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DIAL M FOR MURDER

U.S.A. 1954 105 minutes Color

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Screenplay by Frederick Knott, based on the play by Frederick Knott. Photography by Robert Burks. Art Directors, Edward Carrere & George James Hopkins. Edited by Rudi Fehr. Music by Dimitri Tiomkin. Produced by Alfred Hitchcock. Production Company, Warner Brothers. Print provided by Twyman Films. Cast: Ray Milland (Tony Wendice), Grace Kelly (Margot Wendice), Robert Cummings (Mark Halliday), John Williams (Inspector Hubbard), Anthony Dawson (Lesgate Swann), Leo Britt (The Narrator), Patrick Allen (Person), George Leigh (Williams), George Alderson (The Detective), Robin Hughes (Police Sergeant).

A play by Frederick Knot
A film by Alfred Hitchcock

by Peter Bordonaro

In the early 1950s, within two years, New Yorkers had the opportunity to see *Dial M for Murder* on the stage and on the screen. In making his film, Alfred Hitchcock seemingly took the plot, characters and setting of Frederick Knott's play, used his cinematic skills to make the talky piece lively enough to be acceptable as a movie, directed his actors, including the beautiful new star Grace Kelly, into exciting performances, and was done with it. Contemporary reviews rested on the premise that Hitchcock had managed to make the play into a dialogue movie that was interesting to watch. Recent studies of Hitchcock's work seem to leave it in the category of an 'interesting filmed play'. Robin Wood makes only one reference to it. Hitchcock himself, in the Truffaut interview book, says he merely emphasised the theatrical aspects and tried to avoid the temptation to 'open up' the play.

On the surface, then, the two works remain essentially the same, and *Dial M for Murder* can be analysed in terms of Hitchcock's edit-

ing pattern, his use of colour, and the general adaptation of his cinematic techniques to Frederick Knott's work. A careful examination of both play and film, however, reveals that the director made numerous changes. These alterations are subtle, but they are major because through them Hitchcock turned the material into his own work, retaining the basic plot and most of the dialogue but switching the focus of the play so that the film expresses his own thematic concerns. Although *Dial M for Murder* was shot in 3-D, it was apparently shown commercially only in its flat version. The use of colour and the editing pattern, particularly in the first third, are two of film's obvious achievements. Close analysis of the editing tends only to shed more light on Hitchcock's masterfully cinematic adaptation of a play. Unfortunately, in studying the film I have only had access to a black and white print, and I saw the colour version too long ago to be able to discuss the creative use of colour. The main purpose here, then, is to examine how and where Hitchcock changed the play, and the manner in which these changes reflect his thematic concerns.

A screenplay by Frederick Knott, labelled 'Final Script' and dated July 30, 1953, is in the Theatre Collection of New York's Lincoln Center Library. A study of it yields little, since it too is quite different from the film. In spite of the label, it is apparently only a draft.

There are many categories of changes in the screen version. First and most obvious are those which make the material more cinematic without falsely 'opening it up': the editing, the famous high angle shots and the recurring visual motif of the telephone are examples. Second, there are the changes which create Hitchcockian suspense out of rather straightforward stage thriller material, as particularly evidenced in the murder sequence. Most significant are the changes at a thematic level, which involve subtle shifts in Knott's characters in the arrangement of dialogue in order to express Hitchcock's concern with the nature of human relationships and with sexuality in general. Hitchcock also adds touches of his familiar ironic humour, both for the chuckles they will elicit and for their expression of his overall ironic view of the situation. Naturally, there are also 'nuts and bolts' changes, dialogue which seemingly has been dropped merely to keep the film moving. Lastly, there are those changes which are difficult to explain concretely, such as the name change in the Robert Cummings character: Max Halliday becomes Mark Halliday. One can only speculate on the possible significance of the word 'mark', in the sense of object, or target. On the surface, he is an innocuous or even helpful character, but in actuality hs has been singled out as the mark or target of derision. At any rate, because Hitchcock's form, method and themes are so interwoven, the idea of separating the changes into absolute or exclusive categories becomes not only difficult, but perhaps futile. Hitchcock turns someone else's play into his film by editing his shots into his own genre to express his own ideas.

The first and most noticeable visual alteration is apparent in the main set's design. In the play, the Wendice flat seems more elaborate, and includes an entry foyer at back centre of the stage. The bedroom door is on stage right, next to the fireplace, and the french windows are at stage left. The sofa, upon which most two-way conversations take place, naturally faces the audience. The main action is therefore played out against the background of the entry foyer, and the bedroom door adds little but a convenient exit when characters must be removed from the stage. In the film the set is more confined: not only is the foyer eliminated, so that the front door opens directly into the living room, but the position of the bedroom door gives it more prominence. If we assume for a moment that the action is all shot from the position of the french windows, then we can conclude that Hitchcock merely eliminated the entry hall and turned the set ninety degrees. Obviously, the film is shot only partially from this viewpoint. Many different camera set ups were used to give various views of the room, but the least frequent is that which the play used consistently. Since Hitchcock was composing a 3-D film, he would want a set which would emphasise depth. The sofa faces both the fireplace and the bedroom door, and

thus allows shots taken from behind the sofa to use this door as a framing device. This is one method used to achieve depth.

On the stage, all the scenes naturally take place in the living room. The play opens with a dialogue between Margot and Max:

> 'As the curtin rises, Margot is handing Max a drink. She suddenly hears something outside and opens and peeps through the hall door for a moment. Then she closes the door and turns to Max.
> Margot: For a moment I thought it was Tony. I'm sorry I interrupted you. What were we talking about . . .?'
> *(Random House edition,* 1953, *p. 4)*

Max goes on to talk about his career as a writer of murder mysteries. We learn that the two have had an affair, but that Tony, Margot's husband, has changed and thus the marriage has improved. Margot goes on to explain about her lost handbag and letter, and eventually shows Max the blackmail notes. Just before Tony enters, Max speaks of a story he is writing, a story which obviously involves his affair with Margot:

> Margot: Only to find that husband and wife were very happy, thank you.
> Max: And that he was very glad to know it.
> Margot: Max, let's drink to—the way things turn out.
> Max (raising glass to Margot): Way things turn . . .
> As they are about to drink, Tony enters the room.

Although the movie's opening (up to the point of Tony's entrance) contains basically the same information, Hitchcock's film is very different. The first shot is of a young London policeman (Martin Milner), in medium close-up, standing on a street; he looks around and walks on. The film ends with a shot of the same policeman, photographed from behind, standing by a street lamp. His innocent face tells us that he really does not know what is going on, and the last shot suggests that he has learned nothing. The director does not make much of this; it's just a throwaway joke, but at the same time it is an ironic comment on the vigilance of the police, who supposedly keep order while actually missing the crimes that go on in front of them.

The street dissolves to Tony (Ray Milland) and Margot (Grace Kelly) kissing while standing over a breakfast table in the kitchen. They sit down at the table. Margot glances at the newspaper and then looks up, suspiciously, at her husband. An insert informs us that on the *Queen Elizabeth*, arriving that day, is an American passenger, Mark Halliday (Robert Cummings). We see some very brief shots of Mark's disembarkation, and then a dissolve to Margot and Mark, kissing in the living room. Here Hitchcock has told us in just a minute or two, and in strictly visual terms, a good deal about Margot's marital state and her affair with Mark. Further, this opening and the initial dialogue represent a major alteration in the thrust of the drama.

Margot's first words (and the first in the film) inform Mark that she has not told Tony anything about them. During the first encounter between Max and Margot in the play, we learn the beginnings of the mystery. The love affair seems to exist simply as a rationale for blackmail (and to leave open the possibility of a happy ending). Knott's dialogue points out that the affair is over, that Margot's marriage is now happy (at least in her mind), and that Max, stalwart fellow that he is, accepts matters as they are. On the other hand, by the close proximity of the kissing scenes, the film emphasises Margot's infidelity. Her suspicious glance across the breakfast table shows us that she is not innocent; because she looks at the announcement in the paper and is next seen kissing Mark, she seems to have arranged the meeting. (In the play, it is Max who calls her; dialogue dropped by Hitchcock.)

In the play, Margot is trying to put her past behind her, and the murder plot thus makes her a totally innocent victim. Not so in the film. The change is significant on various levels. First of all, because Margot remains continually guilty, we are able both to sympathise with her and to understand Tony's desire to kill her. The sympathy is not complete, of course, and his motivation, as we shall see, is quite complex. Margot's continued, or desired, infidelity informs us of her ambivalence about the two

men. She is still sexually interested in Mark, so her claims that the affair is over do not sound quite true. At the same time, however, she does seem to be in love with Tony and is still sexually attracted to him.

Hitchcock establishes from the outset the sexual nature of the film, and develops it in this scene. Mark, like Max, seems to accept the situation (Margot *is* putting him off), but the film emphasises his sexual frustration. As the conversation becomes more intimate, Hitchcock frames the couple behind a row of liquor bottles. The 3-D composition of this shot (evident throughout, even in a flat version) places the bottles in the extreme foreground, emphasising their phallic quality. In this shot Mark is trying to express his feelings for Margot, and it ends on another kiss. It is on this kiss, rather than on a toast to the way things turn out, that Tony arrives home. By Tony's entry at this point, Hitchcock indicates Margot's infidelity, Mark's sexual quest and the beginnings of Tony's sexually rooted motivation. Since his wife is kissing another man practically under his nose, Tony also gains some immediate sympathy.

One of Hitchcock's most subtle achievements is the reshaping of the character of Tony. Once again, the man of play and film appear on the surface to be the same. Close examination, as usual, reveals differences. Changes in Margot and in the Margot-Mark relationship alter the audience's perception of Tony; and throughout the film added and deleted dialogue, editing and specific shot compositions significantly transform the character. From his first appearance in the play, he seems cruder, much more the tennis jock he is supposed to be. All dialogue which serves only to point up the differences in culture and education between Tony and Mark is missing from the film. Similarly, conversations which oppose Margot's Innocent to Tony's Villain are dropped. From the beginning, this Tony is more sophisticated and self-confident than Mark. He is urbane, consistently charming and never very interested in athletics.

Knott further stacks the deck against Tony by making him a petty liar. (For example, when Margot phones during his interview with Lesgate/Swann, Tony lies that he is sleepy and has just made some coffee.) The film omits all such statements. Obviously, Tony is involved in the far more evil act of planning Margot's murder, and the audience really does not need any more reason to dislike him. As handled by Hitchcock, the planning of the murder (for which Knott does deserve credit) becomes the plotting of the perfect crime, a work of art. While it is intrinsically despicable, there is also something admirable in the fine precision with which he has worked out the details; and Hitchcock certainly did not want to cloud this grand deception by the inclusion of petty lies.

At the same time, other seemingly innocuous remarks are retained. For example, again during the telephone conversation, Tony misreads 'Albert Hall' in Margot's engagement book: 'Looks like Al Bentall, who's he? Another of your boyfriends?' Hitchcock keeps this sly question because, among other things, it helps shed light on Tony's motivation. That motivation is complex and one of the film's central elements. In the play, Tony's primary motive seems to be money; it is only secondarily, if at all, sexual jealousy. In the film, it is just the opposite. Tony in the play explains to Lesgate a great deal more about Margot's family money and his own search for a rich wife; the implication is that he never had any interest in Margot beyond her wealth. He also tells Lesgate in both versions that when he was confronted with Margot's affair, he was frightened because it would mean the loss of income. Hitchcock does not remove money as a motivating factor, but he reduces it. The film has already revealed Tony as a man wronged by his wife (the kissing scenes), and against this background Tony's explanations to Lesgate beocme only partially true. His motivation is no more clear-cut to him than it is to us; money may be one of the stock motives for murder, but it does not fully explain Tony's obsession. The casting, as with all the characters, is crucial here. Grace Kelly is an extremely beautiful woman, and her presence alone makes it difficult to accept that Tony would only be drawn to her inherited wealth.

In this light, Tony's false limp and the cane offer visual evidence for the sexual motiva-

tion. In the play, as in the film, Tony's 'twisted knee' serves as an excuse to induce Lesgate to come to the Wendice flat. On the stage, however, Tony only 'turns and deliberately assumes a painful limp' (page 29). He does not use a cane. Lesgate only makes one reference to the 'groggy knee', and after all pretences have been eliminated, the stage directions indicate that Tony 'has dropped his limp' (page 44). Lesgate apparently never notices. Since the cane has no necessary function, and since it is a Hitchcock addition, its phallic quality seems unavoidable, especially as it is brought to our attention just as Tony begins to explain to Lesgate that he wants him to murder his wife. When Tony gets up to wipe the fingerprints from the photograph, there is a close-up of the cane, lying down, from Lesgate's point of view. Unlike Knott, Hitchcock has not simply let the matter drop, but rather he has informed us in a very economical and visual manner that Lesgate has noticed it. In doing so, the director also seems to have suggested the deeper implications of the image.

In the next scene of both versions, Tony, Margot and Mark are together before the men go off to the stag party. It is here that the major point of the play is made through Max/Mark's comments on the perfect crime. Knott ironically has Max say that if he were planning the perfect crime it would not work because of 'some stupid mistake' which he would not realize until 'I found that everyone was looking at me.' The plot of *Dial M for Murder*, of course, turns precisely on such a mistake and, at the end of the play, Tony realises his mistake as everybody, the characters and the audience, is looking at him. Hitchcock does not tamper with this basic aspect of the plot.

Directly after this pleasant conversation, however, Knott makes it relatively simple for Tony to take the crucial key from Margot's handbag. First, when he realizes that his ploy about his own missing key will not work, he drops it out of his glove on to the desk. Then Knott sends Margot and Max off stage, giving Tony the opportunity to remove Margot's key from her handbag and place it under the stair carpet outside the front door. Hitchcock alters this scene in order to make it more cinematic, to build suspense and to force audience identification with Tony, as he compels Tony to play a game with Margot and her handbag in order to get the key. On the pretext of borrowing money from Margot, he takes her bag, and when she protests he puts it behind his back. In close-up we tensely watch him remove the key from the change purse, as Margot attempts to take the bag from him.

This scene is one of the most expressive in the film. It suggests most of the film's central ideas, and its value does not arise merely from the obvious plot importance of the key. The scene is significant because in filming it this way Hitchcock forces the audience to identify with Tony's attempt to take the key, and thus moves a major step in implicating the spectator in the murder plan. Further, and perhaps most importantly, it is crucial because in this scene the couple seem genuinely happy. Margot is protesting, playfully but seriously (her refusal to allow Tony access to her handbag reminds us that it contained the original incriminating letter; her protest suggests more incriminating contents, but we are not informed why she objects). Tony plays back, unquestionably serious about removing the key but enjoying the play with Margot. The game has a sexual quality to it which underscores Margot's ambivalent feelings about Tony and his about her. Mark is properly excluded from this scene, and here he seems most like the interloper he is. The scene belongs completely to Hitchcock and is overwhelming because it points out the ambivalent quality of both characters' motivations, while mixing the emotions of the audience. We want Tony to remove the key while we simultaneously want Tony and Margot to send Mark off to the party alone so that they can promptly go to bed together. It does not seem incidental here that the struggle involves a handbag and a key, with all the sexual implications such objects convey, even though they are essential elements in Knott's plot.

Once Tony has secured the key, Hitchcock concentrates on involving the audience with Tony's difficulty in hiding it under the stair carpet. Mark, framed in the doorway, stands in

front of the designated stair, and thus he typically interferes with plans. By means of a cut, we follow Mark and Tony out into the hallway, Hitchcock turns Tony's statement about his boss calling (from the play) into a stalling device for Tony. In doing this, the director milks Knott's dialogue far beyond its original intention and gains its full value. The stall affords Tony the opportunity to place the key under the carpet, and after Tony and Mark have exited, the camera dollies back to the stair and to a huge close-up of the tip of the key, slightly visible under the carpet.

On the stage, the murder scene is handled visually, without dialogue, but in a straightforward manner that seems to have no meaning beyond its necessity to the narrative. Act Two, Scene II opens to the darkened living room, lit only by the fire. Lesgate enters, takes off his scarf and ties two knots in it as he crosses to the french windows. The phone rings. He steps behind the curtains. The light goes on under the bedroom door. Margot enters the room, answers the phone and is attacked. A struggle ensues, and she finally stabs Lesgate with her scissors. When it is over, as in the film, she begins to speak into the telephone.

Although these basic elements remain visually exciting in the film, Hitchcock makes the murder scene longer, designs it for suspense and concentrates a great deal of attention on Tony. By his use of the element of time and images of wrist watches, the director again implicates the audience in the attempted murder. The sequence begins with a shot of Lesgate walking down the dark, rainy street to the Wendice flat. We watch him enter the hall and remove the key. Cut to a brief shot of Margot asleep in bed. Cut back to Lesgate entering the darkened living room. Up to this point, although more suspenseful and cinematic, the scene is the same as it is in the play, but here the changes begin. Lesgate looks at his watch, and a close-up tells us that it is two minutes to eleven. (Tony had arranged to call precisely at 11:00 p.m.) Lesgate goes behind the curtain.

Now a surprising cut to Tony, Mark and others sitting at a table at the stag party. Tony looks at his watch; it is 10:40. Cut back to Lesgate. Cut back to the party; Tony again looks at his watch, but it reads the same time. He asks the correct time; someone tells him that it's twenty past. Mark, significantly, corrects him and informs Tony that it's just after eleven. Tony then hurriedly explains to the surprised Mark that he must call his boss. Cut back to Lesgate, walking across the room towards the door. Cut to Tony, walking towards a phone box which is occupied. He is forced to wait; and the audience, like Tony, feels the wait lasts an interminable time. Finally, he enters the phone box. There is a close-up of the 'M' on the dial, followed by a brief shot of the telephone switching mechanism operating (perhaps the film's only gratuitous shot). At this point we cut back to Lesgate, who is almost out of the door. The sound of the telephone causes him to rush to the windows. With the addition of a shot of Margot rising from bed, the scene is then played out essentially as it is on stage. The major difference is that during the struggle and killing there are a number of cuts back to Tony on the phone, reacting to what he hears. It has been necessary to describe this sequence in detail because it is here that the elements of the play are most obviously moulded into a Hitchcock film.

The shots of Tony, the emphasis on the disparity in the time, and Lesgate's near departure all force the viewer to desire the successful execution of the murder. The succeeding shots of Margot getting up, the light under the bedroom door and her walk across the room are terrifying, but it is too late. We are allied with Tony, and the guilt is ours. Does Tony feel any guilt? His reaction is, as ususal, complex. As soon as he realizes that Margot is on the phone he switches back into his role playing, reacting with surprise and bafflement. The close-ups of his face as he listens to the sounds of the struggle reveal his confused emotions and complex motivations. His realisation of what life without Margot will be, his need to punish her and his frantic desire for the success of his perfect crime are all reflected in his anguished face and enhanced by the audience's own confused emotions at this

time. This is one of the rare moments in the film when Tony is neither cool, self-confident nor in control. (It is typical of Hitchcock's irony that in this chaos, as the perfect crime is about to be committed, he shows us on the wall beside the phone box a portrait of the Queen, a symbol of order.)

The next few scenes reflect some minor changes but none of great importance. Some, such as a brief shot of Tony in a cab and another of Margot taking an aspirin in the bathroom, merely 'open up' the play. Others, such as the rearrangement of events and dialogue upon Tony's return home, tend to encourage more identification with him. Tony's call to the police is naturally heightened by the addition of shots of the cop on the other end of the phone. Hitchcock gives the policeman his usual menacing quality. When Tony says he does not know what has happened, there is a cut to the policeman saying, almost accusing, 'What do you mean, you don't know?' The question grates on us as it does on Tony.

Because Hitchcock shows us the police investigation, he is able to eliminate the play's morning after dialogue describing it. In this morning scene, Knott introduced some new characters. One, a reporter asking questions, is removed by Hitchcock, as are all references to the news media. (Later in the play, after Margot has been condemned to death, Tony has a telephone conversation with a reporter in which they negotiate the sale of Margot's letters and Tony holds out for more money. Hitchcock drops the allusion to the sale: at that point in the film, Tony is adjusting to life without Margot, has turned the failed perfect crime into another seemingly perfect method of achieving his goal, and has plenty of money to live on.)

During the morning scene, Inspector Hubbard (John Williams) is introduced on both stage and screen. Anthony Dawson (Lesgate Swann) and John Williams are the only two actors who played their roles in both versions. Their performances are perfection, and Hitchcock makes no changes or additions to their characters. The director adds some visual humour to Hubbard, as in his fumbling, failed attempt to find a place to hang his hat, which ends in his settling for the cane in a stand, and in his dirty look at Mark when he finds his raincoat crumpled. This latter shot is more significant than it appears at first glance. It foreshadows the Mark-Hubbard competition in solving the case and offers an image both of Hubbard's superiority over Mark and his disdain for him.

After the four main characters have left for the police station, Hitchcock introduces the scene which even a casual viewer notices as a change from the play. This addition is, of course, the close-up of Margot, as off-screen voices indicate the progress of her trial and conviction. (In the play, we learn what has happened through a radio report which Tony hears in his flat.) The film's expressionistic scene is effective in black and white, but since its purpose was designed around the shifting colours, it is pointless for me to comment on it.

So far, we have paid little attention to the character of Mark. In the play, he is unquestionably a minor character. He is Margot's resigned former lover, and he uses his experience in crime writing first to devise a scheme which will free Margot and then to realize Tony's guilt. The film retains this function of the character, and he remains Margot's constant champion, but he also serves not simply as a bystander but as a seeming 'good guy' who is responsible for much of the havoc around him. Mark constantly interferes where he does not belong. In the play, of course, he hinders Tony by being sharp enough to come so close to the truth, but it goes much deeper in the film. Because Hitchcock has made Tony more sympathetic, Mark becomes more dislikeable. Robert Cummings, an actor who does not automatically generate a great deal of sympathy, is thus perfectly cast in the role.

From the beginning, we have seen Mark's sexual involvement with Margot. He has been defeated by Tony, and he stands outside the marriage circle. His attempt to expose Tony, then, is not merely an effort to save Margot but is more critically an attempt to prove his own manhood, to win in the sexual competition with Tony. Hitchcock makes these aspects of

the character clear both visually and verbally. For example, when Mark comes to Tony with his scheme to save Margot (which as we all know by now is the truth), Tony naturally reacts with surprise. 'Why should anyone want to murder Margot?' In the play, Max answers: 'Oh, one of the stock motives. Had Margot a will?' In the film, Mark first replies, 'Tony, I know that's hard for us to see because we both love her.' Hitchcock's addition of this line seems to have a number of meanings. As spoken by Cummings, it seems ironic, and the most surface interpretation of the irony is the absurdity of the statement (how can Tony love Margot if he is sending her to her death?). On another level, the line is true. Both of them do love her, in their respective fashions, but she has sexually defeated each of them. This statement is Mark's only admission to Tony of his feeling for Margot, and the irony therefore arises from the fact that, if it were not for Mark, Tony never would have planned her murder or secured her arrest. The dialogue surrounding this one sentence is essentially the same in both versions, and the simple inclusion of it is one of many examples where Hitchcock, by means of a very subtle change, switched the focus to his own concerns. Shortly after this line, the film retains Tony's accusation of Mark: 'It was because of your—association with her that she lost the sympathy of the jury.' The addition of the earlier statement gives this sentence new meaning.

In both versions, the most obvious change which has come about in the living room since Margot's departure is the addition of a bed. When Max enters the room in the play, Tony almost immediately explains that he moved the bed into the living room because 'everybody stops in the street and peers in at the bedroom window.' In the film, the bed sometimes dominates the frame. Mark takes visual notice of it, but neither he, nor Tony, nor later Hubbard makes any reference to its presence. At the key moment, when Mark has broken open the attaché case and has brought it to Hubbard's attention, his remark to Tony is both sneering and full of pity: 'No wonder you couldn't sleep in her bedroom any more.' The bed has obviously been on his mind since he entered the apartment, but he has said nothing. The sexual implication is nearly explicit, and Mark's statement, coupled with his apparent cracking of the case as he smugly goes on to analyse it for Hubbard, represents his feeling of sexual victory. He can afford to speak compassionately to Tony because, for the moment, he has won, and soon he will not only be in Margot's bedroom but in her bed. Because Tony makes no mention of the bed whatsoever, Hitchcock leaves the interpretation open; yet the bed is there, and the implications are inescapable.

Shortly after Hubbard has slipped back into the flat alone, Max joins him on stage by breaking in through the french windows. He is pursuing his own investigation. In the Hitchcock version, Mark lurks around outside and, when the time is right, humbly asks Hubbard to let him in. Max demonstrates a kind of heroic determination; Mark remains subservient.

There is another indication of Mark's character near the very end of the movie. After Hubbard has brought Margot into the room and explained that Tony had planned her murder, Margot wonders why she doesn't break down. Max answers in the play: 'It's a delayed action, that's all. In a couple of days you're going to have one helluva breakdown.' The line merely offers sympathy and an explanation. In the film, Marks says:'. . . in a couple of days you'll have the most wonderful breakdown.' He smiles and puts his arm around her, obviously gloating in his victory.

Although the play's denouement (like the murder scene) is designed for visual impact and suspense, Hitchcock's alterations ironically weaken Frederick Knott's original intent. The theatre audience waits and hears Tony fumbling with the latch keys. Aided by Hubbard's comment 'He's remembered!' (the play's last line), the audience watches Tony enter the flat for the last time and enjoys the satisfaction of seeing him trap himself. Tony stares at Margot as she 'turns her head away from Tony and towards Max. Hubbard looks Tony up and down for a moment, then moves very slowly to the telephone and dials a

number' (page 182). Since the 'stupid mistake in the perfect crime' is the point of the play, this is a proper ending.

All these elements remain on screen, but because we watch Tony both remember the key (shot through the bedroom window, from Hubbard's point of view) and retrieve if from under the carpet, the effect of his entrance is not the same. Hitchcock has removed the dramatic impact of the last scene in order to concentrate on Tony's reaction to the other characters and theirs to him. Once he realizes that he cannot escape, he becomes again the charming man we have known throughout the film. There is a cut to a close-up of Margot's face, lined with tears. Does she cry only as a release from her horrible experience? Or do the tears result from her feeling of betrayal by Tony, a man she loved and with whom she tried to be happy? Or is is a real disappointment at losing Tony and realizing she must now settle for Mark, not as a lark but permanently? Or does she weep because she realises that the sexual power she believed she exercised over Tony was broken long before she was aware of it? There is no simple answer; Hitchcock has deliberately left Margot and her tears ambiguous. He never really explains Margot, but shows us only her own ambivalent desires and the effect she has on Tony and Mark.

Tony offers Hubbard a drink, but then slyly adds, 'Oh, I suppose you're still on duty.' The penultimate shot of the film is of Hubbard making a telephone call and combing his moustache. The last shot is of the young policeman, outside the flat.

The play *Dial M for Murder* is essentially a thriller whose mystery arises not from the 'whodunnit' question but from the problem of 'where did he go wrong/how does he get caught?' Using this element as a framework for his film, Hitchcock made it a subtle study of sexual relationships. As in so many of his films, he has taken the stock good guy and bad guy and coloured them with nuances, creating complexities which cloud the natural responses of the audience. He has also utilised the familiar Hitchcock situation of an innocent falsely accused of a crime. Margot, however, is not wholly innocent, being guilty at least of a kind of double infidelity.

Given the plot of *Dial M for Murder*, the theatregoer or reader has no difficulty in sorting out his own feelings at the end. He is glad that Tony, an evil near-genius, finally traps himself. His pity for Margot's situation is greatly softened by the realisation that she and Max will live happily ever after. The film viewer is allowed no such comforts. Hitchcock has made Tony too sympathetic for the viewer to be pleased with his downfall: he wants him to get away with it even though he knows Tony deserves to be caught. (A strictly moralist interpretation would explain the ending as part of Hitchcock's strategy to make the viewer deal with his own capacity for evil.) He cannot really believe that Margot and Mark will live happily ever after; nor, after knowing them, can he believe they deserve to. *Dial M for Murder* is not just a filmed play, or a 'straight adaptation'; it is a film by Alfred Hitchcock.

—*Sight and Sound*,
Summer 1976.