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# Behind the Curtain

**By Stephen Rebello**

*Early in Psycho, a woman named Marion Crane (played by Janet Leigh) embezzles \$40,000 from her employer to start a new life with her lover, Sam Loomis (John Gavin). En route with the cash to a rendezvous with Sam, Crane stops for the night at a ramshackle motel. The proprietor, Norman Bates (Tony Perkins), appears to be an introverted, slightly odd mama's boy who spies on Crane through a secret peephole as she undresses for a shower. In the shower, the young woman is brutally stabbed to death, apparently by Bates's mother. Only at the film's end do we learn that the old lady is long dead, killed by Bates, who has kept her alive in his mind by impersonating her.*

**H**itchcock had long used bathrooms as backdrops for scenes of menace. But in *Psycho* he turned a bathtub shower into a place of outright horror and in so doing made film history.

He began preparing actress Janet Leigh for the shower sequence early in the shooting, showing her graphic designer Saul Bass's storyboards quite proudly. "The storyboards detailed all the angles," Leigh remembers, "so that I knew the camera would be *there*, then *there*. The camera was at different places all the time."

"Hitch was very clear about what he wanted from me," Leigh adds. "The shower was a baptism, a taking away of the torment from [the character's] mind. Marion became a virgin again. He wanted the audience to feel her peacefulness, her kind of rebirth, so the moment of intrusion is even more shocking."

Writer Joseph Stefano recalls Hitchcock saying he expected problems with the scene because Leigh was self-conscious, especially about her breasts. "She thinks they're too big," the director said. "We'll try to get it over as fast as possible for her sake."

Hitchcock wanted Leigh to do the sequence nude. But makeup man Jack Barron recalls that "when it came down to it, she wasn't having any part of it." Barron asked Hitchcock if he wanted any

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"wound" makeup. "No," said Hitchcock, "we'll never show any actual stabbing. Just bring *plenty* of chocolate syrup for the blood." (The film was shot in black and white.)

Costume supervisor Helen Colvig and on-set costumer Rita Riggs worried about how to suggest nudity, remain within censorship bounds and respect the star's modesty. Leigh and Riggs studied stripper costumes in magazines. "They all had feathers, spangles, pinwheels and birds of paradise," Leigh re-

was actually very little activity. "After all," says graphic designer Bass, "all that happens was that a woman takes a shower, gets hit, and slowly slides down the tub. Instead, [we filmed] a repetitive series of motions: She's taking-a-shower, taking-a-shower, taking-a-shower. She's hit-hit-hit-hit-hit. She slides-slides-slides. She's hit-hit-hit-hit. She slides-slides-slides. The movement was very narrow and the amount of activity to get you there was very intense."

Hitchcock wanted to convey the pre-



calls. "Rita came up with a brilliant idea, to use moleskin over both breasts and vital parts—and that was it."

"I came to think of it as sculpture," says Riggs. "If we had to see a part of a breast, say, under the crook of an elbow, I'd sculpt moleskin, then glue, cover and trim away until just the amount of the body that was needed was visible."

Hitchcock also hired—for \$500—a 23-year-old dancer-model whose proportions approximated Leigh's. "I want



someone whose job it is to be naked on a set, so I don't have to worry about covering her," Hitchcock explained to Stefano. Hitchcock told reporters that the model, Marli Renfro, was required solely "for a rear-view scene of Miss Leigh."

While the shower scene was based upon a series of repetitive images in which there was a lot of motion, there

cise sound a knife might make when jabbing a body. "He told the prop man to go out and get a watermelon," recalls script supervisor Marshall Schlom. "Knowing Hitchcock, the prop man knew he had to come back not only with watermelons of all sizes, but casabas, cantaloupes and honeydews." In a recording studio, the prop man audi-



Adapted from *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* by Stephen Rebello, published May 1990 by Dembner Books. Copyright ©1990 by Stephen Rebello. Reprinted by permission of Dembner Books.



tioned the melons, stabbing one after another. Hitchcock sat listening with his eyes closed. When the demonstration table was littered with shredded fruit, Hitchcock opened his eyes and intoned simply: "Casaba."

He also insisted upon a shot showing water pulsing out of the shower head straight toward the camera. Schlom recalls that everyone involved wondered the same thing: "If we shoot right at it, how are we going to keep the lens dry?" Hitchcock came up with a solution: Use a

long lens, he said, "and block off the inner holes on the shower head so they won't spout water." The long lens allowed the cameraman to stand farther back from the shower head. Though the water appeared to hit the lens, it actually sprayed past it. "The guys on the sides [of the set] got a little soaked," says Schlom, "but we got the shot."

Stuntwoman Margo Epper played Mother in the sequence. "The crew always referred to Mother and son, Norman Bates, as *totally* separate people," remembers Tony Perkins, who did not participate in the shooting of the shower scene. "Mother always had her own 'backstage' persona, as it were. It was just not acknowledged that *Norman* is Mother."

"Hitchcock was an odd person to work for," says Epper, who was 24 when she shot her scenes for *Psycho*. "We were working on a kind of raised platform. I can

shower curtain that Hitchcock ordained made Epper's face—painstakingly backlit to conceal her identity—plainly visible. It was necessary to reshoot Mother's entry and stabbing motions with Epper's face blackened.

When the scene was finally completed, many in the crew were convinced that Hitchcock had gone too far. "People were saying, 'He'll never get away with this scene,'" costume supervisor Colvig recalls. "Frankly, we all thought he'd cut it to just show Mother coming into the bathroom, the knife raising, the blood, the girl falling and that's it."

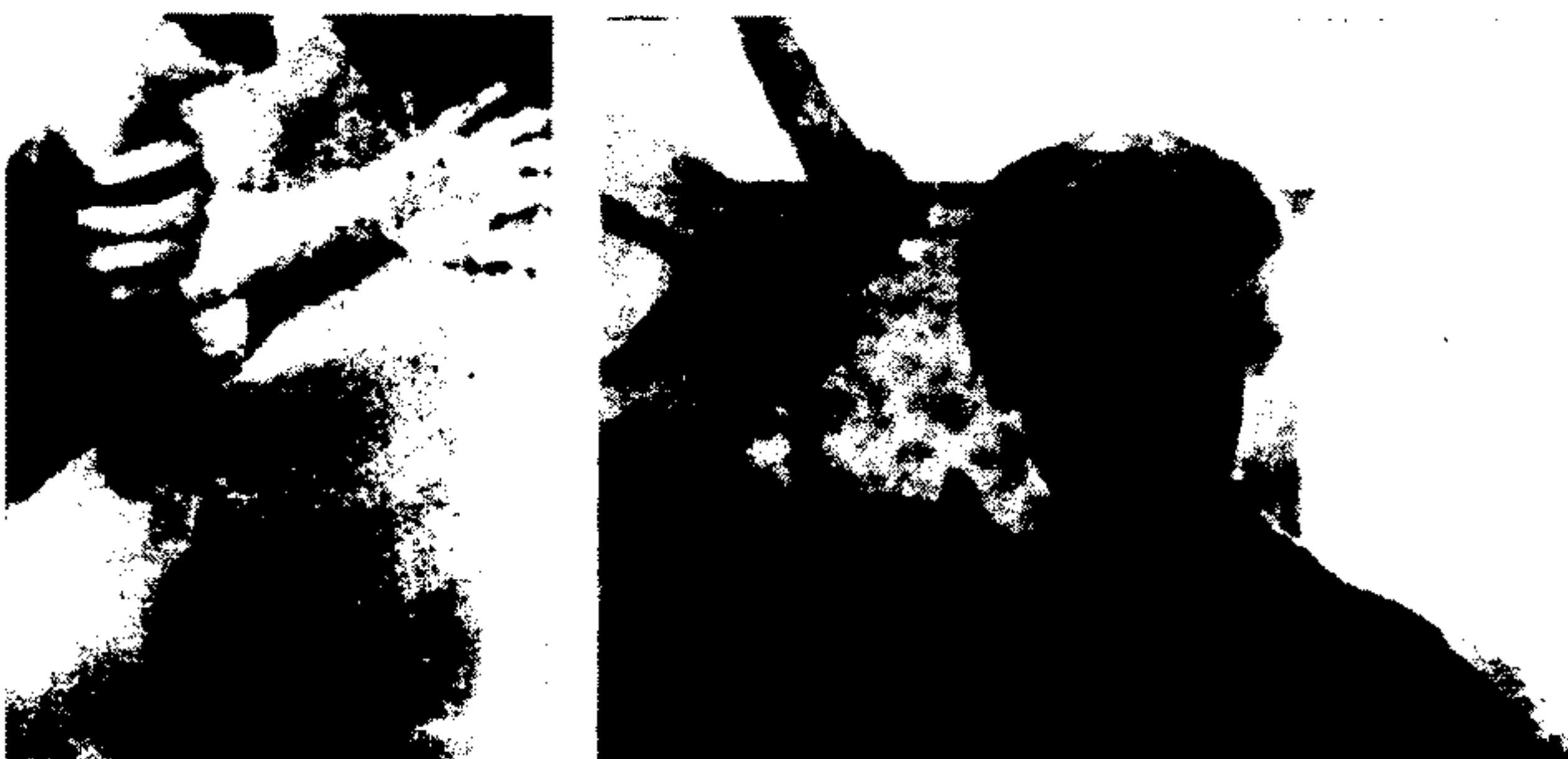
Hitchcock himself "didn't know what he had," Bernard Herrmann, the late, renowned composer of movie scores, once said. "I remember sitting in a screening room after seeing the rough cut. Hitch was pacing back and forth, saying it was awful and that he was going to cut it down for his television show. He made *Psycho* with his own money, and he was afraid it was going to be a flop. [At first] he didn't even want any music in the shower scene. Can you imagine?"

For *Psycho*, Herrmann concocted a cello and violin masterwork that throbbed sonorously as often as it gnawed at the nerves. Hitchcock was so pleased with the "screaming violins" that heightened the terror of the shower sequence—and with the score in general—that he doubled Herrmann's fee, to \$34,500.

Still, nobody connected with the film anticipated the impact the shower sequence was to have, simultaneously titillating and shocking, electrifying the audience without disgusting it.

"I could hear the audience screaming when we planned the scene," Hitchcock liked to say. Stefano says otherwise. "He didn't hear screaming. Laughing maybe, not screaming. We had no idea. We thought people would gasp or be silent, but screaming? Never." ■

1960 UNIVERSAL PICTURES, SHAWLEY PRODUCTIONS (16)



remember him standing just below us looking up and saying exactly what to do and how to do it. I was just shown walking with the knife like I was going to stab her. There wasn't anybody in the shower at the time, but he wanted it to be really real, so he'd have you do the smallest things over and over."

The dazzling white tiles, gleaming fixtures and opaque







*"I don't take showers," says Janet Leigh today, returning to the mise en scene of the crime. "I don't like being closed in, I truly don't."*



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