

Alfred Hitchcock (1899 - 1980) Film Director

Master of Suspense. Alfred Hitchcock began his filmmaking career in 1919 by illustrating cards for silent films at Paramount's Players-Lasky Studio in London. Hitchcock rose from employee to master of suspense and created 53 films between 1925 and 1976, which combined sex, violence, and humor.

Received a Jesuit Education. Hitchcock was born in London and was sent to a Jesuit boarding school, St. Ignatius College, at a very young age. St. Ignatius College was known for its order, discipline, and rigorous curriculum: Latin, English, French, German, history, literature, geography, mathematics, natural science, drawing, essay, elocution, choir, and religious knowledge. Although Hitchcock was only an average student, he did excel at geography, which may be attributed to the time he spent memorizing railway timetables and travel folders. It was during his time at St. Ignatius that Hitchcock developed his fascination with fear. As he remarked to Francois Truffaut in the book *Hitchcock*, "It was probably during this period with the Jesuits that a strong sense of fear developed—moral fear—the fear of being involved in anything evil. I always tried to avoid it. Why? Perhaps out of physical fear. I was terrified of physical punishment. In those days they used a cane made of very hard rubber."

Discovered Artistic Talent. Hitchcock remained at St. Ignatius until he was 14 years old. Following the death of his father, he left St. Ignatius and enrolled in the School of Engineering and Drafting, where he studied engineering, drawing, and drafting. Hitchcock took his first job as a technical clerk with W. T. Henley Telegraph Co. It was here that Hitchcock's artistic talent emerged, according to Eric Rohmer, author of *Hitchcock: the First Forty-Four Films*. "In this very respectable firm he earned the reputation of a prankster by savagely caricaturing the higher-ups and administrators," he wrote. This disregard for authority landed Hitchcock a promotion to Henley's advertising department, where he wrote and edited newspaper copy and drew graphic illustrations.

Developed a Love for Directing. In 1920, a coworker at Henley helped Hitchcock get a job as a title designer for Players-Lasky. He wrote captions that covered the dialogue in silent pictures including *The Great Day*, *Call of Youth*, *Princess of New York*, *Tell Your Children*, *Live Ghosts* and *Always Tell Your Wife*. During this last film, Hitchcock took over the direction when the director became ill, which sparked his interest in directing, according to Rohmer. "Having once tried his hand at directing, Hitchcock understood that this is where his vocation lay." His parents attended movies regularly, a habit that Hitchcock inherited when he began frequenting movie theaters when he was 17 years old, although he never remembered their story lines. He simply felt a strong urge to figure out how they were made. Hitchcock spent many hours watching stage plays and silent films by Chaplin and Griffith, as well as reading technical magazines, and film journals.

Directed His First Films. Hitchcock completed his first film as a director, *The Pleasure Garden*, in 1925. His second film, *The Lodger* (1926), contains the classic Hitchcock theme, an innocent protagonist accused of a crime. Hitchcock's first sound film, *Blackmail* (1930), is about a woman who stabs an artist to death when he tries to seduce her. In this film, as well as *Murder* (1930), Hitchcock coupled sex with violence, a theme he repeated in his later films. Although Hitchcock admitted that his early films *Champagne*, *Waltzes from Vienna*, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* and *Topaz* were disasters, one admirer admitted, "even bad Hitchcock is better than no Hitchcock," according to Haley.

Expressed Fears on Film. Hitchcock's eccentricities and self-proclaimed fears: little children, policeman, high places, and personal failure, became apparent in his films. Although little is known of Hitchcock's childhood, his fear of policemen was the result of a traumatic event. When Hitchcock was only five or six years old, his father sent him to the police station after he misbehaved. The constable locked Hitchcock in a cell for five minutes and told him that all naughty boys received this punishment. As a result, Hitchcock developed a lifelong mistrust of policeman. In fact, he did not even drive a car for fear that he would commit a traffic

violation and be stopped by a policeman.

Exhibited Bizarre Behavior. Hitchcock may have suffered from what doctors classify today as obsessive-compulsive behavior. He always cleaned and dried a sink after having washed his hands. He drank large quantities of tea and threw his tea cups behind him after having finished the last sip. He gave strange birthday gifts and had oversized furniture delivered to his friends' houses. He once served a dinner where everything was blue: blue soup, blue trout, blue chicken and blue ice cream. "It seemed such a pretty color, I couldn't understand why hardly anything we eat is blue," he later explained.

Married Alma Reville. Hitchcock met his wife, Alma Reville, on the set of *Woman to Woman*, where she was the assistant director. He had never dated, although he had once taken his sister to a dance. After a long friendship and unromantic proposal, Hitchcock married Reville at a side chapel of Brompton Oratory on 2 December 1926 and the couple spent their honeymoon at the Palace Motel in St. Moritz. Alma soon gave birth to a daughter, Patricia, on 7 July 1928. Hitchcock lavished attention on the little girl, perhaps to compensate for his own lonely childhood. Patricia appeared in many of her father's films and was an aspiring actress. However, she ended her career in favor of motherhood. According to Haley, Patricia once remarked "that being the mother of sticky-fingered children required all her creative attention."

Created Successful Television Show. CBS began showing *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* on 2 October 1955, which became one of television's most popular broadcasts. According to Haley, this television program enhanced Hitchcock's career more than the 36 films he had directed prior to its debut. During its seven years on the air, 365 episodes were aired. The success of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* led to creation of the *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* and many paperback books, which are still coveted by fans today.

Noteworthy Films. *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, and *The Birds* are often considered Hitchcock's best films, according to Haley. "Each is a classic in its own right, but more importantly, they represent Hitchcock's creative highpoint, his best efforts to date." *Vertigo* is a romantic obsession, which ends in murder and is considered a masterpiece. "Arguably [*Vertigo* is] Alfred Hitchcock's supreme masterpiece, where his technical gifts, mesh most completely with the richness of his material, *Vertigo* is also one of the bleakest, most perverse offerings to come out of the mainstream American Cinema in the 1950s," according to Allan Hunter, author of *Movie Classics*. *North by Northwest*, starring Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint, had all of the elements Hitchcock is renowned for: ingenious shots, subtle male-female relationships, dramatic score, bright technicolor, symbolism, and of course, suspense. ". . . The intense planning is profoundly evident in the complex and carefully realized plot," Haley remarked. *The Birds* presented evil as an environmental fact of life. In *Psycho*, Hitchcock combines suspense and humor, which "was a difficult balance to strike, but that humor—or elements of it—were necessary to relieve the narrative tension and keep viewers interested," Haley wrote. *Psycho* is famous for its shower-murder sequence, a classic example of shot selection and editing that was shocking for its nudity, graphic violence, and its break with convention in which a protagonist is made invulnerable.

Received Numerous Awards. Hitchcock was nominated for five Oscars by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for best direction in *Rebecca* (1950), *Lifeboat* (1943), *Spellbound* (1945), *Rear Window* (1954) and *Psycho* (1960). Although he never won an Oscar from these nominations, the Motion Picture Academy did present him with an honorary Oscar. In 1967, he received the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award. In 1974, the Film Society Lincoln Center honored Hitchcock with a nationally televised party, which presented a montage of his film highlights. The Hollywood Foreign Press Association presented Hitchcock with the Cecil B. DeMille Award, which was named after the famous film producer and director. He was also presented with honorary doctoral degrees from the University of California and Santa Clara University. In 1976, he became commander of the French Order of Arts and Letters. Queen Elizabeth II knighted Hitchcock in 1980, although he had been a citizen of the United States since 1955. The French Cinematheque also named Hitchcock a Knight of the Legion of Honor.

American Decades

Death. Hitchcock died in the presence of his wife, daughter, and grandchildren on 29 April 1980 in his Los Angeles, California home. A CBS announcer reported his death with an implication of mystery. "He died yesterday, apparently of natural causes." which Haley said Hitchcock would have appreciated. "That subtle hint of foul play would have warmed Hitchcock's film maker's heart."

Further Reading:

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