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# Molly Haskell on *Stage Fright*

*Molly Haskell has contributed regularly to the theater and film columns of The Village Voice and has also written for Show and Cahiers du Cinema in English.*

Of all Hitchcock's major films (and I believe it is a major film, though in a minor key) *STAGE FRIGHT* is the only one to give sheer delight, unclouded by deeper disturbance or fear. As Truffaut points out, in his cursory and, I think, unjustified dismissal of the film, no character is ever in any real danger. This is registered as a defect but is actually what makes it so purely and perfectly what it is: a film about acting and the theater which never descends into commonplace, straightforward reality at all. The definition of acting, ranging from the life-and-death lie (Richard Todd's) to the decorously unspoken (the implicit love scene between Jane Wyman and Michael Wilding in the cab), extends before and beyond the stage, but the proscenium arch stretches like a rainbow around the film and defines its limits. The picture begins with a fiction (Todd's flashback), reaches a climax in the great theater benefit-garden party scene "directed" by Alastair Sim and has its denouement in the theater, where the psychopathic murderer is symbolically cut in two (half in, half out of reality) by the curtain. Theatricality is not concealed but flaunted. The initial lie of the theater—This Is Reality—is never uttered; disbelief is not suspended but short-circuited by an ecstatic, multiple adventure into different levels and values of duplicity.

*STAGE FRIGHT* is not only a film about acting, but offers a gallery (and they are presented in succession, almost like vignettes) of some of the most luminous and original performances in the Hitchcock oeuvre. On this point, which pertains not only to acting but to a certain kind of humor, Truffaut shows a real blind spot, particularly, I think, in his derogation of the character and performance of Alastair Sim—the richly self-aware and humorous father of Jane Wyman. In small parts, there is Kay Walsh as Marlene Dietrich's unexpectedly seedy and sinister maid; Miles Malleon as a lecherous barfly; and Joyce Grenfell, as the mistress of a shooting booth, falling into an exquisitely straight-faced comic routine with Alastair Sim. Dame Sybil Thorndike, as Jane Wyman's straight-laced and literal-minded mother, makes a poignantly funny counterpoint to her husband. Marlene Dietrich gives one of the great

performances of her career. And Jane Wyman, if not spectacularly sympathetic, is as she should be—the loyal, slightly mousy ingenue to whom Hitchcock is ever ambivalent. (The French blindness to nuance can also work to their advantage when imperfections in performance do not prevent them from appreciating directorial style. An example is the aforementioned scene in the taxi, in which Chabrol and Rohmer perceive, despite certain character deficiencies, the virtuoso use of crosscutting to establish rapport rather than opposition.)

Chabrol and Rohmer are more generous to *STAGE FRIGHT* than Truffaut. Although they consider it a step backward, a commercial calculation after the failure of *UNDER CAPRICORN*, they allow it to stand without apology between the latter and *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN*, and even talk about it in the same breath as *I CONFESS*.

The central Hitchcockian themes of this period are here—the theme of innocence (embodied by Jane Wyman and the little boy at the garden party); its vulnerability and, finally, transcendental power; the temptation of evil. But there is a kind of playfulness in their arrangement, and an affectionate mockery of the artifice and intensity of melodrama.

The film opens with the one enormous deceit which is its foundation: the famous "lying" flashback in



*STAGE FRIGHT*. Marlene Dietrich, left, and Jane Wyman.



*STAGE FRIGHT*. Marlene Dietrich and Michael Wilding. [photos: Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive]



which Richard Todd recounts to Jane Wyman—and we see—the arrival of Marlene Dietrich at his flat in her bloodstained dress, asking Todd to go to her place, where her husband lies dead, and bring her a fresh dress so she may go on to the theater, etc. The fiction—that Dietrich murdered her husband and that, in going to her place to get the dress Todd was seen and is suspected of murder—is the scenario, the play upon which every character subsequently acts. And in building his or her role upon the blueprint of the Given, each arrives, as actors do, at some kind of truth—a relative and artistic truth rather than an exhaustive, literal explanation. Todd is revealed finally as the murderer and Dietrich is—technically and partially—exonerated, but we never see precisely how it happened, i.e., the *true* flashback. We are left only—and more importantly—with the distinct, occasionally overlapping truths of a group of disparate human beings. They never coalesce because they exist on different planes of reality. Like Alastair Sim and his wife, they live apart and radiate separate orbits according to the ratio of role-playing in their make-up, and the different removes they occupy from the stage.

Marlene Dietrich, always on stage, is the consummate actress. At the center of an amorous triangle, she is the Nordic counterpart to Anna Magnani (and in many ways *STAGE FRIGHT* is Hitchcock's *FRENCH CAN CAN* and *LE CARROSSE D'OR*, a woman too magnificent to be contained in a world made to human scale. Her evil is not malicious but an accident of birth, an excess femininity with which only the grandiosity of the theater is commensurate. In a uniquely muted manner, Hitchcock captures the cool casualness with which she assumes her outrageous prerogatives. At the same time, she is aware of a limit on the roles she can play. Living in the rarefied atmosphere of self-absorption, she cannot breathe the vulgar, vital air of human exchanges, as when she begs Jane Wyman (impersonating her maid), not to burden her with confidences. She knows the extent to which she cannot respond to another human being.

By contrast Jane Wyman, who wants desperately and is studying to be an actress, is totally unequipped for this vocation. She is sincere, humorless (taking after her mother rather than her father) and altogether life-size. Moreover her career doesn't look particularly promising. When Richard Todd comes to find her at the Royal Academy, she is on stage rehearsing what is obviously (and comically) a period drama. At Todd's signal, she fumbles her lines; the rehearsal is terminated, with some relief on the part of the director; Wyman lets her hoop skirt drop to the floor; and dashes off to join Todd. So much for her stage presence and professionalism. She is now freed from the artifice of the theater to take up the great real-life role, in which her heart, not her talent, will sustain her. She is able to succeed as Dietrich's maid (and before that, as a journalist, in persuading Kay Walsh to give her the role) because she is performing out of love (for Todd), belief in his innocence and a wholehearted desire to save him. With any less conviction she would no doubt fail miserably. Her efforts at disguise are already something of a joke, and Hitchcock makes one of his more purposeful cameo appearances as he regards, with befuddled amusement, her attempt to learn lines. But it is only the innocence born of ignorance and faith (as wit-

nessed again in the little boy with the doll) that is somehow equal to, and can disarm evil.

There is a marvelous, offhand beauty in the scene between Sim and Wyman, when she brings Richard Todd to his hideaway shack. His humor is modified, always, by the affection he feels for his daughter, on whom his irony and insight are wasted (an effect which would be similarly wasted on a non English-speaking audience).

Sim, who comes to occupy a behind-the-scene directorial position, can indicate by the angle of his head the weight of feeling and intelligence that are held in check by constant, self-appraising wit. His art—the art of the director—is cerebral and indirect. By anticipating the moves of his daughter, he is brought eventually, ineluctably, to his natural enemy—enchanter, the actress. Their “meeting” occurs in a tent at the garden party, where Dietrich is performing—a brilliant sequence of events which, as Chabrol and Rohmer point out, is described entirely, in all its intricate logic, in visual terms. Sim gets what he wants from Dietrich—an expression of guilt—not just through the doll with blood on its dress, but through the *little boy* with the doll with blood, etc. He meets her challenge through his art and, by calculation and by proxy, gains control.

And in the last scene when Jane Wyman is led by Michael Wilding through the rings of footlights off the stage, it is away from drama into life, to her vocation as wife. For one brief instant the glamor is both hers and the theater's. But the effect she completes (does not create) is the grand directorial design. ■

## STAGE FRIGHT

1950, Warner Brothers, 110 minutes.

Director, Producer, Alfred Hitchcock; Screenplay, Whitfield Cook; Adaptation, Alma Reville; Additional dialogue, James Bridie; from the novel, *Outrun the Constable*, by Selwyn Jepson; Photography, Wilkie Cooper; Art Direction, Terence Verity; Editor, Emard Jarins; Music, Leighton Lucas; Make-up, Colin Guarde.

## CAST

Jane Wyman	<i>Eve Gill</i>
Marlene Dietrich	<i>Charlotte Inwood</i>
Michael Wilding	<i>Smith</i>
Alistair Sim	<i>Commodore Gill</i>
Richard Todd	<i>Jonathan Cooper</i>
Kay Walsh	<i>Nellie</i>
Sybil Thordyke	<i>Mrs. Gill</i>
Miles Malleon	<i>Bibulous Gent</i>
Hector MacGregor	<i>Freddie</i>
Joyce Grenfell	<i>Shooting Gallery</i>
	<i>Attendant</i>
Andre Morell	<i>Inspector Byard</i>
Patricia Hitchcock	<i>Chubby</i>