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Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
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The Stunt Men

BY J. HOBERMAN

Dial M for Murder

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock

Written by Frederick Knott from his play

A Warner Bros. Classics release

At Film Forum

April 9 through 22

Launched in late 1952, Hollywood's comically brief 3-D experiment peaked the following summer. The craze was long over by the time Alfred Hitchcock finished his contribution to the cycle, *Dial M for Murder*, and the movie was

released flat. A pity because, as now can be seen in Film Forum's stunning rerelease, *Dial M for Murder* was by far the most visually compelling of studio stereoscopic movies — rivaled only by Jack Arnold's half-underwater *Creature From the Black Lagoon*.

Taken from a hit Broadway play (and recently remade as *A Perfect Murder*), *Dial M* is a genteel thriller. A reptilian ex-tennis champ (Ray Milland) decides to eliminate his wealthy, unfaithful wife (Grace Kelly), and blackmails an old schoolmate to do the job; when Kelly unexpectedly dispatches her attacker with a pair of scissors, Milland shifts gears to have her framed. Perhaps 90 percent of the action is confined to the couple's cramped, incongruously dowdy living room, but Hitchcock made no attempt to open the piece up. While other 3-D productions assaulted audiences with hurtling tomahawks or Jane Russell's bosom, Hitchcock positioned his actors behind a fussy clutter of monumentalized bric-a-brac and made visual jokes out of rear-screen projection. The lone use of the proscenium-breaking projectile effect is reserved for the murder sequence.

Dial M for Murder runs out of ideas after the killing (a typically kinky montage of jutting, boxy forms that supposedly took a week to shoot), with the film's last half mainly sullen cross-cutting between the overstuffed living room and the clean diagonals of the outside stairwell, where the proof of Kelly's innocence is stashed. But even here Hitchcock's canny restraint allows the stereo image to assert its own uncanny characteristics. The movie suggests that a minimalist like Yasujiro Ozu might have been the greatest 3-D filmmaker of them all.