

Document Citation

Title	The 39 steps
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Source	<i>Dartmouth Film Society</i>
Date	
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The thirty-nine steps, Hitchcock, Alfred, 1935

Dartmouth Film Society Film Notes

THE 39 STEPS Great Britain (1935)

Hannay	Robert Donat	Mrs. Jordan	Helen Haye
Pamela	Madeleine Carroll	The Sheriff	Frank Cellier
Miss Smith	Lucie Mannheim	Mr. Memory	Wylie Watson
Professor Jordan	Godfrey Tearle	Commercial Travellers	
Crofter's Wife	Peggy Ashcroft	Gus MacNaughton, Jerry Verno	
Crofter	John Laurie	Maid	Peggy Simpson

Screenplay by Alma Reville and Charles Bennett from the novel of the same name by John Buchan. Additional dialogue by Ian Hay. Photography by Bernard Knowles. Edited by Derek Twist. Art direction by Otto Werndorff and Albert Jullion. Costumes by J. Strassner. Music by Louis Levy. Produced by Michael Balcon and Ivor Montagu for Gaumont-British Productions. Released in America September 14, 1935.

Directed by ALFRED HITCHCOCK

Q: Is THE 39 STEPS one of your favorite films?

Hitchcock: Yes, pretty much. What I liked about THE 39 STEPS were the sudden switches and the jumping from one situation to another with such rapidity. Donat leaping out of the window of the police station with half of a handcuff on, and immediately walking into a Salvation Army Band, darting down an alley-way into a room. "Thank God you've come, Mr. So-and-so," they say, and put him onto a platform. A girl comes along with two men, takes him in a car to the police station, but not really to the police station--they are two spies. You know, the rapidity of the switches, that's the great thing about it. If I did THE 39 STEPS again, I would stick to that formula, but it really takes a lot of work. You have to use one idea after another, and with such rapidity.

(From an interview with Alfred Hitchcock, 1963)

We have already seen Alfred Hitchcock's first two sound films, BLACKMAIL (1929) and JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK (1930). The next film he made was MURDER (1930), which he calls "the first important who-done-it picture I made" and this was followed by THE SKIN GAME (1931) from a play by John Galsworthy, filmed in much the same static fashion as JUNO. RICH AND STRANGE (1932) was quite a different matter, one of Hitchcock's rare attempts to try something really different than his usual suspense melodramas. Here, he took the adventures of a young couple sailing around the world, ending in shipwreck and a rescue by a Chinese junk. The French critics hold it as one of Hitchcock's best films, but no prints survive in America; the director doesn't care for it very much to judge from interviews.

NUMBER SEVENTEEN (1932) came next, another stage adaption which Hitchcock calls "a cheap melodrama." The lowest point in his career came with a film called WALTZES FROM VIENNA (1933), which he described as "A musical, and the studio couldn't afford the music." Those who have seen the film report that it is terrible beyond description.

But in the following year Hitchcock got back into his stride with the first version of THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH (1934), the only film in his long career which he remade. It was an immediate hit; some British critics claim it is one of his best works, and all British critics seem to feel it is better than the American version, which is not quite true. While it has all the familiar ingredients, the final sequence is extremely confused and Hitchcock himself calls the film "fairly slipshod structurally."

The next film was THE 39 STEPS, which can be called Hitchcock's first great success; it is the earliest of his films which is still in general circulation.

It was received with great praise on both sides of the Atlantic. Sidney W. Carroll, writing in the Sunday Times of June 9, 1936, summed up its virtues very well.

"THE 39 STEPS, which bore about as much relation to John Buchan as SABOTAGE to Conrad, followed immediately after THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH. Although it

has not the weird, rich gallery of fantastic spies and the cold-blooded concentration of that masterpiece, it is a highly enjoyable piece of melodrama. It is, like SABOTAGE and THE LADY VANISHES, concerned with the sinister and dangerously normal facade of espionage...

"Inventive simply as a piece of story-telling though it is, and obviously unpretentious, the lightweight quality of THE 39 STEPS should not lead one to underestimate it. Few directors (and none in Britain) have equalled Hitchcock's quick, sharp, lively grasp of narrative; his skill in establishing, unostentatiously, but authentically, varied natural backgrounds; and his dramatic use of minor characters. Most notable here are the two commercial travellers in the train, Professor Jordan's ambiguous wife, and that intriguing creation, 'Mr. Memory'.

"Every film of real quality bears the unforgettable stamp of its creator. Individuality is a rare and precious thing. In moving pictures it is exceptionally hard to discover. When it is there, however, it usually assumes a force and a distinction unmistakably attributable to its director, and its director alone. In THE 39 STEPS, the identity and mind of Alfred Hitchcock are continuously discernable, in fact supreme.

"Hitchcock is a genius. I dislike the word, it has been overworked to the point of paralysis. But no other epithet is possible when one thinks of all that 'Hitch' stands for, and sums up the various qualities he has brought to this his latest remarkable hotch-potch of screen attack."

The film is very casually based on a novel written in 1915 by John Buchan (1875-1940), one of several which concern the adventures of a character named Richard Hannay. Other parts of the plot were adapted from another Buchan novel, Three Hostages. Purists were outraged that the film took the title of The 39 Steps and so little of its contents, but it is reported that Buchan approved of some of the changes. Another version of the story was filmed in 1959 in color, but it never comes close to Hitchcock's film.

As one critic has written, "With THE 39 STEPS, Hitchcock's apprenticeship was over; the films which were to come were mature creations of one of the cinema's greatest and most original stylists."

David Stewart Hull

Our short subject today is one of the best of Laurel and Hardy's comedies, HOG WILD (1930), directed by James Parrott from a script by Leo MacCarey. The print we are showing is the full two-reel version, not the shortened edition which is more frequently seen.

The next program on our Hitchcock retrospective is THE SECRET AGENT (1936) one of his best films. In order to program this film, we have imported a print from England, and this is a rare opportunity to view a classic which is almost unknown in America. It is screened Saturday, November 6th at 11 pm and Sunday, November 7th, at 4:00 pm. Don't miss it!