

From Drama to Drag



Tony Curtis (left) with Marilyn Monroe & Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot*
Photo Credit: NewsCom/Archives

A Tribute to Tony Curtis

by Jarrod Emerson

SPECIAL FOR FILMS FOR TWO®

Although many stars shined during Hollywood's Golden Age, not many were able to achieve equal acclaim across genres, maintain their staying power over the years, and sport drag so well. But Tony Curtis accomplished all of this!

We lost the Hollywood veteran on September 29, 2010, but his work lives on, as does his name (in daughter Jamie Lee Curtis from his marriage to actress Janet Leigh). Born in the Bronx to Hungarian-Jewish immigrants in 1925, Bernard Herschel Schwartz led a rough early life. At age 18, he joined the United States Navy, and began college following his discharge.

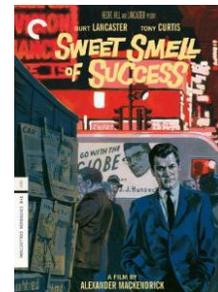
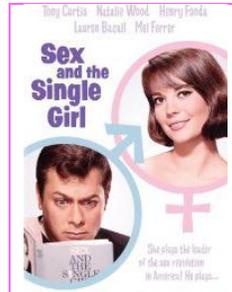
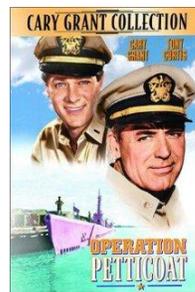
Schwartz was discovered by Joyce Selznick while studying at the Dramatic Workshop of The New School for Social Research in New York. This prompted a move to Hollywood in 1948, where he signed a contract with Universal Pictures, and officially adopted the name Tony Curtis. He initially appeared in bit roles, but Curtis never gave up the goal of proving himself a capable dramatic actor. He gained critical praise in the late '50s for *Sweet Smell of Success* and then *The Defiant Ones* (which earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor in 1959). While Curtis' star had dwindled by the late '60s, much of his work has stayed in the spotlight.

His best trait was his ability to deliver in both dramatic and comedic roles. While Curtis memorably contributed to dramatic fare like Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus*, he made us laugh just as easily in *Some Like It Hot* and *Operation Petticoat*. Many of the characters that he played have aged well, and while Curtis may no longer be with us, the array of faces he brought us aren't going anywhere soon.

Tony Curtis has 130 acting credits listed in the Internet Movie Database (!), some television but mostly movies, so I could only watch a small sample. To write this tribute, I viewed the following films:

- *The Boston Strangler*
- *The Defiant Ones*
- *The Great Race*
- *Insignificance*
- *Operation Petticoat*
- *Sex And The Single Girl*
- *Some Like It Hot*
- *Spartacus*
- *Sweet Smell of Success*
- *The Vikings*

Based on my sample,
I recommend you watch
these six Curtis films →



1) SOME LIKE IT HOT (1959): In this legendary Billy Wilder comedy, Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon star as “Joe” (Curtis) and “Jerry” (Lemon)—Prohibition-era jazz musicians who barely escape a Chicago mafia massacre. With the mob hot on their trail, they disguise themselves as Josephine and Daphne and seek refuge in an All-Girl band. There, they meet blonde bombshell “Sugar Kane” (Marilyn Monroe), to whom Joe/Josephine is instantly attracted. Once the band arrives in Miami, Jerry/Daphne must fight of the advances of eccentric local “Osgood Fielding III” (Joe E. Brown), while Joe, using Osgood’s yacht as his own, tries to seduce Sugar by posing as a millionaire. But how long can Joe/Josephine and Jerry/Daphne stay hidden?

A hit as soon as it was released, *Some Like It Hot* continues to be a historically significant picture over 50 years later, and it is frequently ranked as one of the greatest films ever made. Nominated for six Oscars and winner of one (for Costume Design), this is easily one of Tony Curtis’ most recognizable outings, and for good reasons. Curtis and Lemmon have a strong, memorable, hilarious rapport, and they complement each other, with Curtis embodying the more romantic narrative, while Lemmon hams it up in more purely comedic role.

Curtis is especially funny when he's pretending to be millionaire "Shell Jr." who speaks with an accent that riffs Cary Grant's. One prime example is a side-splitting scene in which Lemmon (in his "Daphne" outfit) brings Sugar to their hotel room to convince her that "Shell Jr." is a fake. When they arrive, Daphne and Sugar find "Josephine" relaxing in the bathtub, but as soon as Sugar leaves, Joe emerges with his "Shell" clothes dripping bubbles. Timeless!

2) THE DEFIANT ONES (1958): Tony Curtis stars as "John 'Joker' Jackson" with Sidney Poitier as "Noah Cullen," two convicts forced to work together. When their transport vehicle crashes during a thunderstorm, Joker and Cullen manage to escape the scene. Chained together, the two must cooperate in order to evade the authorities. The men initially loathe each other, Joker being openly racist, and both men overall distrusting each other. But as they face more obstacles, a bond forms between them.

This film, along with *Sweet Smell of Success*, gained Curtis unprecedented attention when first released, and Curtis deservedly received an Academy Award nomination for Best Actor. The story is simple yet strong, and the script is full of character development. Stanley Kramer's direction is smooth, and very effectively brings out the best in both of his leads. Joker is initially a bitter, bigoted individual, who wants nothing more than to ditch Cullen. A great transformation occurs with this character alone.

A memorable illustration is when the two men seek shelter with young "Billy" (Kevin Coughlin). With their chain finally broken, Joker makes plans to flee south with Billy's mother (Cara Williams), and she gives Cullen directions so he can go his own way. But when Joker learns that she's actually sending Cullen into a trap, he drops everything to search for Cullen. This moment represents the turning point for Joker, and it remains one of the most powerful of Tony Curtis' career.

3) THE BOSTON STRANGLER (1968): Tony Curtis portrays a real-life serial killer in this fact-based thriller. The first half of the film focuses on "Detective Phil DiNatalie" (George Kennedy) and his fellow officers as they investigate a series of strangle victims. They pursue one false lead after another, until expert "Jon S. Bottomly" (Henry Fonda) joins the investigation. "Albert DeSalvo" (the murderer played by Curtis) doesn't even appear until the second half of the film. But how long can his façade last with Bottomly on his trail?

Tony Curtis beat out the likes of Warren Beatty and Robert Redford for the role of DeSalvo. It is a bold step beyond most of his other roles, and typically considered the grand finale of his prime. While Curtis had already shown himself able to bounce between comedy and drama, here he demonstrated a whole new level of versatility. Curtis even sported a prosthetic nose and put on 30 pounds to better resemble DeSalvo, and his portrayal is just as effective in 2011 as it was in 1968. What makes his DeSalvo so chilling is that Curtis plays him as a quietly impulsive, mentally ill man incapable of separating reality from fantasy, rather than a clichéd, screaming maniac.

Director Richard Fleischer makes heavy use of split-screens. In the era of fast-paced thrillers like *24*, this effect has become routine. However, it was a relatively new technique in 1968, and it helps the film by giving us the murders from multiple

perspectives. While the horrific content may be tame by today's standards, the film does not feel dated. Anchored by Curtis' chilling performance, *The Boston Strangler* journeys to a very deep place.

4) OPERATION PETTICOAT (1959): The Sea Tiger, a damaged submarine commanded by "Matt T. Sherman" (Cary Grant), heads to the dock for repairs in the early days of WWII, picking up new crewmember "Lieutenant Nick Holden" (Curtis) along the way. However, much to the dismay of the dedicated Sherman, Holden is inexperienced and unorthodox, and soon he's shaking up Sherman's tightly run ship. While scavenging for parts, Holden returns the Sea Tiger with five stranded army nurses; Sherman reluctantly agrees to accommodate them and hilarious consequences ensue.

Grant excels at playing straight man to Curtis' lovable comic misfit. In the many scenes in which Sherman catches Holden in some impropriety, Grant adopts the face of a disapproving parent, while Curtis looks like a child who's been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Many duos have attempted this dynamic countless times, but it's rarely been better. These well-rounded performances are consistently amusing.

5.) SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS (1957): Tony Curtis portrays press agent "Sidney Falco" in a dark tale of mendacity and corruption. Falco is desperate to get his clients' names into the influential column of "J.J. Hunsecker" (chillingly portrayed by Burt Lancaster), so he agrees to a noxious plan that has dire consequences.

Although the initial response was caustic and the film received no American nominations during the 1958 awards season, *Sweet Smell of Success* is now universally recognized as a classic film-noir. Its characters are seamlessly brought to life: Lancaster's Hunsecker is a condescending, intimidating, unethical bully who easily qualifies as one of cinema's greatest villains, and Falco, who is willing to do almost anything to please him, becomes his lackey. In one scene, when Falco interrupts Hunsecker at dinner with some friends, Hunsecker belittles him. Rather than restraining himself in public, being in front of others only makes Hunsecker's cruel tongue that much sharper.

6.) SEX AND SINGLE GIRL (1964): Inspired by Helen Gurley Brown's non-fiction best-seller, *Sex and The Single Girl* depicts a fictionalized Brown (played by Natalie Wood) with Tony Curtis as "Bob Weston" (a writer hired to discredit her). However, the deeper he gets into his assignment, the more Bob finds himself attracted to Helen, and he begins questioning his own principles.

The book *Sex and The Single Girl* (which encouraged young women to live independent lives and enter into sexual relationships outside of marriage) was groundbreaking in its time, and the film still works. Curtis and Wood head a solid cast in a fun, farcical plot, and display strong romantic chemistry that many current RomComs fail to achieve. And the film even tips its hat to another Curtis performance, but you'll have to see it yourself to know which one!

**Alas, not all Tony Curtis films have aged as gracefully as these six.
Here are two I just can't recommend.**

1.) Spartacus (1960): Stanley Kubrick's 1960 epic tells the story of a famous Roman slave uprising. Kirk Douglas plays the title character, supported by an endless list of stars and well-known character actors. Tony Curtis portrays "Antoninus," one of many slaves inspired to join his revolt.

Spartacus was a huge success, receiving four Oscars in 1961, but it is now severely dated. Even though some of cast members deliver strong performances (especially Oscar-winner Peter Ustinov and the great Laurence Olivier), most of the acting feels forced, and the dialogue sounds old-fashioned.

In one infamous scene (now restored and available on the DVD), Antoninus (Curtis) is bathing his master "Crassus" (Olivier). Crassus attempts to seduce Antoninus, but his double entendres about oysters and snails just sound ridiculous by today's standards. The stylized dialogue, incoherent performances, and melodramatic musical score add up to a costume drama that's lost its punch.

2.) The Great Race (1965): Curtis portrays "the Great Leslie," a massively popular daredevil, with Jack Lemmon as his arch-rival "Professor Fate," and Natalie Wood as photojournalist/suffragette "Maggie DuBios."

Since Curtis is reteaming with director Blake Edwards and co-stars Jack Lemmon and Natalie Wood, all the right elements are present, but unfortunately, the results are not up to par with any of their other collaborations. While still in command of his usual dashing persona, Curtis doesn't have any chemistry with his reunion stars, and I had difficulty sticking with it to the end.

MY BOTTOM LINE:

While not all of Tony Curtis' work has aged gracefully, much of it has. Curtis brought many memorable characters to life, and they will never die.

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Ohio-native Jarrod Emerson has been residing in Chicago for the past four years. He is a graduate of Columbia College Chicago, and is currently enrolled in courses at the Second City Training Center. He has been working with FF2 since 2007, and leaps at any opportunity (or excuse) to see more classic films!

FF2 Editor's Note:

Although we've seen most of the films mentioned in this piece, we saw them before we began FF2, so, alas, most of them are not listed in our database. We are very grateful to Jarrod for going back into the archive to create a personal record of Tony Curtis' most memorable moments on screen.