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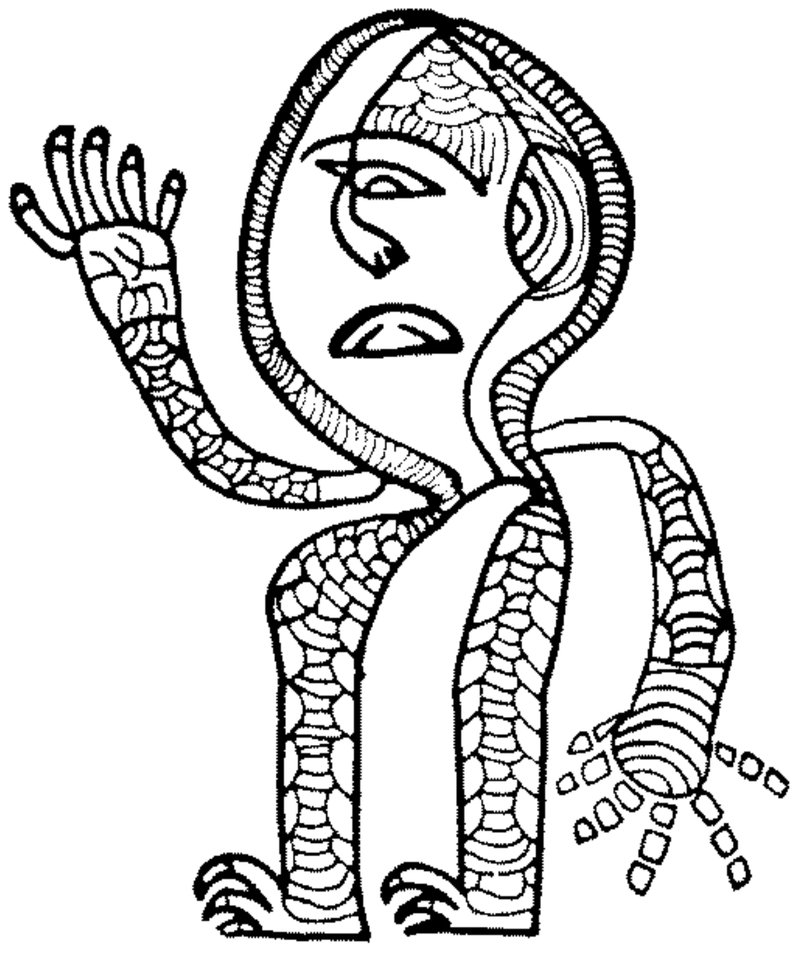

Edited by

Daniel Halpern

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Tangier
London
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Interview with Alfred Hitchcock

In the fall of 1971, the Film Division of Columbia University proposed to the University that Mr. Alfred Hitchcock be awarded an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters for his outstanding contributions to cinematic language. The degree was approved by the various committees at Columbia, and Mr. Hitchcock was contacted to see if he would indeed be able to come to Columbia for the June 6, 1972, graduation to receive such a degree. Mr. Hitchcock agreed.

When he arrived in New York, one of the students called him to ask if he would come to speak to the film students before the graduation ceremonies started. Mr. Hitchcock was happy to oblige by coming to the Film School itself for one and a half hours with the students before the day's ceremonies began. Since most of the students had seen a sneak preview of Frenzy *(to be released a few weeks later), the centerpiece of potatoes and neckties was appropriate. The students began the interview by asking Mr. Hitchcock how he began in the film world.*

ALFRED HITCHCOCK: I worked in advertising, designing advertisements, before going into film. I started out designing art titles, since that was back in the days of the silent pictures when we used narrative titles, character titles and spoken titles. Both the titles and their drawings were, of course, terribly naive. For example, if the title said, "By this time George was leading a very fast life," you'd have those words and underneath a candle with a flame at both ends. But this is where I learned script writing.

QUESTION: Do you think that the studios have learned what "cinematic" is?

HITCHCOCK: No, they haven't. There are too many films with what I call photographs of people talking. When they get translated into a foreign language with superimposed titles, the audience spends their evening reading. They never get a chance to look at the picture. You see, most people get confused; they think that galloping horses are cinema. They are not. They are photographs of galloping horses. Pure cinema is montage, the joining together of pieces of film and creating an idea. It's like putting words together in a sentence. From that comes the audience's emotion. *Rear Window,* possibly one of the most cinematic pictures that anyone's ever attempted, depended upon cutting to what a man is seeing, then cutting back to his reaction. What you're

doing is using his face to create a thought process. A novelist would use words to get this effect. I do it visually. I did the *Encyclopedia Brittanica* motion picture section some years ago and in it I cited an example of cutting from the close-up of a man's face to what the man sees, and then his reaction. This was to illustrate how by a little change you can alter the whole thought process. The example I used was of a man looking out and seeing a woman nursing a baby. When you cut back to him, he smiles. That makes him a rather benign gentleman. Now, leave the two close-ups in and take the middle piece away and substitute a girl in a bikini. Now he's a dirty old man! Just by that one change, you see!

QUESTION: When you write a scene, do you keep in mind the place of the actors on the screen?

HITCHCOCK: The size of the image on the screen and its composition is really orchestration. It's no good throwing a close-up on the screen just for the sake of a close-up. It's like music, you know. You have loud brass when you need it. The same applies to the size of the image. This side of the technical situation is almost completely ignored these days.

QUESTION: I wasn't thinking of the size so much as the *position* of the actors on the screen.

HITCHCOCK: Well, I wouldn't look at it that way. I would say it's a question of whether you're using the subjective treatment. Truffaut was interested in the way I used this subjective treatment. In other words, you make it from one of the actors' point of view. That governs the position and size. I'll give you an example. In the rape scene in *Frenzy* you go to the woman first — she looks up and there's the man coming in the door. It's all from her point of view. It's only when they get very close together that you have to become objective and look at them in profile; if you continue the man from her point of view, it would look too ugly. You'd have this size thing on the screen and she would be almost cross-eyed looking at him.

QUESTION: In *Frenzy*, how long did it take to shoot that potato truck sequence?

HITCHCOCK: Being an ex-art director, I'm an old hand at the technical end. I dictated every cut in that scene to a secretary. It came to 118 from beginning to end. Then I had a platform built about as high as an average table, so that the camera and all the lights could stay on the studio floor. Both the lights and the cameras would have had to be

constantly lifted if we had used a real truck, and that would have been a waste of time and energy. So I just had this platform built with four springs at each corner and loaded it up with the sacks. We could move it around, do whatever we wanted. This is all based on the theory that it's what you're putting on the screen that counts. So many directors are conscious of what they're shooting on the set, that they go to enormous trouble. They've got to have the real truck. I knew that the cutter would have a problem with the 118 set-ups that I dictated because of the similarity of the shots, so I had numbers made on yellow cards. The cutter only had to refer to my dictated script. But to answer your question, the whole scene took about four days.

QUESTION: In *Frenzy* you give us the feeling that one is being speared into a funnel. You start out with wide open spaces in the first shot, and at the end you focus on about an inch of a trunk.

HITCHCOCK: I think what you're really saying is that you start story-wise fairly loosely, and as the story develops, your own concentration becomes sharper and sharper and sharper. That's called script structure. One of the things that pleased me about *Frenzy* was that the background was a character. You see, I've never believed in using a background and then playing something else against it. In this case your background is a produce market, as I'm describing it in the trailer — selling fruits of evil and the horrors of potatoes. But what happens is that here you are in a produce market, and it eventually leads you to potatoes, from the potatoes comes the dust, the dust gets into a brush, and there's the undoing of the murderer. So, that produce market background played a very vital part in the story. It's like when I wanted to do Mount Rushmore in *North by Northwest*. I wanted to use that dramatically, but the Department of Interior wouldn't permit it. I wanted Cary Grant to slide down Lincoln's nose, then hide in one of the nostrils, and then get a sneezing fit. Cary Grant, not Lincoln!

QUESTION: What attracted you to the story of *Frenzy?*

HITCHCOCK: The potatoes, of course!

QUESTION: It seemed that a lot of things you had done in earlier films were pushed even further in *Frenzy*.

HITCHCOCK: Well, I did a few little experiments with sound. In the market, when the police sergeant comes up and talks to the salesman, the red-haired fellow, he suddenly turns around and says, "Oh, meet my friend. . . ." and the man's gone. I took every bit of sound out of the track.

QUESTION: What about when he steps out of the doorway?

HITCHCOCK: Same thing. I took every bit of sound right out, just to emphasize the words from the man: "Is there anywhere to sleep tonight?" And when we tracked out the second murder, down the stairs and into the street, I brought that traffic noise up three times the volume, so that people subconsciously would say, if she screams, nobody's ever going to hear it.

QUESTION: What about the use of music in your films?

HITCHCOCK: A lot of my films don't have any music. *The Birds* had no music. In fact, the bird sounds were entirely electronic from beginning to end. I took the film over to West Berlin. They had a machine there, a huge console, that is guaranteed to give you any sound you want. They gave me an example of a tank battle all done on this machine. Anyway, all the bird sounds were made that way. You know, sometimes you can do without music altogether, and working with musicians is not easy. The trouble with all musicians is that you have absolutely no control. I remember Tiomkin used to say, "Oh, do come down and tell me what you think." And I'd go down and there would be seventy musicians and they'd play a passage and I'd say, "Well, I don't think it's right because. . . ." And Tiomkin would then say, "We can't change it now! It's already orchestrated!" There never is and never can be close collaboration between a director and a composer.

QUESTION: There's a shot in *The Birds* that I'm curious about. It's the beginning of the bird attack on the gas station. You have a high angle shot from out in the middle of nowhere as the gas station goes up in flames. From where was this shot taken?

HITCHCOCK: When we were filming *The Birds* Universal was building a new car park. They had cut the side of a hill away. We put the camera on top of the hill and just had the burning car in the car park, with a few people running; all the rest was blacked out. Then the matte artist made a matte of the harbor and the town, as seen from above. So you got your action movement and your burning car, but the rest of the town is on a fixed matte. Now the problem was how to get the birds in; the rest of that shot was now complete — you actually did look down and see the town and the burning car. We went out to a cliff over the ocean and got a lot of fish and bread and stuff and threw it over the cliff. The gulls behind the camera went down after it; they were constantly going down, chasing the food. When that film came into the studio, we discovered that now and then you could see the surf, the

beach, the cliffside — everything. So we used what is called the rotoscope method. Two old ladies spent three months copying each bird onto a plain background and then copying the silhouette. (When you double print you must have a silhouette first. They used the travelling matte system.) It took them three months to do fifteen feet, ten seconds. This footage was then printed into the scene. You saw the birds going down over the town. I've often wondered why so few people ever question that shot. They take it for granted, I guess. They never say, "Did you have a balloon for that?"

QUESTION: You expressed to Mr. Truffaut a desire to shoot a film about a city.

HITCHCOCK: I'd love to, but I can't find the story.

QUESTION: Don't you think you did that at all in *Frenzy?*

HITCHCOCK: No. The idea that I have in mind is much more ambitious. It's the whole of the thing that makes the city work, starting in the morning and going right through to midnight. The difficulty is getting the material. You have to be careful not to get a cliché story.

QUESTION: Would you focus on one character?

HITCHCOCK: That's the problem. It ought to be one character. The chase story is the obvious choice, but it's too obvious.

QUESTION: From the films that I've seen, it would appear that *Marnie* is the most brilliant in terms of color. The tones and values are the most carefully controlled. Did you spend a lot of time designing sets with specific colors?

HITCHCOCK: I think that with all color you should start with black and white. In other words, to repeat the simile, it's like music: you can orchestrate color. Speaking of using color in films, I actually shot *Psycho* in black and white for one reason only: the flow of blood down the drain. I knew that if the film were in color, that scene would be quite repulsive.

QUESTION: Are there any films that you've shot in color and after seeing the final print wish you had shot in black and white?

HITCHCOCK: No, I think color is all right today as long as you control it. This, however, is often difficult. Unfortunately, there isn't enough coordination in the studios between, say, the dress designer and the set dresser. I mean, it's quite possible for them to have a green settee and

for a woman to come in in a purple dress and sit on it. I think a set dresser ought to be as knowledgeable as a writer. He ought to know the economics of the character who owns the room, what sort of pictures to hang on the wall, what sort of books, what phonograph records. I usually overcome these problems by sending out a photographer to photograph the quarters of an equivalent character, and all the details around his room. Otherwise you can get some very absurd things; you get somebody who puts a Modigliani on the wall and the character has never even heard of Modigliani.

QUESTION: That recalls something in *Suspicion*, where one detective walks over to a Picasso.

HITCHCOCK: Yes, I had him do that. That particular painting always reminds me of a cartoon I once saw about a rather mild country couple who are in a museum. They are staring at an abstract and suddenly the abstract thrusts an arm and a pointing finger at them and says, "I don't understand you either!"

QUESTION: How did the convention of your appearing briefly in each film begin?

HITCHCOCK: When we ran short of actors! It's always very brief. That's because I don't want to suffer the indignity of being an actor for too long.

QUESTION: Last night the women's film festival began. It's a two-week event with many features and shorts directed by women or written by women. They hope to demonstrate that women have had a considerable creative function in film. What about the role of women in film-making?

HITCHCOCK: Strangely enough, there have been very few female film-makers in the history of movies. Lorin Veber was one; Ida Lupino was another. For some inexplicable reason, there have been very, very few women.

QUESTION: You say inexplicable. Is there a possible explanation in terms of unions and male domination?

HITCHCOCK: No, it has nothing to do with that. I don't think men will take orders from women. I think that's your root problem. But it is a strange thing that in the whole of the history of movies, there have been two, at the most three, women directors.

QUESTION: What kind of working relationship do you have with your editors?

HITCHCOCK: Well, I shoot a pre-cut picture. The editor has to put it together as I have shot it. Somebody wanted to have a look at the outtake material on *Rear Window*. He went into the cutting room and there was a small roll of film on the floor. That's all that wasn't used, because I make a film on paper. I never understand this business of shooting from all angles and getting millions of feet of film. I've never been on other directors' sets, so I wouldn't know. I've been asked, "Well, don't you ever improvise on the set?" And I say, "No, I prefer to improvise in an office!" I think the main reason for people not doing this is that they lack the sense of the visual, they can't visualize things ahead of time. I never look through a camera. What for? To confirm or to find out whether the cameraman is a liar? There's no reason for it, because you're dealing with a rectangle, just as much as any painter with a canvas. You have a rectangle in a theater, and that is the thing that you're visualizing all the time.

QUESTION: You say that you don't look through the lens on your camera when you're shooting. Do you admire directors like Sternberg, who had exquisitely framed films?

HITCHCOCK: Yes, well, there are very good pictorial directors. It's like saying do you admire Mexican cameramen like Figuezoa; you say, look what they have to photograph. They've got missions which are white against a black sky with white clouds all done with filters and God is the art director. I don't think it's all that difficult.

QUESTION: In terms of making pre-cut films, didn't you shoot alternative endings to *Topaz?*

HITCHCOCK: Yes, I shot a scene that was true but never to be believed. That was a duel in a football stadium. I was fascinated to see a duel fought in a vast stadium with all the ads for Dubonnet, these two little figures and a man up in the stands with a high-powered rifle. The moment when they start to fire, the man in the stands shoots one of the men in the back. You know, very often you see things that have actually occurred in real life and nobody will believe it when you put it on the screen.

QUESTION: Why did you shoot the ending you finally used?

HITCHCOCK: It was a matter of, shall we say, disagreement with the front office. They always have the last word because they say it's their

money. But I have complete artistic control over everything. I'm very familiar with the top men. They often send a story down and say, "We think this will be a very good picture for you." And I read it and it's horrible. But it's very difficult to go back and say, "You're a jerk for sending this to me." You have to be very tactful in how you handle it. I remember years ago when I was working on *Rebecca*. Peter Selznick, one of the biggest producers, said, "I've got a good idea for the last shot of the picture." I said, "What's that?" And he said, "When this house Mandaline is in flames and smoke is rising into the sky, wouldn't it be a good idea for the smoke to form the letter 'R'?" What do you say, you know? Very embarrassing. You have to go around it some way. I thought it out and said, "Look. I've thought that thing over and I think it would be nicer and more realistic if you go into this Rebecca's room and the sheets are initialed, and you close in on the flames consuming the initial." He said, "Yes, yes, that might be good, too."

QUESTION: How do you feel about previewing a film before an audience?

HITCHCOCK: I don't believe in seeing previews — little boys pick up the cards and write "Junk It" or other rude remarks. And yet, directors take them seriously, they really do.

QUESTION: When you were in England, before you came here, did any specific director appeal to you? When I saw *Young and Innocent*, I immediately thought of Lubitsch. I thought the congenial nature of that film was somewhat atypical of the sort of humor that you do deal with.

HITCHCOCK: Yes, I think that Lubitsch was one of the principal men that I admire. He made all kinds of films long before he came to Hollywood. Lubitsch had made very big spectacular films long before he did his early films here. The first time I saw him, he was playing the part of a clown in a wordless play called *Sumerim*, in 1912.

QUESTION: Do you miss working with the kind of professional actors and actresses that were around Hollywood in the '30s and '40s?

HITCHCOCK: You mean the "Stars"? No, I think I'm much better off to use first-class actors from the theater, to be able to use them while they are playing leads in the West End of London, as I did in *Frenzy*.

QUESTION: Has the front office ever pressured you into using big stars?

HITCHCOCK: Yes. That's why people like Julie Andrews got into pictures, which is ridiculous. She is a singer. But they say, "Oh, she's so big at

the box office." In one movie she's supposed to be a scientist; every time I came across a line which had some scientific meaning, I had to cross it out because I just didn't believe it when she said it.

QUESTION: What is your preparation with actors in terms of rehearsal?

HITCHCOCK: No rehearsal, no rehearsal! I always start a picture with the writer and dictate a treatment. In other words, it's a description of the film as though you ran it with no sound, describing every action and indicating lots of shots, but in narrative form. Sometimes I end up with 100 pages, which are very difficult to read because it is a purely visual description of everything that takes place. You can't ever put in words like "he wondered" because you can't photograph "he wondered." When this is finished, the writer goes off to write the dialogue. This is the method I prefer.

QUESTION: What about preferences as far as shooting? Do you go from begining to end?

HITCHCOCK: It doesn't bother me because I know the film by heart.

QUESTION: Isn't it difficult for the actors without a rehearsal?

HITCHCOCK: Actors are there to do as they're told. Actors in movies cannot have the same freedom as actors in the theater, because in the theater you have a proscenium arch and you have a room and they wander around. But in the case of film, you're cutting. That's why in a film where cutting is an important factor, the method actor is of very little help.

QUESTION: When you have a moving camera throughout, don't you have to pace your actors very carefully?

HITCHCOCK: The trouble comes when an actor has the nerve to say, "Well, I wouldn't do it that way." I have to say to him, "Well, you better or else!" This is because I'm stuck, cutting-wise. You cannot let an actor tell you what he's going to do; the film won't cut together.

QUESTION: Doesn't this cause a good deal of conflict on the set?

HITCHCOCK: No, no.

QUESTION: What attracted you to do a film in 3-D?

HITCHCOCK: It was the fashion and the custom. In fact, somebody at the studio once said to me, "Oh, you should do some of that multiple screen stuff." I said, "What for?" He said, "Well, they've done a film

called *The Thomas Crown Affair* and it's got three images at once." And I said, " Well, Melies did that in 1898."

QUESTION: Did you think at the time you were doing *Dial M for Murder* that 3-D would become an accepted convention like color and sound?

HITCHCOCK: I didn't mind one way or the other. I didn't care. You knew 3-D would never last unless they could get it without the polaroid glasses.

QUESTION: Do you think there's any future for it now with the new laser process?

HITCHCOCK: Only if they develop the holograph, which is lensless photography. I suppose they'll always prod you to extend this sort of thing, so that you can have Indians shooting arrows at the audience, and so forth.

QUESTION: *The Wrong Man* is the one film of yours that stands out as being a sort of semi-documentary feature film.

HITCHCOCK: The mistake I made in *The Wrong Man* was letting the director intrude anywhere in the film. It should have been strictly impersonal.

QUESTION: Are you particularly satisfied with the film, other than that?

HITCHCOCK: Not entirely. You see, I had the moment when Henry Fonda was whispering a prayer to a figure of Christ on the wall, and then I slowly dissolved to a street in Queens and the figure was coming along until it came and superimposed its face over Fonda and you saw that this was the real man. I should never have done that in the film because it never took place.

QUESTION: So you prefer an entirely realistic situation?

HITCHCOCK: You have to stick to it.

QUESTION: In so many of your English films you have these expressionistic touches which are very powerful, and yet you now say that you prefer very realistic qualities.

HITCHCOCK: But I mean in *The Wrong Man*, because we're dealing with an event that actually took place. It's not a fiction story. It's totally different. With fiction you can do whatever you like. The mistake I made with *The Wrong Man* was that I put things in that never actually occurred.

QUESTION: Yes, but don't you feel a sort of mystical hold and attraction between the two men? I mean that technique is experimental. . . .

HITCHCOCK: Oh, I prefer to experiment with the technique of story-telling, but not with true stories. After all, what are you doing? You're pulling an emotion out of an audience. That's our purpose. That's why I'm not a self-indulgent director in terms of " I'm only going to make a film to please myself." I think the whole power of film is that it belongs to so many people on a given night. You create an emotion through film and you have the possibility of having an audience in Tokyo, West Berlin, London and Paris, all going through the same emotions at a given time. I don't think any other medium can do that. Stage can't.

QUESTION: Speaking of stories, how do you feel about adaptations from well-known literature?

HITCHCOCK: I think it's always a risk. A well-written book doesn't necessarily mean you get a well-made film. You're dealing with literature, which is another medium altogether.

QUESTION: But do you need to make a film of a well-written book?

HITCHCOCK: Not necessarily, no. Ideally, when you're adapting a novel to a film script you read the book once, and then put it aside.

QUESTION: Of all the things you've done, do you have a favorite film?

HITCHCOCK: Yes, I liked a film I made called *Shadow of a Doubt*. That was written with Thornton Wilder and was really done in the right way. We went into a small town. We lived there for a bit, got to know all the people, and chose the house that we wanted to use. Thornton thought that the house looked too big for our character, who was only a bank clerk. I said, " Look, Thornton, look at the door, it's peeling, but let's send an assistant to the real estate company and see what rent he pays." The assistant discovered that the rent was correct, so we went back and wrote the script. When I returned to shoot, I discovered that the man was so proud that we'd chosen his house that he had it all repainted. He ruined it. We had to put on an army of painters and dirty it down again.

QUESTION: You've always had a very benevolent attitude toward villains. How did this come about?

HITCHCOCK: Ah, villains. I think villains should be very attractive men. Otherwise they'd never get near their victims. Most people cast heavies

in a very obvious way. I think it's a big mistake. If you look at most of your cultural murderers, they're rather gentlemanly sort of fellows.

QUESTION: You even make them family men.

HITCHCOCK: Yes, why not?

QUESTION: *Suspicion* seems such a good example of that. The villain is tremendously attractive. I heard there was another ending for that movie, too.

HITCHCOCK: Yes, the big mistake in a story of that kind was to cast Cary Grant. In those days the idea of Cary Grant being a murderer was ridiculous. That was the day of the Star. I had an ending whereby the wife really came to the final conclusion that her husband was a murderer, but she was so much in love with him that she didn't want to live. She knew he was going to kill her and she wrote a letter to her mother to this effect, and added, "But, Mother, I think society should be protected." So she seals the letter and puts it beside the bed and then he brings up the fatal glass of milk. She drinks and dies. Then you fade in on one quick shot of a cheerful Cary Grant walking down a street and popping a letter into a mailbox. But they wouldn't do it to Cary Grant. As a matter of fact, to show you the idiocy of front offices, the ex-head of RKO came in from New York and said, "Oh, you should see what the new studio head has done to your picture." He said it with a grin on his face, knowing how ridiculous it was. This new studio head, in my absence, had taken *Suspicion* and reduced it from one hour and threequarters to fifty-five minutes, taking out everything in the picture that might point to the man being a murderer. Everything. Ridiculous. I had to sit down and put it all back again.

QUESTION: The wonderful thing about that film is the ambivalence; one moment you're sure he's the murderer and then the next moment he does something that kind of neutralizes it. Was that intentional?

HITCHCOCK: Oh yes, that was all quite deliberate. It was the woman's mind and what was happening to it.

QUESTION: You made quite a point in your book that you wrote with Mr. Truffaut about Janet Leigh's bra in *Psycho*, especially that it stayed on her chest throughout the movie. In *Frenzy*, I noticed a couple of scenes where this wasn't the case. I wondered what persuaded you to begin removing ladies' clothing on the screen.

HITCHCOCK: Actually, in *Psycho*, she should have never been wearing

a bra at all. She was having an affair at three o'clock in the afternoon with a man in a bedroom. She should have been stripped, but then we weren't allowed. There wasn't that "permissiveness." I'm not a great believer in just showing nudity for the sake of it. Somebody asked me the other day how long did I think nudity would last on the screen and my reply was, "Well, all breasts sag eventually!"