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Great Directors



Sidney Lumet

Lumet, Sidney

William "Bill" Blick

May 2021

Great Directors

Issue 98

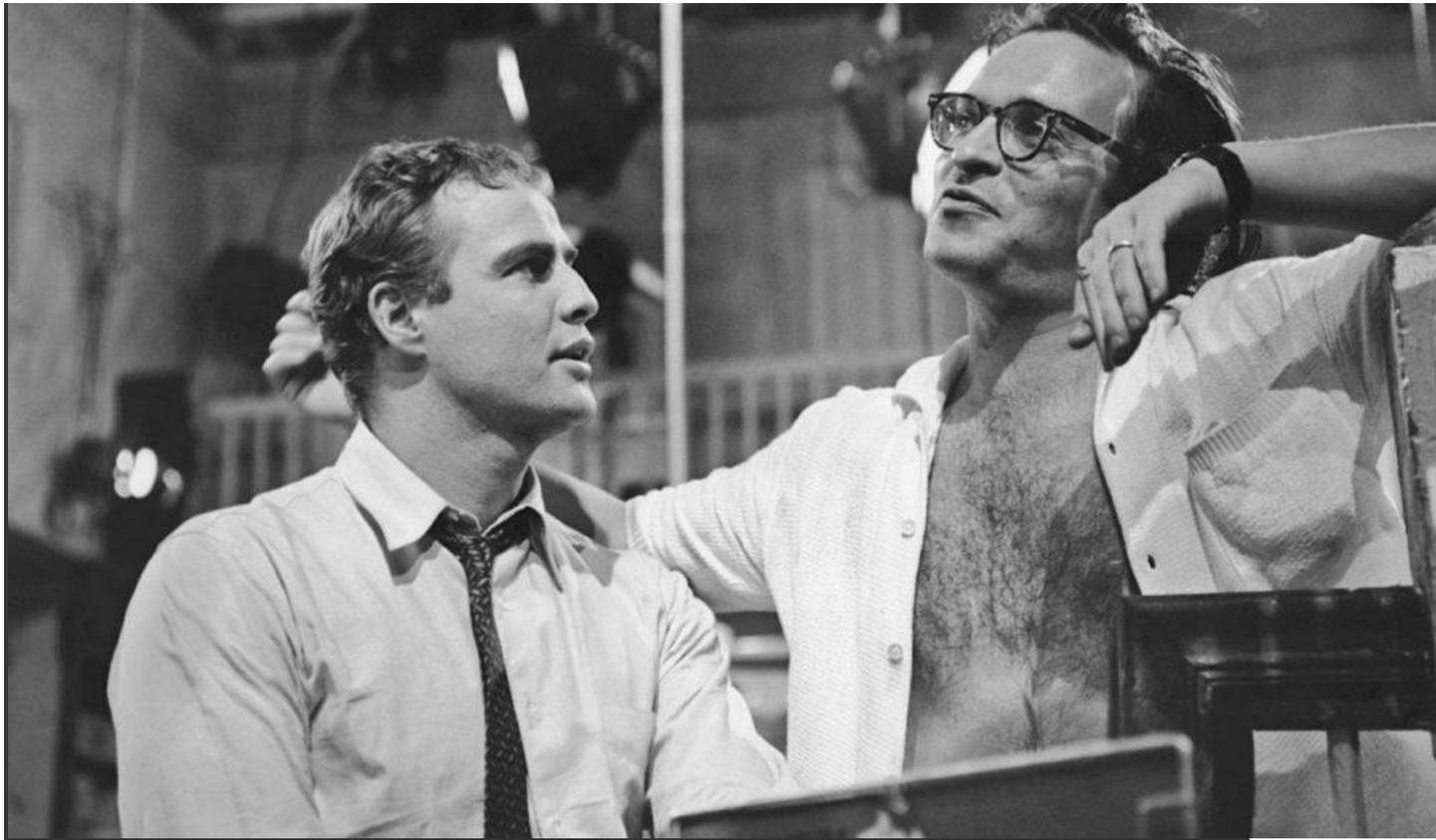
b. 1924

d. 2011

Career Beginnings

Notable for his electrifying dramas of the 1970s and gritty depictions of New York in that era, director Sidney Lumet's career spans six decades. Nancy Buirski's 2015 documentary, *By Sidney Lumet*, attests to the fact that Lumet's familial and artistic patrimony emerged from New York's Yiddish Theatre. The son of Polish Jewish emigrants, Lumet's mother was a dancer and his

father an actor, director, producer and writer. The dramaturgical dimension to Lumet's craft has been a staple of his career, often adapting canonical American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller for the silver screen.



Marlon Brando and Sidney Lumet on the set of *The Fugitive Kind*

Dan Georgakas and Leonard Quart explain:

*The wide range of Lumet's film work has made him a difficult subject for auteurist critics. Beyond the obvious observation that most of his work concerns urban life and that he has an exceptional gift for shooting in confined spaces, finding easily identifiable directorial trademarks is an elusive task. Critics such as Pauline Kael often have also felt that Lumet's films were more theatrical than cinematic.*¹

From Small Screen to Big Screen

Lumet's work evolved from Off-Broadway productions to anthology television dramas, directing hundreds of episodes of *Danger* (1951 – 1953), *Kraft Television Theatre* (1958) and *Playhouse 90* (1960). With increased recognition of the quality of his work, Lumet made his feature-length debut with *12 Angry Men* (1957). The American Film Institute (AFI) has identified *12 Angry Men* as the second best courtroom drama of all time, behind Robert Mulligan's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1968).²



12 Angry Men

Led by an all-star cast including Henry Fonda, Lee J. Cobb, Jack Klugman and Jack Warden, *12 Angry Men* was adapted from Reginald Rose's CBS teleplay of the same name, further establishing Lumet's reputation as a versatile director skilled in translating stories from other mediums into moving images. The film raises an assortment of moral, ethical, and rational arguments around the contemporaneous criminal justice system in the United States. The film leans towards liberalism, but prioritises objectivity over partisanship in the court of law. The claustrophobia and limited cast recalls the *Kammerspielfilm* (cinematic adaptations of chamber plays, championed by Max Reinhardt and August Strindberg) in 1920's German cinema.

12 Angry Men features what would become Lumet's trademark social conscience. The film sees rationality prevail over prejudice, as Juror 10's (Ed Begley) racism towards the Defendant (John Savoca) is condemned by his peers. Lumet continued this dynamic in the NBC teleplay, *The Sacco-Vanzetti Story* (1960), a dramatisation of the controversial Sacco and Vanzetti trial that was seen as being heavily influenced by anti-Italian and anti-immigrant bias. Lumet allows his material to articulate his politics. As the son of Jewish immigrants, Lumet's take on the story was logically consistent with his upbringing.

Guilt

Film historians David Desser and Lester D. Friedman argue that the question of guilt permeates Lumet's films.³ While this plays out literally in his courtroom dramas, *Failsafe* (1964) presents a

nightmarish military scenario that explores the delicate nature of peace in the context of the Cold War.. Released two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis, the film addresses what redemption looks like for a President (Henry Fonda) who accidentally oversees a nuclear attack on Moscow after an off-course civilian airliner is mistaken for a Soviet act of aggression. *Failsafe* is another triumph of an unabashedly bold filmmaker who wasn't afraid to address difficult topics throughout his career.

The Pawnbroker (1967) was American cinema's first attempt to recreate the horrors of concentration camps in the Third Reich.⁴ Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger), formerly a German Jewish college professor, has experienced devastating loss after witnessing his children die and wife being raped by Nazi's. Now a nickel and dime pawnbroker in East Harlem, his shop is owned by local crime boss Rodriguez (Brock Peters) who uses it as a front for tax and money laundering. Writing for *Variety*, Stuart Byron considered Brock Peters' role as the first confirmed homosexual character in American film history.⁵ While the Holocaust is the tragedy that characterises Nazerman's character arc, Lumet doesn't shy away from presenting this alongside American social issues including corruption, gay rights, racism and abuses of power and the law. The emotional isolation and sheer apathy, dramatised by Steiger, is an intense tour-de-force performance that earned him an Oscar for Best Actor. The film approaches redemption with similar pathos to *Failsafe*.



The Pawnbroker

Social Malaise and the Seventies

Lumet entered the new decade on unfamiliar terrain, with the only documentary in his filmography. *King: A Filmed Record... Montgomery to Memphis* (Sidney Lumet, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1970) profiled the legendary Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. two years after his assassination. Composed almost exclusively from archival material, the three hour epic documents rare footage of King's speeches, protests and arrests. Writing for *The Baltimore Sun*, Michael Sragow notes that, "These precious pieces of history are all the more potent because they're presented without commentary. The moviemakers recognize that King's words provide enough charged meaning to illuminate the images."⁶ The film was originally released as a one night event, at an (at the time) exorbitant \$5 ticket price with proceeds going to the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Special Fund. It has since been restored and the AFI hosts free screenings annually on King's birthday.

KING



A FILMED RECORD. MONTGOMERY TO MEMPHIS.

One night only.
March 24th 1970, 8 P.M.
Tickets \$5.00, tax deductible.
All proceeds to
The Martin Luther King, Jr.
Special Fund.

Poster for the theatrical debut of *King: A Filmed Record... Montgomery to Memphis*

Two years after the Knapp Commission issued its final report, revealing widespread corruption in the New York City Police Department (NYPD), Lumet released the biopic of whistleblower Frank Serpico. *Serpico* (1973) sees Lumet directing Al Pacino at his prime in the title role. The somewhat bohemian, unconventional cop is compelled by the pursuit of justice to hold ethically bankrupt institutions to higher standards. Pacino stuns as the increasingly paranoid and frustrated antihero, alienated and isolated for refusing to accept pay-offs. This is quintessential Lumet, breaking the blue wall of silence. Pacino's performance earned him a Golden Globe Award for Best Actor and he spoke fondly of Lumet's direction for years:

What happens is, as a movie goes on, it gets more and more grueling and you really need a director who will help remind you where your character is at all times. Sidney Lumet was like that. All wonderful directors will do that. They snap you to, you know? And you need that, because sometimes you get lulled into a certain rhythm when you've been sitting around for eight hours. The wonderful thing about Lumet is he always kept you in tune.²



Sidney Lumet with Al Pacino on the set of *Serpico*

Community ambivalence towards police (that was typical of the seventies) took centre stage in the second Pacino-Lumet pairing, *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). The film is based on the bizarre true story of John Wojtowicz's attempted bank robbery to finance his lover's gender reassignment surgery, an attempted crime that went horribly and hilariously wrong three years prior to the film's release. Elton John's "Amoreena" scores the opening sequence, creating an atmospheric haze of simmering tension. The occasionally unflattering images of the Brooklyn

daily grind is punctuated by fornicating dogs, loose fire hydrants and sanitation trucks filled with garbage. This sets the stage for a quotidian hero to emerge. Sonny Wortzik (Al Pacino) bursts onto the scene in an explosion of bravura acting, as he accidentally incites a prolonged hostage situation. Sonny squares off against police negotiator Sergeant Eugene Moretti (Charles Durning) and an entire SWAT team, in the process, garnering supporters who cheer him on. The crowd erupts as Sonny shouts “Attica! Attica!” Referencing the Attica Prison Uprising where inmates at the Attica Correctional Facility took 42 prison staff hostage and demanded better living conditions and political rights. Pacino’s delivery would place that line at 86 in the AFI’s *100 Years... 100 Movie Quotes*.⁸ The film entered the popular imagination amidst the aftermath of the Vietnam war and Watergate scandal. The characters’ (and crowds’) resentment of police have led 21st century scholars to call the film an “anti-authoritarian” epic.⁹ Lumet “captures the joy as well as the decay of a crowded city”¹⁰ in an unusually progressive (for its time) celebration of the LGBTQI+ community. A critical and commercial success, the film was nominated for six Academy Awards, seven Golden Globe Awards and six British Academy Film Awards.

Now well versed in directing scathing satire, Lumet turned to Paddy Cheveysky’s screenplay to acquaint audiences with the iconic *Network* (1976). Cheveysky had set a precedent for cynical diatribes with *The Hospital* (Arthur Hiller, 1971), which reach ecstatic proportions in *Network*. Threatened with cancellation after continued low ratings, news anchor Howard Beale (Peter Finch) announces on-air that he will commit suicide on the following week’s broadcast. After ratings skyrocket, what began as Beale’s sincere lamentations on the state of the industry (and society at large) are co-opted by executives and morphed into a live-broadcast of populist purging of emotions. Lumet elicited the performance of a lifetime from Peter Finch, whose line “I’m as mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore!” became an anthem-esque call to arms. Chayefsky’s notes reveal that the live audience echoing Beale’s declaration should, “sound like a Nuremberg rally, the air thick and trembling with it.”¹¹ Conspicuously released two years after the on-air suicide of Christine Chubbuck who announced, “In keeping with Channel 40’s policy of bringing you the latest in ‘blood and guts’ and in living color, you are going to see another first—an attempted suicide” before shooting herself in the head. Lumet, however, maintained that Beale’s character was not based on any one person. Rather, it was a pastiche of contemporaneous personalities.¹²



Network

Eighties and Onwards

Lumet returned to old tropes and explored new ones throughout the '80s. *Prince of the City* (1981) rehashed the crime drama of corrupt cops in a neo-noir aesthetic. *The Verdict* (1982) was another critically acclaimed courtroom drama, this time coming in at number four on the AFI's Top 10 Courtroom Dramas.¹³ The story revolves around a down-on-his-luck alcoholic lawyer, Frank Galvin (Paul Newman), who has resorted to attending wakes to hand out business cards. Feeling paralyzed by the justice system, himself and the world, Frank's redemptive arc aligns with a medical malpractice suit after a woman who was mistakenly put under anesthesia goes into a coma in a Catholic hospital. Frank advocates for the patient and her family in a legal battle of David and Goliath proportions, as they challenge institutionalized corruption. Scripted by Pulitzer Prize winning playwright David Mamet, the film is yet another testament to Lumet's ability to elicit strong performances from all areas of the cast hierarchy. Lumet writes, "I love actors because they're brave and all good work requires self-revelation."¹⁴ Throughout his career, Lumet required extensive pre-production rehearsals to iron out any problems in the script and determine exactly where his camera(s) will be for each shot. This provided an avenue for experimentation and improvising with alternative takes.



The Verdict

The early '90s resulted in critically and commercially unsuccessful films. The miscast Melanie Griffith stars as homicide detective Emily Eden *A Stranger Among Us* (1992) who goes undercover as a Hasidic Jew and attempts to uncover a murder in the community. As previously discussed, Lumet is known for his social realism, yet this film is uneven and unrealistic. While the plot is intriguing, the unfolding of events is overly restrained and Griffith's baby-soft voice lacks authority and authenticity in such a stark, atmospheric film. Griffith's performance resulted in a Razzie Award for Worst Actress at the Golden Raspberry Awards. Lumet went on to make two more forgettable films, *Guilty as Sin* (1993) and *Night Falls on Manhattan* (1996).

Lumet's final film, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007), is a psychologically complex crime thriller wherein two troubled middle-aged men (Philip Seymour Hoffman and Ethan Hawke) decide to rob their parents' Westchester jewelry business. Again, crime doesn't pay as their mother Nanette (Rosemary Harris) is killed in the hold up. Philip Seymour-Hoffman, Marisa

Tomei, and Ethan Hawke are all, as to be expected, riveting. The film, while not large in scope, is a successful conclusion to Lumet's influence in filmmaking.

Conclusion

Given the breadth of Lumet's oeuvre, it's debatable whether or not he has a distinctive, recognisable style. The canon encompasses such a large canvas, it is impossible to say whether or not his films are instantly recognizable. There are, however, trademark characteristics: gritty New York urban realism, dynamic and snappy dialogue coupled with frequent collaborations with the best actors and writers in the business. These collaborations captivated film critics and the public alike, as both bore witness to Lumet's talent for translating text to screen. Lumet's politics are unabashedly liberal and often elicit distrust of the establishment as characters challenge the status quo. As Chuck Bowen writes, "Real patriotism isn't self-congratulatory."¹⁵ Lumet's films don't chastise the society that gave rise to them from a place of apathetic nihilism, rather, Lumet challenges his characters and audiences to do better. To live up to American ideals. To hold these truths as self-evident, that all men are created equal.

Filmography:

- *The Challenge* (Short, 1955)
- *12 Angry Men* (1957)
- *Stage Struck* (1958)
- *That Kind of Woman* (1959)
- *The Fugitive Kind* (1960)
- *A View from the Bridge* (1962)
- *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962)
- *The Pawnbroker* (1964)
- *Fail Safe* (1964)
- *The Hill* (1965)
- *The Group* (1966)
- *The Deadly Affair* (1967)
- *Bye Bye Braverman* (1968)
- *The Sea Gull* (1968)
- *The Appointment* (1969)
- *Last of the Mobile Hot Shots* (1970)
- *King: A Filmed Record... Montgomery to Memphis* (co-directed with Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1970)
- *The Anderson Tapes* (1971)
- *Child's Play* (1972)
- *The Offence* (1973)
- *Serpico* (1973)
- *Lovin' Molly* (1974)
- *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974)
- *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975)
- *Network* (1976)

- *Equus* (1977)
- *The Wiz* (1978)
- *Just Tell Me What You Want* (1980)
- *Prince of the City* (1981)
- *Deathtrap* (1982)
- *The Verdict* (1982)
- *Daniel* (1983)
- *Garbo Talks* (1984)
- *Power* (1986)
- *The Morning After* (1986)
- *Running on Empty* (1988)
- *Family Business* (1989)
- *Q&A* (1990)
- *A Stranger Among Us* (1992)
- *Guilty as Sin* (1993)
- *Night Falls on Manhattan* (1996)
- *Critical Care* (1997)
- *Gloria* (1999)
- *Find Me Guilty* (2006)
- *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007)

Endnotes:

1. Dan Georgakas, Leonard Quart. "[Still 'Making Movies': an interview with Sidney Lumet](#)," *Cineaste*, Spring 2006, 6+. *Gale Academic OneFile* accessed May 20 2020. [↗](#)
2. American Film Institute, [AFI's 10 TOP 10: The 10 Greatest Movies In 10 Categories](#), March 2011. [↗](#)
3. David Desser, Lester D. Friedman, *American Jewish Filmmakers* (City: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 172. [↗](#)
4. Anita Gates, "[Hollywood's Slow Awakening to Holocaust's Horrors](#)," *The New York Times*, 5 April 2005. [↗](#)
5. Stuart Byron, "Homo Theme 'Breakthrough,'" *Variety*, p. 7, 9 August 1967. [↗](#)
6. Michael Sragow, "['King: A Filmed Record' soars on high rhetoric, raw courage — and sanity](#)," *The Baltimore Sun*, 14 January 2011. [↗](#)
7. Rick Lyman, [FILM: Pacino on Pacino \(And on the Video Monitor\)](#), *The New York Times*, 20 April 2003. [↗](#)
8. American Film Institute, *100 Years... 100 Movie Quotes*, CBS, 21 June 2005. [↗](#)
9. Richard Aloysius Blake, *Street Smart: The New York of Lumet, Allen, Scorsese, and Lee* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), p. 71. [↗](#)
10. Chuck Bowen, *Dog Day Afternoon deeply loves the America it critiques*, *The A.V. Club*, 7 January 2015. [↗](#)
11. Dave Izkoff, [Notes of a Screenwriter, Mad as Hell](#), *The New York Times*, 19 May 2011 [↗](#)

12. FoundationINTERVIEWS, [Sidney Lumet on directing the film "Network" – TelevisionAcademy.com/Interviews](#), YouTube, 10 November 2011. Accessed 26 April 2021. 
13. American Film Institute, [AFI's 10 TOP 10: The 10 Greatest Movies In 10 Categories](#), March 2011. 
14. Dan Georgakas, Leonard Quart. "[Still 'Making Movies': an interview with Sidney Lumet](#)," *Cineaste*, Spring 2006, 6+. *Gale Academic OneFile* accessed 20 May 2020. 
15. Chuck Bowen, "[Dog Day Afternoon deeply loves the America it critiques](#)," *AVClub*, 1 July 2015. 