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Dartmouth Film Society

SHADOW OF A DOUBT (1942-43)

Young Charlie	Teresa Wright	Ann Newton	Edna Mae Wonacott
Uncle Charlie	Joseph Cotton	Roger Newton	Charles Bates
Jack Graham	Macdonald Carey	Station Master	Irving Bacon
Emma Newton	Patricia Collinge	Pullman Porter	Clarence Muse
Joseph Newton	Henry Travers	Louise	Janet Shaw
Herbie Hawkins	Hume Cronyn	Catherine	Estelle Jewell
Fred Saunders	Wallace Ford		

Screenplay by Thornton Wilder, Alma Reville, Sally Benson, based on an original story by Gordon McDonell. Photographed by Joseph Valentine. Music by Dmitri Tiomkin. Designed by John B. Goodman, and R. A. Gausman. Costumes by Vera West and Adrian. Edited by Milton Carruth. Produced by Jack H. Skirball for Universal Pictures. Released January 12, 1943.

Directed by ALFRED HITCHCOCK

On several occasions, director Alfred Hitchcock has stated that SHADOW OF A DOUBT is his best film. Most critics agree, placing it in the pantheon of his finest work, which includes THE 39 STEPS, THE LADY VANISHES, REAR WINDOW and VERTIGO.

The film is quite unlike Hitchcock's previous movies. The atmosphere is that of a small American town, observed in almost neo-realist style. There is no chase in the familiar tradition, and more important, Hitchcock reveals to us quite early that Uncle Charlie is indeed the "Merry Widow Murderer," which to a certain extent cuts down on the suspense factor. This greatly bothered critics at the time of SHADOW OF A DOUBT's release, much as they were irritated in VERTIGO when the mystery of Kim Novak's personality is solved almost thirty minutes before the film is over. However, Hitchcock knew what he was doing, even if the critics did not.

Hitchcock collaborated very closely on SHADOW OF A DOUBT with the novelist Thornton Wilder, who did far more than merely write part of the script. In order to absorb the atmosphere of Santa Rosa, California, where the film was shot, Hitchcock and Wilder moved to the small town for several months before the picture began. In its wealth of documentary detail, SHADOW OF A DOUBT much resembles THE WRONG MAN (1957) although the coldness of the latter film is missing.

It is apparent from the start that the two Charlies are really the two parts of one personality. Hitchcock plugs away at this point so obviously (who ever heard of a girl named Charlie?) that he comes perilously close to allowing the girl to be all good and Uncle Charlie to be almost without any positive qualities.

But the situation is far more complex than this. As John Russell Taylor pointed out, "It gains particularly over the other films of the period in two respects. The first is the extreme neatness and ruthless logic of the script's development, with everything in its place in a perfectly ordered, morally ambivalent world where everything goes by twos--Chabrol and Rohmer (the French authors of a book on Hitchcock) detail two scenes in the church, two scenes in the garage, two visits of the police to the house, two meals, two attempted murders, and a number of identical shots of the two Charlies, uncle and niece: two close-ups of the back, two travelling shots from the front, two shots from below and so on. The second is the use of locations, which lets air into the airless world of Hollywood studio realism, where all too often in other films Hitchcock's special talents seem to suffocate and drop."

It is in the discovery of these extra factors that one draws an added amount of pleasure from Hitchcock's work, over and above the obvious appeal of his

tricky stories. For example, there is the moment in VERTIGO when one realizes that the whole point of the film is not the identity of the heroine but rather the hero's hopeless search for an ideal which never existed in the first place. Or in PSYCHO as we are completely taken off guard when the heroine is murdered when the film is only one-third done. Or the startling use of color in almost every shot of MARNIE, color used for psychological motivation without thought of realism.

The casting of SHADOW OF A DOUBT is better than in most of Hitchcock's films of the period. Teresa Wright was extremely popular at the time, although it is a little difficult to see why now; in any case, she puts in a careful and quite convincing performance. Joseph Cotten, fresh from his sojourn with the Mercury Players and Orson Welles, is in a class by himself as Uncle Charlie. Patricia Collinge is particularly good as the mother and Hume Cronyn amusing as the murder-loving neighbor. On the debit side, Macdonald Carey is wooden as the detective.

Hitchcock has always been good in the direction of minor characters, and there is a particularly well-drawn passage in a sleazy bar in which a tired waitress strikes just the right note of despondency and broken illusions, counterpointing the frightening situation between the two Charlies. The little reception after Uncle Charlie's speech is also worthy of mention, with the sanctimonious minister quickly saying "no" to a drink for his wife as well as himself. It is from such details that the strength of Hitchcock's films derive.

It has been observed that the film would have ended far better if Uncle Charlie had just left town, but the censors would not allow this. Or as an alternate ending, if both Charlies had died together, which was impossible from the box-office point of view. The final scene, which seems a bit weak and trite today, had more meaning in the World War II atmosphere of 1943; one could seriously wonder how such monsters could be born into the world.

David Hull

The next Dartmouth Film Society program is Fritz Lang's epic DIE NIBELUNGEN, in two parts, SIEGFRIED and KRIEMHILD'S REVENGE. This was the most spectacular of all German silent films, and one of the most entertaining. The titles for part one are in German, those for part two in French and English. A complete synopsis will be provided; the story is not difficult to follow in any case. DIE NIBELUNGEN will be shown Tuesday, February 1st at 4:00 and 8:30 pm.