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HITCHCOCK

Its success was nevertheless enormous, and O'Casey, enchanted, proposed a script on Hyde Park to the film-maker. Hitchcock rejected the temptation. He was in the midst of discussions with Clemence Dane and Helen Simpson—whose novel *Under Capri-corn* he was later to film—about an eventual adaptation of their play *Enter Sir John*. O'Casey's script became a play, *Within the Gates*. Two months later, Hitch began work on a film adapted from *Enter Sir John*, which he entitled *Murder!* (1930).

Hitchcock's inventiveness, subtlety, and profundity in *Murder!* was as great as his boredom had been in *Juno*. The film has not only withstood the test of time, but it is one of his most successful—or, at any rate, one of the three best films of his English period along with *Rich and Strange* and *The Thirty-Nine Steps*. In fact, *Murder!* has several unexpected characters as well as a maturity, a seriousness, and a freedom of expression that are only rarely to be found in his films shot on British soil. More importantly, this film throws light on Hitchcock's future handling of thrillers. From this point of view, *Murder!* is an almost unique godsend. The plot belongs to the popular detective genre in which a murder is followed by an investigation and a final disclosure of the guilty party; there are no "compromises" because they are unnecessary; lastly, and most significant, its style is very varied,

the tone passing skillfully from one register to another exactly as if Hitchcock, finally feeling himself in full possession of his powers, wanted to "put on film" the ensemble of his formal obsessions. A plot summary follows:

Diana, a young actress, is discovered unconscious alongside the body of one of her friends. She is accused of murder, tried, and eventually found guilty, in spite of the efforts of one juror, Sir John, a famous actor-manager who is persuaded of the innocence of the woman with whom he has fallen in love. He tries—in

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vain—to get from her some details of the murder, and indeed she seems to have a secret she is unwilling to reveal. Retracing the police investigation on his own, he ends by discovering the strange truth: the assassin is the accused woman's fiancé, who works in a circus, where he does a trapeze act disguised as a woman. Having overheard a conversation between Diana and the victim, he has killed the latter because she revealed to Diana that he was a half-breed.

Obviously, this is an absolutely classic detective plot, but it is heightened by a very important and characteristic detail: there is no doubt that the assassin's true secret is not that he is a half-breed in the ordinary sense but a sexual half-breed, a homosexual. Hitchcock makes no attempt to hide his intentions: he shows us many of the character's feminine tics (he pats his hair, studies himself in mirrors, pirouettes, becomes hysterical) and even shows him to us dressed as a woman! Once this is understood, the film is seen in an unexpected light: it is the first panel of a triptych that includes *Rope* and *Strangers on a Train*, a triptych that illustrates the problem of homosexuality from three points of view: moral in *Murder!*, realistic in *Rope*, and psychoanalytic in *Strangers on a Train*.

In *Murder!* the homosexual kills when he is unmasked. Unlike the protagonists of *Rope*, or Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker) in *Strangers on a Train*, he considers himself abnormal and is aware that his vice is a defect. But he is also incapable of loving, and he is interested only in escaping the consequences of his crime. When Hitchcock gets around to probing the problem of homosexuality in the two other films, we will become aware that his condemnation

of homosexuality is justly based on the impossibility of true homosexual love: since this love is only an imitation, it is condemned to nonreciprocity. Diana loves the homosexual, since she allows herself to be convicted in his stead, but the homosexual doesn't love her, since he permits her to do so.

But the important qualities of *Murder!* derive from the purity of its direction. We have already noted its freedom of tone and style. The film opens with a long lateral track, punctuated by cries and the sound of footsteps, in which a black cat crosses the screen—an agonizing dolly that suggests the imminence of murder. Next come, unexpectedly, a series of squalid or burlesque observations: a big woman has trouble with her nightgown, a man can't pull up his window. Though the setting is London, there is nothing British about it. It recalls German expressionism and suggests Berlin. Later, this impression is furthered by the contrast between the minute realism of details and the stylization of whole scenes. The deliberation of the jury is presented without so much as a striking clock or an off-camera sound, but little by little the camera settles on the face of Sir John, around whom in turn appear the faces of the jurors arguing, giving their reasons, losing their tempers; the sound is intensified, the hubbub becomes infernal and completely unreal. Add to this the prison scene in which Sir John questions the woman he loves and who is going to be hanged, and everything—the framing, the lighting, and even the décor, which is reduced to a few essential lines—irresistibly evokes Murnau. First Griffith in *The Manxman* and now Murnau: Hitchcock acknowledges his masters.

But he also shows how he differs from them, and *Murder!* gives us a moment of marvelous Hitchcockian purity. Sir John is in his dressing gown in the bathroom. He sips a glass of old port and looks at himself in the mirror as he listens to the prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*. We “hear” the stream of thoughts on which he is being carried toward the imprisoned young woman. In this very long shot, just faintly embellished by a slight forward track, the



"*Murder!* (1930) has . . . a maturity, a seriousness, and a freedom of expression . . . only rarely to be found in his films shot on British soil." Sir John (Herbert Marshall) visits the scene of the crime. (PHOTO FROM BRITISH NATIONAL FILM ARCHIVE)

combination of *all* the visual and sound elements makes us literally feel, as though it were a caress, the slow and irresistible welling up of love in the character's heart. In addition, the choice of Herbert Marshall as the leading man was a stroke of genius. Like Ivor Novello, Marshall was a Hitchcock-type actor: unusual, seductive, intelligent. We will rediscover this character in the Robert Young

of *The Secret Agent*, the Joseph Cotten of *Shadow of a Doubt*, the Cary Grant of *To Catch a Thief* . . . and, again, the Herbert Marshall of *Foreign Correspondent*.

Once more, Hitchcock shows his predilection for the final “climax.” In *Blackmail*, the British Museum sequence already contains a suggestion of the apocalyptic. Here the setting is a circus in which we follow the dizzying whirls of a trapeze artist in a tutu. The desire to conclude with a spectacular touch is not the only reason for this choice. As in certain moments in *Spellbound*, *Strangers on a Train*, or *To Catch a Thief*, the film leaves behind the earth to which it was strongly anchored by the minutiae of detail and launches into a world of vertigo and paroxysm.

The exceptional quality of *Murder!*, the considerable progress it revealed, and its more than respectable commercial success make it difficult to understand why Hitchcock next agreed to do a film based on John Galsworthy’s play *The Skin Game* (1931). The only apparent reason would seem to be that Galsworthy’s considerable literary reputation would provide Hitchcock with an opportunity to demonstrate the magnitude of his ambition. The play was bad and already dated, but perhaps Hitchcock thought he could “make something of it.” If this was the case, he was soon brought down a peg, because *The Skin Game* is the worst film he has ever put his name to—a botched job in which the auteur seemed totally uninterested. There is no trace of stylization in the acting or of precision in the direction. On several occasions the movements of the actors, who are obviously doing whatever comes into their heads, catch the cameraman unprepared. As a result, we see either the beginnings of a camera movement that quickly comes to a halt, or the character stepping out of the frame while the camera wildly searches around for him in a sudden panic. It seems unlikely that this is a stylistic effect, especially since the film is completely devoid of all style. This imprecision on the part of the man who championed the use of storyboards indicates the film’s unimportance in the work of Hitchcock, who doesn’t care to be reminded of its existence. When he is, he immediately clamps his hands over



The disintegration of a marriage is studied in *Rich and Strange* (1932). Here Fred Hill (Henry Kendall) eyes a phony princess (Betty Amann) at a shipboard costume party. (PHOTO FROM BRITISH NATIONAL FILM ARCHIVE)

his eyes and ears in bitter contrition! So let us merely rescue from this dusty *The Skin Game* an amusing auction scene and a very beautiful shot in the last reel—and then let’s pass over it as a film unworthy of its auteur.

Hitchcock owed himself a compensation—or at least that’s the way *he* felt, for to his great surprise *The Skin Game* was very well received. He therefore next decided on a film to his own liking,