Tony Curtis (1925-2010)

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Veteran actor Tony Curtis died on September 29 at his home in Las Vegas, Nevada. He was 85. Always a talented and energetic performer, Curtis appeared in more than 100 films and television shows during a career which spanned six decades.

Curtis was born Bernard Schwartz on June 3, 1925 in Manhattan. His parents were Hungarian immigrants and his father struggled to earn a living as a tailor. The family spoke Hungarian at home and Curtis would not learn English until the age of five or six, when he began elementary school.

Curtis's family was deeply affected by the events of the Great Depression. As he would write in his 2008 memoir *American Prince*, "My father made so little money that at one point we lived in the back of my father's tailor shop in a building that had been condemned by the city." Curtis wrote that he went to the movies frequently to escape "the constant stress of poverty and unhappiness." Curtis and his brother Julius were placed in an orphanage for a time when their parents found they could no longer afford to care for them.

When he was a little older, Curtis dropped out of high school and spent three years in the Navy during the Second World War. After the war, the GI Bill enabled him to study acting at the Dramatic Workshop at the New School in New York. During this time, Curtis performed in summer stock theater before heading to Hollywood in 1948. There he found small roles in notable films such as Robert Siodmak's *Criss Cross* and Anthony Mann's western *Winchester '73*. By the mid 1950s, Curtis would become an established leading man. His best films were made during that decade.

In *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), Curtis played Sidney Falco, a small-time press agent trying to make it in the "big game with the big players." Falco's job is to "dig up scandal about prominent people and shovel it thin among columnists who give them space." Having fallen out of favor with major gossip columnist J.J. Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster), Falco attempts to return to his good graces by agreeing to split up the impending marriage of Hunsecker's sister to a young jazz musician he despises. Falco plants a blind item in the press denouncing the musician as a communist and a drug user.

When he sees the consequences of his actions, Falco finds them difficult to live with. The "game," it turns out, is a dirty one, and to make it, one has to be willing to sacrifice too much of oneself. The fame, wealth and power pursued by Falco nearly destroy him. Under pressure, the young press agent is willing to trade certain friendships and principles for the promise of success. It's too much for him ultimately.

Curtis plays Falco sympathetically. One is always aware of the enormous pressures bearing down on him. The actor's blending together of Falco's confidence—or at least the appearance of confidence—and the fear and anxiety lying just beneath it makes for a strong performance.

Both in drama and in comedy, Curtis excelled at playing hustlers and "smooth operators," though often not cynical or malicious ones. His hustlers are always in a hurry, fast-talking and shortsighted, ready to take whatever route makes itself available to them. Something essential about life in the postwar boom period comes across in several of the personalities Curtis brought to life in his films.

In 1958, Curtis starred in *The Defiant Ones*, a film about two prisoners—one white, the other black—who escape from a chain gang in the South. The two are shackled together and are forced to overcome their

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racism and work together to avoid capture. While the film suffers from some of the heavy-handedness common in the "message films" of producer-director Stanley Kramer's work, it does contain some powerful moments and the performances of Curtis and co-star Sidney Poitier are moving. Curtis was himself very proud of the anti-racist message of the work. He and Poitier earned Academy Award nominations for their performances. Curtis, who became friends with Poitier during the making of the film, was reportedly instrumental in getting Poitier his first above-the-title star billing in the credits of this movie.

In Billy Wilder's comedy *Some Like it Hot* (1959), Curtis and Jack Lemmon star as two musicians from Prohibition-era Chicago forced to go on the run from the mob after witnessing a gangland killing. With no other means for leaving town at their disposal, they dress like women, rechristen themselves Josephine and Daphne and join an all-girl jazz band headed for a gig in Florida. When Curtis's character falls for the band's singer, Sugar Kane (played wonderfully by Marilyn Monroe), he adopts yet another persona to win her affections; the musician transforms himself into a millionaire named Shell Oil Jr. (!), which Curtis performs as a rather impressive imitation of Cary Grant.

The film is genuinely funny, one of the great Hollywood comedies. The scene where Lemmon tells Curtis he is engaged to marry another man, in particular, is a classic. "Why would a guy want to marry a guy?" Curtis asks. "Security!" says Lemmon. The film is a delight to watch.

Curtis appeared in another memorable comedy in 1959, Blake Edwards' *Operation Petticoat.* Here he was Lieutenant Nick Holden, the supply officer aboard a submarine commanded by Matt Sherman (Cary Grant). Holden is a con man whose maneuvering leads the submarine from one misadventure to another, until he somehow manages to have the entire vessel painted pink. Curtis was an ideal performer for the type of comedy, frequently surreal or absurd—in the best sense of the word—and almost always risqué, that Edwards favored. Curtis would team up with the director for several films during his career.

By the 1960s, Hollywood had reached a significant state of decline and there were fewer and fewer opportunities for actors of Curtis' generation to perform in serious films and develop their art. There were a few notable films, however. There was *The Rat Race* (1960) directed by Robert Mulligan, about a struggling young couple in New York, beset with financial hardships. In *The Outsider* (1961), Curtis portrayed Ira Hayes, the Native American marine who was among the soldiers who took part in the raising of the American flag over Iwo Jima who returns home from the war deeply disturbed by his experiences.

In addition to these works, there was, of course, the unwieldy *Spartacus* (1960), directed by Stanley Kubrick, about the slave uprising in ancient Rome. Another film with *Sweet Smell of Success* director Alexander Mackendrick, *Don't Make Waves* (1967), had its moments perhaps but doesn't hold up well today. Curtis also earned praise for his performance in *The Boston Strangler* (1968).

That there is little of note beyond the 1960s is not a reflection of Curtis's own talents so much as it is of the overall decline in cultural life in the United States. Despite these challenges, Curtis continued to act up until his death. His final film role came in 2008's *David and Fatima.* Curtis's best films remain well worth seeing. The actor will be remembered as one of the more lively and engaging personalities in postwar Hollywood filmmaking.

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