



HITCHCOCK, IN SINISTER BLACK & WHITE

Alfred Hitchcock just won't go away. How is it that years after his death, he remains so recognizable, and his work so very much alive?

Having established himself as the foremost director of motion picture suspense by the 1950's, and already famous for appearing briefly in all his films, Hitchcock seized the new medium of television by the throat and created his own mystery series, which he hosted each week. Thus a man known for his brilliance behind the camera became a star in front of it- indeed, a brand-in his own right. Once you glimpsed his portly, moon-like countenance coming into the camera's view, you knew just where you were and what you were in for...and you were glued.

Over his lifetime, Hitchcock was variously criticized for doing only one genre well, for being too overtly commercial, and for not being a particularly good director of actors. True or not, it's beside the point. What counts for a creative artist is the extent to which his work lives on with audiences, and on this basis few if any directors can lay claim to a more enduring film legacy.

His particular gift was an unparalleled ability to apply the art of storytelling and the power of the motion picture camera to create uncertainty, tension, and fear. Hitchcock admittedly was a highly nervous, suggestible character himself, which shouldn't surprise us. After all, at sleep-away camp, wasn't it the kid who was most afraid of shapes in the dark who told the best ghost stories?

Hitchcock knew that for adults in the real world, ghosts don't go away, they simply take different forms. His canvas became those things that continue to keep us up at night: the chance and fragile nature of life, and the fear of death, our own darkest impulses, and of course, those of others.

Never straying far from this primal source, Hitchcock's genius was to take coincidences that might seem far-fetched on their own and build highly involving and credible yarns around them. Save the occasional, inevitable misfire, this magic formula worked time and again.

Any solid DVD library should include numerous Hitchcock titles. My own features over twenty. As I compiled my choices for this two-part series, it struck me that they divided themselves up fairly neatly into black & white and color recommendations. So, what follows is the best of Hitchcock on the silver screen.

Much of the master's early British-made films from the twenties and thirties are available on DVD, but beware—most of these are of substandard reproduction quality. Happily, his two best British films have also been released by the Criterion Collection. Though relatively pricey, both the picture quality and the many extras make these a worthwhile investment.

The first is "**The 39 Steps**" (1935), starring Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll. The story of an innocent man unwittingly drawn into a spy ring, "Steps" is not only gripping but enormously clever, with wonderful chemistry and repartee between the two stars. "Steps" was re-made twice, but the original towers above the rest.

Three years later came "**The Lady Vanishes**", featuring Michael Redgrave and Margaret Lockwood. Here a young woman claims that a fellow passenger has vanished from a train, but no one else claims to have seen her. Again, the priceless banter between the heroine (Lockwood) and her unlikely ally (Redgrave) elevates what is already a nifty little mystery into something infinitely more special: a thrilling love story, or a romantic thriller- take your pick.

The cash and climate of Hollywood soon beckoned to Hitchcock, and his first American film, released two years later, was a smash: "**Rebecca**". Much more in a psychological vein than his earlier pictures, this tale of a timid second wife haunted by the ghost of the first is a superb showcase for the dashing Laurence Olivier but also for character actress Judith Anderson, who positively exudes evil as the cold, beady-eyed housekeeper Mrs. Danvers.

Joan Fontaine, younger sister of Olivia de Havilland, became a star on the strength of that movie, and Hitchcock was quick to use her again, in "**Suspicion**" (1941), opposite Cary Grant (his first of four films done with the director). Fontaine, still the shy and bashful beauty, adores her handsome husband, but over time begins to suspect nefarious intentions. Is it all in her mind? You never find out till the end, but getting there's the fun of it. (Nigel Bruce, famous as Doctor Watson in the original Sherlock Holmes series, lends priceless comic relief as Cary's befuddled pal.)

Unaccountably, **"Foreign Correspondent" (1940)**, one of my personal favorites, is less well known than most of these other titles. At the heart of the story is another international spy ring operating on the eve of the Second World War, compromised by reporter Joel McCrea and including one or two unexpected members. The movie is full of colorful, fascinating characters, including Herbert Marshall as the leader of a pacifist party, George Sanders as an arrogant fellow reporter, and Hitchcock regular Edmund Gwenn as a killer in sheep's clothing. It also features some unforgettable set-pieces –in particular, watch for the famous windmill scene. This DVD is way overdue, as "Correspondent" is Hitchcock of the first order.

A recurring Hitchcock theme- evil lurking in the presence of innocent everyday life- is explored in **"Shadow Of A Doubt" (1943)**, about a doting uncle with a hidden side. Highlighted by a chilling performance from Joseph Cotten and Hume Cronyn's portrayal of a milquetoast neighbor, this film gives new meaning to the adage: "you can't pick your family". The climax aboard a moving train with "Uncle Charlie" (Cotten) and his suspicious niece (Teresa Wright) is unforgettable.

Hitch's second movie with Cary Grant, **"Notorious" (1946)** may just be his very best. The ingenious premise: American intelligence coerces the daughter of a Nazi spy to use her feminine wiles to implicate more of her father's colleagues. Romance between Agent Devlin (Grant) and the girl (Ingrid Bergman) complicate matters. Including a smooth, expert turn by Claude Rains as the mother-dominated villain, "Notorious" is on my own top ten list of all movies.

Robert Walker, a gifted actor of the 1940's, died tragically young, and his performance in Hitchcock's **"Strangers On A Train" (1949)**, is undoubtedly his best remembered. He plays a wealthy psychopath named Bruno who draws out a chance acquaintance with a tennis pro (Farley Granger) into a bizarre double murder scheme. This tale of deranged obsession also includes subtle homo-erotic undertones, daring for the time and adding to the overall creepiness of the proceedings. Still, it's the film's nerve-jangling climax, set at a carnival, that will sear itself in your memory.

Hitchcock's last and most famous black and white film was made a full ten years later: **"Psycho" (1960)**. Hitchcock had only decided not to shoot in color because he feared the censors would cut the famous shower scene if they saw red blood! While not minimizing the movie's effectiveness, by the standard's of today's gore-fests, it is a relatively

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restrained murder story—but extremely disturbing nonetheless. It achieves its chills more by what is withheld than by what is shown. More than any other Hitchcock movie, it exerts its grip by heightening our awareness and dread of what might be coming at us in the next scene, at the top of the stairs, or just beyond that shower curtain. Of its type, “Psycho” stands above and beyond most anything else on celluloid, a product born of painstaking care and nuanced brilliance.

(Next week: “Hitchcock, In Dying Color”.)