

# One wee drop of the real stuff – that did the trick for our Sandy



David Thomson

There has always been a vein of British crime films in which decent, law-abiding people are invested in the crime itself. In *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, we want the upstart Louis Mazzini to murder every d'Ascoyne in sight because we might be republicans. I recall a TV film about the Bywaters-Thompson murder case of the Twenties where the poisoning was driven by the quality of the sex that went on. But no case was more pardonable than *Whisky Galore!* (1949) in which some law-abiding but crafty Scots become smugglers because shipwreck has made them an offer they could not refuse – whisky, on the rocks, already.

*Whisky Galore!* is released on DVD tomorrow (Optimum £19.99) and I suspect that many will fall upon it with glee. The movies are very often about the expression of lurking desires, and the craving for the real stuff is light enough to shine through the darkness of criminal conspiracy. The film is funny, but the need is authentic, and nothing can mask the desperate desire in Basil Radford, Joan Greenwood, James Robertson Justice and the several other Scottish actors. The film came from a novel by Compton MacKenzie, and it was directed by Alexander or Sandy Mackendrick, who is a case all on his own.

Mackendrick was a Scot, born in Boston, in 1912, because his parents were on holiday there. Back home, he was a student at the Glasgow School of Art and a graphic artist in advertising. But in the late Thirties, he turned to film and as war broke out he was hired by the Ministry of Information. After the war, he went to Ealing and wrote a few scripts – the big flop, *Saraband for Dead Lovers*, and that formative hit, *The Blue Lamp*. Thus he was established, and in the early Fifties he made a run of films: *Whisky Galore!*; *The Man in the White Suit* (with Alec Guinness); *Mandy* (about a deaf child); *The Maggie* (a rather laborious comedy, with American actor Paul Douglas increasingly frustrated in the Highlands); and *The Ladykillers*.

That last was such a hit that Mackendrick was recruited for America by the Hecht-Hill-Lancaster company, and so it was that he made *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957). Today, that is a very famous piece of noir film. There are devotees who can recite the glittering dialogue that passes between gossip columnist J H Hunsecker (Burt Lancaster) and “arsenic cookie” publicist Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis). Moreover, the look of the film (as photographed by James Wong Howe) is one of the first impressions of modern Manhattan at night. The film certainly broke fresh ground. The press had never been shown as so corrupt. America had rarely been portrayed as so loathsome – or enticing.

That delight did come later. Mackendrick had been raised at Ealing by the studio head Michael Balcon to be respectful of budget and economy. *Sweet Smell of Success* was not a hit, and it was made at a time when displaying too many streaks of anti-Americanism was asking for trouble. Later on in life, Mackendrick was tough on his own film. He called it hopeless melodrama, full of lines so exaggerated they can hardly be uttered with a straight face.

There is truth in that. The film has a sluggish second half, and it founders on the character of Hunsecker's adored but tedious sister – a creature from a different kind of movie, and an increasing drag on the narrative of this one. None of that really matters. The film was made in a delirious hurry. Ernest Lehmann's original script was being polished or rewritten by Clifford Odets – a great playwright of the 1930s, but a wreck by then – as the shooting went on. And everyone got what was special: that the stink and the snarl of the real city were being delivered; and that two strange actors – insecure yet tyrannical – Lancaster and Curtis, were getting the chance to act without restraint. That's why nothing matters except for the first 40 minutes or so which, quite simply, changed talk on the American screen.

Did Mackendrick grasp that? I don't know. He had made a brilliant flop – but he never got anywhere close to it again. There were a few more films, and *A High Wind in Jamaica* deserves another look. But he soon retired, claiming that he couldn't stand the climate of deal-making. Instead, in the early Seventies he began to teach at CalArts, near Los Angeles. There is a very good book, *On Film-Making*, that is derived from his class notes and it's clear that he was happy teaching. His regrets? They stayed largely buried, but if you look at *Sweet Smell of Success* or *Whisky Galore!* you can surely feel the drive and the desperation in a man who was made for risk, not security. He died in 1993 – his life might make a great film.

PS My column last week had the characters singing “America the Beautiful” at the close of *The Deer Hunter*. Yes, you're all right – it was “God Bless America”.

d.thomson@independent.co.uk

Mackendrick was tough on 'Sweet Smell of Success' later on in life

Crime pays: James Anderson, left, and James Robertson Justice toast their success in 'Whisky Galore!'

