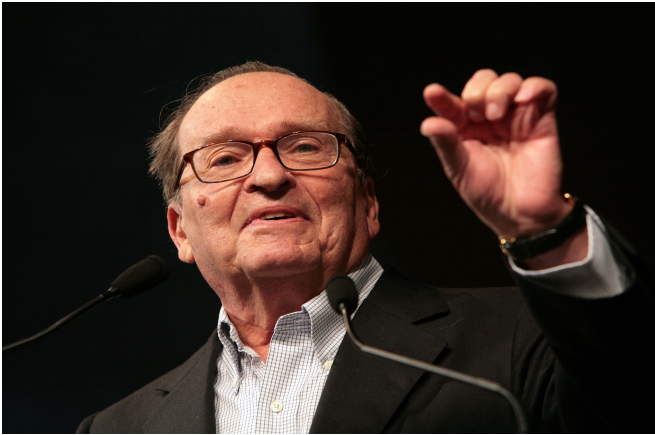


I'm Sad As Hell



**Sidney Lumet at the Festival du Cinema Americain
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A Tribute to Sidney Lumet

By Jarrod Emerson

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One of the greatest cinematic storytellers is no more. Whether it was a lone juror, a desperate bank robber, or a disgruntled news anchor, Sidney Lumet's six-decade career was full of realistic, gritty stories about deeply personal journeys. These characters were real people, who often embarked on personal quests in which they challenged society. In short, Mr. Lumet told stories that were no fantasy.

Born in Philadelphia on June 24, 1924 to entertainer parents, Sidney Lumet's first brush with the arts came at age four, when he debuted in the Yiddish Theater. Lumet continued acting throughout his youth, before joining the military for WWII. Upon his return, he studied at The Actor's Studio. After forming his own theatre company, Lumet moved into directing for television in the early 1950s.

In 1957, Lumet made a transition to the silver screen with the acclaimed *12 Angry Men*. Over the next fifty years, He cranked out an average of one film a year, and was personally nominated for four Academy Awards, while three of his films received "Best Picture" nominations. On April 10th, 2011, Lumet succumbed to heart disease at age eighty-six. Like Howard Beale, Lumet himself may be off the air, but may his stories be broadcast forever. For this tribute, I was only able view a fraction of Lumet's vast filmography:

- ***Twelve Angry Men***
- ***The Pawnbroker***
- ***The Hill***
- ***Serpico***
- ***Dog Day Afternoon***
- ***Network***
- ***The Wiz***
- ***Prince Of The City***
- ***The Verdict***
- ***Daniel***
- ***Running On Empty***

- *Guilty As Sin*
- *Before The Devil Knows You're Dead*

Based on this sampling,
I highly recommend
These Nine Lumet films »



1) DOG DAY AFTERNOON (1975): “Sonny Wortzik” (Al Pacino) and his accomplice “Sal” (John Cazale), stroll into a Brooklyn bank, for a simple armed robbery. However, nothing goes as planned. The situation spirals out of control as Sonny is forced to improvise, which in turn catches the attention of the authorities led by “Sgt. Moretti” (Charles Durning). As the day wares on, Federal Agents arrive, Sonny is thrust into the media spotlight and his deeply personal motives become public.

Based on the Life Magazine article “The Boys In The Bank”, *Dog Day Afternoon* was released to overwhelming acclaim. The film took home an Academy Award for Frank Pierson’s terrific screenplay. Every signature Lumet beat is found here: a stripped-down narrative, realistic tone, theatrical atmosphere, and a protagonist challenging the establishment.

Al Pacino gives one of his most enduring performances as Sonny Wortzik, a real “rebel without a clue”. One of Lumet’s most interesting protagonists, Sonny is a jaded Vietnam Veteran, who seems incapable of rational thought. Although he spends a majority of the film holding hostages, and making demands, Sonny is delusional rather than evil. Pacino masterfully conveys his stress. The Supporting cast also sports standout turns. The late John Cazale gives both a voice of reason and comic relief as Sal, Sonny’s frustrated sidekick, while Chris Sarandon appears in a small but unforgettable Oscar-nominated part as Sonny’s pre-operative transsexual wife. Suspense and drama are rarely interwoven so well!

2) NETWORK (1976): Veteran UBS news anchor “Howard Beale” (Peter Finch – in the role of a lifetime) is told of his show’s impending cancellation. Despite being

fired for an on-air suicide threat, colleague and friend “Max Schumacher” (William Holden) successfully appeals for one last Beale sign-off show. This time Beale begins a cynical rant about life and the media manipulation, spawning a catchphrase: “I’m mad as hell, and I’m going to take this anymore!” which millions of viewers repeat on his instruction. Suddenly UBS decides to exploit Beale’s breakdown by turning it into a weekly program. But will the ratings last? What lengths will the cold, career-driven “Diana Christenson” (Faye Dunaway) and her powerful boss “Frank Hackett” (Robert Duvall) go to keep them up?

Released in 1976, *Network* is one of Sidney Lumet’s most beloved films, both then and now, winning four of its ten Academy Award nominations. Lumet flawlessly executes Paddy Chayefsky’s eerily humorous script. Heavy on dark satire, *Network*’s message about the control the media exorcizes over people is as striking today as it was three decades ago.

Along with a brilliant story, Lumet directs one of his finest ensembles ever here. Peter Finch, who posthumously won an Oscar for his portrayal of the bewildered Howard Beale, never disappoints. Like Sonny Wortzik, Beale is fed up with society, and is unafraid to question the corruption of his trade. Meanwhile, another one of *Network*’s Oscar performances comes from Faye Dunaway, who electrifies as the icy, emotionless Diana. Her chemistry-turned tension with William Holden is very well played. Rather than a one-dimensional villain, Diana is a work-obsessed woman who looks out only for the wellbeing of UBS network. The film perfectly walks the tightrope between satire and cautionary tale.

3) THE PAWNBROKER (1964): “Sol Nazerman” (Rod Steiger) is the only one of his family to survive The Holocaust. Now a pawnshop owner in East Harlem, Sol has morphed into a cynical, emotionless recluse. He blows off his eager apprentice “Ortiz” (Jamie Sanchez), rejects the friendship of social worker “Marilyn Birchfield” (Geraldine Fitzgerald), spending much of his time in solitude. Furthermore, gangster “Rodriguez” (Brock Peters) wishes to use Nazerman’s store as a prostitution front, which reawakens unpleasant memories of his wife’s fate. At what cost will Sol rediscover empathy?

Only after Arthur Hiller left during pre-production did Lumet take the reigns, making one of his finest films in the process. *The Pawnbroker* was groundbreaking in a number of ways, most notably the extent of nudity as well as depictions of concentration camps. Adapted from Edward Lewis Wallant’s novel, the film was an enormous critical success. With the help of Quincy Jones’ jazzy score, eerie black and white camera work, the heat and steam of early 60s New York come alive.

The role of Sol Nazerman earned Rod Steiger an Oscar nomination. Even though Sol physically survived the Holocaust, his emotions died along with his family, save for the bitter, selfish feelings that caused him to implode. In the end, a whole new series of painful events occur that re-awaken Sol’s compassion. Steiger brilliantly shows the wall that caps Sol’s emotions crumbling, until it comes crashing down. A brilliantly played early instant of this comes when Ortiz asks why business comes so naturally to Jews, to which Nazerman blasts into an angry rant about the centuries of

persecution that his culture has faced. A powerful story of helping your fellow man, this gem broke many barriers.

4) 12 ANGRY MEN (1957): A troubled New York youth stands accused of murdering his father. The 12 jurors retire to a hot room to determine the young man's verdict. All vote guilty, except "Juror 8" (Henry Fonda). Initially dismissive, the other 11 men listen as Juror 8 makes his case. Tensions rise, as the men gradually begin to question their votes. Some are more willing to listen to reason than others. Bigotry, Compassion, and Empathy are just a few of the emotions that flood the room, as verdict remains uncertain.

Adapted from Reginald Rose's teleplay, *12 Angry Men* is one of the most impressive film debuts ever, earning Lumet his first Academy Award nomination. The film contains what would become the key Lumet ingredients over the following decades: A protagonist who dares to challenge the consensus, fierce opposition, and a bare-bones style similar to the stage. The performances are top notch, particularly those of Henry Fonda, as Juror 8 and Lee J. Cobb as Juror 3. If Juror 8 is the most open-minded of the group, Juror 3 is the polar opposite. A distraught, embittered father, Juror 3 refuses to change his vote, creating great tension between him and Juror 8. The rest of the cast is some of the greatest characters to grace the screen.

5) THE VERDICT (1982): Once promising Boston attorney "Frank Galvin" (Paul Newman) has descended into alcoholism, lost his last three cases, and is closer than ever to being disbarred. Frank accepts an intriguing medical malpractice case, while finding an encouraging companion in a woman named "Laura" (Charlotte Rampling). His opposition is the intimidating "Ed Concannon" (James Mason). Frank soon becomes determined to win the case, as it may be his last opportunity to resurrect his career.

Whereas *12 Angry Men* brought us the jury's turmoil, *The Verdict* shows the inner-turmoil from the lawyer's perspective. Paul Newman takes us on every bumpy painful turn in Frank's arch. Although Frank initially accepts the case with little enthusiasm, he soon becomes passionately devoted to winning it. Despite the opportunity to settle the case, Frank insists on taking the case all the way to the court, as he realizes he's doing the right thing.

This inner-battle is wonderfully chronicled in an early screenplay from David Mamet. James Mason's Ed Concannon is an awesomely subtle, a resourceful defense attorney who uses every dirty trick and seems unbeatable. Charlotte Rampling also gives a believable companion in Laura, who has an unbelievable secret. Jack Warden and Lindsay Crouse also show up in very good supporting roles. *The Verdict* is a powerful tale of redemption that has not dated one bit.

6) THE HILL (1965): During World War II, A handful of insubordinate British soldiers: "Joe Roberts" (Sean Connery), "Harris" (Ian Bannen), "Jacko King" (Ossie Davis), "George Stevens" (Alfred Lynch), and "Monty Bartlett" (Roy Kinnear) have just arrived at a military detention camp in the Libyan desert. Staff "Captain Wilson" (Harry Andrews) rules the camp with an iron fist. Everyday, inmates are subjected to

running laps up and down the camp's steep man-made hill, while baking in the desert sun. When one of the men dies at the hands of abusive staff "Williams" (Ian Hendry), Roberts will not let it end quietly. As Roberts and Jacko begin to protest, the camp's Staff begins to clash over power and responsibility.

Here, Lumet indulges in another unique "anti-establishment vigilante" story, and the results are unforgettable. Ray Digby adapted *The Hill* from his play of the same name. Like a stage production, the film retains a bare-bones atmosphere, with Black & White cinematography and no musical score, making it one of Sidney Lumet's grittiest entries.

The cast is marvelous. Sean Connery, whom had been eager to prove himself outside of James Bond, is amazing as our anti-hero. Cynical about the military, Roberts refuses to back down in the pursuit of justice. Even after Williams has him brutally beaten, Roberts is out for the truth. Ossie Davis also electrifies as the comically rebellious Jacko King, a black officer whom not only endures harsh rule, but racism. While one might take Harry Andrews' Wilson to be the villain, Ian Hendry's Williams surpasses him, creating an evil, yet believable antagonist who takes liberties with his power. A bare-bones story with the meat in its performances, *The Hill* is a graphic tale of rebellion and survival.

7) BEFORE THE DEVIL KNOWS YOU'RE DEAD (2007): Embezzler "Andy Hanson" (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) and his strapped brother "Hank", devise the perfect solution to their financial problems: knock off the jewelry store owned by their parents (Albert Finney and Rosemary Harris). However, the robbery is severely botched, and both are faced with loose ends as the situation worsens. Further complicating matters are Hanks long standing affair with Andy's wife "Gina" (Marisa Tomei), and Andy's heroin addiction.

Before The Devil Knows You're Dead is at heart the chronicle of a dysfunctional family, told in the form of a crime drama. Always adventurous, Lumet delved into both Digital filmmaking and non-linear storytelling with this entry. The story is executed not unlike a Tarantino film, as we see the ordeal played back from multiple perspectives. After a relatively uneven output for the last two decades, the 82 year-old Lumet closed out his career on a high note with this nasty little tale.

The film sports a great combination of veteran and contemporary actors. Phillip Seymour Hoffman makes Andy Hanson an arrogant, manipulative and selfish crook, whose sole motivator is greed. Ethan Hawke's Hank, seems unable to think for himself, and is preyed upon by Andy. Marisa Tomei, Albert Finney and Rosemary Harris also master their characters beautifully. The dark family parable allowed Mr. Lumet to exit with grace!

8) SERPICO (1973): Officer "Frank Serpico" (Al Pacino) is dedicated, completes assignments and is different. He leads a counter-cultural life, sporting long hair, a thick beard, frequenting the music and art scene. He is also an honest cop, who balks at his crooked co-workers. With the support of colleague "Bob Blair" (Tony Roberts) and his girlfriend "Laura" (Barbara Eden-Young) Serpico puts his life on the

line to expose the corruption that flooded the New York City police department throughout the late 60s and early 70s.

Based on the true story of retired police officer Frank Serpico, the movie was adapted from Peter Maas' biographical chronicle of the officer. The film covers twelve turbulent years of Serpico's life. Like *The French Connection* before and *Taxi Driver* after, *Serpico* gives us an unsettling, and gritty take on New York City. Lumet's realism fits the story like a glove.

In the first of his two legendary collaborations with Lumet, Al Pacino is magnificent as the idealistic, determined officer. Serpico quickly becomes another trademark Lumet vigilante. On multiple levels Serpico challenges a largely corrupt police force. He remains staunchly opposed to any form of bribery, while nearly all of his peers relish it. In his crusade, Serpico becomes loathed and threatened by many, but refuses to be deterred. Tony Roberts, John Randolph and Barbara Eda-Young round out a solid main cast. Perhaps it is Lumet's most brutal story.

9) RUNNING ON EMPTY (1988): Having bombed a napalm lab during Vietnam, "Annie" and "Arthur Pope" (Christine Lahti and Judd Hirsch) remain federal targets, frequently moving their family around, assuming new identities. Their eighteen-year old son "Danny" (River Phoenix) is a piano prodigy. His new music teacher "Mr. Phillips" (Ed Crowley) marvels at his skills. As the encouraging Phillips mentors Danny, he begins a romance with the teacher's daughter "Lorna" (Martha Plimpton). With this and college approaching, Danny begins to desire a life independent of his fugitive family.

Released in 1988, *Running On Empty* may be one of Lumet's lesser-known films, but it is amongst his greatest. Naomi Foner's intimate story gives the "coming-of-age" tale a perfect twist. The late River Phoenix was nominated for an Academy Award for his portrayal of the talented, but conflicted Danny, who's on the cusp of young adulthood. He's never had a chance to stay in one place for very long, and naturally feels obligated to help his parents. Phoenix meticulously chronicles Danny's transition from a boy to a young man. He and Martha Plimpton share a wonderful chemistry. Their romance is played as gradual, with the awkwardness most of us experienced in high school.

Judd Hirsch and Christine Lahti also excel in their roles as Danny's parents. Rather than criminals, Arthur and Annie are portrayed as good, loving parents whom made a horrible mistake, years before. Even Though Arthur initially opposes the idea of Danny going on his own, he comes to realize that he may be turning into the very authoritarian he once despised. Christine Lahti's Annie is more encouraging of the two. In an emotional scene, she asks for forgiveness from her estranged father, while asking him to take care of Danny should the family part ways with him. This is a very sweet coming-of-age story about not giving up hope.

However, even a storyteller as versatile as Sidney Lumet has created the occasional misfire. As many of his films hold up, the following do not:

1) THE WIZ (1978): Shy, timid schoolteacher “Dorothy Gale” (Diana Ross) has not moved out of her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry’s Harlem apartment, despite their encouragement. While chasing after her dog Toto in a violent snowstorm, Dorothy is swept away to the mysterious urban land of OZ. There she meets a “Scarecrow” (Michael Jackson), a “Tin Man” (Nipsey Russell), and a “Lion” without courage (Ted Ross). All Dorothy wants is to go back to Harlem. The group journeys down the yellow brick road to seek “The Wizard” (Richard Pryor), who just may have want they want.

Adapted from the highly successful Broadway musical, this urbanized, African American retelling of L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard Of Oz* is something of a standout in Lumet’s resume. A rare foray to a lavish, artsy and stylized story, *The Wiz* proved both a critical and commercial failure, and it’s easy to see why. While the sets are epic in scope, the matte paintings are beautiful, and the many of the numbers are undeniably catchy, the end product does not gel as one might expect. The result simply feels cobbled together. While the then 33-year old Diana Ross shines as a singer, she feels too old to convincingly pull off the role of Dorothy. Most of the performances are wooden, with the possible exceptions of Michael Jackson and Richard Pryor. Ultimately the film is little more than hollow, bubbly entertainment that lacks the timelessness of its source material.

2) GUILTY AS SIN (1993): Fresh off the success of her latest case, Chicago defense attorney “Jennifer Haines” (Rebecca De Mornay) is a rising star. Her latest client is suave womanizer “David Greenhill” (Don Johnson), who stands accused of murdering his wife. Jennifer soon comes to regret taking David on, as he begins to intrude into her personal life, threatening both Jennifer and her boyfriend “Phil” (Stephen Lang). Despite his adamant plea of innocence, Jennifer soon suspects David is guilty and will strike again!

Penned by veteran horror scribe Larry Cohen, *Guilty As Sin* marks yet another foray into the legal genre for Lumet. This one however pales in comparison to his other courtroom outings, lacking the charm, depth or originality. The film is lackluster in both its script and execution. The profanity and gore were the only reminders that I was watching a piece of cinema and not a “Made-For-TV” production. Rebecca De Mornay and Stephen Lang do the best they can with rather one-dimensional characters. Don Johnson’s villain is devoid of any subtleties, making him a forgettable, melodramatic caricature. The film clearly aims for a mixture of drama and thriller, but it emerges diluted, trite, and unoriginal.

My Bottom Line:

While some of Lumet’s work has not held up the bulk of it has, leaving a legacy of rich, timeless stories that will always have an audience.

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A graduate of Columbia College film school, JARROD EMERSON has been working with Films42.com since 2007. With interests ranging from screenwriting to improv, he is grateful to Jan and Rich for their support, and for giving him a reason/excuse to watch even more movies! The bottom line is there can never be too much cinema in Jarrod's life!