

A MOVIE MAR

It was a dangerous movie.
And a brilliant one.
When *Sweet Smell of Success*
opened on June 27, 1957,
however, it was a flop.
But Ernest Lehman's biting tale
of a Walter Winchell-like
gossip columnist, J. J. Hunsecker,
played by Burt Lancaster, and
a terminally hungry press agent—
Tony Curtis, in a stunning
breakthrough role as
Sidney Falco—has echoed
down the decades and is being
adapted for Broadway by
John Guare and Marvin Hamlisch.
From interviews with Lehman,
Curtis, and producer James Hill,
SAM KASHNER reconstructs the
appropriately dark and
vicious birth of a masterpiece
of New York noir



KED DANGER



SWEET TALK

"Sidney, this syrup you're giving out with, you pour over waffles, not J. J. Hunsecker," says Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster) to Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) in a scene from *Sweet Smell of Success*.

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Sweet Smell of Success has always been a dangerous film. It even had the most powerful gossip columnist in America pacing nervously across the street from Loew's State on Times Square, where the film was having its premiere in New York on June 27, 1957. Walter Winchell, the fast-talking, snap-brim-fedora-wearing arbiter of American culture, was waiting for a handful of his spies to reassure him that the movie was going to be a flop. And indeed it was. The film that's now regarded as a delicious morality tale, credited with sullyng Winchell's reputation for all time, failed at the box office.

The public hated it. Earlier, when it was screened for a Northern California audience, one viewer wrote on the preview card, "Don't touch a foot of this film. Just burn the whole thing."

But 42 years after its release this stylish black-and-white movie refuses to go away. Its sly influence has cropped up in the work of directors as diverse as Martin Scorsese, Barry Levinson, the Coen brothers, and Paul Thomas Anderson. *New Yorker* film critic David Denby has called it the finest New York film ever—besting even *Annie Hall* and *Taxi Driver* on his personal list. "It was such a tough film," Scorsese has said. "It was vibrant, alive. The images of New York, the location work were all brilliant. . . . It was a world of operators I knew very well."

Why has this film, rejected by its initial audiences in favor of *Peyton Place*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and *Funny Face*, re-emerged in all its low-life glory? What is it about *Sweet Smell of Success* that causes the film to live up to its hype: THE MOTION PICTURE THAT WILL NEVER BE FORGIVEN—OR FORGOTTEN!, as its theater posters claimed.

Just about everything.

Sweet Smell of Success—the story of an unethical press agent named Sidney Falco and a power-mad gossip columnist named J. J. Hunsecker—does for New York what *Sunset*

Boulevard did for Hollywood. It was conceived as a short story called "Hunsecker Fights the World," published in 1948 in *Collier's* by Ernest Lehman, an unhappy press agent who wanted only to be a novelist and a screenwriter; it was Lehman's attempt to expiate his guilt for being one of the little guys feeding the big columnists the stuff that made Walter Winchell more powerful than presidents.

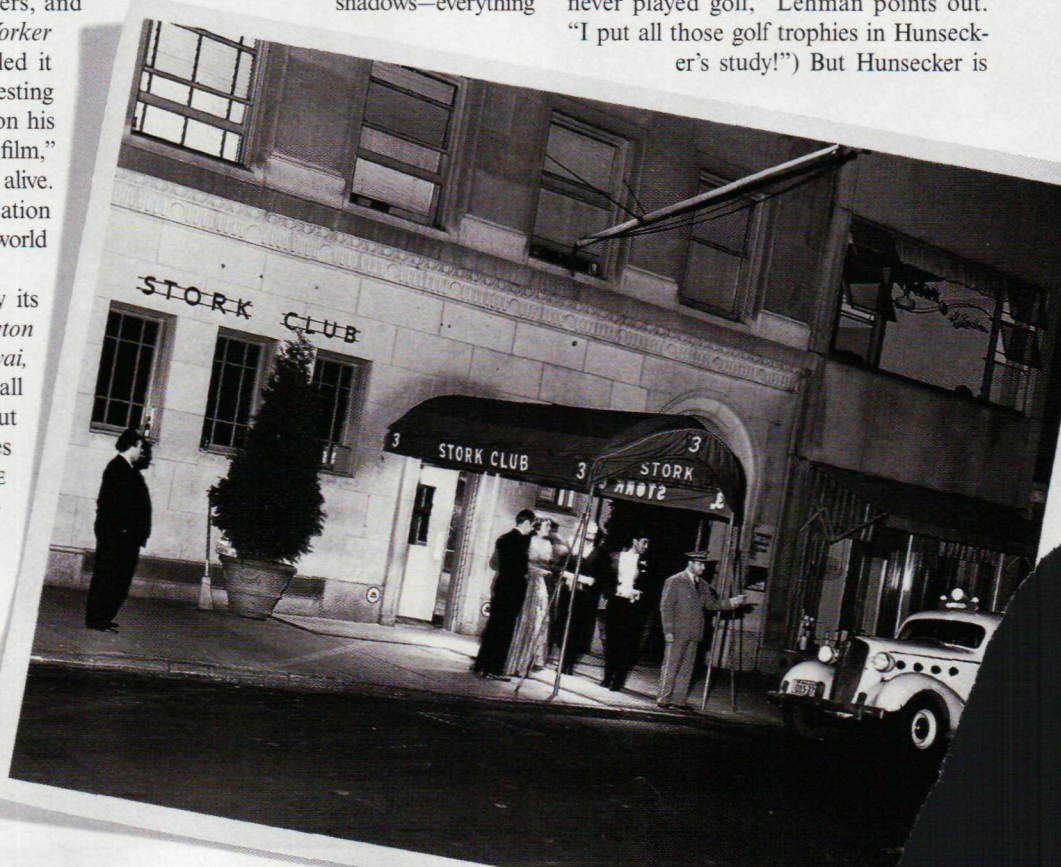
The writer Michael Herr called Winchell "the wizard of the American vicarious: gossip columnist, failed vaudevillian, power broker, and journalistic demagogue, one of the most powerful and famous men of his time." At the height of his popularity, in the late 1930s, 50 million people—two thirds of American adults—read Winchell's syndicated column and listened to his Sunday-night radio broadcast. An insecure man, he was quick to perceive slights and avenged them ruthlessly. As he wrote in his autobiography, "I'm not a fighter. I'm a 'waiter.' I wait until I can catch an ingrate with his fly open, and then I take a picture of it." Winchell's special brand of nastiness is the evil heart of *Sweet Smell of Success*.

Among the film's many pleasures is James Wong Howe's chiaroscuro cinematography, which unerringly captures the look and feel of postwar New York City. Howe shot his subjects from low angles so they always seemed to be "knifing up through the air, poised for the kill," as critic and screenwriter Stephen Schiff put it. The city is awash in brilliant shadows—everything

shines, seemingly drenched in acid rain: the enormous neon signs above the great buildings, even the newsstand holding down its corner of the sidewalk in front of Nedick's. At one point, after Hunsecker watches a drunk being bounced from a nightclub, he turns away and says, "I love this dirty town." *Sweet Smell of Success* is a corrosive valentine to New York, embracing its energy and its clashing ambitions. But what cineasts really love about this film is its biting dialogue, written by Lehman and that most miserable of urban geniuses, Clifford Odets. Where else would you hear a sinister cop utter the words "Come back, Sidney. I want to chastise you"?

The Sturm und Drang of bringing Lehman's morality tale to the screen had a nearly lethal effect on a number of its players: It made Lehman so ill he had to leave the project. It deepened the melancholia of the great Odets. It almost sent Susan Harrison, the fragile actress who played Hunsecker's sister, over the edge. And it helped to derail the career of its talented director, Alexander "Sandy" Mackendrick.

Burt Lancaster plays the villainous J. J. Hunsecker, understood by all audiences—then and now—to be a swipe at Winchell, though Lehman claims he went out of his way to make Hunsecker as different from Winchell as he possibly could. ("Winchell never played golf," Lehman points out. "I put all those golf trophies in Hunsecker's study!") But Hunsecker is




FAMILIAR HAUNTS
Walter Winchell, right,
generally acknowledged as
the model for Hunsecker,
and singer Al Jolson at
Manhattan's Stork Club,
where the columnist
held court at Table 50.
Inset, the entrance to the
Stork Club, 1939.



COLD CALL

"Relax, lump! I told you I wasn't peddling any fish today," Falco tells a talent agent nervous about being conned, before pretending to dictate a column item to Hunsecker over the phone.

Inset, Falco and Rita, the cigarette girl (Barbara Nichols).



"A towering, impressive figure ... zipping up his fly and smiling proudly. ... That was my introduction to Lancaster."

Winchell: an unscrupulous, megalomaniac gossipmonger who rules his empire from a table at '21.' (In real life Winchell's was Table 50 at the Stork Club.) Lancaster portrayed Hunsecker as a tight-lipped monster, "the first heartless titan in American film," according to film historian David Thomson. He's obsessed with his own power, destroying careers on a whim, using his column to bludgeon his enemies and friends alike. But then, he has no friends, just lackeys and hangers-on like Sidney Falco who suck up to him, the press agents whose livelihoods depend on getting their clients mentioned in Hunsecker's column. "You're dead, son—get yourself buried!" are nearly the first words that come from his mouth.

What drives the plot is Hunsecker's relationship with his sister, a fragile doll named Susie in an oversize mink, and his resolve to break up Susie's romance with Steve Dallas, a jazz guitarist played by the gleamingly clean-cut Marty Milner. (This was another element that was too close to reality to be a coincidence: Winchell was a smothering father to his beautiful daughter, Walda, to the point of ruthlessly hounding her boyfriend, a producer named William Cahn, in an attempt to destroy him.)

Enter Sidney Falco, press agent on the make and uneasy protagonist of this twisted tale, played by Tony Curtis in arguably the greatest role of his long career. Falco is Hunsecker's lapdog—he'll do anything to stay in the columnist's good graces: lie, cheat,

pimp his girlfriend. And destroy Steve Dallas by libeling him as a pot-smoking Communist. When Hunsecker says to Falco, "I'd hate to take a bite out of you; you're a cookie full of arsenic," Falco just smiles. It was a hell of a role.

In some ways, Ernie Lehman was not a typical press agent. He was probably the only one in history who had been raised by a Czechoslovak nanny. His parents lived in Woodmere, Long Island (one of the affluent Five Towns), but lost their home in 1938, when Lehman was 18. Shy and high-strung, Lehman had the nervous system of a whippet. He went into public relations because it offered financial security. He would soon develop moral qualms about his profession. "I knew Winchell. I was the guy on the other end of the phone. He'd go into a 30-minute tirade about Ed Sullivan, then he'd say, 'Who is this?' The nicest thing you could do was to keep someone out of that world."

"We were a frightened bunch of people," Lehman says about the cadre of press agents and writers who fed the columnists, who made the rounds of all the nightspots in New York in the 40s: '21,' El Morocco, the Stork Club. "We knew [our] lives were in the hands of a small group of columnists. It's hard to believe the columns were that important in those days. There were three in the *Daily News*. There was Nick Kenny and Walter Winchell in the *Mirror*, there was Louis Sobol and Dorothy Kilgallen in the *Journal-American*, there was Lucius Beebe in the *Herald Tribune*.

There was George Ross in the *World-Telegram*."

Lehman was still living with his parents on West 75th Street when he was absorbing the world of *Sweet Smell of Success*. Looking back on that whole period, Lehman says that he "was fearful" when he quit his job in 1948, rented a cottage and a writing studio in Provincetown, Massachusetts, with his wife, Jacqueline, and began writing a hundred-page "novelette" extending the short story. "I knew I was playing with fire," he says.

Irving Hoffman was the chief press agent for whom Lehman, as legman and writer of items, had worked. "Irving was a celebrity, really," Lehman recalls, "and he was one of the few men who could stand up to Winchell, tell him where

to get off." Hoffman was tall, physically imposing—"a great talker and phone man." He had terrible vision and wore thick glasses. He usually wore a camel-hair coat. He was a star in his own right, a friend of J. Edgar Hoover's, and his clients included a number of the major motion-picture studios. He had his own power, including a column in *The Hollywood Reporter* with the highbrow title "Tales of Hoffman." Lehman contributed to those columns, and to a weekly segment called "Last Week on Broadway."

When Lehman showed his former boss the manuscript of his short novel, which would be published in 1950 in *Cosmopolitan* under the title "Tell Me About It Tomorrow" (Herbert Mayes, *Cosmopolitan's* editor in chief, didn't want the word "smell" to appear in his magazine), Hoffman was furious.

"Ernie," he asked, "how can you do this to me? Everybody's going to think I'm Sidney! Everybody's going to think Hunsecker is Winchell! You have things in here that only somebody who's close to Winchell would know!"

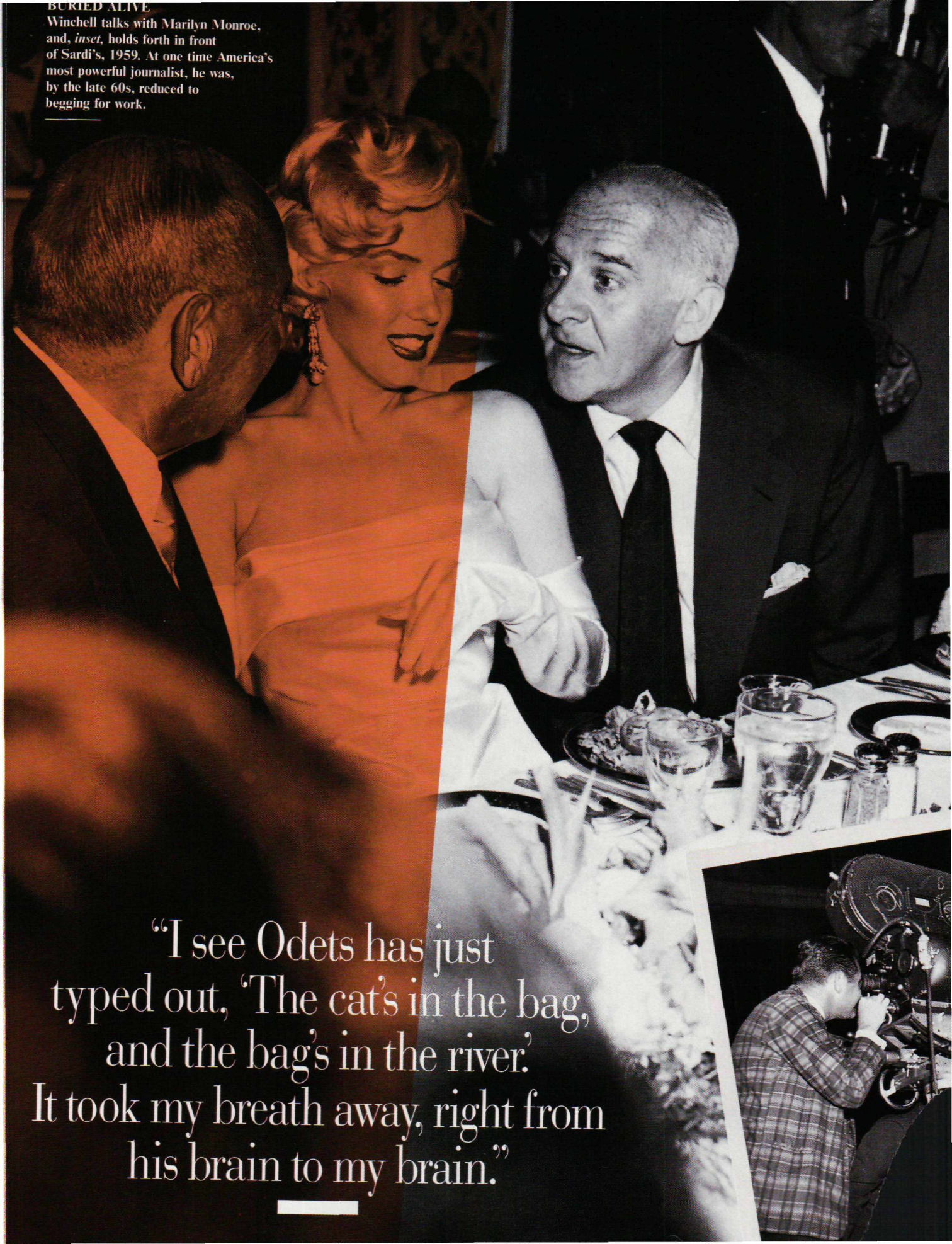
There were similarities. Falco read Hunsecker's column the day before, as Hoffman did Winchell's. Falco had an apartment-cum-office that was very much like Hoffman's. ("I used to visit Irving's office," Lehman recalls. "He would hand the phone over to me so I could hear Truman Capote's voice.") A bedroom lurked behind the front desk, where on at least one occasion Lehman had to knock off a theater review to the sounds of moans and bouncing bedsprings coming from behind the door. Hoffman was a world-class womanizer, a fact confirmed by Lehman's friend the producer David Brown, who has known the writer since they were boys together on Long Island.

Brown was the managing editor of *Cosmopolitan* when Lehman's novelette appeared in the magazine. Brown has said that "Hoffman was afflicted with satyriasis, male nymphomania." But there was one important difference between Sidney Falco and Irving Hoffman: Hoffman didn't have to suck up to Winchell. Lehman tried to explain this crucial difference to his former boss, but it didn't matter. "Irving had a right to feel betrayed," Lehman would later say. In fact, out of respect for Hoffman, he made several small changes in the manuscript: having the secretary address Hunsecker as "boss" instead of "chief," for example, because Winchell's secretary, Rose Bigman, always addressed Winchell

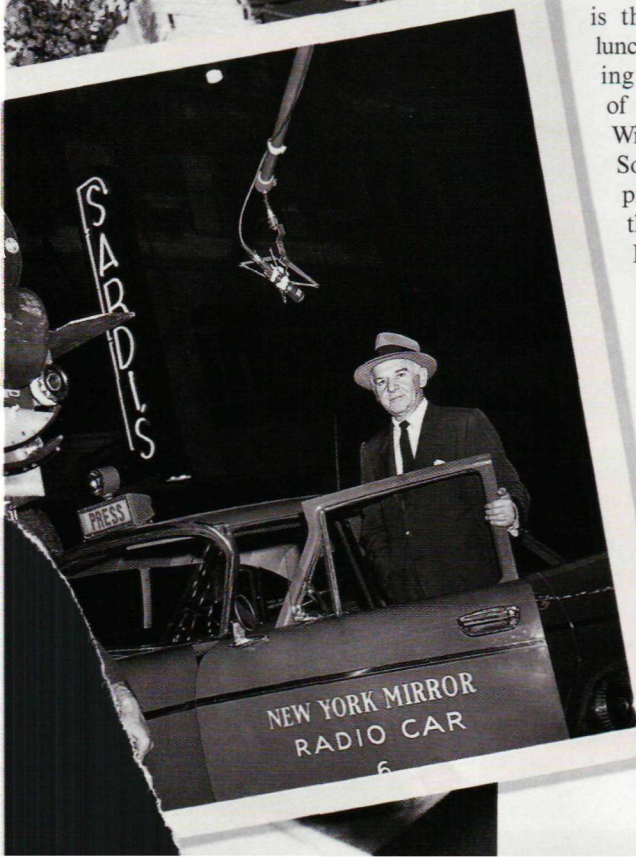


BURIED ALIVE

Winchell talks with Marilyn Monroe, and, *inset*, holds forth in front of Sardi's, 1959. At one time America's most powerful journalist, he was, by the late 60s, reduced to begging for work.



"I see Odets has just typed out, 'The cat's in the bag, and the bag's in the river.' It took my breath away, right from his brain to my brain."



as "chief." But Hoffman was not assuaged. "For a year and a half, he didn't talk to me," Lehman admits. "We had a complete break."

Winchell tried to derail the inevitable speculation that came when the novelette was published by calling up rival columnist Louis Sobol and saying, "Hey, did you read that story Ernie wrote about you!" But everyone read it as an attack on Winchell anyway, and that's why, at first, no one in Hollywood would touch it. Lehman's agent in Los Angeles, George Willner, attempted to sell the story to the movie studios even before it appeared in *Cosmopolitan*. He wrote to Lehman in Provincetown in June 1949: "The big problem still remains the resemblance to Winchell. I... went to all places where I thought it would do some good, but I still ran up against the same problem.... I'll say one thing for your story—it set this town on its ear, and Ernest Lehman's name is probably as well known out here now as any of the top ten or twelve writers."

Ironically, it wasn't the manuscript of "Tell Me About It Tomorrow" that brought Lehman to Hollywood, but his estranged mentor, Irving Hoffman. In 1952, Hoffman finally wanted to make up with Lehman, after they were brought together by a mutual friend, a press agent for Artie Shaw named Sid Garfield. As an olive branch, Hoffman offered Lehman a plug in his column. Better yet, he let Lehman write the whole column himself:

"The world I want to see on film is the world of Toots Shor's at lunch-hour, Sardi's at 11 of an opening night, Lindy's at 2 o'clock of any morning... the world of Winchell and Wilson, Sullivan and Sobol... of columnists on the prowl for items, press agents on the prowl for columnists..." Lehman ended his pitch with "Now I may be wrong (and I don't think I am), but just off his past performances I would say that Ernest Lehman is the guy who can write that kind of picture."

Two weeks later, Paramount called. And none too soon: Lehman, who was writing freelance now, had become a pariah at Lindy's, the Stork Club, '21'—places where he had formerly plied his trade. Press agents got up and left whenever he entered the room.

The film-production company of Hecht-Hill-Lancaster could be a treacherous place to work. Harold Hecht had been a hooper and a literary agent. Small, clever, and tricky, Hecht laughed a lot and drank a little too much. The skinny on him was that, despite his affability, you shouldn't turn your back: he was given the nickname "the Mole." In *Naming Names*, Victor Navasky's book on Hollywood and the House Committee on Un-American Activities, he is described as "a denigrating informer."

The 32-year-old Burt Lancaster had just made his debut on Broadway in *A Sound of Hunting*, in which he played a tough World War II sergeant, when he met Harold Hecht in 1946. Hecht, 6 years Lancaster's senior, had already spent some 20 years in show business, but with modest success. Hecht recognized Lancaster's immense potential, even though the actor's major credential before the Broadway play was his membership in a two-man trapeze-and-gymnastic act. Lancaster's charisma was instantly apparent, though. His sheer physical presence was overwhelming; his shadow fell over you before he even entered the room.

In order to induce Lancaster to go in with him, Hecht came up with the idea of forming their own film-production company, something unthinkable for a mere actor at the time. "Here we were," Hecht told Lancaster's biographer, "a couple of bums without a quarter between us, discussing producing our own pictures."

James Hill, the third partner in Hecht-Hill-Lancaster, who was brought in seven years after the company's formation, was perennially boyish. He had been a page at NBC before becoming a contract screenwriter at MGM. People wondered why he was made a partner in the company. The truth was Hill "was Burt Lancaster's boy," according to Julius Epstein, who, with his brother Philip, co-wrote the screenplay for *Casablanca*. It had been Lancaster's idea to put Hill's name between Hecht's and his own; Hill would come between the two in other ways as well, most often as a buffer—because Hecht and Lancaster were usually at each other's throats. In return, Lancaster found women for Hill, and not just any women—movie stars. In February 1958, at the age of 41, Hill would marry Rita Hayworth—her fifth marriage, and his first. The marriage would last only three years.

When Hill first came to work at the Hecht-Lancaster building on North Cannon Drive, which had formerly housed the



GLOBAL WARNING

Susan Harrison and Marty Milner being menaced by Curtis and Lancaster, in a publicity still. Inset, left: a snapshot of Lehman, in which he was thinking of plot points for the film, he now says.

William Morris Agency, he noticed the intense rivalry between his two new partners. "Harold and Burt," Hill recalls, "had as strange a relationship as you could get. People were frightened of Burt, and he never did anything to make people unfrightened of him." Another friend described the relationship as "a Freudian can of worms." Not only was Lancaster capable of verbally brutalizing Hecht, he once lifted him into the air and threatened to throw him out the window.

Their contention stemmed from Hecht's desire to "get out from under Burt's shadow," Hill says. Lancaster wasn't just a company figurehead; he was an active and involved partner. Lehman recalled that "Burt had the power. He was the famous movie star. He had the money, which Harold Hecht didn't have. . . . In terms of publicity and power, Burt Lancaster had both. Hecht was the nobody."

Hecht resented Hill's presence in the company, but he wasn't about to go up against Lancaster. "It was old-fashioned jealousy," Lehman says. Once Hill became involved in the making of *Sweet Smell of Success*, Hecht lost all interest in the film, although he was the one who had originally angled for the rights.

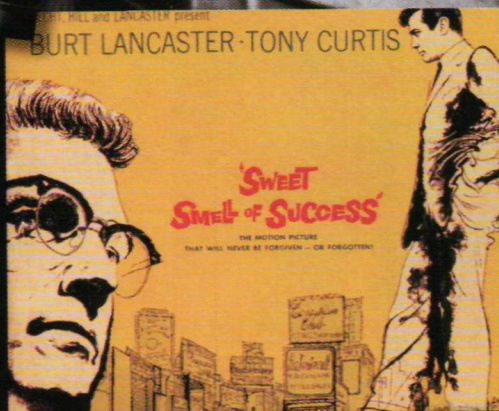
From the minute Lehman walked into their plush offices, with an aviary of twittering finches that seemed to fall silent whenever Lancaster passed by, he didn't like his surroundings. "They were profligate," he remembers. "They spent money on everything—\$12,000 remodeling the executive washroom." The partners also maintained a luxurious apartment on Wilshire Boulevard for their trysts, replete with gold-plated dinnerware and a Utrillo hanging in the hallway near the bathroom; the antiques and hundred-dollar ashtrays still had their price tags attached.

Lehman's first encounter with Lancaster didn't do much to change his mind: "I was sitting with Harold Hecht. The door opened



SHOOTING STAR

Inset, above: cinematographer James Wong Howe, here in 1943, shot the actors from low angles so they seemed to be "knifing up through the air, poised for the kill." *Inset, right:* the poster for the movie.





PLAYING SCARED

Iuset, below: Harrison and screenwriter Clifford Odets.

Inset, bottom: from left, Alexander Mackendrick, the director, producer Jim Hill, Lancaster, production-company partner Harold Hecht, and Curtis on the New York set, which was chaotic because of a power struggle between Mackendrick and Lancaster and the lack of a completed script.

and in walked a towering, impressive figure. He was zipping up his fly and smiling proudly, saying, 'She swallowed it.' That was my introduction to Burt Lancaster.

"I called my agent and said, 'I'm not going to do this picture. Get me off of it.' Harold Hecht pleaded with me. He got down on his hands and knees and said, 'Please don't leave, or Burt will blame me.'"

Although they were the only producers in town with the courage to show interest in the project, frankly, they scared Lehman—there was a whiff of violence about the place.

Lancaster was rumored to have beaten up a girlfriend who was a telephone operator. "He was known to be violent with women," confirms Lehman. *Confidential* magazine published an article in 1955 with the headline THE SECRET'S OUT ABOUT BURT LANCASTER. A woman named Francesca de Scaffa, who at one time had been a mistress of the Shah of Iran and then married the actor Bruce Cabot, who saved Fay Wray from the ape's clutches in *King Kong*, had gone to the scandal sheet and offered her story. She had met with Lancaster to maneuver for a role in the 1954 film *Vera Cruz*, but, she claimed, when she turned down his sexual advances he attacked her, ripping the sleeve from her \$400 Jacques Fath dress. "Things went from waltz time into a tempo four times faster than the mambo," the magazine reported in its signature style. "Burt's tendency toward clobbering cuties is rapidly becoming no secret at all among dames in the know in Hollywood."

"The place was rife with womanizing," Lehman remembers. Early on, the screenwriter was invited to a meeting with the three heads of the company, the subject of which was "Who can we find to become our official procurer?"

"I'm ashamed to say," Lehman explains, "that I was a part of this meeting. There we were, scratching around for women. They were the most corrupt group. I really sank into the depths when I decided to work with them."

Lehman remembers being in Palm Springs with his wife when Hecht and Hill tried to persuade him to join them in Acapulco, where they had two women waiting. "I said no, absolutely not. And to this day I can't figure out

why they did that. . . . Here I was, married with two young children—my wife was in the next room. . . . What were they trying to do by exporting me to Acapulco? It was very strange.”

Paddy Chayefsky was also working for the production company at the time and had just adapted his television play *Marty* for it. He and Lehman would go on long walks together and trade horror stories. “I seemed to have been surrounded by evil,” Lehman says today. “But they were the ones who felt a great affinity for *Sweet Smell*. They dug it. Nobody else did, really. The film could only have been made by Hecht-Hill-Lancaster.”

It was the unexpected success of *Marty*—in 1956 the film won four Academy Awards, including best picture—that made Lehman change his mind about letting the project go forward. “When *Marty* won the Oscar, I said yes,” Lehman recalls. “On the condition that I also direct the picture.”

Tony Curtis hounded Burt Lancaster for the part of Sidney Falco, the weaselly press agent who long ago had thrown his moral compass into the East River. Lancaster had been impressed with Curtis the previous year during the making of director Carol Reed’s *Trapeze*, the sawdust-and-sweat circus drama in which the two men were teamed as aerialists who fall out over Gina Lollobrigida. The movie was highly successful, but there was more chemistry between the two men in tights than between either man and the girl.

Curtis knew he had been born to play the streetwise Falco. “All they had to tell me was New York. I was raised in that city. I should have done it as the first movie I ever made.”

For the role of Hunsecker, Lehman thought of Orson Welles. But while Lehman was working on the first of several drafts of the screenplay, Lancaster would sit in on story conferences. “He was fascinated,” Lehman remembers. “It’s like he smelled that this could be a different role for him—no hero. One day, Burt just said, ‘I’m going to do it.’ That’s when it became a bigger venture, more important.”

With Lancaster now starring in the film, Lehman’s sensitive stomach began to give him trouble. “It bothered me a lot,” he said. “They used to make jokes about it. I remember at a meeting we had one day when Burt looked at me and he said, ‘I can see us all standing around Ernie’s grave, and there’s a stomach tree growing out of it.’ And the three of them laughed. This was the atmosphere I was working in. This was not John Houseman or Billy Wilder.” Instead of using the project to

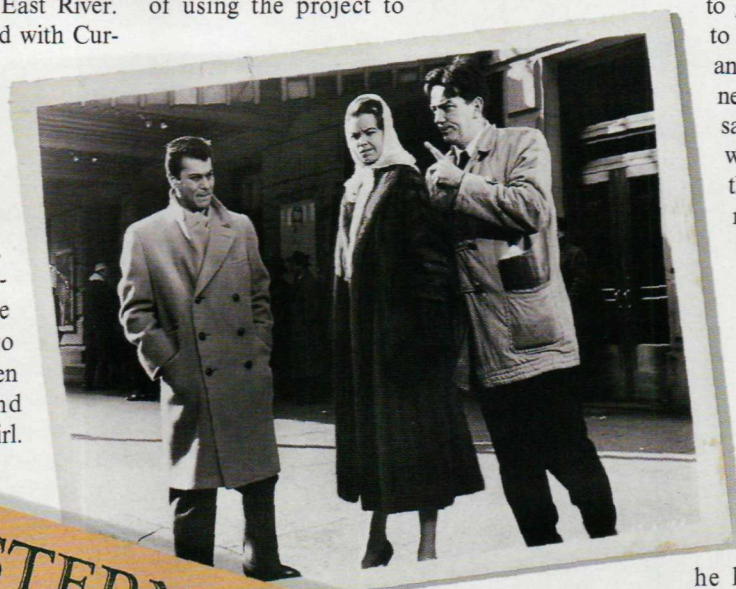
atone for “having done some pretty terrible things as a press agent,” Lehman felt he’d entered a whole new level of corruption.

After United Artists came in with the funds to produce the picture, Hecht fired Lehman as director. The ostensible reason was that Lancaster’s first directorial effort, on *The Kentuckian*, a 1955 film with Lancaster and Walter Matthau, had lost money for United Artists, but the truth was, as Hill explains 42 years later, “we were never gonna let Ernie direct!” In fact, Hill believes that “Ernie didn’t want to work on the picture at all, or he wouldn’t have made a demand like that.” Tony Curtis confirms this. “We were talking about getting Orson Welles to play J. J. Hunsecker. They’re gonna let Lehman, who’s never directed a movie before in his life, direct Orson Welles? They [promised him] that, I feel, because they wanted to get the property. That’s the only reason.”

Lehman says he was crushed when Hecht called him in to his office to give him the news. He went to his agent, Lew Wasserman, and said, “‘Lew, I have terrible news for you.’ And Wasserman said, ‘I already know.’ That was the trouble with MCA in those days, because Wasserman was also their agent! So they made me a producer instead of the director. I kept getting more and more pain in my gut, and more and more stress. And that’s when they chose Alexander Mackendrick. Sandy was already there on another project, so they asked him to direct. It seemed an unlikely choice. What would

he know about the world of Broadway and New York nightlife?” He was from Scotland, after all.

In a way, Mackendrick was coming home when he flew to America in 1956. Although he grew up in Glasgow and worked in England, he had actually been born in Boston of Scottish immigrant parents. When his father died in the Spanish-flu epidemic of 1918, it was decided that the experiment of living in America just hadn’t worked out. The family returned to Scotland, and Mackendrick was raised by his grandparents. (Mackendrick was fond of telling people that he had been conceived in Hollywood.)



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DL=Day Letter
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ATTENDED INVITATION PREVIEW SWEET SMELL HOUSE CROWDED
AUDIENCE APPLAUDED WILDLY AT END OF PICTURE WE LOVED
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OUR STORY PREDICT IT WILL BE VERY PROVOCATIVE AND
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“Harrison admitted to a fascination with high buildings—she had an impulse to throw herself off.”

STRIKING OUT

Susie Hunsecker (Harrison) and Falco in a publicity still. “I’d rather be dead than living with you,” Susie tells her brother before she walks out in the last scene.

Opposite: top, Mackendrick, right, directs Curtis and Harrison; bottom, a 1957 telegram sent to Lehman by his father, Paul.



so his "mistrust of Hollywood was pre-natal.")

Mackendrick had made his reputation directing two of the classic Alec Guinness comedies for Britain's Ealing Studios, *The Man in the White Suit* (1951) and *The Ladykillers* (1955), the latter considered the apotheosis of the Ealing style. His background was in design; he had been a wonderkind at the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson before being hired to create storyboards for Ealing, which he then parlayed into directing. His comedies are known for their dark-edged humor ("Where there is comedy he rims it in black," wrote one critic). Guinness described him as "a man of great charm but of astonished outrage at the wickedness of the world."

Soon after *The Ladykillers* was made, Michael Balcon sold Ealing Studios to the BBC, and Mackendrick sought his fate abroad. "He got a call from his agent one day asking him to come out here and talk to somebody at Paramount," Mackendrick's widow, Hilary, remembers. "It was all rather mysterious, so naturally he was intrigued." Mackendrick, used to the camaraderie of Ealing, turned down offers from big studios such as Paramount and producers such as David O. Selznick, deciding instead to sign with Hecht-Hill-Lancaster, because they promised he could direct an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*.

Mackendrick and his wife settled into a rented house on South Rodeo Drive. Mackendrick's biggest complaint about Hollywood at that time was its lack of pubs. At Ealing Studios each crew member would drink a quart of bonded whiskey a night.

During daily conferences with Mackendrick, Lehman quickly recognized the Scottish director's brilliance. "His words just tumbled over each other; I couldn't quite follow him at times. He was too bright for me, too fast. Working with Sandy was great, but at the same time stressful. You had the feeling he wasn't even listening to you because his mind was going so fast."

After one particularly rough story conference, Lancaster walked Lehman out into the hall and put an arm around his shoulder. "We're going to start shooting next week in New York," he said. "You're going to have to do some rewrites behind the camera."

"O.K., Burt, but first I'm going to have to go see my doctor."

Lehman was really suffering. David Brown, then living in Los Angeles and working as an executive at Twentieth Century Fox, drove him in his Mercedes roadster to Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. "When I woke up the next morning," Lehman recalls, "the doctor was seated next to my

bed. He said, 'Ernie, we've looked up there with a sigmoidoscope, and you're not going back to work. In fact, you're leaving the country.'"

When the doctor called to say that Lehman was leaving the picture, two of the partners turned to each other and said at the same time: "I hope the son of a bitch dies."

Lehman traveled to Hawaii and then on to Samoa and Tahiti. "I went native," he remembers. "One day I was lying there by myself on a beach, and suddenly I sat up and realized, My God, they're shooting a picture in New York called *Sweet Smell of Success*. I'd forgotten all about it."

It was Mackendrick's idea to bring in Clifford Odets, whom he had admired from afar. Odets, who was already adapting A. B. Guthrie's novel *The Way West* for Hecht-Hill-Lancaster, had never gotten over the triumph of having five plays running simultaneously in New York in 1935 when he was only 29, including *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!* The "Bernard Shaw of the Bronx" was stocky and handsome, with wild hair like Einstein's that bushed up around his head. "He used to be wonderful to observe at parties," Tony Curtis recalls. "He had an old tuxedo with a vest and he had a very beautiful look about him in those days. No one looked as elegant as he with a martini in his hand. He had a great deal of fire and lust and drive." Odets took many women to bed, including the movie star Luise Rainer, whom he married in 1937.

Odets left New York soon after for California, where he accepted Hollywood's lucre but spent the rest of his life being considered a hypocrite for abandoning the leftist ideals of his great, early plays. It was an opinion that the playwright shared, torturing himself with his sense of self-betrayal.

The playwright Arthur Miller spent some time with Odets in Hollywood in 1958, six years after Odets had been a friendly, though captious, witness for HUAC during the McCarthy bloodletting. Finishing the screenplay for *Sweet Smell of Success*, Odets felt, would give him a way of striking back at that public humiliation. Miller described the embattled playwright as typifying "what it meant to survive as an artist in America. There was something so utterly American in what had betrayed him—he had wanted everything." Miller compared Odets to his wife Marilyn Monroe: "Like her, he was a self-destroying babe in the woods absentmindedly combing back his hair with a loaded pistol."

Harold Clurman, one of the founders of the Group Theatre, which had launched Odets, kept exhorting the playwright to leave Hollywood and return to New York. But

Odets knew that the theater world of the 30s, in which he had made his reputation, no longer existed. Even with his tremendous early success, he could not have supported himself there. As Miller observed, there was little to return to: "Only show business and some theatrical real estate."

In 1936, Odets had predicted that "in a few years the movies will have developed into the most important artistic medium the world has ever seen, and it's high time playwrights found out about them." Twenty years later, when he was signed to finish Lehman's script, Odets was living in diminished circumstances—divorced from his second wife, driving a dusty old Lincoln, and caring for his two children, Nora, 11, and Walt, 9. A gifted painter and collector of works by Klee and Matisse, Odets was reduced to selling a number of the paintings from his collection to survive.

Tony Curtis remembers his first meeting with Odets. "He used to call me 'boychick,' right from the start." There was a kind of bond between Odets and Curtis—the playwright may have seen in the younger man his own youthful, urban beauty, now rumpled and fading. "The picture is loaded with little references to my looks," Curtis points out, "the boy with the ice-cream face" ... and Rita, the cigarette girl, calling me 'Eyelashes.'"

One of the things Odets did was to give Curtis the key to Sidney Falco. He said, "Don't be still with Sidney. Don't ever let Sidney sit down comfortably. I want Sidney constantly moving, like an animal, never quite sure who's behind him or where he is."

Curtis took Odets's suggestions to heart and gave what many consider his breakthrough performance. Up until then he had swashbuckled his way through numerous "tit and sand" movies, such as *Son of Ali Baba*, and made lots of money for Universal, which had transformed a rough-cut Hungarian Jew named Bernard Schwartz from Brooklyn into a brilliant teen idol who called himself Anthony Curtis. *Sweet Smell of Success* would reverse that transformation.

There's sweet irony in the fact that Curtis went back to his roots—back to being Bernie Schwartz—to unleash the character of Sidney Falco on the world. Falco's little aria on success, delivered to his lugubrious secretary while he's getting dressed in the cramped bedroom behind her desk, could easily have been Curtis's credo as well: "Hunsecker is a golden ladder to the places I wanna get. Way up high, Sam, where it's always balmy and no one snaps his fingers and says, 'Hey, shrimp, rack the balls!' ... From now on, the best of everything is good enough for me."

Sweet Smell of Success

"I was really astounded by the twist of it," Curtis says about playing Falco. "I was able to grace the part with little physical innuendos. Not for nothing, I wanted to make him an excellent athlete, growing up in the streets of New York, playing stickball. He punched, he boxed, he did everything, always on his feet, always moving."

Both Mackendrick and Lehman thought Curtis was miraculous as Falco. For Curtis, the role opened doors; other complex and demanding roles would follow—in *The Defiant Ones*, *Some Like It Hot*, *The Great Impostor*, and *The Boston Strangler*. And behind all those roles was Sidney Falco: "In all the films I've done, I've never lost Sidney. And I don't want to lose him," Curtis says.

In contrast to Falco, J. J. Hunsecker hardly ever seems to move—he's usually shown sitting, at his desk in '21,' at his desk writing his column, in a studio waiting to tape his television show. In one early draft of the script, Lehman put Hunsecker in a wheelchair, tended by a male nurse named Sam. Ambition moves, power stays put.

One of cinematographer James Wong Howe's

challenges on the film was

to transform the vitally robust Lancaster into a tense, bespectacled ghoul. How do you shrink this huge man? The solution was to use the glasses to suggest a man who wasn't physically powerful, though with a violent presence. The horn-rimmed glasses are one of the elements that made Lancaster's performance so chilling. He takes them off in only one scene—when Falco is describing Steve Dallas for him and revealing why Susie is so smitten with the musician. As he removes his horn-rims, Hunsecker turns his face into shadow, as if he must resort to his darkest side to get rid of Dallas. Lancaster wore glasses in real life, and he fought with Mackendrick about wearing them in the film. But Mackendrick won this battle, and Howe—who had just won an Oscar for his work on *The Rose Tattoo*—used the glasses as a focal point for light. The shadows cast by the skeletal Lancaster's face give him the skeletal walking corpse. It's as though they were already a dead man, his

soul long since squeezed out of him by the machinery of power. "Match me, Sidney," he says, extending his cigarette to Falco from his throne at '21,' in his sadistic little game of dominance and submission.

Howe is rightly credited with the movie's darkly dazzling evocation of Broadway nightlife. It would have been impossible to get the sort of shots he wanted filming inside '21,' so interiors were filmed in Hollywood at Goldwyn Studios' Soundstage 8—they spent \$25,000 just re-creating '21,' with movable "wild walls" to make way for Howe's camera. Howe smeared the walls with oil so they would gleam. To capture the smoky atmosphere of New York nightclubs, sets were built two feet off the



SMOTHERING INSTINCTS
Walter Winchell and his daughter, Walda,
at the Stork Club, 1944.

He tried to break up her affair with Billy Cahn, a producer, much as Hunsecker does in the movie with Susie and jazzman Steve Dallas.

ground and smoke pots placed underneath, so that Howe could "light the smoke," according to the director Richard Blackburn (*Eating Raoul*).

Production moved to New York City to begin location shooting in the winter of 1956. Odets was brought along to finish the script and furnish script changes as needed. He and Hill traveled east by train because they thought he could get a lot of the writing done that way. By the time they had reached Chicago, however, Odets still hadn't written anything. Hill had to resort to devious methods to get Odets to work, such as scribbling an unusable scene himself and saying, "Let's give this to Sandy." Hill knew that Odets "had great pride in his work. He would some-

times write the same scene eight times before he'd let you read it."

But there was another problem. Odets didn't seem to realize until Chicago that they were going on to New York. He complained to Hill, "For Christ's sake, I can't go to New York! I can't face those people!"—meaning the theater people he had left behind, who by now considered him a defector: Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, and other members of the Group Theatre.

Meanwhile, Mackendrick had mixed feelings about Odets's sizzling dialogue, worried that it would sound "stagey." But Odets reassured him: "You're probably worried that the dialogue is exaggerated and may sound implausible. Don't be. Play it real fast—and play the scenes not for the words but for the situations! Play them 'on the run' and they'll work just fine."

By the time shooting finally began in New York, things had really become chaotic. "One of the most frightening experiences of my life was to start shooting in the middle of Times Square at rush hour with an incomplete script," Mackendrick later said. It was the dead of winter, and it was bitterly cold. "God, you needed all the clothes you could get on, and you were still cold," the production manager, Richard McWhorter, remembered. Adding to this, the

mimeographed sheets of Odets's script were often distributed to the cast and crew after the scene had been shot.

Then, one night early in the production, Tony Curtis noticed that Odets was missing from the set. He asked where Odets was, and was told, "We've got him locked up at the Essex House." And sure enough, Curtis remembers, "there was bleary-eyed, stiff-haired Clifford, sitting in his pajamas on a couch, with papers—typewritten, handwritten—all over the joint. I said, 'Let's go out for dinner,' and Hill said, 'What, are you nuts?' They wouldn't let him out until he had completed more work on the script."

Eventually, Hill allowed Odets to leave his hotel room and go down to Times Square. They made room for him and his typewriter in a prop truck.

"I remember," says Curtis, "it was about three or four in the morning, and it was cold, bitter, and miserable. Between shots, I was strolling around, and I heard this tik-tik-tik coming from inside the prop truck. So I go and look in, and there's

Sweet Smell of Success

Clifford Odets, sitting in an overcoat, huddled over his typewriter. I said, 'What the hell are you doing here this time of night?'

"He said, 'I've got to finish this sequence. You have two more days shooting here, and I've got to get it done.'"

Curtis joined him in the truck. Odets suddenly looked up and said, "Come here, kid. I want to show you something. Look at what I'm writing."

"I see he's just typed out, 'The cat's in the bag, and the bag's in the river.' It took my breath away, right from his brain to my brain."

Mackendrick would note years later, "There never was a final shooting script for the movie. . . . It was all still being revised, even on the last day of principal photography. It was a shambles of a document."

But a bigger problem on the set was the power struggle between Mackendrick and Lancaster. They both wanted to be the man in control. Lancaster would go behind Mackendrick's back, for example, to give Marty Milner direction on how he should play the role of Steve Dallas. Mackendrick would later observe, "The hysteria of that production was the edge of fear. . . . You're working from moment to moment."

Curtis recalls how Mackendrick insisted on absolute silence on the set, or he wouldn't shoot. "Even if everything went perfectly," Curtis says, "he would still want to reshoot. In the middle of a scene, he'd yell, 'Shut up!' Everyone tiptoed around him on that set. Burt would get mad because they couldn't afford all that reshooting." Mackendrick in fact did an epic number of takes of the scene in which Hunsecker watches a drunk being bounced from a nightclub. They did it over and over and over again, going all night long, and then Mackendrick said, "Print Takes 1 and 2 and let's wrap!"

Lancaster was furious: "Remind me to pay somebody to take the little Limey's legs off," he said.

Elmer Bernstein, who composed the film's powerful, jazzy score, confessed to the director James Mangold (*Cop Land*), "The combination of people on that movie—Hecht, Lancaster, Odets—was a snake pit. There was a cultural distance between Burt and Sandy. It was like Sandy's heart beat at a different rate.

"Burt was really scary," the composer recalled. "He was a dangerous guy. He had a short fuse. He was very physical. You thought you might get punched out. . . . It

was a miracle that [Sandy] finished that film. In fact, I think that film is what finished Sandy." Lancaster would later admit with a grin that Mackendrick considered him "the epitome of evil."

Their biggest fight would be over the ending of the movie. The film critic and screenwriter F. X. Feeney, who would later befriend Mackendrick, knew that "Lancaster was adamant about ending the film in a certain way, which Sandy was opposed to." Mackendrick had been warned by Alan Crosland, the film's editor, that Lancaster intended to take over and reedit it. "Sandy was at his notepad trying to figure out how he could do it his way, when a big shadow fell over him—it's Lancaster. He had to come clean about what he was doing." He ultimately had to shoot the scene in two different ways, and cut the final ending on his own, behind Lancaster's back.

The choice was, in part, whether to end with Falco's getting beaten up by the sadistic cop Harry Kello—ominously portrayed by character actor Emile Meyer—or to end with Susie Hunsecker's rejecting her brother and walking out into a shaft of sunlight, one of the few to appear in this otherwise dark film. Hill and Lancaster cut the final scenes to end with the pummeling, but when they screened it they could see it wasn't working. "So Sandy tells them," Feeney recalls, "'I've cut the film this way—why don't you look at it?'" In a kind of grudging spirit, they all sat down, and Sandy had the rare satisfaction of watching them sink in their chairs and kind of get it—they actually got his ending [with Susie walking out]."

When Lehman returned from Tahiti, Mackendrick called him and said, "Come down, I want to show you the rough cut." Lehman was dazzled by parts of it, but disappointed by the ending and the preceding suicide attempt, in which Susie is prevented by Falco from throwing herself off the balcony of the penthouse apartment she shares with her brother. (Hunsecker keeps her like one of those caged finches, in a little bedroom just off his study.) Lehman had originally written a similar ending, but he changed it to give her character more strength and cunning. Mackendrick, however, felt that the story "needed someone to bring death into the room," so that Falco and Hunsecker can finally be toppled.

Lehman blames himself for planting the idea. "It had to be my stupidity in telling them about the ending I had originally written and thrown out," he says.

The role of Susie Hunsecker went to an 18-year-old actress from the Bronx with no professional experience. Susan Harrison had been a waitress at the Limelight, a

Greenwich Village coffeehouse, and a model in the Garment District. She had the delicate, frightened look of a startled deer. At five feet seven she was a willowy, nervous girl with brown eyes and light-brown hair who smoked incessantly. Described by a gossip columnist as "a person with moods," Harrison at the time was thrown into the tough, womanizing partnership of Hecht-Hill-Lancaster, and a number of the cast and crew feared she wasn't going to make it. The fragility she conveyed on-screen was not an act.

"I heard the whispers that I was neurotic, difficult—an oddball," she would later say. "I wore long hair, black stockings and oversized sweaters. . . . I didn't know what I was doing when I was in front of the camera but it looked good."

In preparing for her climactic scene, Mackendrick asked the young actress, "Here, Susan, is where you lock yourself in your room. What would you want to do before you committed suicide?"

Feeney remembers Mackendrick telling him that Harrison had "admitted to a fascination with high buildings—she had an impulse to throw herself off. Sandy said, 'Just give us that,' but he saw something in her that was a little frightening. He was genuinely prescient about people."

What Mackendrick didn't know was that shortly before beginning work on the film Harrison had fallen 10 feet during a photographic shoot with the German-born photographer Peter Basch. It had happened in a private house behind the Chateau Marmont in West Hollywood; she fell through a second-story awning onto a patio. Harrison later admitted that her fall might have been a veiled suicide attempt. "I had a thought, deep down, of killing myself because I was very depressed."

Peter Basch remembers the accident, and he vividly recalls Harrison's unusual beauty. Basch has photographed many ingenues, including Tuesday Weld, Jane Fonda, and Natalie Wood, when they were barely in their teens. "What I found fascinating about her was that she was not the girl next door," Basch recalls. "She was a young woman with a strong erotic component; she could have worked all over Europe. The Italians would have loved her." Harrison was so luckless that not only did she fall 10 feet to a concrete floor, the ambulance called to rescue her crashed on its way to the house. Her injuries were slight, though, and she ended up suing Basch and the owner of the house. "Her choice of men—I think that's what tripped her up, really," says Basch.

When Falco tells Susie Hunsecker toward the end of the film, "Look at yourself, you're nineteen years old,

and you're falling apart at the seams ... with a fatality for doing wrong, picking wrong, and giving up even before you start a fight," he could have been speaking about Harrison herself. It was one of those many moments when the line was blurred between life and art.

Curtis says that "working with those guys was tough. We all came in with barrels loaded, we all came in to fight. Susan had no experience at all, so we drove her down into nowhere." She seems lost in the film.

There were a number of reasons why *Sweet Smell of Success* failed at the box office. The movie was just too cynical for the times—in 1957, America was in no mood to see a film about its dark side. And the public wasn't ready to see two popular stars, Curtis and Lancaster, cast as villains. They had been so winning in *Trapeze*. One film executive marveled that the film seemed to have been made "almost in defiance of the box office."

The Hollywood reporter Ezra Goodman accompanied Hill, Hecht, and Lancaster to San Francisco for a preview. After the screening, Hecht approached Goodman and asked him what he thought of the picture.

"I told him that I thought it was poor. Hecht was overjoyed. His face broke out into a wide CinemaScope-type smile and I became his buddy. [The movie] was a flop and lost a great deal of money, but Hecht was happy." Once Hill had ended up getting the producer's credit on the film, Hecht was glad to see it fail.

At a party at Hill's Los Angeles apartment after the preview, Lehman sat at a table with Lancaster, who turned to him suddenly and said, "You weren't that sick, Ernie. You didn't have to leave the picture. I ought to punch you in the jaw right here and now."

Lehman said, "Go ahead, Burt. I need the money."

"They resented me," Lehman says now. "They considered me an enemy in their midst. I never saw Clifford again. He was off on another picture. They got rid of everyone."

One of the people they got rid of was Mackendrick, two weeks into the filming of *The Devil's Disciple*, the film he had initially been hired to direct. Lancaster claimed that the director was simply taking too long, driving up the budget. "Sandy was a very brilliant man," Lancaster explained, "but we hadn't the time or the money for him. That's the truth."

Hilary Mackendrick recalls that her husband "was let go from *Devil's Disciple* after he had already shot sequences with Laurence Olivier. ... He had no idea why it

happened. He was particularly annoyed that Harold Hecht did not speak to him personally but sent in the production manager. It was very crushing for him. He became depressed." It's possible that Mackendrick was being made a scapegoat for the box-office failure of *Sweet Smell of Success*, despite the critics' appreciation of the film and the fact that it made *Time's* and the *New York Herald Tribune's* 10-best lists for 1957.

Mackendrick returned to England, where he made a few more films before he came back to Hollywood in 1969. He spent 10 years developing a film based on the life of Mary, Queen of Scots, which he felt would have been his masterwork, only to have Universal cancel the project. His last film would turn out to be a silly 60s comedy with Tony Curtis and Sharon Tate called *Don't Make Waves*, which was plagued by problems—including the death of a stuntman. Mackendrick came to the conclusion that in Hollywood "the deal is the real product; the movie is the by-product of the deal." When the California Institute of the Arts began looking for someone to head up its new film program, it asked Mackendrick. He accepted, was its dean for 9 years and a much-beloved teacher until his death at the age of 81 in 1993. He never made another film. "Without him," Anthony Lane wrote in *The New Yorker*, "the landscape of cinema has grown dimmer."

"He was cynical, cynical about everything," Hilary Mackendrick says. "He took to calling *Sweet Smell of Success* a piece of hokum, but that was his nature. He just couldn't bring himself to acknowledge that he had made a masterpiece."

In 1960, three years after the movie was released, Hecht, Hill, and Lancaster dissolved their partnership. In 1965, Susan Harrison sued Hecht for \$25,000, claiming that he had "fraudulently induced" her into abandoning a contract she had with Hecht-Hill-Lancaster. After that, she seemed just to disappear. Except for a 1960 teen-exploitation movie, *Key Witness*, she did not work again in Hollywood. In October 1965, Harrison was given a suspended 90-day jail sentence by a superior-court judge in Los Angeles for child neglect, after she failed to give her two-year-old son urgently needed medical attention. The boy, Daniel, had sustained a brain injury after having fallen. (Repeated attempts to locate Harrison today, even by a private detective, were unsuccessful.)

Walter Winchell refused even to see *Sweet Smell of Success*. "I don't fool with the Lehmans of the world," he allegedly said when asked why he didn't retaliate in his column. It wasn't until the end of the

year, nearly six months after its run, that Winchell acknowledged the film at all, reporting matter-of-factly that Hecht-Hill-Lancaster would stand to lose \$500,000 on it. But, as Winchell's latest biographer, Neal Gabler, wrote, Lehman's novelette and Mackendrick's movie "helped sully Walter Winchell's name forever." He lived another 14 years, long enough to see his power and influence evaporate. The power of the tabloid gossip column had ebbed with the coming of television—and Winchell, though he briefly tried television, was really a radio man. David Brown describes his last encounter with Winchell, not long before his death: "It was at Danny's Hideaway. He was all alone in the booth, surrounded by his clippings. He had totally abandoned his column, he had been fired, but he still had that incredible ego. At his funeral, you know, nobody was there who wasn't paid to be there." According to Gabler, Walda discouraged people from attending the funeral.

As for Odets, he continued to work on films, often uncredited. He had always been a cynic about *Sweet Smell of Success*. "Hell," Odets once said to Burt Lancaster, "you can get killed just yearning for Hollywood."

Odets was hired to write *Wild in the Country* (1961) for Elvis Presley, but when he had Presley commit suicide at the end of the picture, he was told to rewrite the ending. He did so because he needed the money. "Everything he was against at the beginning of his career," observed his friend the pianist Oscar Levant, "he wound up doing himself."

Odets lived for six more years after the release of *Sweet Smell of Success*. Just as he had accepted the inevitability of movies, he accepted the inevitability of television, and agreed to be a writer for *The Richard Boone Show*. But when a stomach complaint turned out to be cancer, Odets was hospitalized. All his old friends from Broadway, the ones he had avoided during location shooting in New York—Harold Clurman, Elia Kazan, Lee Strasberg—showed up at his bedside to pay homage to their former golden boy. His death received modest notice in the press: *Time* magazine dismissed his long career in a flippant epitaph: "Odets, where is thy sting?"

But Odets, near the end of his life, had written his own epitaph: "That miserable patch of events, that mélange of nothing, while you were looking ahead for something to happen, that was it! That was life! You lived it!"

Lehman, on the other hand, has had a spectacular career as a screenwriter in Hollywood. His credits include *Sabrina*, *The King and I*, *Somebody Up There Likes*

Sweet Smell of Success

Me, North by Northwest, West Side Story, The Sound of Music, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, Hello, Dolly!, and Hitchcock's last film, Family Plot. He's now co-producing with David Brown a musical adaptation of *Sweet Smell of Success* for Broadway. John Guare, author of *The House of Blue Leaves* and *Six Degrees of Separation*, has written the book, and Marvin Hamlisch, composer of *A Chorus*

Line, is writing the score with the lyricist Craig Carnelia, who contributed to the musical adaptation of Studs Terkel's *Working*. The English director Nicholas Hytner (*The Madness of King George*) is slated to direct.

Sweet Smell of Success has come full circle, to, perhaps, where it belongs. It had always been David Brown's dream to make it into a Broadway musical: "After all," Brown suggests, "it's a fable. And a musical lends itself to a fable. We are now living in a tabloid era—not the era of

wonderful nonsense, but an era of character assassination, of instant celebrity. In my view, it was all invented by J. J. Hunsecker."

As for Lehman, he's remaining on the West Coast, content not to involve himself creatively in this new incarnation of the novella he wrote 50 years ago in a Provincetown studio. "I wrote the novel, the screenplay—it's theirs now," he says. "I'm staying away from it. I just hope they have a good press agent. Maybe Sidney Falco will get the job." □

Sue Mengers

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 404 that when I went to see him in *Death of a Salesman* I had every intention of going backstage, but I was so upset by it that I couldn't. My father was Willy Loman." She pauses. Then: "God, I hate to talk about myself. How do you like the tuna fish?"

According to the Rosenfield book, Mengers moved with her mother, by now a bookkeeper, to the Bronx. In 1955, she answered an ad for a receptionist at MCA, the powerhouse talent agency run by Jules Stein and Lew Wasserman (which later bought Universal and divested its agenting business). Mengers worked at MCA for a couple of years, until she was unceremoniously given the boot for failing to summon an agent from the men's room to take a call from Tyronne Power. From there she went to the smaller Baum-Newborn agency. Again she was frequently in trouble. Her boss, Marty Baum, "had a roaring temper and Sue was a total fuckup," according to Tom Korman, then a young agent, now a manager. An indifferent typist, she was not cut out to be a secretary, and Baum, Korman told Paul Rosenfield, "must have fired her 50 times. One day an actress, who was our client, was supposed to audition for *The World of Suzie Wong*, and nobody could find her. Sue, only Sue, knew she was having an affair with a married musician. Sue was in sheer panic from Marty Baum screaming at her every three minutes. . . . Finally she called the musician at home, and a woman answered. Sue said, 'You old sneak! I found you.' Well, of course, it was the musician's wife. And Marty Baum fired Sue once again."

Her next job was as secretary to Charlie Baker, head of the theater department at the William Morris Agency. One of his clients was Gore Vidal, who had a hit on Broadway called *Visit to a Small Planet*. Vidal, who became a good friend of Mengers's and eventually a client, remembers her from those days: "She had an outer of-

fice, he had an inner office. She was very flirtatious. One day I popped in to see Charlie, and suddenly I said, 'Oh, I've got to go,' and opened the door to his office, nearly putting her eye out as she was down peeping through the keyhole, or with her ear to the keyhole—I never could get her to admit which it was. In due course, she left the Morris office and went to work for another agent."

The other agent was Korman, who had left Baum-Newborn in 1963 to start his own agency, Tom Korman Associates. That same year he wooed Mengers from Morris by offering her her first job as an agent. Korman's shop started out with only three clients: the fading movie star Joan Bennett; Claudia McNeil, who had appeared in *A Raisin in the Sun*; and the writer-actress Lillian Roth, whose memoir *I'll Cry Tomorrow* had been adapted into a hit movie in 1955. But Korman Associates quickly became known as the Jolly Robbers, for the boldness with which it purloined clients, or, alternatively, the Relative Wrong agency, as in dancer-actress Marge Champion instead of Gower, actress Jocelyn Brando instead of Marlon.

Vidal continues the story: "I believe she took Charlie Baker's Rolodex. She had everybody's phone number, and as she had been listening to everything that was going on, she was perhaps the most knowledgeable agent in the business." She wooed people such as Tom Ewell, who was then a big Broadway star, with *The Seven Year Itch* and a lot of other plays to his credit. In those days, actors would come in early, before their matinees, and have lunch at Sardi's, where Mengers would troll for clients. One afternoon, Mengers stopped by Ewell's table, dropped her business card in his water glass, and said, "Hi, I'm Sue Mengers, I met you with Charlie Baker, I'm now on my own, I just want to be frank with you—I'd love you to be our client." According to Vidal, "Ewell said, 'What can you do for me that [my agent] Abe Lastfogel can't do?' She said, 'Fuck David Merrick!' With that, a star was born. She got him, too."

At the time, Merrick, the powerful producer of such Broadway hits as *Gypsy* and *Hello, Dolly!*, and the film director Otto Preminger (*Laura*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, *Exodus*) were "the two most formidable, frightening names to agents," according to Mengers. "But Merrick would take my calls because he knew I would be either amusing or I'd give him a free idea. When *Hello, Dolly!* opened, I called David and gave him a list of replacements, from Ginger Rogers on down, and in fact I tried to get Ginger Rogers to let me negotiate it for her. I thought I would faint on the way up to her suite in the elevator. And there she was, sitting behind a tray, sipping coffee, and she never even offered me a cup. She made me feel—ugh."

In 1967, Preminger was directing *Hurry Sundown*, and Mengers was trying to sell him on one of her male clients. Preminger was a liberal, famous for openly employing blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo on *Exodus*. As she recalls, "He said to me, 'Miss Mengers, your client is a fairy!' Of course he was, but I said, 'Oh, Mr. Preminger, that's not true—I've been to bed with him.' I would go that far, yes. I wish I could say he gave the guy the part, but he didn't. He may have broken the blacklist, but gay was verboten in movies."

One of Mengers's clients was Constance Bennett, Joan's sister and a fading star in her own right. Mengers knocked herself out to get Bennett into her "comeback" film: *Madame X* (the umpteenth remake of a 1908 French melodrama), which starred Lana Turner and Ricardo Montalban and was produced by Ross Hunter. Instead of being grateful, Bennett complained about her billing below Turner, demanding that her name be set off by a box on the ads and posters. It wasn't. Bennett, who had gotten a hefty salary, refused to pay her commission to the agency. Then, just before the movie came out, she died. Mengers sent Hunter a telegram that said, CONSTANCE FINALLY GOT HER BOX!

Mengers was shameless hustling clients. One of her favorite lines was "Get rid of