

Hitchcock: Small change, for the most part

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Directed by Sacha Gervasi; screenplay by John J. McLaughlin, based on the book by Stephen Rebello

Legendary British-born filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) directed more than fifty feature films in a career spanning six decades. He is generally recognized today as one of the supreme artists of British and American cinema.

He directed such classics as *The 39 Steps* (1935), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Saboteur* (1942), *Notorious* (1946), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956), *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959), to name only a few.

Hitchcock's masterful cinematic achievements feature intense drama laced with a subtle dark humor, revealing an insightful, singular and troubling vision of a troubled world. It is perfectly natural that the filmmaker should be the object of public fascination, both as to his artistic and personal life. This year two films about Hitchcock have appeared—*The Girl*, recently aired on HBO, and *Hitchcock*, a theatrical release, directed by Sacha Gervasi and focused on the making of *Psycho* (1960), one of the director's best known works.

Psycho was a major box office and critical success, seen by audiences throughout the world. About the film, Hitchcock was to explain to French filmmaker François Truffaut in the 1967 book that documented their conversations, "I feel it's tremendously satisfying to be able to use the cinematic art to achieve something of a mass emotion." In the half-century since *Psycho*'s release, film historians and critics have made great efforts to dissect the film and its impact. This is a subject, in other words, with a great deal of cultural history attached to it.

Now, apparently undaunted, British-born Gervasi has thrown his hat into the ring. With a screenplay based on Stephen Rebello's *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho*, his movie spends far less time considering *Psycho*'s actual production, however, and far more speculating about the relationship between Hitchcock (Anthony Hopkins) and his wife and collaborator, the remarkable Alma Reville (Helen Mirren).

Gervasi's film begins and ends with Hitchcock acting as host in a format similar to that of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, his popular television series of the 1950s and 1960s. As the film opens, the director, at age 60, is eager to embark on a new project following one of his greatest commercial successes, *North by Northwest*.

Hitchcock's proposal to make a movie loosely based on Robert Block's study of grisly murderer Ed Gein is initially opposed by Paramount studio head Barney Balaban (Richard Portnow), Hitchcock's agent Lew Wasserman (Michael Stuhlbarg) and Alma herself.

Paramount relents when Hitchcock agrees to self-finance the

project in exchange for a percentage of the gross, putting his Bel Air, California home at risk. Alma stands behind her husband, but begins to feel unappreciated professionally. Furthermore, she is tired of monitoring his eating habits and feels threatened by his predilection for his blond leading ladies, the latest being Janet Leigh (Scarlett Johansson) in *Psycho*. Provocatively, Alma begins working on a screenplay with her friend Whitfield Cook (Danny Huston), who had contributed to the scripts of *Stage Fright* (1950) and *Strangers on a Train*.

Hitchcock holds a grudge against *Psycho*'s second leading lady, Vera Miles (Jessica Biel), for having withdrawn from *Vertigo* after getting pregnant ("Why do they always betray me?"). The sexually-confused and mother-obsessed Norman Bates will be memorably played by Tony Perkins (James D'Arcy), chosen by Hitchcock for his effete, nervous qualities.

Meanwhile, Gein (Michael Wincott), a criminally insane Wisconsin farmer who killed a number of women and desecrated the bodies of numerous corpses in the 1950s, keeps popping up in Hitchcock's nightmares and morbid thoughts. Peculiarly, Gein assumes the status of the director's therapist in Gervasi's film, counseling Hitchcock that, "You can't keep this stuff bottled up."

Because of the rift between Alma and Hitchcock, the first cut of *Psycho* is stillborn. It comes to life only when Hitchcock acknowledges his wife as his ultimate leading lady.

Hitchcock is most interesting when it deals with the director's fight with the studio and the censors and his ingenuity in promoting the film. It is considerably less interesting when it offers conjecture about the relationship between the Hitchcocks. It is ridiculous when it inserts Gein into the filmmaker's psyche.

The empirical facts presented in the movie are essentially the small change of *Psycho*'s production. Furthermore, *Hitchcock* is plagued by an inelegant construction and superficial script, weaknesses that are somewhat masked by the engaging performances of both Mirren and Hopkins, although the latter is more one-note.

Mirren and Hopkins overshadow—to say the least—many of the secondary actors. Johansson and Biel look like deer in the headlights for the most part. The talented Toni Collette as Hitchcock's assistant is able to hold her own, as is Stuhlbarg as the director's agent. Huston is a bit flat, but he basically functions as a plot device around which to organize a marital crisis. The Gein role should have been left on the cutting room floor.

Psycho, made in thirty days, was shot in black and white in part to get the notorious murder shower scene past Production Code officials. *Hitchcock*'s production notes explain that *Psycho* had more than twice the box office success of *North by Northwest*, the

director's previous biggest hit, and in 2012, the movie was ranked number 18 on the list of America's Greatest Movies as compiled by the American Film Institute.

Psycho has fascinating elements, including of course the remarkable Perkins. Critic Manny Farber complained, however, about the "clutter" and "suppositional material" in the film ("Why is taxidermy necessarily a ghoulish hobby?"), while praising its first third ("the humdrum day-in-the-life of a real estate receptionist") as "bare, stringent, minimal." As a psychological study, much of *Psycho* seems rather silly today and an awful lot of the movie takes on the character of scaffolding for the shocking finale.

Coming after such master works as *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Vertigo* and *North by Northwest*, which, each in its own way, provided rather subdued, chilling commentary on postwar America, *Psycho*'s gimmicky flamboyance, by contrast, seems less telling and intriguing.

Writing in 1998 about Gus Van Sant's shot-for-shot remake, David Walsh of the WSWS commented: "The claim is made for the original *Psycho* that by making the average-looking Bates into a homicidal maniac, Hitchcock transformed movie audiences' notion of the abnormal and psychotic in American life, bringing it far closer to home. Unfortunately, I think the opposite is largely the case. The script and film wasted the opportunity, in my view, to say something substantial about 'normal' America and merely created a new category of the alien Other ...

"*Psycho*, it seems to me, revealed Hitchcock's artistic and intellectual limitations and marked the beginning of his decline. The source of difficulty becomes even more 'external' and alien in *The Birds*, and the filmmaker then drifted off into Cold War films and other lesser projects." (It was Truffaut's impression that Hitchcock was not satisfied with any of the films he made after *Psycho*.)

Nonetheless, the social and cultural circumstances under which *Psycho* was released should be taken into account. The Hollywood anti-communist blacklist, with all the cowardice and conformism that implied, did not officially end until the fall and winter of 1960, several months after *Psycho*'s release, when Dalton Trumbo's name appeared in the credits of *Spartacus* and *Exodus*. (Hitchcock had played a role in breaking the ban in 1957, hiring previously blacklisted actor Norman Lloyd as an associated producer on his CBS television series.)

In that sense, *Psycho*, in its frank treatment of adultery, white-collar crime and mayhem, came as something of a breath of fresh air at the time and painted a disturbing picture of middle America in the 1950s.

Unfortunately, *Hitchcock* director Gervasi (previously responsible for the documentary *Anvil: The Story of Anvil*) and screenwriter John J. McLaughlin (co-writer of *Black Swan*, in addition to a number of television series and movies) are simply in over their heads. They largely dwell on the salacious trivia of Hitchcock's life. A serious treatment of his work would require a grasp of the artistic and social process that virtually no one in the current film world possesses.

Hitchcock was one of those major film artists like Charlie Chaplin, John Ford, Orson Welles and Howard Hawks who both

took his art and examination of life seriously and also provided great popular entertainment. Such an ability is always bound up with deep insight into one's times and mores, and an element of opposition.

Hitchcock was a conscious artist of the mid-20th century, with all of its threats and dangers. He came of age at the time of the Russian Revolution and lived through the rise of fascism, Stalinism and two world wars. One of Hitchcock's concerns was to examine how ordinary people, with ordinary strengths and weaknesses, navigated this rather treacherous period and how they held on to their dignity and sanity—or did not.

Contrasting Orson Welles to Hitchcock, critic Andrew Sarris wrote that "Welles is concerned with the ordinary feelings of extraordinary people and Hitchcock with the extraordinary feelings of ordinary people. Whereas Welles flourishes in baroque settings, Hitchcock functions in commonplace settings."

Although by no stretch of the imagination a consciously political filmmaker, Hitchcock, like most of the intriguing artists of the period, had contact with left-wing ideas and figures. The latter included Ivor Montagu, Peter Viertel, Dorothy Parker, John Houseman, Ben Hecht, John Steinbeck, Jo Swerling, Clifford Odets and Sean O'Casey.

About his first encounter with Hitchcock in 1941, the renowned actor/producer Houseman remarked: "What I was unprepared for was a man of exaggeratedly delicate sensibilities, marked by a harsh Catholic education and the scars from a social system against which he was in perpetual revolt."

This spirit of "revolt," combined with his meticulous realism, emerges in his hostile depiction of police and authority figures in particular. A good number of his central characters are, in one way or another, "on the run" from the law or unfairly accused of a crime (*The 39 Steps*, *Saboteur*, *North by Northwest*, *Frenzy* [1972], etc.). The "frame-up" of an innocent man or woman (done in almost documentary style in *The Wrong Man*, 1956) is a central motif, and an appropriate one for much of the past century.

Fellow filmmaker Truffaut said of Hitchcock, "His films are at once commercial and experimental," and further. "While the cinema of Hitchcock is not necessarily exalting, it invariably enriches us, if only through the terrifying lucidity with which it denounces man's desecration of beauty and purity."

As it turns out, few of the remarkable filmmaker's most interesting concerns or characteristics manage to break their way into *Hitchcock*.



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