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Author(s)	Dane Wilsonne
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SABOTAGE

(Britain/1936) 79 minutes \$30.00

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock - Screenplay, Dialogue and Continuity by Charles Bennett, Ian Hay, Helen Simpson, Alma Reville and E. H. Emmett from the novel "Secret Agent." by Joseph Conrad - Cinematography by Bernard Knowles - Edited by Charles Friend - Art Direction by O. Werndorff - Musical Direction by Louis Levy - Cartoon Sequence by Arrangement with Walt Disney - A Gaumont-British Picture. Players: Sylvia Sydney, Oscar Homolka, John Loder, Desmond Tester, William Dewhurst, S. J. Warrington, Matthew Boulton, Joyce Bardour.

When sand is thrown in electrical generators, the lights flicker and fail, trolleys slow to a halt, and a small, ailing cinema that is trying to make it through the British depression is faced with a dilemma: refund the admissions? or declare the entire matter an act of God and keep the money? Ironically, we know who sabotaged the power and light plant: The owner of the theatre (Oscar Homolka), a quiet, shy, furtive man with king-sized eyebrows, who declares, "Anything for quiet—I can't hear tension." Why the sabotage? We're never told for certain, because Hitchcock considers it beside the point. All we know is that "They're making trouble at home to keep our minds off trouble abroad." *They* are not defined, nor is the *trouble*.

When a Scotland Yard Inspector (John Loder) with an eye for Homolka's wife (Sylvia Sydney) makes it impossible for Homolka to plant a bomb in a subway station on a Saturday, designated in the film as *The Lord Mayor's Birthday*, he cheerfully sends his wife's little brother across town, toting the bomb and some cans of film. We know the bomb will explode at 1:45 and the tension mounts as the boy (Desmond Tester) is delayed by one thing (a toothpaste demonstration) and another (The Lord Mayor's Birthday Parade) and still another (the fact that a motorman doesn't want him to board a bus carrying cans of cellulose-nitrate film because they're dangerous and not allowed on public conveyances). At exactly 1:45, the boy is playing with a scene-stealing puppy on board an omnibus, holding the film and the parceled bomb on his lap. Well, we know no director could get away with blowing up both a puppy and a small boy, don't we?

We do, eh?

Although the mounting tension makes the film typically Hitchcock, in addition to the way we are maneuvered this way and that—used, as it were—there are some scenes with minute detail of which the master no longer seems capable. For example, the Scotland Yard man is in the theatre behind the screen, and the projected image on the Bijou screen comes through the screen's sound perforations and plays itself out on Loder's clothes. With the early-thirties lighting and the slower film, that scene was hard to plan and execute; today, I doubt if Hitchcock would even bother with the intricacy of it. There is also a beautifully photographed scene near the end of the film done with alternating close-ups of Sylvia Sydney's and Oscar Homolka's faces as he thinks she may stab him with a carving knife. She realizes what he is thinking, he realizes that she knows what he realizes, and she knows she must now do what he realized she was thinking. Then, in the cross confusion of who is thinking what who is realizing, he stupidly . . . but that would be giving it away.

After learning of a tragedy, Sydney starts to cry and her tears slowly turn to laughter-through-tears as she sits down in the Bijou auditorium and watches part of an early Disney cartoon, which is, ironically, *Who Killed Cock Robin?* This scene is masterfully done. There is also some strange, almost zany comedy in the film; one of the scenes involves an old lady returning a defective canary to the pet shop. "I've tried everything to get him to sing. I've sung to him, I've clapped my hands, and I've fried bacon."

"Ah, you must whistle to him every few moments," advises the proprietor.

"Well! Maybe you'd like *me* to sit in the cage while *he* does the housework," she snorts indignantly.

When Homolka is meeting a confederate at the Aquarium, in the background we hear an unidentified boy tell his girl friend, "After laying a million eggs, the female often changes her sex."

And the girl's reply, "Huh! I don't blame her!"

In one unintentionally memorable scene, Sylvia Sydney faints on the soundstage "sidewalk" in front of the Bijou and a cloud of dust arises. Hmm. Apparently Gaumont-British Films couldn't afford a janitor!

Dane Wilson-GDW

1979 Kit Park Films 132