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# **Elstree Calling, Juno and the Paycock**

After directing Gordon Harker in a sequence of *Elstree Calling*, Hitchcock went on to another eminent literary adaptation, *Juno and the Paycock*, which he describes as 'a photograph of a stage play. . . . The camera was encased in what looked like a telephone booth in those days for reasons of soundproofing.' The cast consisted almost entirely of the production's original Irish actors, and this transliteration of Sean O'Casey's most popular play was highly regarded at the time by, notably, James Agate, as well as by others whom one would have expected to be very sensitive to any infidelity. Retrospectively, and to anyone sufficiently attuned to film form, the film's very fidelity lies in its infidelity. It's not particularly a matter of opening out in time and space. There are, by now, examples enough of films quite as 'enclosed' as this one is, to vindicate the medium from the imputation that it can't remain within narrow bounds. And in any case it's obvious that any living space offers a multiplicity of subspaces, reverse-angles and varied configurations, particularly if you allow for changes of lighting, contrasted rhythms of cutting, and so on. It wouldn't be a very great *tour de force* to make a half-hour film whose hero never moves outside a telephone-booth, and even easier with perfectly organic and natural interludes like leaning against it outside waiting for the irascible old lady to make endless calls or to scan the bend in the road for the first possible sight of the expected automobile. The key lies in the phrase, 'natural and organic'. Where the stage-play's restrictions start to cabin, crib, confine, bind in, is when the play can't expand to take in action which it would be relevant to see and

when unity within the scene requires a stylised concatenation of events. Here again, the distinction is far from clear-cut. The mainstream theatre has subsequently absorbed, from a pre-cinematic avant-garde (and the popular Victorian theatre!), a sufficiently fast and fluid staging. The difference lies not so much between stage and screen as media as between the rules and conventions of the naturalism within which Sean O'Casey worked, and what was required of the mainstream cinema at the time of Hitchcock's adaptation. Even here, it's worth remembering that, at about this time, Lewis Milestone with *Rain*, King Vidor with *Street Scene*, and Jean Renoir with *Boudu Sauv  des Eaux*, were all solving the problems of endowing the enclosed, naturalistic play with appropriate movement and rhythm. The real problem, one suspects, was more specific. On the one hand was the relationship between this particular play's form and the events which it describes. On the other, were the technical and financial limitations of the company and the studio for which Hitchcock was working.

Perhaps, as Agate's remarks imply, the film worked well enough within the filmic conventions of its time, when, mainly for reasons of cheapness, 'stagey' general shots were much in use. Perhaps *aficionados* of the theatre and of literary texts are not the best judges of whether a film adaptation thereof works well as a film. In any case, the film offers the modern spectator a variety of problems.

In the first place, of course, a spiritual, rather than purely conventional, problem is offered by O'Casey's 'well-constructed play' with its 'great moments'—which are all the more awkward in view of the play's constructional clumsiness, at least by the standards of Ibsen and Strindberg. Second, the film relates to an older cinematic idiom and rhythm, geared partly to the excitements of the Americans and the Russians, and partly to relatively simple, fast, full-hearted reactions to events. Today's intellectual spectator is likely to be more at home with the slower, smoother, heavier, more brooding style of, say, Wyler's *The Little Foxes*, and to require more time to catch, and then to think through, his more cautious and nuanced feelings (whence the relative slowness of Henry King's films for Fox through the '50s). *Juno* moves too fast; climaxes appear too suddenly, are cut across too drastically. In a decade or so fashions may have changed again. The spectator may find the smooth slow pace of the '50s and '60s tedious in the extreme, and feel only repetition whereas in fact the spectator was groping for attitudes so that his mind was moving even though the film wasn't. *Juno* seems particularly lacking in dolly-shots,

and tends to restrict any depth in groupings to long-shot, which suggests problems with sound equipment and shallow-focus lenses analogous to those with which Renoir was grappling. But whereas the French situation gave the director and his creative * quipe* an ascendancy over the technicians, in England the balance between the system and the artist was less favourable to the innovations required to master the new techniques, and for once Hitchcock the redoubtable technical thinker was unable to impose himself.

A third problem lies in changes of behaviour. It's one that has to be thoroughly clarified, now that the cinema's existence stretches back through three-quarters of a century characterised by rapid and continuous cultural, and therefore behavioural, change. The problem has appeared already in literature, of course, although there too a kind of uneasy avoidance of the problem exists as between those who claim that art is great in so far as it transcends local differences of behaviour (so stressing, with pleasure, the fact that it lends itself to different interpretations in every age), and those who claim that art is valuable also in showing other, different, mutually exclusive, patterns of thought and behaviour, thus widening and deepening our sense of historically real human possibilities. Although it's not too difficult to combine the two propositions, there is a great deal of tension between them, particularly as regards the usefulness of minor works of art, which, precisely because they are tied, albeit intelligently and sensitively, to their time and place, force us to adapt to them and don't allow us to bring to them assumptions with which we are already more than sufficiently familiar. It can certainly be argued that intelligent minor works are a necessary commentary on major works of their epoch, precisely by making it easier for us to see the meaningful differences as well as the similarities, many of which may well be taken in a shallow and sentimental way unless their complex interaction with dissimilarities is grasped. In consequence, many semi-alien works of art tend to get unjustly consigned to nostalgia or camp. And the importance of honouring, rather than dismissing, many intelligent minor movies remains. The problem is particularly acute for the cinema, not only because of the particular severity of judgement mentioned in the preliminary chapter, but because the cin camera with its very detailed recording of external behaviour, depicts every aspect of human style, from ways of standing to the slightest mannerism, far more precisely than the merely evocative paraphrase which is all that words can provide. The less thoughtful men of letters sometimes point to the fact that films seem to date more rapidly than

the written word as indicative of some lesser level of achievement in the film medium. But one important reason why films seem to date more rapidly is because they record everything external more exactly. And it's impossible to dismiss what it records as mere ephemera. One doesn't need to be a psychologist to understand that gestures and postures may reveal states of soul, or complex psychological attitudes and progressions, while also (to provide a further degree of refinement) requiring, for fuller understanding, some sense of the conventional, the normal and the ideal, kinds of physical existence. All the nuances which so often filter through the meshes of verbal description are not too fine for the camera eye.

Just as the Cockney accent has changed profoundly since its—stylised and approximative—recording by Dickens—and is still changing—there's every reason to suppose that the language of the body has changed no less profoundly. In the 1930s Pathé film clips of the coster comic Gus Elen, reliving his heyday of twenty or so years earlier, not only the accent, but the facial expressions and every gesticulation frequently strike those born after 1940 as being quite as alien and incomprehensible as a Zulu's, being adapted to the more specialised world of the old East End. The differences between them and us are so striking as to make it immediately obvious that spontaneous responses aren't enough and that the critic can't 'judge' the performance as false or true at all. He can enjoy learning from it, though, quite apart from the great deal that remains of its contemporary entertainment value. The problem becomes much more complex when the difficulties are less striking, as when behaviour is in a kind of transitional stage (although all stages are transitional!) between a familiar style and an unfamiliar one. The spectator is jerked, often rapidly, between what he immediately recognises as authentic and strangenesses which he may too rapidly assume are inauthentic. What's even more difficult is that very often these semi-alien styles of behaviour were observed and reproduced by people to whom they were semi-alien, stage Cockney and Stage-Oirish being celebrated instances. As if all that weren't enough, much that is

spiritually authentic in high culture art responds to a tradition of attaining the larger than life which may seem false to temperaments steeped in the current combination of documentary realism and cool underplaying, but which responds to a natural and logical intellectual process whereby the extraordinary clarifies or comments on the ordinary.

One might have anticipated difficulties in adapting distinguished stage performances for the screen, but as it happens the smoothest and most cinematic performances (Sara Allgood as Juno and Sidney Morgan as Joxer) come from the actors who had played those parts on the stage, while Edward Chapman, who didn't play the Paycock in the theatrical production, plays in what looks to me the stagiest way of all; seems, at times, almost beyond Hitchcock's control. Otherwise the film's merits and artifices make for a blurred but legible carbon copy of the play's, and moving as Sara Allgood is I wouldn't myself want to say that its humanist fundamentalism as to poverty, suffering, family feeling, treachery, irresponsibility, divided loyalties and the horrors of Civil War survive without impairment the contemporary preference for irony, coolth and moral scepticism. It may well be that the loss is largely ours.

An act division is marked by a burst of fire and the appearance of a row of machine-gun bullet-holes. The effect precedes the analogous one in Howard Hawks's *Scarface*, although Hitchcock, like Hawks, may well have got it from Von Sternberg, who had used it in *Underworld*. A few years later and Hitchcock or B.I.P. might have been tempted to open out the play in such a way as to give it something in common with the gangster film, in which, at this point, immigrant-class families and mothers did loom large. It's ironical to think that a few years later Hitchcock might thus have found an extensive American audience and enjoyed a success which would have set the British film industry a valuable counter-example to *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. The encounter of O'Casey, and Hitchcock's adaptation of the gangster's film expressionistic opportunities would also have been interesting, quite apart from the resultant parallel to John Ford's *The Informer*.