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'Trouble:' comedy ... Hitchcock style

By Doris G. Worsham
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The late Alfred Hitchcock was at his creative peak during the mid-1950s, a period in which he directed such masterpieces as "Vertigo," "Rear Window," and "North by Northwest." But the underrated 1955 black comedy, "The Trouble With Harry," was a major departure at that time for the "master of suspense."

"The Trouble With Harry," which opens today at San Francisco's Bridge Theater, was often list-

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ed as one of Hitchcock's favorite and most personal films. Absent from "Trouble" are such typical Hitchcockian formulas as the fast chase and innocents caught in a web of incriminating circumstances.

Instead, "Trouble" is essentially a mannered, one-joke comedy-mystery set in a picture-postcard Vermont village starring John Forsythe, Shirley MacLaine, Edmund Gwenn, Mildred Natwick, Mildred Dunnock and Royal Dano.

"Trouble" is the third in the Hitchcock reissue series. It is particularly noteworthy for the film debut of an unknown 20-year-old chorus girl born Shirley MacLean Beatty. She changed her name to Shirley MacLaine and was discovered in the Broadway musical "The Pajama Game" in 1954 by "Trouble" associate producer Herbert Coleman.

Since MacLaine is up for the 1984 best actress Oscar for her stunning performance in "Terms of Endearment," this delightful come-



John Forsythe and Shirley MacLaine in 'The Trouble With Harry,' a 1955 Alfred Hitchcock black comedy.

dy of the macabre may become a curiosity for those interested in her first film appearance. MacLaine represented an unusual Hitchcock heroine — the majority of his leading ladies were often cool, austere

blondes.

The presence of Harry Worp's supine corpse kicks off a dizzying series of events in "Trouble," which was also produced by Hitchcock and based on Jack Trevor's novel, "The

Master."

The villagers who inadvertently stumble onto Harry's body in a village clearing are: Gwenn as a

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crusty sea salt hunting rabbits who believes his stray shot and killed Harry; Natwick as a very proper spinster with a yen for Gwenn; Forsythe as a struggling abstract painter sketching the countryside; MacLaine as a tomboyish young divorcee once married to Harry; Jerry Mathers (of "Leave it to Beaver" TV fame) as her precocious son who believes yesterday is today and today is tomorrow; and Dunnock, who gives a sardonic performance as the local storekeeper.

Shortly after the film was completed, Hitchcock succinctly described his newest work: "The Trouble With Harry" is a comedy about a dead person. Harry gets buried and unburied four times. He's the real villain of the piece."

Indeed, Harry is trouble for those who find his body, although romance blossoms between Forsythe and MacLaine, and Natwick and Gwenn.

Initially, they observe Harry's body very matter-of-factly and leave without reporting their discovery to the local deputy sheriff, morosely played by Dano. Through a series of plot twists too crucial to reveal here, Hitchcock masterfully implicates

several of the key characters in Harry's demise while Harry is repeatedly buried and exhumed.

In "Trouble," Hitchcock depicts a fairy tale-like world in which the eccentric and ordinary blend with the horrifying and unusual. In this small Vermont town, the people are not what they seem.

Eventually the question boils down to how these average citizens get out of a messy situation that threatens their romances and reputations as solid citizens of the community? Harry indeed becomes the villain of the film.

Although MacLaine is an appealing comedienne and Forsythe is a handsome leading man, the old-timers — Gwenn and Natwick — steal the film with their wonderfully delivered banter and hilarious, often reserved, courtship. Gwenn and Natwick make a charming screen duo and it is a tragedy that they didn't make more films together.

Hitchcock's "Trouble" is a film of meticulous detail, from the editing, staging of key scenes and transitions, to the filming of the gold and russet colors of autumnal New England.

Hitchcock's hand is also evident in the crisp dialogue of John Michael Hayes' witty screenplay that is executed like a complex jigsaw puzzle and

the images featured in the naturalistic, burnished photography of Robert Burks, the cinematographer for most of Hitchcock's films. The early Technicolor and Vistavision of "Trouble" is spectacular.

Adding to the technical excellence of "Trouble" is the sprightly, comical score of Bernard Herrmann, who subsequently scored many of Hitchcock's films up to the 1964 melodrama, "Marnie."

The reissued "Rear Window" and "Vertigo" have earned millions in recent months and Hitchcock's comic "The Trouble With Harry" will no doubt do similar business at the box office during this current Hitchcock revival.