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CREW

Directed by **ALEXANDER MACKENDRICK**
Produced by **JAMES HILL**
Executive Producers **TONY CURTIS, HAROLD HECHT, BURT LANCASTER**
Screenplay by **CLIFFORD ODETS** and **ERNEST LEHMAN**
From the Novelette by **ERNEST LEHMAN**
Photographed by **JAMES WONG HOWE, ASC**
Art Director **EDWARD CARRERE**
Costumes Designed by **MARY GRANT**
Editorial Supervision **ALAN CROSLAND, JR**
Music Scored and Conducted by **ELMER BERNSTEIN**
Songs by **CHICO HAMILTON** and **FRED KATZ**
Hill-Hecht-Lancaster Productions/Norma-Curtleigh Productions, 1957

A COOKIE FULL OF ARSENIC

by Michael Brooke

Made towards the tail-end of the film noir era, Alexander Mackendrick's first American film *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) is one of the darkest, most cynical portraits of the director's birth nation ever to see the light of a projector bulb. It took two of the era's biggest stars, cast them against type not merely as villains but as men so calculatedly amoral that each successive scene saw them plumbing new depths of degradation, while refusing to toss the viewer a leavening bone. Small wonder it was an unmitigated box-office disaster: 1957 audiences weren't remotely ready for this, and the film's icy bleakness remains startling even today, especially to the unprepared first-time viewer. When a character is called "a cookie full of arsenic", it's a metaphor that could just as easily apply to the whole film.

But it's also a masterpiece, one of the most ferociously clear-eyed studies of the seamier side of American journalism and the cult of celebrity attempted either at the time or since, and the most cinematically flamboyant quasi-portrait of a major media figure since Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) took on the media tycoon William Randolph Hearst. Although it was strenuously denied that the monstrous J.J. Hunsecker (one of Burt Lancaster's career-best performances) was explicitly based on legendary columnist Walter Winchell (1897-1972), a libel action on Winchell's part might well have had traction, especially if the film had been more successful. Winchell reportedly sent spies to early screenings to gauge whether it would be a hit, and allegedly urged press agent Irving Hoffman (his own Sidney Falco) to spread the word amongst interested parties that the film was a tedious misfire. Like his fictional counterpart, Winchell wielded enormous power—at the peak of his fame in the late 1930s, it was estimated that his column was read by fifty million Americans, well over a third of the total population at the time, and two-thirds of its adult portion.

Winchell was one of the columnists to whom Ernest Lehman had to grovel for verbal scraps when a rookie press agent in the late 1930s, an experience that Lehman later parlayed into the story and first draft screenplay of *Sweet Smell of Success*. Lancaster, the film's co-producer and star, also had first-hand knowledge of this world thanks to being talent-spotted and mentored in the mid-1940s by Mark Hellinger (1903-47), a successful Broadway columnist turned producer who cast him in *The Killers* (1946) and *Brute Force* (1947), although Hellinger's final film, the Lancaster-free *The Naked City* (1948)[1] is perhaps the closest antecedent to *Sweet Smell*, not least for its then groundbreaking preference for authentic NYC locations over studio sets. What would Hellinger have made of Mackendrick's film? Would he have relished its depiction of a milieu that he knew well, or would he have considered it far too close to home even though its most precisely targeted barbs had been aimed at his rival?



Indeed, one of the reasons why the independent company Hecht-Hill-Lancaster took on the project is that higher-profile studios were genuinely concerned that Winchell and his minions would do to them what Hunsecker and his hapless supplicant and genuflector Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) attempted to do to Hunsecker's own perceived enemies. A weak-willed man who is desperate to push his faltering career onto a more secure plane, Falco is easy meat for Hunsecker, who knows exactly which buttons to push and which bribes to offer (chiefly, a promise to let him write Hunsecker's column during a sabbatical) in order to persuade him to wreck the burgeoning romance between Hunsecker's younger sister Susan (Susan Harrison) and jazz guitarist Steve Dallas (Marty Milner), of whom the columnist disapproves for unspecified reasons - although given his disquietingly close attachment to his sister, it seems likely that he'd object just as readily to any other suitor. The fact that one of the wrecking balls takes the form of an insinuation of Communist sympathies was a further presumed dig at Winchell, Senator Joseph McCarthy's only serious rival for the position of America's Red-Baiter in Chief.

On screen for much of the running time (and far more than Hunsecker), Falco is by some distance the most loathsome character that Curtis ever played, but the actor was actively looking for a role that might stretch him outside his previous narrow and typecast range (if he never actually uttered the damningly Brooklyn-accented "Yonda lies the castle of my fadda" in the 1954 medieval costume drama *The Black Shield of Falworth*, the legend was endlessly reprinted). He had previously worked for HHL, and opposite Lancaster, in Carol Reed's *Trapeze* (1956), a big hit for the company, not least thanks to the chemistry between its two stars. Eager to try something more adventurous with what he saw as sympathetic collaborators (Curtis and Lancaster, both working-class New Yorkers, had been on-off friends for a decade), Curtis accepted the part of Falco script unseen, his interest piqued by co-producer Harold Hecht's description of "a tough guy". It was an interest that went beyond playing the part, as Curtis's own production company Curtleigh Productions (the 'Curtleigh' a fusion of the surnames of Curtis and his then wife Janet Leigh) joined forces with HHL and its subsidiary Norma Productions to make the film, making uncredited executive producers out of its two leads, a decidedly unusual situation for the time that placed a fair amount of deeply unwanted pressure on Mackendrick, a Hollywood neophyte who already had his hands full. Curtis was and remained justifiably proud of his nervy, fidgety performance, although in his autobiography he complained that the negative reaction from gossip columnists such as Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper caused the film to flop and forced him back to the kind of lightweight roles that he despised.

Falco would have understood the process only too well: throughout the film, he clearly sees himself as a Hunsecker *manqué*, learning at the master's right hand as he watches him cutting his three guests (plus Falco the interloper) down to size. But when Falco tries a similar tactic on Hunsecker's fellow columnist Leo Bartha (Lawrence Dobkin), he comes badly unstuck. The two

men push a folded-up piece of paper (containing a smear about Dallas) so precisely back and forth that Bartha's wife Loretta (Lurene Tuttle) wonders if they're playing chess or checkers. They're certainly playing a game, but Falco isn't close to the grandmaster that he aspires to be, and Bartha completely wrong-foots him by effectively sacrificing a pawn by admitting his adultery to his wife. This not only defuses Falco's blackmail attempt but places himself several rungs higher on the ascent towards the moral high ground—and Loretta then unexpectedly twists her husband's knife with a coldly efficient relish that leaves Falco pointedly avoiding everyone else's understandably curious gaze.

This verbal one-upmanship infects every conversation to the extent that when Dallas bluntly tells Hunsecker to his face what he thinks of him, you can hear the proverbial pin drop—sacked from his regular gig, Dallas has little to lose and no interest in becoming enmeshed in the web that Hunsecker and Falco have been spinning while simultaneously denying its existence. The whip-smart dialogue in these scenes repays close study, not least for the cunningly euphemistic ways that screenwriter Clifford Odets worked around the restrictions imposed by the Production Code. British censors, however, proved resistant to the finished film's suggestion that Falco might be pimping out the cigarette-girl Rita (Barbara Nichols) in exchange for publicity-related favours, cutting out a full three minutes (since restored) from the print that initially played in British cinemas.

Odets went well beyond his original three-week polishing brief, taking four months to rewrite Lehman's script from stem to stern, with only the structure, characters and a handful of Lehman's lines remaining. This and Mackendrick's contribution are discussed in exhaustive detail elsewhere in this booklet and on the accompanying Blu-ray disc. The film's other great creative powerhouse was cinematographer James Wong Howe (1899-1976), who formed a particularly close working relationship with fellow perfectionist Mackendrick. Howe had first picked up a camera a full half-century earlier, had mastered his craft well before the talkies came in and never lets you forget that for all the dialogue's coruscating crackle, this film was made by people fully aware that cinema is primarily a visual medium. (Mackendrick himself started out as a fine artist and storyboarded his films with a professional's attention to detail, while Edward Carrere's production design is full of witty touches, not least the motif of Hunsecker's poster-sized eyes unsettling visitors to his office even when he isn't physically present.) Howe's images recall film noir, of course—although the noir style was itself strongly influenced by the lighting that Howe himself showcased in the 1930s—but also the starkly flashbulb-illuminated black-and-white images by his exact contemporary Weegee (1899-1968), another great anatomist of New York's seamy side.

Everything glistens and gleams, whether it's New York neon reflected in a rainwashed street, the glint of Falco's Brilliantined hair as it briefly catches a dim nightclub light, or the reflections off

Hunsecker's black-rimmed spectacles (the lenses calculatedly enhanced with a spot of Vaseline) and the black Bakelite phones with which these gentlemen of the press conduct business and blackmail. When the production relocated to a Hollywood studio after a location shoot during a particularly cold New York winter (December 1956 to January 1957), the newly constructed interiors retained the literal slickness of the New York locations by dint of Howe smearing the set's walls with oil, so that they would similarly catch the light. A slug could track through half the shots entirely unnoticed, a singularly appropriate metaphor under these particular circumstances. Martin Scorsese, a huge fan, borrowed elements of its style for his own quasi-Expressionist paeans to NYC, *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver* (1976), and, while stylistically different, *The King of Comedy* (1983) also seems to owe something to *Sweet Smell's* basilisk stare at the actions of morally reprehensible yet oddly riveting protagonists.

Howe was also a devotee of the "magic hour", that all too brief 15-20 minute slot at dawn and dusk when there's still enough light to shoot but the sun is no longer visible (seen to brilliant effect behind the opening credits as the first edition of the New York Globe hits the streets with an audible "whump", and in the very last shots), and he made extensive use of wide-angle lenses both to suck as much available illumination onto the negative as possible and to give the characters a sinister, looming quality, an effect enhanced further by shooting them at a slightly low angle. Hunsecker may not ultimately have been played by Orson Welles (the most serious pre-Lancaster casting suggestion), but his spirit imbues much of the film's baroque imagery, not least when coupled with elaborate camera movements—the latter being as much an insurance policy on Mackendrick's part as a stylistic decision, because it's harder for aggressively interventionist producers (as HHL notoriously were) to cut the end result in ways other than those originally intended. Further atmosphere was provided by composer and NYC native Elmer Bernstein's deliciously brassy and sleazy score, plus a collaboration with the Chico Hamilton Quintet, who appear onscreen as themselves.

Depending on which source one consults, the tortuous production, Odets' protracted rewrites, the location shooting and Mackendrick's contentious perfectionism either doubled, quadrupled or quintupled the original \$600,000 budget. While Lancaster loved the end result, his partner Harold Hecht was far less keen, expressing a strong dislike of the film well before disastrous test-screening cards proffered such pithy advice as "Don't touch a foot of this film. Burn the whole thing." Although decidedly wrong about the film's artistic merit, Hecht was right to be concerned: widely detested by the stars' respective fan-bases, *Sweet Smell* wasn't just a flop but so financially calamitous that it led to the winding-up of Hecht-Hill-Lancaster within three years. Not unexpectedly, Walter Winchell was delighted by the film's failure, waiting until it was certain that the losses were substantial before using his column to gloat about it. However, posterity has had the last laugh—as the once instantly recognisable persona of the real-life Winchell fades from living memory, Lancaster's J.J. Hunsecker is widely assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be a perfect

impersonation. In a world that Sidney Falco himself describes as "dog eat dog", it's a singularly fitting epitaph.

Michael Brooke is a freelance writer and multimedia producer with a particular interest in British and central-eastern European films and filmmakers. A regular and prolific contributor to *Sight & Sound* since 2002, he was one of the creators of BFI Screenonline and has worked in various capacities on dozens of Blu-ray and DVD releases from such labels as Arrow, the BFI, Eureka and Second Run.

Further Reading

American Prince: My Autobiography by Tony Curtis and Peter Golenbock (Virgin Books, 2008)
Burt Lancaster, An American Life by Kate Buford (Aurum Press, 2008)
Lethal Innocence: The Cinema of Alexander Mackendrick by Philip Kemp (Methuen, 1991)
On Film-Making: An Introduction to the Craft of the Director by Alexander Mackendrick and Paul Cronin (Faber, 2004)
Sweet Smell of Success by James Naremore (BFI Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)
'A Movie Marked Danger' by Sam Kashner (*Vanity Fair*, April 2000)

Footnotes (to be added to the relevant page)

1. The Killers, Brute Force and The Naked City are all available as Arrow Academy releases.



CONTEMPORARY REVIEWS

by Michael Brooke

***Sweet Smell of Success* was a notorious commercial disaster which also received decidedly mixed reviews in the US, not least because journalists clearly resented such a relentlessly dark and cynical portrayal of their profession. On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the reception was more positive, perhaps because the various reviewers could rationalise that British journalism “wasn’t like that”, and also because there was a local-boy-made-good story behind Alexander Mackendrick’s first American film. (One reviewer even described the American-born Scot as an Englishman.)**

A heartless, lurid piece of filmmaking, a study in ultra-modern evil acted out to the accompaniment of cool jazz and the shrilling of reputations being torn to shreds. It is directed by a young Scot from Ealing Studios - Alexander Mackendrick. His last picture was the very British-type comedy, *The Ladykillers*. Yet here he comes up with a film utterly American in atmosphere and spirit. In one stroke he makes a sensational film and puts himself in the top flight of international directors.

(Anthony Carthew, *Daily Herald*, 12 July 1957)

Few films have maintained such a constant atmosphere of menace as this outraged yet fascinated contemplation of the Broadway gossip empires. Details of corruption are dwelt on with a rare relish, while the few virtuous characters are so briefly glimpsed that they scarcely begin to emerge from the crowded background. As a result, the edges of the film’s protest are to a certain extent blunted. The esoteric world of journalists and publicity men is invaded with no concession to outsiders. The pace is hectic and the jargon and allusions - often obscure enough in themselves - are made still more confusing by an extraordinarily literary style of dialogue.

(Derek Hill, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1957)

There is in fact only one fault of artistry, a big one shared with *Titus Andronicus* as well as with some other better plays and films. That fault is that the murk is too unrelieved, that there is too little contrast of good deeds in the pervasive naughtiness (and how inadequate that word seems in the context) of the world about which the story is told. There are some redeeming characters, it is true, [but] they are not enough: they do not sufficiently balance the awfulness of all the rest, so as

to sustain a vital interest in the development of the story. Where utter unscrupulousness prevails and where moral turpitude knows no limits, dramatic interest withers away.

(*Manchester Guardian*, 13 July 1957)

In *Sweet Smell of Success* we are among New York’s sensational columnists, sniffing the human garbage in Manhattan’s open drain. To prepare you for what’s coming, I need only say that Clifford Odets is part author of the screen-play. A country that has Mr Odets for a citizen doesn’t need an enemy. The villain of the piece - if you exclude the publishers who print the filth, the millions who lap it up, and the legislators and judges too timid to devise or enforce a law of libel - is an ogre who might be twin to Mr Odets’s film producer in *The Big Knife*. Played by Burt Lancaster with spectacles, a deadpan face and a voice heavy with menace, he exudes hatred for the whole human race with the exception of a pretty young sister, for whom he has an obsessive passion.

(Campbell Dixon, *Daily Telegraph*, 13 July 1957)

From time to time, though not often enough, American film-makers give us a document, made in a white-heat of anger and bitterness against those aspects of a jungle society which govern the struggle for power in the Press, in Politics, in Big Business or on Sunset Boulevard. [...] *Sweet Smell of Success*, brilliantly directed by an Englishman [*sic*], Alexander MacKendrick [*sic*], is a study of megalomania on many levels.

(Elizabeth Frank, *News Chronicle*, 12 July 1957)

Alexander Mackendrick makes his debut as a Hollywood director with *Sweet Smell of Success*, a film as unlike any of his Ealing comedies as any film could be. It is a sleek and soulless tale of corruption concerning a feud between an ambitious Broadway Press agent (Tony Curtis) and a ruthless columnist (Burt Lancaster), an ugly picture blistering with brutal wit and establishing Mr Curtis as something more dramatic than a haircut.

(*Daily Mail*, 12 July 1957)

A magnum of Broadway vitriol that sprays corrosively over the nerve ends of newspaper ethics. [...] *Sweet Smell of Success* has the cold-blooded excitement of a stroll through the reptile house. The lounge-suited monsters coil behind their typewriters. Venom spurts from every sentence. And the terrified victims are swallowed whole. Written in part by Clifford Odets, the dialogue has the accent and the sour tang of truth. Directing his first American film, Alexander Mackendrick

brilliantly nets a small, seedy world within his camera. And the playing—particularly that of Tony Curtis—has an attack and authority that drive a melodramatic plot at a pell-mell pace. *Sweet Smell of Success* is not for everyone. But I recommend it as a savage and satisfying piece of picture-making.

(Philip Oakes, *Evening Standard*, 11 July 1957)

This is the disturbing thing about *Sweet Smell of Success* (and such recent films as *The Great Man* and *Face in the Crowd* as well). Their presentation of the contemporary scene is persuasive. One recognises the backgrounds, for great emphasis is placed on authentic locales. One even recognises—or via the gossip columns, one imagines he recognises—some of the people themselves. But the view of these people, the attitude towards people in general is one of unmitigated contempt and distaste. [...] Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman have fashioned a slick and morbidly fascinating film which Alexander Mackendrick has directed with an extraordinary feeling for the supercharged Times Square milieu. James Wong Howe has photographed it with dexterity and Elmer Bernstein has contributed an effective score. But *Sweet Smell of Success* has the taste of ashes.

(*Saturday Review*, 6 July 1957)

The jargon, the allusions and the sheer pace of *Sweet Smell of Success* will make demands on audiences outside its own experience. But its sharp squeals of disgust deserve wide attention. [...] Burt Lancaster, miscast and with an impossibly written part, tries hard; but the surprise of the film is Tony Curtis, who makes the slimy press agent revoltingly real.

(*Tribune*, 26 July 1957)

Marty Milner and a striking young newcomer, Susan Harrison, walk through the story with their integrity clutched to them as if it were something precious, but quite solid and definite: a small package, say, easily mislaid. This is one of the increasing number of American films that examine the world we live in with artistic, as well as moral, strictness and look it straight in the eye—a salutary and (in the widest sense) an entertaining thing to do.

(Isabel Quigly, *Spectator*, 26 July 1957)

This film gives us a scarifying picture of an underworld known to us only by repute. It is brilliantly directed by Alexander Mackendrick (who, despite his *Whisky Galore*, is American born), and

photography and acting reinforce a tension that recalls early gangster pieces. Cruel to the cruel! I found it fascinating, and most of my objections to its human unreality—I must admit—came afterwards.

(William Whitebait, *New Statesman*, 20 July 1957)

This is, of course, as most of these films are, a melodrama masquerading as a true-life exposure, but that realised, it can be enjoyed masochistically as the kind of film that grips one by the throat and hurls one from the cinema limp and gasping with a boot in the stomach and possibly a needle or two in the arm. [...] One shudders to think what frightful experiences must have befallen the director, Alexander Mackendrick, since the days when he made *Whisky Galore* and some other light-hearted Ealing extravaganzas.

(David Watt, *Financial Times*, 15 July 1957)

In rational moments, I don't believe in [J.J. Hunsecker]. I accept the dreary venom of the stuff he writes and the calculated insolence of his table-talk, but not his actions, which, when I get out of the cinema, appear to me the inventions of hysteria; I cannot believe that even the most feared American columnists engage in blackmailing the police and using them to beat up inconvenient acquaintances. And yet inside the cinema, so superbly is the thing done, one's skin crawls with credulous horror. The acting is first-rate, in particular Tony Curtis's performance as the lizard who scurries at the crocodile's call.

(Dilys Powell, *Sunday Times*, 14 July 1957)

Thrashing about in this amoral vacuum, *Sweet Smell of Success* becomes at times almost as hysterically neurotic as its characters. It not only calls a spade a spade, but screams it. And its only lesson is that when dog eats dog it is likely to get acute indigestion. But the cynical script of Clifford Odets and the brilliantly exciting direction of Alexander Mackendrick keep this film moving so fast and so intensely that one forgives its supercharged, exaggerated atmosphere. Burt Lancaster is so heavily sinister he could at any moment have whipped off his glasses and revealed himself as a Gestapo spy. Tony Curtis is astonishingly persuasive as a sickening agent prepared to slide through any slime for a fast dollar. And Susan Harrison, as the columnist's sister, is an interesting newcomer who brings a much-needed whiff of fresh virtue to this subterranean world.

(Milton Shulman, *Sunday Express*, 14 July 1957)



DENSITY AND SUBPLOTS IN SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

by Alexander Mackendrick

In 1969, two years after the release of the critically and commercially unsuccessful *Don't Make Waves*, Alexander Mackendrick accepted the post of Dean of the newly founded film school at the California Institute of the Arts, which he would hold until 1978, thereafter becoming a CalArts teaching professor until his death in 1993. The following, published in *On Film-Making: An Introduction to the Craft of the Director* (ed. Paul Cronin, Faber & Faber, 2004), is sourced from a lengthy handout that Mackendrick prepared for his students on the subject of dramatic construction, atypically drawing on one of his own films as an example. The full version was illustrated with extracts from various script drafts by Ernest Lehman and Clifford Odets which were too lengthy to include here, although Mackendrick's detailed descriptions provide some compensation.

Recently, a story-editor at one of the studios commented that a common weakness of scripts submitted was the absence of a subplot. I hadn't heard the term 'subplot' for some time. In classic theatrical convention it is common to have subordinate figures who develop stories that are in some degree distinct from the main theme, though they are interwoven into the central subject matter. A good many Shakespearean plays are constructed in this fashion. There is also, of course, the kind of story that deals with a group of characters. We have studied *Stagecoach* but there are a host of other examples. The epic disaster films like *Airport* and all those television mini-series rely on the pattern of a number of parallel plot-lines.

The extreme case, indeed, may be the television series of the type that has become a formula, where a number of established characters have more or less constant and unchanging relationships, and new and separate plot-lines are developed every week. Each episode contains new plot elements, a new premise and a new resolution, while the main characters and the basic themes (if there really is anything worthy of being called a theme in such television stories) are unchanging. And, because they are never really resolved, each situation can continue for as long as the invention of writers and the interest of the public can be maintained. Though common in television, group stories seem to have died as a form of the cinema these days. They used to be much more common, and if I have a prejudice against them, it is probably because the English studio at which I got some early training was addicted to the kind of stories that had multiple protagonists (the Ealing comedies *Passport to Pimlico* and *Whisky Galore!*, for example).



I have never been sure why writers and directors of that era were so happy with this formula. I think they believed it provided the opportunity for not only more variety of characters but also a lively pacing that could be achieved by intercutting the progression of the subplots. After one film of this kind I began to dislike the structure because I felt it weakened the drive of the narrative rather than strengthened it. All of the characters essentially became cameo roles that couldn't be developed in any depth, and the multiplicity of minor tensions was apt to reduce the tension of the main theme. This is why I am not sure if the comment of the story-editor about subplots is really sound. Or at least, I think there is a danger of it being misunderstood by students. I suspect, however, that the story-editor was really complaining of something a little different: a certain thinness of subject, a limited range of themes, a lack of density in the dramatic structure (to say nothing of the fact that, when planning a project that is as short as student projects usually have to be for economic reasons, there is rarely space for subplots).

Students often confuse length with substance. A work that is lengthy is thought to be more serious, more like a proper feature. I have heard complaints from students that a film of only ten or fifteen minutes cannot adequately deal with characters, themes and plots of substance. Personally, I do not believe this and can state a very good reason why it is a better test of students' craft to produce scenes that are only three to five minutes in length rather than a full-length film. A feature of about two hours is usually made up of something like twenty-five scenes, each averaging perhaps five minutes. Key scenes may be a bit longer, but are seldom more than ten minutes. The structure of the entire work, if you are studying a classic dramatic film, is likely to have the traditional elements of plot, characterisation and theme combined in exposition, crises and the gradual build to the obligatory scene near the end.

What is intriguing, however, is that the structure of the story is apt to be reflected in every scene, each of which serves almost as a microcosm of the structure of the whole. I believe this is why, from the study of one of the significantly shorter scenes within the whole, it is not difficult to evaluate the ability of a director and writer to demonstrate the skills needed to produce a full-length work. Simply, if you do not have the ability to control the dramatic structure of a scene of five to ten minutes, it is doubtful whether you can structure a whole film effectively. Moreover, if a project is meant to demonstrate to possible employers in the industry that the writer/director has the skills necessary for more ambitious tasks, then ten to fifteen minutes is quite enough. Potential employers are likely to be very busy people. Many of them will sample the beginning of a film but cut it off when they have seen enough, missing the obligatory material of the story that is usually near the end.

In the context of density in screenplay writing, let me speak here of *Sweet Smell of Success*, a film I directed in 1957 for the Hecht-Hill-Lancaster Company. Written by Clifford Odets from a first-draft script by Ernest Lehman, it starred Burt Lancaster and Tony Curtis. It is a film I have

mixed feelings about today, and I am writing about it here to illustrate some problems in the structuring of a screenplay, not because I mean to claim that it is an important work. It isn't. Among other things, the film was a big flop at the box office, though the reasons for this are perhaps rather complicated. It was much too costly, chiefly because it was made under rather chaotic circumstances: Odets had so badly underestimated the time he would need for revisions of Lehman's script that I had to start shooting while he was still working on scenes to come, and on a couple of occasions filming had to be halted.

Moreover, most of the critics in the popular press (with considerable justification) resented the savagely unflattering picture that the film presented of their profession, or at least of that subsection of it: the New York gossip columnists and their associates, the press agents. At the time *Sweet Smell of Success* was made, a number of people assumed that the character Burt Lancaster plays (J.J. Hunsecker) was based on the famous Broadway gossip columnist Walter Winchell. For obvious reasons, since the story presents both the columnist and his profession in an unflattering light, the producers denied this. But it should be stated that Ernest Lehman (who also wrote the original story upon which the script was based) had once worked in the offices of a Broadway press agent who was a close associate of Winchell. Winchell had also been the subject of a series of exposé newspaper articles that do bear some vague resemblance to incidents in the story.

There were other problems to deal with. The production department had used Lehman's draft for its scheduling and budgeting, so to say the film went over schedule is not really accurate because there never really was a schedule or a definitive budget. I am ashamed to admit that from the point of view of the director, chaos can have some advantages. It forces him to think fast and improvise, seizing on unforeseen opportunities. There is the exhilaration at the fact that the whole elaborate superstructure of executives—whose job it is to look over the shoulder of the director—are at his mercy, because nobody else knows what is going on. On the other hand, it is a wholly disastrous way to make films and, in view of the fact that *Sweet Smell of Success* was not a success at the box office, it did not necessarily help the careers of a number of people who worked on it.

What's more, up to that point Tony Curtis had played only relatively sympathetic parts, and the audience that went to see him, assuming he was the hero of the story, were first dismayed and then angered as it slowly emerged that this nice young man was a monster of cynicism and corruption, more contemptible even than the sinister figure of Hunsecker. There were also some commentators who saw the whole subject matter of the film as an attack on the 'American Way of Life' and the 'success ethos'. Looking back, I cannot say I am surprised at its poor reception. What is a bit more unexpected is that since its release the film has been appearing in art-house cinemas and festivals, and has developed, as they say, a 'cult following', for which much credit must be given to the gutter-poetry quality of Odets's melodramatic lines.

Though in a number of ways *Sweet Smell of Success* does seem ludicrously hammy and theatrical, of course we knew this at the time. It was also clear that it was intrinsic to the genre that the characters and performances should be exaggerated, verging on the grotesque. And while I cannot recommend the film for student study on aesthetic grounds, there is one aspect of it that may be of value for analysis: the writing process, the way that one scriptwriter (Odets) went about the job of rewriting the work of another (Lehman). I have chosen here to look carefully at the film because I was present at the stages when it was being written by these two very experienced writers, and participation in this process taught me a great deal, particularly about the subject we are discussing here: story structure, not only as applied to the script as a whole but crucially also within individual scenes. Corny as the film is (and it is a quite shameless piece of melodrama), it has real vitality throughout because Odets constantly provides glimpses of subsidiary conflicts and tensions.

Clifford Odets was a playwright of some importance in the history of American drama and had been a hero of mine long before I became a film-maker. As a screenwriter, however, he was extremely theatrical. I have to admit I found his dialogue mannered and very artificial, not at all realistic. At the same time, I recognised that not only is the whole plot of *Sweet Smell of Success* somewhat exaggerated, it also deals with an environment and characters who seem to enjoy quite grotesquely colourful forms of speech. (On another level, Damon Runyon's stories of the same environment have a similarly preposterous style.) Clifford sensed, I think, that I was concerned about the problem of style and explained to me: "My dialogue may seem somewhat overwritten, too wordy, too contrived. Don't let it worry you. You'll find that it works if you don't bother too much about the lines themselves. Play the situations, not the words. And play them fast." When it came to the highly stylised, almost preposterous, lines the actors had to speak, I found this to be a marvellous piece of advice. Indeed, it reinforced my understanding of dialogue in film: the spoken word is often at its most effective when the actors concentrate not on the words and their literal meaning but on the actions that underlie them, the real intentions and motivations of the characters. A line that reads quite implausibly on the printed page can be quite convincing and effective when spoken in a throwaway or incidental fashion by the actor.

Ernie Lehman and I had become friends during a period when we were both under contract to Hecht-Hill-Lancaster. I had been preparing a project that was cancelled because of casting problems, while Ernie had been assigned as not only the writer of *Sweet Smell of Success* but also as director. He began, however, to have second thoughts about choosing it as his first directing assignment and decided he would be safer if he remained as writer/producer. He asked me if I would like to direct it. I liked the material for several reasons. One was that I had always hankered to make a melodrama, a film noir as it has been called, and felt this was a chance to get out of a reputation I had for small, cute British comedies. Another was that, though it was in England, I'd had some experience of the world of tabloid journalism and was both repelled and fascinated





by some of its grub-bier aspects. A third was that I liked the idea of trying to capture on screen the atmosphere of Manhattan. (It has been done many times since, of course, but *Sweet Smell of Success* was actually one of the first attempts to shoot night scenes on location in the city.) I also appreciated the themes of the story and felt I could work well with Ernie Lehman, though I did explain to him and the producers that there were certain things about the first draft that worried me a good deal, not least that it wasn't very cinematic. Just about every scene consisted of an exchange of dialogue between two people sitting at a table in a restaurant, at a bar, or in a nightclub. The screenplay was nothing but talk, with little consideration given to physical surroundings and visual atmosphere.

My earliest reaction was that though such an approach was necessary for much of the story, we could at least make an attempt to move it out into the streets. I felt that one of the characteristic aspects of New York, particularly the square mile that constitutes the area between Forty-Second Street and Fifty-Seventh Street (the theatre and nightclub district), is the neurotic energy of the crowded sidewalks. This, I argued, was essential to these characters, people driven by the uglier aspects of ambition and greed. Without it they would seem to be even more unbelievable than they already were. I was enormously lucky to discover that the producers were instantly receptive to this idea, and even before we set down to work on the screenplay, the producers allowed me to take the cameraman (the great James Wong Howe) and the production designer (Edward Carrere) on a reconnaissance trip to New York to explore the locations. It was on this visit to the city that we developed the formula of starting many of the scenes in exteriors, beginning with short passages of dialogue on the claustrophobic Manhattan streets outside the bars, apartment buildings, offices and street corners, before following the characters into the interiors. A complex matter this was, since it meant very careful matching between material shot on night locations in New York and studio-built sets on the sound stages of Goldwyn Studios in Hollywood. I am not at all sure that this effect helped the film to be less theatrical, but do feel it contributed to the inward aggression that helped to make the scenes work. Though the screenplay is immensely talky and theatrical, I think the camera helped disguise this.

In retrospect, I realise I may have been falling into a trap not uncommon in the profession: when a director is uneasy about some aspects of the script but does not know how to resolve them, he will often retreat into concentrating on more technical challenges that allow him to escape from things that are more important. The truth, perhaps, was that I was uncomfortable about characters and situations that I did not really believe in and hoped to conceal these fundamental flaws by the fancy footwork of visual effects. A common fallacy is that you can make a piece of writing conceived in theatrical terms more cinematic by 'opening it out'. This usually means keeping the same dialogue, but playing the scene against backgrounds of more pictorial interest. Though this may indeed help to provide more atmosphere, it does not necessarily make the scenes any more interesting.

At this point came a major disaster: Ernie Lehman fell ill, only a month or so before shooting was due to start, a date that could not be postponed because of contracts to the principal actors, we were faced with the task of finding a new screenwriter to solve a number of the problems we had identified in the script. By enormous good fortune Hecht-Hill-Lancaster had just put Clifford Odets under contract to work on another project and we were able to persuade him to do what, at that juncture, seemed a relatively simple job of story doctoring: polishing the dialogue and making some minor adjustments to the scene structure. We could not have been more wrong. It is, of course, well known that few writers are able to resist the temptation of changing the work of another screenwriter, but none of us realised how much work Clifford found that he had to do. Very little of Ernie's script was left in the end, though the basic themes remain in the film we know today, and with the exception of the final scenes, the plot was substantially as originally conceived. What Clifford did, in effect, was to dismantle the structure of single sequence in order to rebuild situations and relationships into scenes that were more complex and had much greater tension and dramatic energy. Disastrous as this process was from the point of view of the production, the truth is that for me personally it was an experience that taught me a staggering amount. I can make no claims for the completed film, but what I can say is that without this work done by Odets, it would have had none of the vitality you see up on the screen.

It is not easy to explain Clifford's process. It took place mostly in story conferences, daily meetings between three people: Odets, producer Jim Hill and myself. Much of the discussion was lively, aggressive argument in which it seemed that we ripped every scene to shreds, to the point where I was growing increasingly nervous that nothing would be left. But what I slowly began to recognise was that I was being given the privilege of watching the processes of a dramatic intelligence working out the intricacies of character interaction. There was an interesting pattern to Clifford's work on the successive drafts of a scene. During a story conference he would improvise in the way an actor does, sometimes using a tape recorder, more often just talking and making notes. Then he would go off on his own to sketch out a scene that he would come back and read (perform, in fact) for our benefit. His acting, to my mind, was atrocious. Moreover, the scene would usually be horrendously overwritten and much too long. Then he would set about cutting it down quite ruthlessly. Clifford was, in fact, much more drastic in the editing of his own first drafts than any other writer I have worked with. In effect, during this process he would reduce the scene to a bare bones of the essential moves of the dramatic action. All that would be left were the key lines that triggered a shift in the story, a peripeteia of some kind.

The scene was still in Clifford's handwriting. Nothing had been typed. At this stage it was my impulse to beg him to have it typed up so we could examine it. But he always managed to frustrate me in this and tried to keep the material flexible as possible as he began to find new problems with it. Often this was because as he improvised the situation by playing it from the point of view of one of the characters, he uncovered previously unnoticed problems related to interrelated characters.

Retaining only the essentials of the scene, he would then switch points of view as he improvised the complementary reactions of another figure. Once more the scene would expand and once more Clifford would drastically cut it down again, keeping—at each successive stage—only the essentials from the previous draft, creating a piece of writing with more and more density and sinew.

Naturally this was a time-consuming process. The real reason why many scripts are too long is wittily put in the apology of a correspondent who explained at the end of an extremely discursive letter: "I'm sorry this is such a long letter. I didn't have time to write a short one." Dramatic economy, which includes the ability of the writer to cut what at one point he might have considered to be his best work ever, is one of the most important skills a writer can have, learned only through much experience, combined with a ruthless attitude and an utter lack of sentimentality. It takes effort, lots of effort. It means rewriting and rewriting and rewriting - a constant process of distillation. Simply put, I find that many student films are too long simply because not enough effort has been put into the hard work of making them short.

Odets's process was his extraordinary method of building the dramatic mechanisms of a scene. It often required him to produce a number of drafts of dialogue that were progressively dismantled and then cannibalised into subsequent versions. In early drafts the dialogue was heavily weighted in favour of one of the characters who would be permitted lengthy and even cumbersome exposition, quite simple and one-sided explanations of attitude. These were often very near to being overt expressions of internal thought. The next stage might be Clifford's examination of the reactions to such monologues. Much of what he had written would then have to be revised because "He wouldn't be able to say that because She wouldn't let him get away with it—She'd interrupt him by pointing out that..." While working on these easy drafts, Odets was well aware that he was including far too much material, that it would need to be compressed and cut down. But that was the point.

Certain things emerged during this process. A particular line of dialogue that was important or expressive of a significant idea might have to be eliminated from the speech of one of the characters. But it was sometimes possible to retain it by transferring it to one of the other characters (though not necessarily in the same scene). Implausible as a direct statement, it would work fine as an attribution in someone else's mouth. Complex and sophisticated characters are apt to be unwilling, unable or reluctant to explain their feelings and purposes, particularly in situations of conflict. The dramatist often finds it convenient to explain His feelings by rewriting them in the form of Her attributions of feelings and thoughts about Him. Things that He would never admit, or may not even recognise about himself, can be made explicit thanks to Her. ("Methinks she doth protest too much" is a convenient phrase to remember.)



Odets, describing his methods of fashioning a tightly knit and dense script, offered this advice: see that each of the characters arriving in a confrontation scene comes with ammunition (as he used to remark, a character has to have "a back to his head and money in his pocket"). The climax of many effective plays or screenplays features a scene in which two characters, often the protagonist of the story and an antagonist, confront each other. In Hollywood jargon this is sometimes referred to as the shootout, even when the weapons are purely verbal. Intelligent characters (and scenes between characters who have little intelligence are apt to be dull) usually arrive with a number of moves that have been mentally rehearsed in advance. They have thought out not only what they mean to say, but also how it will probably be received.

An argument is, in this sense, like a chess or card game. The instigator (A) is likely to have a fairly clear scheme of opening moves. He will have several gambits in mind and is prepared for the countermoves these may provoke. Similarly, his opponent (B) has foreseen (A)'s intentions and has prepared either defensive tactics or a counter-attack. Thus a confrontation scene between (A) and (B) will often begin with a number of dialogue exchanges that are an exploration of prepared positions, probing for strengths and weaknesses, while also establishing psychological bases. Tension in a scene of this kind clearly arises out of conflict, the clash of wills. The first task of the writer is therefore to be as clear as possible when it comes to the desires of each of the confronting characters. What exactly does (A) want? What obstacles does he expect (B) to raise? How does (A) expect to overcome these obstacles? Through what persuasion? What promise? What threat?

In this respect, once the psychological vying between characters has resulted in, perhaps, one character winning out over the other (albeit temporarily), then come the important expository surprises as certain pieces of information, perhaps unknown to one character, become, in the hands of another, an ace, a trump card. Such dynamics can produce a shift of the dramatic equilibrium, a peripeteia. In an intricately plotted scene there can be more than one such trumping move. Thus it is another of the tasks of the writer to think out just these points where ignorance of some key information leaves one of the characters vulnerable, a move in which the tables can be turned by the other. A character who holds our interest will, during such scenes, often discover something unexpected, some contradiction within his or her own personality, an unforeseen emotional impulse. (Plot moves, however, are only one of the elements in an effective confrontation scene. Indeed, a scene that rests solely on a clash over plot points is likely to be thin stuff. One sees too much of this kind of writing in television stories where characters act aggressively but have no emotional depth or variety of feelings, no potential for shifts of mood, no capacity for character growth.)

The effect of Odets's ideas about density created a depth and conviction to the characters of *Sweet Smell of Success*, greatly enhancing many scenes. As a process it seemed to me rather like

the weaving of a fabric that, because of the tensions of multiple interlocking strands, is supremely strong. Clifford would frequently use secondary characters in this way, establishing them as the basis for triangulation, the three-way interplay of characters. I had, as I say, noted that the original screenplay seemed to have a great many scenes that were simple dialogues, interaction between two people. Clifford's instinct seemed always to devise patterns of three, four and five interacting characters. One of his private pleasures was listening to chamber music, especially small string ensembles and quintets. Clifford admired compositions in which the voices of five instruments were thematically interwoven, yet each with a clearly identifiable melodic line contributing to the harmonic pattern. As such, he wanted to make certain scenes in his screenplay follow a similar pattern, where there would be a quintet of voices. There are several instances in the script of *Sweet Smell of Success* where I think Odets was particularly successful in doing this.

In the first story conference between Odets, myself and the producer, Jim Hill, I presented some of the ideas I had already been working on with Ernest Lehman. I had the idea of beginning the film with a sequence I felt would set the general tone of the film: the frantic activity that surrounds the moment when the first edition of a big city newspaper hits the streets (it was finally used as background for the titles). I explained how I could use posters on the side of the delivery trucks and the masthead of the column itself to set in motion the sequence of scenes that would build slowly to the introduction of the figure of the columnist. I suggested this would be a better start than the ambiguous scene of the suicide that introduced voiceover narration and flashback. (Privately, I have a distaste for these two things, both of which are often a sign of the failure to create scenes in which the exposition is presented in terms of present dramatic action.) I had no need to argue the point, for Odets had already been feeling much the same way. Encouraged, I also made the suggestion that we could establish the profession of Sidney (Tony Curtis's character) visually if we could play a scene not in his home, but rather in an office where the set design and incidental activity could show just how a press agent lives. Perhaps, I said, Sidney could actually have a bedroom attached to his office, something that would indicate his association with the newspaper column and the degree to which he was dependent on his job.

Odets again seized on this. Pursuing the same line, he said he had been thinking about the roles of Sidney's mother and the brother. In Lehman's early draft these two characters appeared in the early scenes but were substantially absent thereafter. Useful, of course, as supporting roles to reveal the background of the protagonist, but without much connection with the rest of the action. Possibly, he thought, there were other more interesting ways to make the same points using characters already established in the script. For example, instead of the character of the mother, Odets proposed that the character of the theatrical agent could be a relative of Sidney's, his mother's brother (such a person would have the right to scold Sidney in much the same fashion as the brother and the mother). The idea of the bedroom/office also prompted Odets to suggest that Sidney has a secretary, Sally, who also sleeps with him on occasion, a sad and slightly squalid

relationship that was not only rich in its implications of character, but which meant that scenes now devoted to character exploration could be more explicitly relevant to the plot. (The early scene in Odets's draft with Sidney and Sally in his office where he gives a self-justifying speech is not only an early statement of the story's theme, thus anticipating situations in the climax of the story, it also gives a depth to Sidney's character as it shows us his attitude to his secretary, whom he treats with such little respect. Thus the character, theme and plot are all functioning at once in the scene.)

Clifford promised to work on these ideas. Then he began to focus on the scene he felt needed most work: the introduction, in the Twenty-One Club, of the figure central to the whole subject, J.J. Hunsecker. Lehman's original version contained three characters sitting at the newspaper columnist's table, but very little use was made of them. They were merely extras to the scene, while in Odets's version each of the five characters are continuously in play throughout. For purposes of exposition, Odets had considerably expanded their parts, making them foil figures and effectively providing a compact subplot for them. Like Odets, I felt the scene was not really as powerful as it ought to be, but having no positive suggestions, I had made no complaint. Odets proceeded to give us a demonstration of the way a practised dramaturge, a man with long experience of such difficulties, explores for ideas to solve them.

"I don't understand!" he declared with force. "This man Hunsecker is a newspaper columnist. I know what that means. What I don't understand is why everybody seems so terrified of him. Why?" Jim Hill protested to Odets, "Oh, come on, Clifford, he's not just any columnist. Everybody knows how he behaves." "No they don't," said Clifford. "Some people might know. Maybe you and I know, but most people have no idea. This is a man who treats one of his associates as if he were dirt. But Sidney just sits there and takes it. Why does he need it? Why doesn't he just get up and walk away?" Jim protested again: "He can't walk away. It's his living." "How?" asked Clifford. "How? Because a Press Agent has to get his clients' names into the paper. That's what they pay him for. And besides that..." Jim, in some exasperation, went on to elaborate on the relationship between Sidney and Hunsecker. While he was doing so Odets scribbled notes on his memo pad, then switched his attack. "But why is everybody else so much in awe of this creature? He insults everybody but nobody talks back to him. I just don't believe in this man." Once more Hill insisted, "Don't you understand! This guy Hunsecker is a man who can tell Presidents what to do!" Scribbling again, Clifford said more quietly, "Oh, sure. But where does it say that? And even if somebody it, I don't believe it. You've got to show me."

During all of this I made no comment, as I saw Odets's point clearly. But what had begun to worry me was that, if he was correct (and I felt he was), then there would need to be a lot more expository talk, a lot more of the kind of verbiage I felt was already bogging down the momentum of the story. More exposition, I felt, was bound to weaken the scenes rather than strengthen

them. What Clifford had been scribbling down as he talked were Jim Hill's answers that were later worked into the dialogue of the script. Clifford was actually using Jim as a foil, or rather was playing the role of foil himself so that Jim was provoked into improvising the answers to the questions that had not been properly addressed in the first draft script. As for myself, I was indeed correct in my fear that the Twenty-One Club scene would have to be longer and more elaborate. But Clifford's skill meant that as it was transformed from primarily a two-hander into a five-cornered exchange of considerable complexity, the scene became brilliantly tense.

Though I personally was often uneasy about Odets's dialogue, I had nothing but admiration for his skill in scene construction. His adeptness in this kind of dramatic carpentry was quite extraordinary and is something we can all learn from. As I examined Clifford's version of the scene, I realised that its strength was in the ensemble structure he had constructed. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that at any given moment each of the five characters present is involved in some way with every one of the other four. There are, in a sense, twenty-five separate interactions. This, of course, had an immediate effect on the way in which camera coverage is planned, and I had to think very carefully before it was time to rehearse and before it became my task to design the staging. In order to maintain the ensemble feeling before the cameras, with its sense of a continuous flow in interactions, it seemed important to me to design the images so that sometimes five, sometimes three, and sometimes two, figures were in the frame. At the same time, the moves of the actors constantly called attention to the shifting patterns of the axes of their confrontations and interactions.

[In] Lehman's original draft [of the Twenty-One Club scene], Sidney is initially refused access to the restaurant by the maître d'. Odets, however, thought that the rejection had to come directly from Hunsecker himself. Lehman also introduces Rita, the cigarette girl, to fill in the time while Hunsecker is consulted by the maître d'. The subplot of Rita is a plant for the idea that Sidney gets later (persuading Rita to sleep with Otis Elwell). The Odets version places this scene early in the story.

Lehman introduced three subsidiary characters at Hunsecker's table: two men and a pretty girl. They are useful as an audience for Hunsecker's monologue, but not much more. Odets seized on Lehman's suggestions but has made more use of these foil figures, developing them as characters with a subplot of their own. In Lehman's draft, once Sidney is sitting at the table, it appears he has come to Hunsecker to ask what J.J. is doing to him and why. As a move in the story this is really rather weak as he seems to have prepared no coherent moves of his own. Sidney must surely be shrewd enough to know what Hunsecker's motives are, and would not confront Hunsecker (certainly not publicly) unless he has brought some ammunition himself, which he has done in Odets's version. First is the bad news that Dallas has proposed to Susan. Second, Sidney has

already worked out a method of solving this problem, one he intends to put into effect. He needs only the promise from Hunsecker that he will be rewarded.

[What Odets] has done is present us with active exposition. The entire subplot of the Senator, the Girl and the Agent is a practical demonstration of the real power of this scandal-sheet columnist Hunsecker, someone seen to be a genuinely dangerous individual. A page or two of dialogue can be lifted out to form a very brief little mini-drama of its own (Hunsecker's unmasking of the Agent as a procurer, for the Senator, of this would-be actress). It contains a plot, exposition and even a climax within the larger structure of the manipulative and mutual blackmail relationships of the two principals (Hunsecker and the press agent Sidney Falco). Note that this is the only scene in the script in which the Senator, the Girl and Agent appear.

Note too that though in Lehman's draft (as in Odets's too), Hunsecker's insane jealousy at the love affair between Susan and Steve is a plot point, his self-pity and self-indulgence weaken his character as an antagonist. In both the Lehman version and the Odets rewrite, Hunsecker is characterised as paranoid, absurdly vain and egotistical, though in some speeches in Lehman's draft ("I waste my strength, my energy, worrying about fleas, there'll be nothing left to fight the dragons with") he seems to be somewhat childish, altogether unaware of how others react to him. Odets's main criticism of the original scene as written was that no one could take seriously a man so whimperingly weak. In the Odets draft, Hunsecker is no less of an egomaniac but a good deal more shrewd, less self-pitying and complete with a sadistic sense of humour.

There are many things to notice when comparing the two drafts. For example, Sidney's four-line interaction with the maître d' helps establish the characters of the two men and probably of Hunsecker too, while the line "something—with—long—red—hair" tells us something about the character of the Girl. Sidney's rudeness to the telephone girl is in character, as he is apt to be as impolite to his inferiors as he is flattering to those he needs. (It is also an indication of his anxiousness at meeting J.J.). Sidney's decision that he would rather not speak to Hunsecker in the company of others suggests what later emerges, that Sidney has ammunition for the confrontation to come. As far as the audience goes, hearing Hunsecker on the telephone before seeing him is a tease in delaying the entrance of the chief antagonist of the story.

When the build-up of a confrontation has been this elaborate, it is necessary to deliver some strong conflict immediately. Thus the scene begins with a very direct skirmish between the two men once Sidney starts talking to Hunsecker. Sidney is in danger of being thrown out of the club when he decides to play his ace (the information concerning Susan). Note, however, that once this card has been played (once a fuse has been lit and a showdown promised), Odets can take an extravagant amount of time before coming to the point (Sidney telling Hunsecker about Susan being engaged), something that comes only several script pages later.

Think also about the joke that Hunsecker tells about sports cars in California. In Lehman's script, Hunsecker tells a joke that is somewhat crude and not all that funny. The incident is not meant as comedy, rather as characterisation: vulgar gags are indeed part of the stock in trade of tabloid columnists. But Odets takes the point a little further, for while the mildly dirty joke is included in his draft for the same purpose, its unfunnyness is emphasised by the fact that only the sycophantic agent laughs.

Soon after comes a good example of triangulation. Sidney addresses his line "A man has just been sentenced to death" to the Senator in order to needle Hunsecker in revenge for the fact that earlier Sidney also had been 'sentenced to death'. Throughout the whole scene, a ricochet effect is achieved: a line is delivered to one person, but for the benefit of a third party. This triangulation is what gives density to the interaction.

When Hunsecker does finally start his move (his attack on the Senator), it is with the line "What exactly are the unseen gifts of this lovely young thing that you manage?" The non-reaction of the Senator is the signal to us that he knows very well where Hunsecker is going. This is marvellous screenwriting, as it offers the director the chance to show through editing and camera angles that the significance of the scene is in what is being implied, not said (specifically in the way the characters avoid eye contact). Inevitably, the Senator's strategy of defence is to change the subject, and he is successful in this because Hunsecker cannot resist the chance to exploit Sidney's humiliation at being called an actor. (All press agents are apt to despise the performers who are their clients.) There follows another good example of the ricochet technique, with Hunsecker's lines about the "hungry press agent", though directed to the three people sitting opposite him at the table, playing strongly on Sidney's reactions.

When the Senator asks Sidney about his job, it is for expository purposes. The lines explaining the relationship of the press agent and the columnist are elaborations of the things that Jim Hill, as producer, said to Odets during our story conferences. But Odets not only employs the Senator as foil, he also provides the answers through an acrimonious quarrel between Sidney and Hunsecker. Hunsecker's anger at Sidney, based on another totally separate matter, is then switched to a vicious attack on the Agent. These abrupt shifts of emotion are what makes Hunsecker dangerous. However, when at the climax of the scene he moves in for the kill, he is at his most gentle and sincere. Here Odets is finally delivering the promise of a long and slow build-up to the man who "can tell Presidents what to do". As Odets explained to me, with his line "Are we kids or what?" Hunsecker switches back to being humorous and charming because he "just tasted blood".

In scene after scene, Odets helps build density within the script as a whole, for example playing out a short interaction between Sidney and Jimmy Weldon, one of his clients, just before he enters the Twenty-One Club. Here, an entire drama is created in only two pages. Though Weldon is mentioned

in Lehman's version, Odets makes much more effective use of the character. When Sidney returns to his office in the second scene of the film, Sally is speaking to 'Mr Weldon' on the phone. Sidney signals to her that he doesn't want to take the call. By having Weldon actually fire Sidney on the steps of the club just before Sidney is about to confront Hunsecker, dramatic tension is increased as Sidney is now much more desperate. Note also the use of the girl with Weldon who functions as a foil. Weldon's attack on Sidney is more humiliating in front of a witness, and by having Weldon address to her lines that are meant for his press agent, Odets is effectively using her to bounce lines.

One of the elements Odets retained from Lehman's draft is the story of the comedian Herbie Temple and the confidence trick Sidney plays on him. Discovering that the gossip column for next day's edition contains a plug for the comedian, Sidney calls on Herbie and offers to persuade his columnist friend to include an item, even going through the pretence of making a phone call to his office instead of the newspaper. The incident is a complete subplot in itself (seen to pay off in a later encounter with the comedian), and again adds density to the narrative as a whole. Though the scene (along with others in the final film) could be eliminated without serious damage to the main action of the story as a whole, its value is obvious. While the encounter with Herbie does not do much more than further illustrate Sidney's devious methods, it does show him successful in his chicanery and provides some relief from the picture of the young man who is so at the mercy of his co-conspirator, J.J. Hunsecker.



ABOUT THE RESTORATION

This digital transfer was created on a SCANITY Film Scanner in 4K resolution from the original 35mm camera negative. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches, splices, warps, jitter, and flicker were manually removed using MTI's DRS system and Pixel Farm's PFClean system, while Digital Vision's DVNR system was used for small dirt, grain, and noise reduction.

The monaural soundtrack was remastered at 24-bit from the original 35mm magnetic soundtrack. Clicks, thumps, hiss, and hum were manually removed using Pro Tools HD. Crackle was attenuated using AudioCube's integrated audio workstation.

Telecine supervisor: Lee Kline.

Telecine colourist: Sheri Eisenberg/Colorworks, Los Angeles.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet produced by Michael Brooke

Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni

Technical Producer: James White

Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje

QC and Proofing: Michael Brooke, Anthony Nield

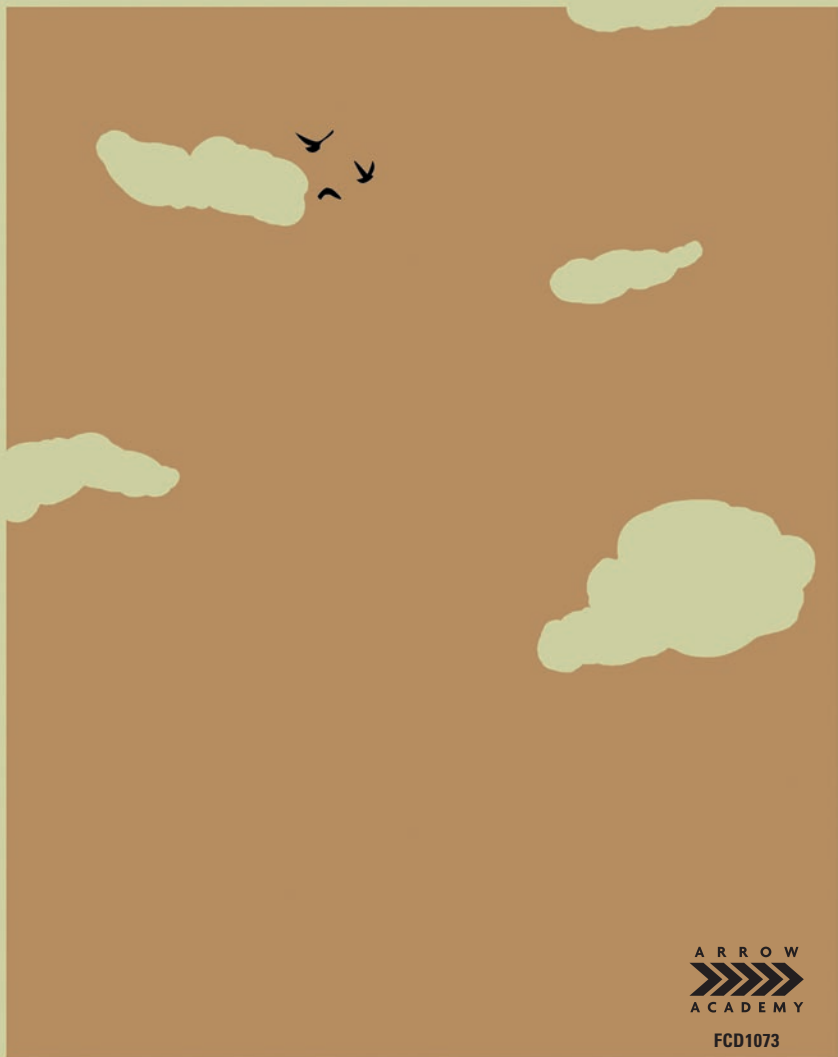
Blu-ray Mastering: David Mackenzie

Artist: Chris Walker

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SPECIAL THANKS

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ARROW

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