

THE BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GREAT FILMS WITH BRUCE JACKSON & DIANE CHRISTIAN

PRESENTED BY THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO AND THE MARKET ARCADE FILM AND ARTS CENTER

OCTOBER 23, 2001 (IV:8): SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

ALEXANDER MACKENDRICK, (8 September 1912, Boston, Massachusetts—22 December 1993, Los Angeles, pneumonia), directed only 8 other films: *Don't Make Waves*, 1967, *A High Wind in Jamaica*, 1965, *A Boy Ten Feet Tall*, 1965, *The Ladykillers*, 1955, *The Maggie*, 1954, *Mandy*, 1952, *The Man in the White Suit*, 1951, and *Whisky Galore!*, 1949.

ERNEST LEHMAN (8 December 1915, New York, New York) is credited with 14 film scripts, almost all of them major hits. Some of them are: *Black Sunday*, 1977, *Hello, Dolly!*, 1969, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 1966, *The Sound of Music*, 1965, *The Prize* 1963, *West Side Story*, 1961, *From the Terrace*, 1960, *North by Northwest*, 1959, *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, 1956, *The King and I*, 1956, *Sabrina*, 1954, and *Executive Suite*, 1954. He also wrote, produced and directed *Portnoy's Complaint*, 1972, which was dud. He had two best picture Oscar nominations, *Hello, Dolly!* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and four screenwriting nominations, *Virginia Woolf*, *West Side Story*, *North by Northwest*, and *Sabrina*, but the only one he ever took home was an honorary award "in appreciation of a body of varied and enduring work" in 2001. Honorary Academy Awards are mostly given to people who the Academy, 1, realized never got one but should have, in light of the lesser competition that did and, 2, is old enough to be likely to die without ever having gotten one, thereby making the Academy look driven by trend and hype.

BURT LANCASTER (2 November 1913, New York, New York—20 October 1994, Century City, California, heart attack) was so over the top so often it's perhaps easy to miss how good an actor he really was. He is the only star ever to appear in back-to-back presentations of the Buffalo Film Seminars. Were he still inhabiting this mortal coil he would perhaps not consider that conjunction among his most significant accomplishments, which would not be uncharitable or unreasonable, given the range of them., His first screen role was riveting: "Swede" in *The Killers* 1946, based on Hemingway's famous short story. His fourth film, *Brute Force* 1947, is still one of the best prison movies and was one of the reasons Bruce loathed the otherwise loveable Hume Cronyn, who played the evil warden, for decades. He was in nearly a hundred theatrical and made-for-tv films in all, and he played the lead in at least half of Hollywood's great war movies. Some of his memorable performances: *Field of Dreams*, 1989, *Local Hero*, 1983, *Atlantic City*, 1980, *Go Tell the Spartans*, 1978, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, 1977, *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, 1977, 1900, 1976, *Ulzana's Raid*, 1972, *Airport*, 1970, *The Gypsy Moths* 1969, *Castle Keep*, 1969, *The Swimmer*, 1968, *The Professionals*, 1966, *Seven Days in May*, 1964, *Birdman of Alcatraz*, 1962, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, 1961, *Elmer Gantry*, 1960, *The Unforgiven*, 1960, *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, 1957, *The Rainmaker*, 1956, *The Rose Tattoo*, 1955, *From Here to Eternity*, 1953, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, 1952, *Jim Thorpe - All American*, 1951, *All My Sons*, 1948, and *Sorry, Wrong Number*, 1948. Lancaster was nominated for four best actor Oscars (*Atlantic City*, *Birdman of Alcatraz*, *Elmer Gantry*, and *From Here to Eternity*), but he

SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS (1957, 96 min) Hill, Hecht & Lancaster/Norma-Curtleigh Productions

Burt Lancaster.... J.J. Hunsecker
Tony Curtis... Sidney Falco
Susan Harrison.... Susan Hunsecker
Martin Milner.... Steve Dallas, Quintet Leader
Sam Levene... Frank D' Angelo
Barbara Nichols.... Rita, Cigarette girl Elysian Club
Jeff Donnell.... Sally, Falco's secretary
Joe Frisco.... Herbie Temple, Comic
Emile Meyer... Lt. Harry Kello
Edith Atwater.... Mary, Hunsecker's secretary
Jay Adler.... Manny Davis, Linda James' Manager
Lewis Charles.... Al Evans, Herbie Temple's agent
Lawrence Dobkin.... Leo Bartha, Columnist
Chico Hamilton
Paul Horn, Chico Hamilton Quintet
Fred Katz, Chico Hamilton Quintet
Joseph Leon.... Joe Robard
Autumn Russell.... Linda James, Singer
Carson Smith, Chico Hamilton Quintet
Queenie Smith.... Mildred Tam, Hunsecker's radio guest
Lurene Tuttle.... Mrs. Loretta Bartha
David White.... Otis Elwell, Columnist

Directed by Alexander Mackendrick
Script by Ernest Lehman and Clifford Odets
based on Ernest Lehman's novelette
Produced by James Hill
Original music by Elmer Bernstein
Cinematography by James Wong Howe

never won. The dolts.

TONY CURTIS (Bernard Schwartz, 3 June 1925, The Bronx) did a lot of tv in the 80's and 90's, often playing himself or what was little more than a parody of himself. He's one of those actors who appeared in a lot of films, more than 100, but whose reputation rests on only a few of them and several of those are in the order of "Oh, how interesting that Tony Curtis is doing *that*." Some of his films are : *The Boston Strangler* 1968, *The Great Impostor* 1960, *Spartacus*, 1960, *Operation Petticoat*, 1959, *Some Like It Hot*, 1959, *The Defiant Ones*, 1958, and *Kings Go Forth*, 1958. He also had small parts in *Francis the Talking Mule*, 1950, *Winchester '73*, 1950, *City Across the River*, 1949, and *How to Smuggle a Hernia Across the Border*, 1949. We made up nothing in this entry.

MARTIN MILNER, 27 December 1931, Detroit, Michigan, is far better known for his work in television series than films. He was a regular in "Emergency!", "Adam-12", and "Route 66". He also appeared in *Sex Kittens Go to College*, 1960, *Compulsion*, 1959, *Marjorie Morningstar*, 1958, *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, 1957, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, 1949, and *Life with Father*, 1947.

SUSAN HARRISON, 26 August 1938, Leesburg, Florida, appeared in only one other film, *Key Witness*, 1960.

JAMES WONG HOWE (Wong Tung Jim, 28 August 1899, Canton, China. [now Guangzhou, China] —12 July 1976, Hollywood, cancer) was nominated for best cinematography Oscars for *Funny Lady* 1975, *Seconds* 1966, *The Old Man and the Sea* 1958, *Air Force* 1943, *The North Star* 1943, *Kings Row* 1942, *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* 1940, and *Algiers* 1938; he won for *Hud* 1964 and *The Rose Tattoo* 1955. Some of his other films were *The Molly Maguires*, 1970, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 1968, *Hombre*, 1967, *Seconds*, 1966, *This Property Is Condemned*, 1966, *The Outrage*, 1964, *The Last Angry Man*, 1959, *Bell, Book and Candle*, 1958, *Picnic*, 1955, *Come Back, Little Sheba*, 1952, *The Brave Bulls*, 1951, *Body and Soul*, 1947, *Passage to Marseilles*, 1944, *The Strawberry Blonde*, 1941, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, 1937, *Fire Over England*, 1937, *Manhattan Melodrama*, 1934, *The Rough Riders*, 1927, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, 1923.

ELMER BERNSTEIN (4 April 1922, New York, New York) most recently did the music for *Gangs of New York* 2001. 234 films ago, in 1951, he scored *Saturday's Hero*. Some of his other films along the way were, *Bringing Out the Dead*, 1999, *The Rainmaker*, 1997, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 1995, *The Age of Innocence*, 1993, *Cape Fear*, 1991, *Rambling Rose*, 1991, *The Grifters*, 1990, *My Left Foot*, 1989, *Funny Farm*, 1988, *Three Amigos!*, 1986, *Ghostbusters*, 1984, *Airplane!*, 1980, *The Great Santini*, 1979, *Zulu Dawn*, 1979, *Meatballs*, 1979, *Animal House*, 1978, *The Shootist*, 1976, *The Trial of Billy Jack*, 1974, *The Gypsy Moths*, 1969, *True Grit*, 1969, *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas!*, 1968, *The Great Escape*, 1963, *Hud*, 1963, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 1962, *Birdman of Alcatraz*, 1962, *Walk on the Wild Side*, 1962, *By Love Possessed*, 1961, *The Magnificent Seven*, 1960, *From the Terrace*, 1960, *Desire Under the Elms*, 1958, *Some Came Running*, 1958, *God's Little Acre*, 1958, *Kings Go Forth*, 1958, *The Tin Star*, 1957, *The Ten Commandments*, 1956, *The Man with the Golden Arm*, 1955, and the "Gunsmoke", 1955, TV Series. Bernstein had 13 Oscar nominations for best music, score or song, and won only once, for *Thoroughly Modern Millie* 1967.

ERNEST LEHMAN on the writing of *Sweet Smell of Success*:

To be literal, *Sweet Smell of Success* began one summer in the late forties in a rented room in Provincetown on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. I would bicycle over there each morning from our summer cottage and sit over my Royal portable until 1 p.m., when I'd switch from writing to tennis playing for the rest of the day.

I was fooling around with my first attempt at a novel, based loosely on my three or four years in Manhattan as a Broadway press agent, dependent on and more than a little fearful of the powerful gossip columnists of the era—Walter Winchell, Dorothy Kilgallen, Louis Sobol, Danton Walker. I called my novel *You Scratch My Back*—, and by summer's end, I had two convictions: 1) I was never really going to finish the book, but 2) I had written enough material to take back to New York and rewrite into two short stories, which I soon published in *Collier's* and *Cosmopolitan*, respectively, as 'Hunsecker Fights the World' and 'It's the Little Things that Count'.

But out of that summer of failed novel writing and two successful short stories, I derived a powerful conviction that there lurked a vivid, authentic, dangerous novelette in the world of columnists and press agents that I had been exploring, based on my own experiences along night-time Broadway.

Immediately on returning to my Manhattan home base, I rented a little hotel room a few blocks away from the apartment and holed in every day for all the day, bringing into being the story of J.J. Hunsecker and Sidney Falco and Susan Hunsecker, a story that would one day become famous, and even more serendipitously, I came up with a title, 'The Sweet Smell of Success', which was to have an endless destiny of its own.

Cosmopolitan editor Herbert R. Mayes bought this, my first long-form fiction, with immense enthusiasm, but would not use a title with the word 'smell' in it. The novelette was published in 1952 as *Tell Me about it Tomorrow*. It caused a sensation on Broadway: I had dared to take on a feared and powerful columnist, no matter how well I had cloaked him in the guise of fiction. I tensed, awaiting columnar retaliation, but it never came. However, no Hollywood film studio would dare go near my novelette as a possible movie. The Hollywood giants felt even more vulnerable than did the lowly press agent turned fiction writer.

It was when Paramount Pictures, impressed by *Sweet Smell* and a follow-up published novella called *The Comedian*, summoned me and family to the West Coast in 1952, that I began to receive repeated pleas from the independent producers Hecht-Hill-Lancaster to let them have the film rights to my work, with me doing the screenplay and directing.

I balked. Let sleeping dogs lie.

And then, in the mid-fifties, the Hecht-Hill-Lancaster independents won many Oscars, including Best Picture, with their production of *Marty*. Impressed, I quickly developed a newfound larger respect which overwhelmed all my fears. Contracts were signed, work began, several difficult drafts of the screenplay were tortured out of my typewriter, and I went to New York to nail down some shooting locations.

It was when I returned to California that I was suddenly confronted with distributor United Artists' decision to drop me as director. They had just been bitten by another first-time director, Burt Lancaster, doing *The Kentuckian*. I was so disappointed I started developing a pain in the gut (not realizing how lucky I would eventually be with Alexander Mackendrick directing). Came the day when Burt Lancaster told me I'd have to go to New York to do some screenplay rewriting while they were shooting. 'First I'll have to see my doctor,' I said, 'to find out what this pain in the gut is.' They sedated me overnight in a hospital, shoved a sigmoidoscope up my rear, and then the doctor said: 'Your colon is a clenched fist. You're not going back to the picture. You're not going to do *any* picture. You're going away, out of the country.'

Two weeks later, lying on the sands of Tahiti, I suddenly sat up. Six thousand miles away, the picture was shooting, and I had forgotten all about it.

Clifford Odets had done some brilliant rewrites, Tony Curtis gave the performance of a lifetime, and today, forty years later, I bask in the reflected glory of the work so many others did to make *The Sweet Smell of Success* an historic film.

Sweet Smell of Success. Clifford Odets & Ernest Lehman.
Faber and Faber, 1998.

DAMIAN CANNON. MOVIE REVIEWS UK 1997

...Matching Lancaster for sleaze, Curtis casts his feelings outwards in *Sweet Smell of Success*. Constantly wringing his hands and nervously ducking verbal slaps, Falco is slimy and utterly self-centered. In his eyes gleams intelligence, street smarts warped by the twisted mould of his chosen career. Looking to escape a low-grade background he'll step on anyone, even so-called friends like Rita, on his journey up the ladder. It is in these supporting roles that the true nastiness of Falco is revealed; quick with a bright smile he uses Nichols and Milner. In different ways they are both honest and decent, sucked into the Manhattan swamp. It is, however, telling that they ultimately allow themselves to be corrupted. No one escapes this urban jungle unchanged.

Technically *Sweet Smell of Success* shines like a beacon, albeit one shrouded in gleaming wet streets and harsh neon tubes. Featuring cinematography by James Wong Howe, the look is defined by crisp contrasts and deep pools of shadow. With infinite menace faces loom in and out of the darkness, lit up to enhance their contours and emotional state. New York has rarely looked so beautiful and yet so fake; those on the way up party into oblivion, briefly leaving behind the stench of failure. Bumping up these stakes is Elmer Bernstein's score, stirring Broadway and jazz into a potent musical soup. Perfectly matched to the pace of the story, these tunes distinguish an already excellent picture.

And then, of course, there's the dialogue. Sharp and scorching, it's a storm of quotable remarks, bleak cynicism and corrosive asides. Despite lines which might appear unwieldy when taken out of context, the words flow beautifully within *Sweet Smell of Success*. Catchy enough to be a part of that particular scene (night-clubs, hotels and typewriters), the meaning of J.J. and Falco's phrases is obvious. It all combines beautifully, highlighting the breathtaking arrogance of the two but never giving them a soft-focus in some misguided attempt at sympathy. These are bitterly cold figures and Alexander Mackendrick doesn't let us forget it. With tight control over every aspect of *Sweet Smell of Success*, his attempt at film noir is a riveting success.

ROGER EBERT

The two men in *Sweet Smell of Success* relate to each other like junkyard dogs. One is dominant, and the other is a whipped cur, circling hungrily, his tail between his legs, hoping for a scrap after the big dog has dined. The dynamic between a powerful gossip columnist and a hungry press agent is seen starkly and without pity. The rest of the plot simply supplies events to illustrate the love-hate relationship.

When *Sweet Smell of Success* was released in 1957, it was seen as a thinly veiled attack on Walter Winchell, who for decades had been the most famous and reviled gossip columnist in America. Forty years later Winchell is mostly forgotten (he died in 1972), but the film lives on--sharp-edged, merciless. The performances by Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis have not dated or grown soft; although both men were dismissed as studio stars at the time, can we think of a "serious actor" who could have played either role so well?

...The movie, photographed by James Wong Howe in winter in black and white, takes place within a few blocks of Manhattan's midtown club district. Scenes are set in 21 and other night spots, and those who notice will find a nice irony in the fact that Hunsecker lives in the Brill Building on Broadway, which for decades has housed show-biz offices and Tin Pan Alley composers--and has a long, empty entrance hall that was used for the loneliest shot in ``Taxi Driver.

Hunsecker knows his beat cold. “I love this dirty town,” he says in the opening scene. He calls all the maitre d's and hat-check girls by name, holds court for senators and call girls at his favorite booth, and doesn't miss a thing. Here is the kind of detail the movie notices: Falco leaves his office without his coat, to save on tips. Later, as he and Hunsecker leave 21 together, the columnist says, “Where's your coat, Sidney? Saving tips?” But we have just seen Hunsecker take his own coat without tipping. He never tips and never pays, and no one in this world would ever expect him to.

Although Falco is in exile as the story opens, Hunsecker cannot quite banish him from his sight because he needs him. How does the top dog know he rules unless the bottom dog slinks around? Falco approaches Hunsecker's booth and the columnist senses he's there without even needing to look around. He holds up an unlit cigarette and in the movie's most famous line says, “Match me, Sidney.”

The screenplay is by Clifford Odets, that poet of left-wing social drama, whose hard take on American society led to *Golden Boy* (1939) and Robert Aldrich's *The Big Knife* (1955), which did for a Hollywood screenwriter more or less what *Sweet Smell* did for the columnist. His co-writer, Ernest Lehman, based it on a story he'd written. The director was Alexander Mackendrick, from Britain, whose filmography consists mostly of comedies (*The Ladykillers*, *The Man in the White Suit*)--and then this one extraordinary American noir.

The movie is uncanny in its ability to capture that time and place, just before the beatniks popularized modern anti-conventionalism. Jazz musicians wear suits and ties, hair is cropped short, and the trick is to always appear cool--a trick Hunsecker has developed into an act. The streets outside are filled with anonymous people, all in a hurry to get somewhere, and when Falco walks with them he becomes part of the crowd. When Hunsecker walks, his limousine follows him. For people like Falco, he is the key to getting off the sidewalk and into the booth as 21.

Odets and Lehman pull off the neat trick of making the film seem hard-boiled and realistic while slipping in dialogue as quotable as it is unlikely. “You're dead, son,” Hunsecker tells Falco. “Get yourself buried.” And in a moment of introspection: “My right hand hasn't seen my left hand in 30 years.” Falco is told by one of his clients, a club owner: “It's a publicity man's nature to be a liar. I wouldn't hire you if you wasn't a liar.” But Falco tells the truth when he confesses, “J.J. Hunsecker is the golden ladder to the place I want to get.”

...*Sweet Smell of Success* is one of those rare films where you remember the names of the characters because you remember them--as people, as types, as benchmarks. “Even today,” the writer Ben Brantly wrote about this film not long ago, “I've heard theater publicity representatives speak wryly of going into their ‘Sidney Falco mode.’ The film stands as the record of one of the most convincing and closely observed symbiotic relationships in the movies. Hunsecker and Falco. You can't have one without the other. “From now on,” Hunsecker says, “the best of everything is good enough for me.” Well, at least he has the best flunky. JAMES MANGOLD (director of *Cop Land* and *Girl, Interrupted*):

The innovation of *Sweet Smell* is often credited to Ernest Lehman's courageous portrayal—in his original novelette and screenplay—of the underbelly of the post-war American media machine. But the dazzling achievement of the film springs not merely from its politics—many mediocre films of the fifties took on important political concerns—but from the swirlingly brilliant screen-narrative and language—verbal and visual. [Mackendrick] supervised all the rewrites on the film. When Ernest Lehman fell ill, [he] chose Clifford Odets to do the rewrites. The collaboration of these three continued through production.”

"Barry Levinson made fond references to *Sweet Smell* in both *Rain Man* where a clip from the film plays on a television in a hotel room Cruise and Hoffman are staying, and in *Diner* where a supporting character continually spouts J.J. Hunsecker dialogue."

Sweet Smell of Success. Clifford Odets & Ernest Lehman. Faber and Faber, 1998.

COMING UP NEXT WEEK, TUESDAY NOV 6:

Luchino Visconti, *IL GATTOPARDO/THE LEOPARD* 1963

The version of this film released in the US forty years ago was badly cut and mangled. This restored print of Visconti's magnificent epic, based on Lampedusa's novel, set in Sicily in 1860, shows why the film has long been so highly regarded by European critics. Burt Lancaster is superb as the prince coming to terms with Garibaldi's unification of Italy, and Alain Delon and Claudia Cardinale are one of film's great romantic couples.

Then it's a mere four more in the fall 2001 series:

Nov 13 Bernardo Bertolucci, *Il Conformista/The Conformist* 1970

Nov 20 Nicolas Roeg, *Don't Look Now* 1973

Nov 27 Terrence Malick, *Days of Heaven* 1978

Dec 4 Terry Gilliam *The Adventure of Baron Munchausen* 1988

For notes and links for each film, visit our website: <http://www.buffalofilmseminars.com>

THIS SUNDAY IN THE MAFAC SUNDAY CLASSICS....

***WOMAN IN THE DUNES*, Hiroshi Teshigahara 1954**

We like all the films Michael Faust has programmed for the MAFAC Sunday Film Classics, but now and then there is one that gets us to say "Rats! He beat us out on a dilly." This is one. A Japanese entomologist finds himself held prisoner in a sand pit with an alluring woman who expects him to work at her side. To his surprise, the scientist develops an intense bond with his female companion and resigns himself to an eternity of hypnotic routine. A surreal allegory reflecting man's grim fate, adapted from the acclaimed existentialist novel by Kobo Abe. That description may not sound like enough fun to provide an alternative to the usual Buffalo Sunday afternoon program of big guys in stretch pants running around and knocking one another insensible, but it is. Trust Mike. Academy Award Nominations for Best Director and Best Foreign Film.

ONLINE HANDOUTS: UB A LITTLE MORE SLUGGISH THAN WE PROMISED YOU LAST WEEK

Last Friday we said that we would post text-only Acrobat PDF files of all of this season's Tuesday goldenrod film notes on our web site this week (about 500k each), and soon thereafter would post text-only versions of the previous 42 sets of film notes as well. Don Schack, UB math prof and a regular member of our Tuesday night company, suggested that we also post PDF files of the full film notes, with all the graphics, since many people who might want them have access to high speed lines, which would permit easy downloading of the much larger files. That seemed reasonable enough, so last Tuesday night we sent up a request for that space too. The UB computer people set up a site, but it was the wrong kind in the wrong place. We've asked them to fix it, but they haven't responded yet so we haven't been able to make the promised files available. As soon as UB provides workable space, we'll

post the files. Our apologies for the delay.

DIANE'S FRENCH CONNECTION

The Albright-Knox is offering three lectures to celebrate its current show, *The Triumph of French Painting*. Diane will give the first of them on Friday November 9th at 7:30 p.m. in the Gallery's Auditorium. The title of her talk is "'Lost in the Stars': Voices from French Literature and Film 1800-1927." She'll speak on literature and film and show clips from the Lumière Brothers' *Paris 1900* and Abel Gance's *Napol on*. Friday November 9th, 7:30 p.m. in the Gallery's auditorium. Tickets required.

Email DIANE engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu email BRUCE bjackson@buffalo.edu. For the complete BFS FALL SCHEDULE, with notes and links for each film, visit our website: <http://www.buffalofilmseminars.com>