

Document Citation

Title A hitch in time

Author(s) Kelly Vance

Source East Bay Express

Date 1983 Oct 28

Type article

Language English

Pagination 16

No. of Pages 1

Subjects

Film Subjects Rear window, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1954

A Hitch in Time

REAR WINDOW. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Scenario by John Michael Hayes from a novelette by Cornell Woolrich. With James Stewart, Grace Kelly, Thelma Ritter, Wendell Corey, and Raymond Burr. At the Grand Lake.

By Kelly Vance

Rear Window has burst upon this tepid, almost complacent year of movie-going like a tornado on a duck pond. Held out of circulation for several years by Alfred Hitchcock, and later by his estate, its rerelease (along with plans to screen Rope, Vertigo, The Trouble With Harry, and the 1956 version of The Man Who Knew Too Much) gives audiences and critics a chance to sharpen their perceptions of one of

MOVIES

the world's immortal directors, even as Hitchcock sharpens our wits with his graceful, precise rendering of what started out as Cornell Woolrich's short detective story, "It Had to Be Murder." Now that Rear Window has been in the movie houses for a couple of weeks, it might be appropriate to examine one or two elements of its style. It's certainly the best picture of 1983. And it was made 29 years ago. What does that say about Hitchcock's art, or about the contemporary state of film art? The answer, as always, is in the frames themselves, with a slight assist from film history.

In 1954, the year of its release (and the year of Dien Bien Phu), Rear Window wasn't nominated for Best Picture in the Academy Awards. George Seaton's The Country Girl, Edward Dmytryk's The Caine Mutiny, Stanley Donen's Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, and Jean Negulesco's Three Coins in the Fountain were, along with Elia Kazan's On the Waterfront, which took Best Picture and Best Director honors for Kazan. Hitchcock was Window's complicated, rich visual



award-giving bodies which were apparently less than overcome by Rear Window. Kazan's pasty-faced blend of neo-realism and method acting was the hot ticket of 1954, it seems, plus the usual run of light musicals, melodramatic potboilers, and romances. Things haven't changed all that much since then. If you substitute Phil Kaufman for Kazan and squirt in '30's-throwbacks Lucas and Spielberg, you've got a pretty good formula for 1983, as well. But, typically, Hitch made money, finishing with \$5,300,000 in rentals, which was good enough for fifth place in the box office race that year. Part of this audience success, and much of Rear Window's energy, came from casting an actor who was rated fourth biggest box office draw in 1954 (behind John Wayne, Martin and Lewis, and Gary Cooper): James Stewart.

James Stewart is the least likely nominated in the director's and most "American" of Hitchcategory, and John Michael Hayes cock's classic leading males. From was also in contention, for Rear Robert Donat and Michael Red-Window's screenplay. Grace Kelly grave in the '30s through the uncerpicked up Best Actress for The tain '40s with Joel McCrea and Country Girl. Cinematographer Gregory Peck, and on into the bril-Robert Burks was nominated for liant collaborations with Cary his memorable handling of Rear Grant, Hitchcock's heroes almost always affected the sort of midscheme. The New York Film Crit- Atlantic demeanor most of the ics, the Cannes Festival, and the scripts called for. They were for-Golden Globe were also among the eign correspondents, or Canadians

on leave in Britain, or retired resistance fighters. But James Stewart After years in screwballs, oaters, was a cowboy. In fact, it was only two years after his appearance in Rope that Stewart made Winchester 73 for Anthony Mann, the first of a remarkable series of westerns, most with Mann at first but continuing with John Ford, which put Stewart with John Wayne at the very center of the screen western hierarchy. And yet, from 1948 to 1958, Stewart was one of the most sophisticated and worldly male leads in the Hitchcock book.

As "Jeff" Jeffries, world-roving photographer-on-the-mend. Stetype, and he's resolutely American. As he sits in the summer heat conpeering into apartment windows, but not Mr. Smith, not Destry, not this down-to-earth, honest, grassroots American guy. What a devilmakes the most of Hayes' ingratia-

wrinkle in the Stewart film persona. Capra-corn, and Lubitsch nostalgia, Stewart found himself in a highly subjective wheelchair, ensnared in a guilty discovery, and trading repartee with Grace Kelly, the ultimate Hitchcock woman.

And Grace Kelly was just that. In just three pictures with Hitchcock her archetypally "cool blonde" personality so established itself (in Dial M for Murder, Rear Window, and To Catch a Thief) as part of the Hitchcock mystique that the director used two substitute actresses in three different movies after Kelly wart is the perfect blend of the retired to Monaco, before he gave man-of-action and the reflective up on the cool blonde idea in the late '60s. In Rear Window, Grace Kelly is nothing less than the shimstructing voyeuristic fantasies from mering image of the Harpers Bazaar the glimpses he gets through his '50s, going beyond today's new neighors' windows, we're ready to wave fashion stereotype as effortbelieve that he's a professional, Life lessly as she must have done with magazine-weight peeping tom. We the first edition of that particular could picture Macdonald Carey, the image in 1954. As Lisa Fremont, snoopy detective from Shadow of a she not only functions as the hero's Doubt, deriving twisted thrills from legs and as the skeptical half of the voyeur/sleuth team, but she sums up the often conflicting libidinous musings of the camera (and thus of Jeff's own consciousness, because ish stroke of casting. Hitchcock we see what he sees until the very end of the film) into one decidedly tingly witty dialogue and the offbeat erotic package. When she first apsituation to uncover a brand new proaches Jeff, our introduction to

her is through one of Hitchcock's patented zoom-in-track-out shots of her face bearing down from the background with a quick cut to a closeup two-shot for the surprise kiss, all without a word of dialogue. In a film full of dazzling technique, this sequence is still the most compelling. There is love, and two real lives, behind the "pretend lives" Jeff watches through the window as if it were a giant TV screen.

Robert Burks' photography is so essential to Rear Window, and so rightly Hitchcockian in its fluidity, that the stagy, rather eerie apartment set doesn't get discussed much. It's a slice of Greenwich Village cliche-in-microcosm from the director who's never been afraid of using models, no matter how artificial they look. That fake soundstage sunset at first seems as glaring as the toy train in Number Seventeen or the stunt windmills in Foreign Correspondent, but as the picture rolls on the apartment set takes on a life of its own and the disbelief softens. The famous opening pan across the sets of windows establishes a visual tone which never deviates. As long as Jeff is stuck in his wheelchair, we'll have to accept what he sees as the real world. When Lars Thorwald the killer finally breaks the proscenium arch, all bets are off. The moviegoers' pure terror which Jeff apes as he helplessly watches Lisa's predicament at Thorwald's gets shifted in the confrontation scene completely onto the viewer. Jeff goes from voyeur to participant in a hurry, and the passive-tableau window motif seems to vanish in an instant, replaced by the realistic image of a dangerously high window, the kind one falls out of.

Most of the assertions above assume that the reader has seen Rear Window and is at least curious about the films of Alfred Hitchcock. To aid in further research, let me recommend three books, the last two of which are in print: Hitchcock's Films by Robin Wood (Zwemmer/Barnes), Hitchcock: The First Forty-Four Films by Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol (Ungar), and the indispensable *Hitchcock*, interviews with the director by Francois Truffaut (Simon and Schuster). Francophobes and those who shun art films shouldn't be put off the the predominance of old Cahiers du Cinema names as the authors of these studies. Instead, just remember those original-release box office figures—five million dollars worth of Americans (at 1954 prices, yet) can't be wrong.