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As is well-known, Francois Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard began their film careers as critics writing for the journal *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 1950s. Within the pages of this influential journal, Godard noted Frank Tashlin’s *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* as one of his favourite films of 1957.

Both Godard and Truffaut would go on to sing the praises of the Jerry Lewis vehicle, *Who's Minding the Store?* (1963) and other Tashlin/Lewis collaborations, therefore they are at least partly to blame for the inordinate respect afforded the films of Jerry Lewis by French cineastes.

No matter what you think of the Lewis *oeuvre*, there is certainly one thing that distinguished many of them: the comic sensibility of director Frank Tashlin. Long before he would work with Martin and Lewis or the solo Lewis vehicles, Tashlin was associated with a number of comedy gems, including two incomparable Bob Hope classics, *The Paleface* (1948) and *Son of the Paleface* (1952). He had begun as a writer and director of cartoons, directing a number of wartime Daffy, Porky and Bugs shorts and eventually broke into features with *The Lemon Drop Kid* (1951) starring Bob Hope.

It is the legacy of writing and directing cartoons that Godard and Truffaut recognised in Tashlin’s later work, and it is easy to see this is the case when watching *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* I’m not trying to sound high-falutin’ when I say this – in fact I would insist that it is Tashlin’s cartoon sensibility that lifts the film stylistically above other satires of the period such as Billy Wilder’s *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), for example.

The vibrant, super-staturated colours and the brilliant Cinemascope cinematography of *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* are only the two most obvious aspects of this cartoon inheritance, for there is in addition a comic dexterity in the handling of character, dialogue, and pace that would make Bugs and Daffy smile in appreciation.

Here’s the story: Rockwell P. Hunter (the great Tony Randall) is an advertising executive for the La Salle Jr., Raskin, Pooley & Crocket Advertising Agency. He is not at the top of the pile mind you, just a middle executive type, and the firm is about to go down the gurgler if someone in the firm cannot resurrect the Stay-Put Lipstick account. Hunter’s niece lives with him and is obsessed with the buxom peroxide movie star Rita Marlowe (Jayne Mansfield, naturally). In an inspired
moment Hunter comes upon the idea that if only he can get Rita Marlowe as the new face of Stay-Put Lipstick, then not only will he save the agency, but he will be able to marry his fiancée, advance his career and live happily ever after.

Rita makes a deal with him: if Rocky pretends to be her new paramour, thus making her boyfriend Bobo Brannigansky (Mickey Hargitay, Mansfield’s real-life husband) jealous, she will sign up for the Stay-Put Lipstick campaign… and thus the elements of a classic farce are put in place.

Yet it is not as a farce that Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter? plays out. Rather it is a cleverly handled satire upon late 1950s America: rampant consumerism, the glowering ever-present eye of the television set and its attendant tele-mediated world, the cult of celebrity, and the hollow sound of climbing the rungs of ambition. In other words, beware the Hollywood chorus singing, “You’ve got it made!” as a brilliant, hallucinatory sequence towards the end of the film announces.

In terms of Extras, the DVD is rather thin: an original trailer for the film and advertisements for further DVDs in the Director’s Suite series is all you will find. The DVD does however come with a wonderful critical essay on the film by Jonathan Rosenbaum, who goes into considerable depth in comparing the work of Tashlin with that of playwright and screenwriter George Axelrod whose play Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter? Tashlin’s film is based upon. If you had any doubts that this film was in fact some sort of postmodern classic before anyone had even thought of the term, then Rosenbaum’s essay should easily convince you that that’s indeed the case.

Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?
Directed by Frank Tashlin
Stars Tony Randall and Jayne Mansfield
USA, 1957, 91 mins
Rated G
Available to rent or buy through Madman Entertainment

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