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No one to my knowledge has been able to locate Hitchcock, the cameo imp, in *The Trouble with Harry*. (An eagle-eyed Hitchcockian claims that there is a neo-nized silhouette of Hitch in *Rope*, another toughie for cameo appearances.) In any

event, many viewers and reviewers have professed to find *Harry* a letdown in the current Hitchcock series after the exegetic explosions of *Rear Window* and *Vertigo*. Even the Oscar cachet for Shirley MacLaine, who made her screen debut in *Harry*, is unlikely to make this slightly morbid, slightly raunchy whimsy palatable to '80s audiences. Not that *Harry* was any more a smash back in 1955. *To Catch a Thief*, released earlier that year, had been regarded as something of a disappointment after *Rear Window*, but *Harry* was dismissed as downright self-indulgent. All right, Hitchcock was entranced by Vermont in autumn, and he wanted to display his droll way with the macabre in a radically incongruous setting. But the movie is never funny enough to justify its stylized treatment, and the situations are never engrossing enough to redeem the arch bohemianism of its milieu. Indeed, even more today than in 1955, the notion of a painter in Vermont professing to be uninterested in mere money is ludicrous. We all know too well by now that the so-called "simple" life of uncrowded rusticity is the ultimate ego trip of crass elitists.

Still, once one concedes the slightness of the movie, and the problematic nature of its squashed humor, it is very easy to enjoy it in a relaxed spirit of bemused acquiescence. The acting ranges from the pleasantly inoffensive to the unaffectedly genial, and that is not a bad range for an enterprise of this kind. Obviously, *Harry* was re-released ahead of *Rope* because of the Oscar publicity for Shirley MacLaine, who does not have any of the coy facade of such a quintessential Hitchcock heroine as the late Grace Kelly. With Shirley what you see is very much what you get, and here in her first movie role you can already see some of her too-deliberate head-tilting mannerisms designed to project a

perky piquancy, a mannerism picked up perhaps when she was in the chorus line trying to mug her way into the big time. It seems also now in retrospect that she was the first important movie kook, and considerably ahead of her time in not making a big deal about sex. And she is admirably suited to the thematic thrust of *Harry*, which demonstrates how not to make a big deal about either sex or death. John Michael Hayes's script may be somewhat too glib on both subjects, but the admirable frankness of MacLaine's personality gets the movie over many of its potential rough spots. In fact, to the extent that she doesn't always seem to "get" all the goings-on, she acts as a surrogate sensibility for the audience.

John Forsyth as the artist-hero-lover is saddled with much of the burden of making the plot move on from its very doubtful first premise, namely that the corpse of a grotesquely improper Bostonian named Harry could be buried and reburied, discovered and rediscovered, several times over a 24-hour period by a group of excessively eccentric characters in search of nothing much in particular, and least of all their author. Forsyth is fascinating to look at today as a '50s lead who never made it to stardom, but who is now bigger than ever and an almost frighteningly familiar face from *Dynasty*. With the benefit of hindsight, one might speculate that Forsyth's overprepared straightness suggests a bit too much prissiness and self-mockery to overcome the trend of the time toward uninhibited Method madness.

For once, Hitchcock does not undercut his romantic leads. Yet, in leaving them alone, however benignly, he creates a vacuum that is filled very artfully and even movingly by Mildred Natwick and Edmund Gwenn in a late-autumn romance that blossoms miraculously and defiantly before the imminent onset of winter. It was to be Hitchcock's own last burst of autumnal cheerfulness before the seemingly unending morbidity of his winter tapered off in the mellowing coda of *Family Plot*, itself an extended double entendre on the subject of death and sex. ■

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The Trouble with Harry
Thoughts on *Harry* & Hitchcock
- Andrew Sarris