

Sweet Smell of Success (U)

23rd April 2012

Director: **Alexander Mackendrick**
USA 1957

Running time : 96 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Burt Lancaster** (J. J. Hunsecker), **Tony Curtis** (Sidney Falco), **Susan Harrison** (Susan Hunsecker), **Marty Milner** (Steve Dallas), **Barbara Nichols** (Rita).

SCRIPT: **Clifford Odets, Ernest Lehman** from a novella by **Ernest Lehman**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **James Wong Howe**. EDITING: **Alan Crosland Jr.**. MUSIC: **Elmer Bernstein**.

One of the minor characters of Barry Levinson's love letter to his Baltimore youth, *Diner* (1982), wantonly spouts lines from his favourite movie. *Diner* being a quirky independent film, that movie had to be an equally dark horse, Alexander Mackendrick's US début, a film in which Burt Lancaster requests a light from his acolyte Tony Curtis with the immortal line, 'Match me, Sidney.' Tonight's film.

Sidney Falco is a press agent after a taste of the big time action. He needs the people he wants to promote to get noticed, and there is no surer way than for his items to appear in the column of J. J. Hunsecker, the foremost columnist on the New York scene. This guy holds court in bars and restaurants like a cross between Blofeld and David Letterman, insulting with impunity those at his table because they all want the same thing from him.

Now Sidney swims around with the little fish in the murky waters around Time Square. He will think nothing of procuring sexual favours from cigarette girls in return for vague promises of professional advancement. So when J. J. hears of the liaison between a rising jazz saxophonist and his own sister, a girl for whom he holds an excessive fraternal attachment, then who better to plant a few drugs in the man's coat pocket?

All this may have you wondering at the film's U certificate, but of course there wasn't the array of alternatives back then; moreover, drugs and sex were suggested rather than shown. For an adult audience, however, there is much to chew on and we are not condescended to.

The project is observant of the three unities and all the action takes place in what seems to be a perpetual night of cocktails, hat checks, dirty deals and veiled threats. The producers deserve credit for the ambience, to which the black and white cinematography of veteran James Wong Howe and the big band sound of composer

Elmer Bernstein contribute in no small measure. Only in the final sequence, as J. J. Hunsecker stands on his balcony overlooking his 'realm' and Sidney Falco learns to his regret that even bent cops are happy to do him favours, only then does a squeamish dawn begin to soften the chiaroscuro.

One might marvel at the outsider shrewdness with which Mackendrick marshals his resources. Having come from the very different world of *Whisky Galore*, *Mandy* and *The Man in the White Suit*, he is given a handsome train set to play with across the pond and he uses it to turn an appraising gaze at the seamy underbelly of one of America's noted institutions: Broadway. In fact the director was born in Boston, Mass. and was only brought up in Scotland, and there are traces of the disenchantment of *Sweet Smell* (the title is of course ironic) in earlier films such as *The Maggie*. But at the time no one had looked corruption in the eye quite as he did with this film, and it was reviled in some quarters for it. Hence its essential quality as a quotable cult movie for the *Diner* character: only the enlightened appreciated it. 'HUNSECKER: You sound happy, Sidney. Why should you be happy when I am not?'

What remains in the mind after several viewings, though, is not so much the individual lines: for that you have to get into the teens. It is the atmosphere surrounding two great actors – well, one great one and one good one – opening up parts of their own *personae* which had hitherto been kept hidden, perhaps even from themselves.

David Clare