

Bugsy

by Emily Soares | December 08, 2008



Richard Levinson's rich-looking **Bugsy** (1991) tells the story of Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel: mobster, killer, father of Las Vegas and lover of Virginia Hill. A man of humble and criminal beginnings, Siegel also had a pathological desire for respect and wealth. This version of the story is lavishly told, the glamour of Siegel's milieu far upstaging the violence of his real life, while the romance of the picture resonates most strongly for what it created off-screen: the famous pairing of Beatty and Bening.

In many minds, Bugsy redeemed Beatty's career, rescuing it from the disaster of *Dick Tracy* (1990). **Bugsy's** noir is far richer and more complex, a nice complement to what James Toback, who wrote the script for Beatty, saw as the actor's own duality: "Warren combines an elegant and well-cultivated charm with a tensely impacted psychosis. The role gave him a historical person through whom he could express his wild extremes," he said in Suzanne Finstad's biography *Warren Beatty*.

"I honestly believed until the last minute that he wouldn't do the movie. The script is so far out, so excessive...he went all the way with it," said Toback. The film's camera operator, Joseph Cosko, Jr. recalls that Beatty was "really involved with it. Who knows, maybe he related to Bugsy Siegel? He was the character."

As in other films that he's produced, Beatty inserted some of his own idiosyncrasies into his role, having Siegel use a tanning reflector and put cucumber slices over his eyes. He also took liberties with certain events in the film, such as the scene where Siegel offers to buy the not-for-sale Beverly Hills mansion of opera singer Lawrence Tibbett. The fictitious event is based on a story that the granddaughter of opera star Lauritz Melchior told about Clark Gable trying to by her grandfather's home on Mulholland. Beatty inserts Melchior's name into the dialogue as a homage to the original source of the scene.

For Beatty, what made **Bugsy** work was Siegel's love for Virginia Hill: "Romance runs through most of my movies,' Beatty reflected at the time, 'even going back to *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), which I sort of co-wrote, and *Heaven Can Wait* (1978) and *Reds* (1981). Because I believe that love can conquer all,'" he said in Finstad's biography.

By all accounts, Hill's and Siegel's relationship was a tumultuous one. A paramour of many organized crime figures, Hill was no shrinking violet and gave Siegel as good as she got. Whether she was working for Siegel or against him is left open to interpretation at the film's end, as in real life. In either case, their pairing was explosive, and the task for **Bugsy** producers was to find an actress who could create that chemistry with Beatty.

In 1990, when Toback and Levinson were assembling possible choices to play Hill's character, Michelle Pfeiffer was at the top of the list. But Bening's star was on the rise that year, fresh from her successes in a small but memorable role in Milos Forman's *Valmont* (1989). Beatty would later recall seeing her on the screen in that film and thinking, "That is an amazing woman."

A role in *Postcards from the Edge* (1990) and her breakthrough performance in *The Grifters* (1990) sealed the deal. The latter film previewed in Los Angeles just as Beatty was closing in on the final pick for Virginia Hill, and Bening's "it" girl status made her a natural choice for the part, as well as the fact that he had fallen in love with her by their first meeting. According to the biography *Warren Beatty* by Finstad, the actor declared himself to Bening on the day that they shot their characters' first encounter (at the time, she was linked romantically to Ed Begley, Jr.). Beatty told her, "As much as I'd like to have some sort of relationship with you, I'm not going to bother you with that while we're making the movie."

It didn't exactly turn out that way, but by all accounts the on-set romance between the two stars was incredibly discreet, so much so that director Levinson had no idea, stating "Everybody thinks that's impossible, but it's true. And we were together all the time, the three of us, on the set. But they were never hanging around, kind of whispering in one another's ear, kissing in the corners and stuff, holding hands. They didn't do any of that stuff."

The relationship turned out to be a keeper and the two went on to marry and have four children together. The fate of **Bugsy**, however, was not as long-lived. Although box-office receipts and acclaim for the film were modest, it did manage to score two of its ten Oscar® nominations: Best Art Direction and Best Costume Design. Beatty, Harvey Keitel and Ben Kingsley all received nominations for their roles, as did Barry Levinson, James Toback and Ennio Morricone for his distinctive score. The film was also nominated for Best Picture and Best Cinematography.

Producers: Warren Beatty, Mark Johnson, Barry Levinson
 Director: Barry Levinson
 Screenplay: James Toback; Dean Jennings (book "We Only Kill Each Other: The Life and Bad Times of Bugsy Siegel") (research source)
 Cinematography: Allen Daviau
 Art Direction: Leslie McDonald
 Music: Ennio Morricone
 Film Editing: Stu Linder
 Cast: Warren Beatty (Ben 'Bugsy' Siegel), Annette Bening (Virginia Hill), Harvey Keitel (Mickey Cohen), Ben Kingsley (Meyer Lansky), Elliott Gould (Harry Greenberg), Joe Mantegna (George Raft), Richard Sarafian (Jack Dragna), Bebe Neuwirth (Countess di Frasso), Gian-Carlo Scandiuzzi (Count di Frasso), Wendy Phillips (Esta Siegel), Stefanie Mason (Millicent Siegel), Kimberly McCullough (Barbara Siegel), Andy Romano (Del Webb), Robert Beltran (Alejandro C-134m. Letterboxed.

by Emily Soares

SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTERS

Our monthly newsletter delivered on the 1st of each month that features your printable programming calendar, articles and exciting TCM news and updates.

SIGN UP NOW

CONNECT WITH TCM

