a bumpy stretch that began in 1992 when he miscast Melanie Griffith as a cop infiltrating a sect of Hasidic Jews in A Stranger Among Us. Devil, shot on high-def video with the balsky energy of a renegade a third Lumet’s age, is the real deal. Philip Seymour
Hoffman and Ethan Hawke play desperate brothers who plan to rob their parents' jewelry store in Westchester County, a safe bet that instead sparks a family tragedy out of Eugene O'Neill. How like Lumet. You sit down for a caper and get the emotional rug pulled out from under you.

We meet at his office on the top floor of the Ansonia, a historic building that once housed Enrico Caruso, Babe Ruth and the sex club Plato’s Retreat. An eight-block walk from the West Side apartment where he lives with Mary Gibel, his wife since 1980, the shoe box of an office looks like, well, shit. A peck through a tiny window reveals pigeons flying over the city he adores. Otherwise, it's a desk, two chairs and nothing on the white walls to suggest a life that accumulated four wives, two daughters, an Army stint in Burma and a reputation for social protest. And nothing about the career of a master who started as a child actor onstage, moved on to directing live TV and then movies that amassed five Academy Award nominations for him, seventeen nominations for the actors in them and an honorary Oscar in 2005 for life achievement. Lumet leaves the celebrating to others — he's still achieving.

I'll start by saying congratulations. It's been fifty years since you made your first movie, 12 Angry Men. Devil is your forty-fifth feature. You're putting me on. I'm not, and you know it. Are these tributes getting to be a pain in the ass? In all honesty, I don't look at my movies. When they're over, they're over. If I run across one of them on the box, I might look in for five minutes. As for that honorary Oscar, I think maybe they're saying, "We're surprised you're still alive" [laughs]. You usually get these things a few months before you die. The last thing I know anything about is the thinking on the West Coast. They called me out there from New York when 12 Angry Men came out and got nominated. I was the hot thing, you know, the new flavor. They had this picture they wanted me to do with 5,000 battleships, the works. And I said to the studio head, "Look, all you see in my movie is twelve guys in a jury room. How do you know I can do this?" And he said, "We're looking for a young Lewis Milestone."

Didn't he win an Oscar for directing All Quiet on the Western Front? Right. Lewis was in his early sixties, and I happened to know that he had developed a case of shingles because he couldn't get a fucking job. The irritation and frustration had mounted to such a degree that he was wearing white gloves to hide the rash. So I asked, "What's wrong with the old Lewis Milestone?" That broke up the meeting fast [laughs].

So you're saying ageism has always been a problem in Hollywood? Yes, that sense of being nervous about older people. America is a country that throws away old things, and I guess that includes us directors. What surprises studios is that anybody as old as I am can still function well. On Devil, you wouldn't believe the number of reviews that have mentioned my age right away — eighty-three-year-old Sidney Lumet, da da da da da da. It's a little silly.

You're not wearing white gloves, so I'm figuring your age didn't hurt in getting the financing for Devil? It wasn't easy, but it wasn't grueling, either. There's a lot of private money in movies now. Devil is privately financed. It's a positive development, but it's also a two-edged sword. These people don't understand word one about film.

So what gets these financiers interested? Profit? Their name onscreen? They're interested in getting laid. To them, the girls involved in movies are all 36-D cup. I walked into the Beverly Hills Hotel years ago, and one of these guys was sitting in the Polo Lounge, smashed out of his mind, with an arm around a girl on his left and an arm around a girl on his right, groping for a tit on each side. That was as bold a thing as I'd ever seen then. And none of it's changed [laughs]. These are the constants in life.

Let's walk through a little history here. You've been nominated for an Oscar as Best Director four times. And you haven't won yet. Do you think there's still a shot? As long as I'm alive.

You're not pissed about not winning? I hate to sound like a smart person [laughs]. But I've always had the perspective that it's the work that matters. So that's been where the concentration has gone. I didn't even go out for the Oscar show when I was nominated on 12 Angry Men. It's not out of nobility. I'm thrilled that they gave me an honorary one. I clutched it. You wouldn't have been able to pull it out of my hand without killing me. One of the reasons is I love a hit. And the best thing about awards is that they can get me the money for three more flops. I've been a minority in terms of the establishment part of the business. I'm from New York.

Isn't there a New York establishment? I've never been aware of one. I don't see Marty Scorsese socially, and there's nobody's work I admire more. Woody Allen? Never. [The artist] Julian Schnabel and I talk, but we were friends before he became a movie director. Maybe they just don't include me. As far as I know, the New York film cabal doesn't exist.
Let's get to your latest New York movie: You open Devil
with a hot sex scene, which is not in the Lumet
tradition. Right. I don't do fucking scenes.

So why this time? The first thing we see is a naked Philip
Seymour Hoffman and Marisa Tomei going at it in a hotel
room in Brazil. Were you trying to make a "today" movie
with a porn-Web-site vibe? I don't know what the suck today
is, any more than I know what a commercial movie is. The
reason for the sex scene is simple. Andy, Hoffman's character,
is going to do some very unpleasant things during the body of
this movie. It's therefore important to know what it is he wants,
what's driving him. And he wants his idea of fancy sex — fancy only because
he can't really function unless he's away from the
city, away from his
brother, from his parents.
He's one of those people
who needs the cruise-ship
mentality to function
sexually.

Tomei naked, I get it. But Hoffman? That's the point. He's
overweight. He's got a big ass. And to top it off, he's looking at
himself in the mirror. But you have to know what his character
wants. So it was the first thing I added.

After you made them brothers. Right. They were just friends
in Kelly Masterson's script. People often talk about the family
dynamics in my movies, maybe because in 1962 I did Long
Day's Journey Into Night with Katharine Hepburn. That one
says it all about family. But looking at my work that way would
inhibit me. It's like if I had to come up with some defense for
each movie of mine that fails at the box office. I can't. I don't
have enough ego to say, "That's a good movie. Fuck you if you
do n't know it." But I know it. I don't forget [laughs].

Was it easy casting the movie, getting Hoffman and
Hawke? Wonderfully easy. I sent the script first to Philip, one
of the finest actors in the country, and I gave him the choice to
play either brother: Hank or Andy. Then I sent it to Ethan. And
Ethan said he wanted to play Hank. I was surprised, because
Hank is a weak character, and most actors are afraid of that. But
Ethan had this image of how to activate a weak man. He's
always in motion. I preferred Andy to be older, to be the
influence on Hank, pushing him. So I called Philip back, and he
said, "Great." That simple. Marisa Tomei was my first choice to
play Andy's wife, who's cheating on him with Hank. Marisa is
wonderful after that sex scene, when sadness overwhelms her. I
love that moment. I also love it when Albert Finney, as the
father, walks down the hospital corridor at the end. There's
another scene in the script after that with Ethan and Marisa, but
I didn't use it. I knew the movie was over when Albert walked
out. It doesn't matter what happens after. Let the audience
wonder.

You've made some movies — A Stranger Among Us, The
Wiz, Family Business — that you've been hammered for.
How does that make you feel? It hurts. But what happens over
time — maybe it's because I started so early as an actor, four
years old — there's always been a leveling influence. I don't
plunge into despair. And when it works well, I don't go wild
with joy. Now maybe I'm missing something. Maybe I've
reduced the size of my life. I don't think so. I think it's the
sensible way to work.

You were praised for your book Making
Movies, in which you
said, "I've done two
movies because I
needed the money.
I've done three
because I love to
work and couldn't
wait anymore." Do
you know a movie
will suck while you're making it? In one, I knew at the end of
the second week of rehearsal. And the other one, I knew on the
second day of shooting. And the terrible thing is there's nobody
I can talk to, because I'm the director [laughs]. I can't tell the
actors. They'll go running to the hills and scream, and be totally
useless. So I'm stuck with this knowledge. And now I've got to
go through eight weeks, whatever the shooting schedule is. But
you do know.

It must be a special kind of torture. It is. What helps is that
all of us have this never-ending talent for self-deception
[laughs]. You need that self-deception just to go to work.

OK, let's look at some Lumet classics from the 1970s.
What's your memory of Dog Day Afternoon, with Al Pacino
as a bank robber who takes hostages? It's the quintessential
New York movie. Well, my biggest memory of it is how high
we were. I think we did that movie in, like, thirty-two days.
And that's 500 fucking people in the street all the time. Part of
the exhilaration came from Al's performance, because he was
so screaming high. He was two octaves above C.

Was he living this part? He was so terrified of it that the only
way he could get through it was to turn himself into an
obsessed actor, although he's always obsessed, really. Do you
know that the day before we started shooting, he quit?

You're kidding, right? He asked me and the screenwriter,
Frank Pierson, to come up to his house for some cockamamie
reason. It was preshooting terror. And we walked in. He was
On 9/11, you were shooting _100 Centre Street_ for cable TV. Right. I arrived around 9:10 a.m., and coming over the Triborough Bridge, I saw Tower Two go down. And there was never a doubt in my mind that we should continue. I called everybody together, and I said, "If you're worried about your families, go, please. But if there are enough of you left, I want to keep on working." I had cots brought in so we could sleep at the studio. And then the following day, Wednesday, when we went back out on location, members of that crew came up and said, "Sidney, you were so right for us to keep working, because all we would have done is go home and watch the fucking box, same shots over and over, of everything falling."

Speaking of the box brings us to _Network_. Peter Finch won the first posthumous Oscar, for playing a crazed TV anchor who's mad as hell because TV will do anything for ratings, including film robberies and executions. This was in 1976. You and writer Paddy Chayefsky actually foresaw the birth of reality TV. People would say to me and Paddy, "It's a brilliant satire." And we'd say, "What satire? It's sheer reportage" [laughs]. We had the feeling while making _Network_ that something special was happening. But it wasn't totally joyful making it. I was so worried about my comedy skills. I was very good at making jokes. But here, working with Chayefsky, who was the modern Molière, the jokes were about the most serious things.

When you direct something like the "mad as hell" scene, are you aware it's going to have an impact on the _zeitgeist_? Not when I'm doing it. But I knew that "mad as hell" had to be done in total truthfulness. And it was such a sense of devotion and participation by Peter Finch on the first take. And I wanted to do another. "Start slower," I said, "and let's see what we get." And we started Take Two, and Peter stopped in the middle. I didn't know about his heart condition then. He wasn't saying anything, because it would have made him uninsurable. He just stopped and said, "Sidney, I can't go on." I said, "OK, let's not push it." And what you see in the movie is that first half of the speech from Take Two, and the rest from Take One. He was dead a few months later.

You seem to have a genuine connection with actors. You're probably the only director, living or dead, who has ever directed both Marlon Brando and Vin Diesel. Is it because you began your career as an actor? I understand what they're going through. The self-exposure, which is at the heart of all their work, is done using their own body. It's their sexuality, their strength or weakness, their fear. And that's extremely painful. And when they're not doing it in their performance, they pull back. They get shy. Paul Newman, who I worked with on _The Verdict_, is one of the shyest men I've ever met. That's why rehearsal is so important.

How long to rehearse on a movie? Sometimes three weeks — _Long Day's Journey Into Night_ was four weeks. It depends on...
the complexity of the characters. That way the actors get
confidence in what I see in them. Actors have told me, angrily,
about directors who don't see. That's the reason Marlon Brando
was a tester. He would test to see if the director understood
what he was doing.

How did Brando test you? He tested me the second day we
were shooting The Fugitive Kind. He would do two takes. But
in one, he was working from the inside. In the other, he was just
what we call indicating it. Doing the same vocal pattern, the
same physical pattern, but not really playing it. He watched to
see which take I printed.

And what if you picked wrong? Oh, you are fucked from
there on in [laughs]. Because he is not going to pour it out for
somebody who doesn't see it.

What about your movie orphans, the ones no one takes
home and gives careful attention, even on DVD? Daniel is one because
of my love for that script Edgar Doctorow did from his own book [a
fictionalized version of the
Rosenbergs and their execution for
spying] and for the theme: the cost
children pay for their parents' passions. The failure of that movie got
me to do two more movies, Running on Empty and the silly, bad Family Business, with the exact
same theme. Crazy.

Let's try an experiment: Pretend that you just got a script.
And it's called The Sidney Lumet Story. I'm saying no right
now [laughs].

Humor me. I want to know where the movie starts. Do you
paint a rosy picture of your life as the child of Baruch
Lumet, a star of the Yiddish theater? You have a father,
and then you have this guy who's also up on the stage. Is
there a disconnect? He was no father figure. He was only a
father up on the stage. It's the only time I liked him. He was a
terrible man.

Did he lose his patience with you? He didn't have patience. He
had a bad temper. He hit us. He was probably unfaithful to my
mother all the time. I don't know. But she sure complained
about him. I could hear the fights. Nothing admirable about
him, until he went to work. And then he was admirable.

And how was he when you started to get in his game and
act? Thrilled. This was during the Depression. So when I
worked, we ate. He wasn't working that often. The Yiddish
theater was well past its great days. He was a very talented
actor, but he had an accent — a heavy accent, Polish — so he
never could work on Broadway. And eating was a problem for
a long time, until I began working steadily on Broadway.

And your mom was what? Worried? She was supportive. We
eat regularly when I worked.

Any siblings? A sister, older, and I think she probably had
some resentment because, among other things, I got all the
attention.

Did you like it? Loved it [laughs]! As Mel Brooks said, it's fun
to be the king.

You started acting onstage when you were four. At eleven,
you made your Broadway debut in Dead End. I found a New
York Times review of your stage performance in My Heart's
in the Highlands. It said, "Lumet, as the boy, was charming
and showed a manly technique." What many things were
you doing? I was acting the part. One of
the points of the play was that my father is
a poet, and I'm the kid, thirteen, and I'm
taking care of him, 'cause he can't do squat
about life. I'm the one who gets us through
it.

Just like at home? Exactly.

On to Hollywood: What was the first acting you did in front
of the camera? Just did it once: One Third of a Nation. I was
fifteen.

How would you direct that scene in your movie biopic? To
show the terror. The director was maddening. And he knew
nothing about actors, or working with them. The star was
Sylvia Sidney, who, you'll pardon me speaking badly of the
dead, was a nasty old cunt. When it was time for my closeup,
the director said, "Sylvia, please give him the lines, instead of
the script girl." She was so resentful of that, she sat there
clicking her knitting needles. She was a great knitter. Not one
look at me, just mumbling. She was terrible. The whole
experience was lousy.

Acting's loss, directing's gain. How does it make you feel
when you run into younger filmmakers, like George
Clooney, who say, "Mr. Lumet, I admire your work so
much that I'm stealing from it"? I don't know what the fuck
they're talking about. I don't know what they're stealing,
because, to me, the style of every movie is determined by the
script. As far as I can see, there is no Lumet style. I pour myself
into it, but I don't know what they're extracting. I swear I don't.
I'm thrilled that a movie of mine has a resonance for somebody
that I never intended, 'cause that means I did it well, but I never
know what it is….
Lumet on Lumet: The Director Takes a Fresh Look at a Handful of the Film Classics That Made His Reputation

12 Angry Men, 1957 "Henry Fonda has to talk sense to the other jurors — Lee J. Cobb (above) played a racist. One room. People think the smaller a movie is, the simpler it is. Not so." When I tell Lumet the film is the fave of Harry Potter (Daniel Radcliffe), he smiles.

Serpico, 1973 "Al Pacino's talent is just blinding. His Frank Serpico is a New York cop protesting cop corruption. Protesting is what mattered to him. That got to me. I was brought up Orthodox. The Jewish ethic is stern, moralistic. I thought like that very early."

Network, 1976 "Peter Finch's TV news anchor yelling 'I'm mad as hell' is a sane man yelling at an insane world. The writer, Paddy Chayefsky, was prescient. The only thing that hasn't happened yet from that movie is a reality show where they shoot someone on the air."

Prince of the City, 1981 "This was Treat Williams playing a cop who crosses the line. I remember we shot it all over the city, hundreds of locations. I have never paid so much attention directing a movie. New York always gives me back as much as I put into it."

The Verdict, 1982 "Paul Newman's lawyer, as David Mamet wrote him, is looking for salvation. It's about the separation between the law and what justice actually is." Lumet's fast pace made Newman joke that Lumet "could doublepark in front of a whorehouse."

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