Lessons From 'Working Girl,' 25 Years Later

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The classic movie *Working Girl* turns twenty-five this year. It was one of those rah-rah 1980s movies, like *Nine to Five*, that showed the world that a woman could be just as successful and smart as any man in business. Today that seems like a given, but in 1988 it seems like it was still pretty revolutionary.

Melanie Griffith plays Tess, a working-class Staten Island woman with ambitions to trade in the title of “Secretary” for something more. Sigourney Weaver is Katharine, the two-faced boss who steals Tess’ idea and inspires her to finally go after what she really wants. Joan Cusack is her BFF (and the comic relief) and she’s rocking some industrial-sized 80s hair. Perms and shoulder pads were big in the 1980s, but did people really wear hair and makeup that was so... frightening? It must have taken them two hours to get ready for work.

Since it’s twenty-five years old, there are some things in *Working Girl* that are outdated, obviously. When Tess gets her big break, she suddenly has to start dressing like the femme version of a dude in a baggy blazer and thin necktie. Let’s be glad those days are over. Still, even after all these years there are some great lines in the movie that ring true today. It’s worth checking out – let’s just leave those electric-shock
hairdos where they belong, in 1988.

“Dress shabbily and they notice the dress. Dress impeccably and they notice the woman.” – Sigourney Weaver tells this to Tess on her first day at work. She’s quoting Coco Chanel, and it’s good advice even though the character is passive aggressively telling Tess to lose the giant Staten Island earrings and bangles. Still, it’s true – would you hire someone who strolled in wearing a muumuu and clogs? Doubtful.

“I read a lot of things. You never know where the big ideas could come from.” – Maybe Tess didn’t go to Harvard but she’s got some tricks up her sleeve. She gets genius ideas for business deals from The New York Post’s Page 6 – whatever works. She’s right, too. Sometimes the best ideas come from strange places. Maybe you won’t cure cancer because of a lightning bolt of inspiration you gleaned from US Weekly – but you never know.

“Never burn bridges. Today’s junior prick is tomorrow’s senior partner.” – Amen! Katharine the backstabbing boss says this and even though she’s a jerk, she’s right on. It’s so tempting to lash out if someone screws you over, but unless it’s something so grievous you have to call the authorities, it’s probably best to keep all bridges intact. You just never know.

“You wanna be taken seriously, you need serious hair.” – OK, let’s forget that most of the hair in Working Girl looks like wigs borrowed from the Phil Spector movie. If you love your Snooki pouf or your pink beehive and you’re about to go interview for a job at your dream law firm, you might want to dismantle your signature ‘do and go for something a little more serious. If your dream job is to be Lady Gaga’s stylist, keep the pouf. Just make sure the hair fits the gig.

“I have a head for business and a bod for sin.” – This is maybe better as a movie line than as a real-life mantra that you go around repeating to everyone you work with. Still, it’s a classic and it’s pretty cute – for the movies.

“I am not a steak, you can’t just order me!” – Tess yells this at her cheating boyfriend Mick (Alec Baldwin with longish black hair – sexy). It’s kind of silly but it might be a good response to throw back at someone just for fun. Maybe not the CEO, but it’s fair game for significant others, friends, family, and for building up your confidence by yelling it over and over at your reflection in the bathroom mirror.

“I’m not going to spend the rest of my life working my ass off and getting nowhere just because I followed rules that I had nothing to do with setting up.” – This is why you love Tess. She’s feisty, and she’s never content to sit back and let life pass her by. No matter how many obstacles are in her path, or how many people doubt her, she keeps going until she gets what she wants.
She doesn’t take the safe route either – she takes chances and risks losing everything for the chance to “make it.” Let’s forget the 80s hairdos and the fact that she spends a decent part of the movie in a bra and garter belt (she looks great but who the hell wears a garter belt every day besides Dita Von Teese?) and let’s appreciate her chutzpah. It’s OK to break the rules sometimes – you never know what can happen on the other side.

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