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ALFRED HITCHCOCK: Late British, Early American

"YOUNG AND INNOCENT" (Gaumont-British, 1937) Directed by Alfred Hitchcock; produced by Edward Black; scenario by Alma Reville and Charles Bennett from the Josephine Tey novel "A Shilling for Candles"; Camera, Bernard Knowles; Art Direction, Alfred Junge; Music, Louis Levy; Editor, Charles Frend; 78 minutes


The fifth of Hitchcock's six thrillers for Gainsborough, "Young and Innocent" was one of the quietest and least melodramatic. Rather like John Ford relaxing after "The Quiet Man" to make "The Sun Shines Bright", this seems to be Hitchcock doing just what he wants to do - throwing in sequences that he's always been anxious to use but has never had a spot for, and getting out into rural England to enjoy the sunshine and have fun with comic policemen. It was one of the last films from his British period; only "The Lady Vanishes" and "Jamaica Inn" followed before he left for Hollywood.

While it was never one of his best British films, "Young and Innocent" is the one that suffers the most from American editing. Others, like "The 39 Steps", were just snipped at. Here however, not only was the quite subtle and appropriate title changed (presumably on the theory that it sounded old-fashioned and corny) to a more routine and meaningless title, "The Girl Was Young", but one whole sequence was lopped out, much to Hitchcock's dismay. About half-way through the film the young fugitives call on a relative, partly to establish an alibi, and are caught up in a game of blind-man's-buff at a children's party. It's the most typically Hitchcockian sequence in the film, a sequence that finds parallels in "The 39 Steps", "Saboteur" and others. Although played for comedy, there's an underlying note of real suspense - the couple having to avoid getting caught up in the game so that they can escape before they're found out. Superficially it seems an easy out to make - it doesn't seem to advance the story in any way, and it must be admitted that the excision is so smooth as to leave no trace at all. But its absence is felt; in such a leisurely film, the elimination of a sequence designed to add suspense at a given point is quite serious. Furthermore, time is the real menace in the film; the audience knows from the beginning who the killer is, and there is never any direct confrontation between him and the hero and heroine. They are never once threatened in any way by him, so the suspense values fall back on the hero finding the important evidence before the police find him - and the necessary manipulative and delaying tactics provided by that one party sequence are a key part of the film's effectiveness.

Those of you who have never seen the full British version (which I believe was shown only once in this country, at the Museum of Modern Art's Hitchcock retrospective a dozen years back, for which British prints were imported) may not miss the sequence at all, but because of its absence may be inclined to rate the film as a lesser Hitchcock. Nevertheless, much of charm and real interest remains. The opening sequence, so theatrical that one doesn't take it seriously, then pays off doubly with the beautiful shots of the corpse being washed ashore, the swell of the surf raising one arm so that it seems in some bizarre way to be swimming in death. The quarry sequence, which has absolutely nothing to do with the rest of the film, provides one of the few melodramatic action thrills, and is obviously an episode that Hitchcock had long wanted to do and threw in here because the locale seemed to justify it. Hitchcock's fascinating with miniatures is also well on display. There's the most intricately designed and photographed railway siding "set" brought into play in one episode. It would hardly have been easy to peel just one set off to do a dozen London suburbs which have identical set-ups and shoot it full-scale, since there's nothing particularly unique about the design of the set or the way it is used. But not only does Hitchcock use the miniature, but he also has the disarming gall to hold the shots long after it has become quite apparent that it is a miniature, albeit an exceptional one. The final sequence of the killer's collapse is dramatically perhaps a little silly - but cinematically fascinating, utilising of those tremendous tour-de-force single shots which in itself justifies the whole picture
In fact, the whole film has even less logic than usual for Hitchcock, rather surprisingly in view of the stress on naturalistic backgrounds and the underplaying of melodrama. But if Hitchcock plays down excitement, he certainly doesn't tone down his own performance, mugging it up almost like Fernando in a lovely little comedy cameo as a photographer outside the police station.

--- Ten Minute Intermission ---


It's rather frightening to realise that this middle-period Hitchcock, which seems like one of yesterday's movies to so many of us, is already over 20 years old. It hasn't been shown in theatres for a great many years, though at one time it was fairly common on television, though usually in somewhat hacked form. This print is fully complete, and in a perverse sense of film history, we've added its several tv and theatrical reissue trademarks too, to provide it with a form of family tree.

In a sense, "Foreign Correspondent" is the last of the vintage Hitchcocks, although far from being the last good one. At the same time, "Rebecca" excepted, it's the film that ushered Hitchcock's melodramatics into the era of "Big Time" Hollywood production. His second American film, it was his first spy story since "The Lady Vanishes", and is a strange mixture of old and new. Pleasantly, it takes us back to the era of Balkan intrigues, master spy rings, gentlemen villains and all-important clauses in secret treaties. It contains some of Hitch's very best sequences: the assassination in the rain, the hide-and-seek in the windmill, the attempted murder in the house (with its black humor payoff), the picturesque meetings in the tatty little room off Charlotte Street - as well as some of his most audacious individual shots (the dolly in through the plane window in mid-air!). And there's a wonderfully varied parade of characters too - Edmund Gwenn's moody but eerie little killer, and such old friends as Basserman, Granach, Cianelli and Kosleck.

But it is also Hitchcock doing a "super" production - and despite its superb photography by Mate, and outstanding production mountings, it is the beginning of a slow (and frequently impressionistic) downward spiral towards too many stodgy and top-heavy productions. It is all-star; it is too long; it is too slow in getting under way; and after the sensitive and functional heroines he'd been used to (Madeleine Carroll, Edna Best, Margaret Lookwood, Sylvia Sidney) Laraine Day consumes far too much footage for the little that she contributes. (The admittedly lovely Miss Day, formerly Laraine Johnson of George O'Brien westerns, and Dr. Kildare's girl-friend over at MGM, had just begun to move into masterful) And the walloping roaringly spectacular climax of the airliner's crash into the sea - a triumph of masterly studio tank work, with one truly terrifying shot of the sea rising in the cabin of the sinking plane - is somehow too much of a traditional Hollywood finale, lacking the quieter satisfaction of the besieged, stalled train in "The Lady Vanishes". But the good things, and the overall entertainment package of melodrama and comedy, certainly outweigh the occasional slowness of (most especially) the earlier reels. Hitch, whose guest star here is early in the film, gets wonderful visual assistance from Mate and Menzies - whose opening shot is incidentally a duplicate of his opening shot in Douglas Fairbanks' "Reaching for the Moon" a decade earlier. Hardy had Hitch finished his "best vintage film" than Fritz Lang made a similar last stand with another fine war-oriented thriller, "Man Hunt". The climax of "Foreign Correspondent" shows taking himself seriously for perhaps the first time; something he never quite got over.

--- Wm.K.Freerson ---