

Alfred Hitchcock's 115th birthday



Courtesy Universal Pictures



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Alfred Hitchcock, the man known to cinematic history as “The Master of Suspense,” would have been 115 today, August 13th. Hitchcock made movies, he said, about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances (a formula smart filmmakers follow to this day) and reportedly believed that the length of movies ought to be determined by the capacity of the average human bladder. Both are tough to argue with.

The son of Catholic greengrocers in Leytonstone, in London’s East End, Hitchcock had a lifelong distrust of authority and police officers in general. Supposedly, when he was a boy, Hitchcock did something to aggravate his father, who sent him to the local police station with a note for the desk sergeant. When the

young Hitchcock gave the note to the desk sergeant, he was locked in a cell for five minutes, and was then told “That’s what we do to bad little boys.” Film historians who actually have no evidence to disprove the anecdote love to dispute it. Hitchcock repeated the story to his dying day, and his own sister said it happened.

Hitchcock came to the infant film industry in London when he was a young man himself, and

movies and the man grew to maturity together. He started out drawing the artwork for title cards in silent movies, but before long was directing. His first major success was the silent thriller "The Lodger," starring Ivor Novello, based on a popular novel itself inspired by the Jack the Ripper murders. His 1935 English talkie "The 39 Steps" was a popular success, and is the basis for a current Broadway play.

At the end of the thirties, Hitchcock came to Hollywood, signed to a contract by the M-G-M defector and independent producer David O. Selznick. Selznick was a hands-on producer who had a well-deserved reputation for driving directors crazy. Fortunately for Hitchcock, Selznick was too occupied with "Gone With the Wind" while Hitchcock shot his adaptation of Daphne DuMaurier's novel "Rebecca" to provide more than token interference.

Selznick loaned Hitchcock out a couple of times, notably to Walter Wanger for "Foreign Correspondent," an anti-Nazi thriller that remains memorable for a couple of set pieces, in particular a plane crash that continues to astonish even modern audiences. In 1942, Hitchcock made "Shadow of a Doubt," a black and white masterpiece starring Teresa Wright and Joseph Cotton with a screenplay co-written by Thornton Wilder. This portrait of a charming serial killer who's returned to his small hometown to hide out was decades ahead of its time. 1946's spy movie "Notorious," had a daring plot for its time, with spymaster Cary Grant ordered to pimp out Ingrid Bergman, with whom he's fallen in love, to get information out Claude Rains. The device was ripped off in "Mission: Impossible II," though audiences didn't notice. The ending of "Notorious" (there will be no spoilers) is especially audacious.

The fifties may have been Hitchcock's best decade, during which he turned out "Rear Window," "North by Northwest," "Vertigo," "To Catch a Thief" and the enormously underrated, fact-based, legal thriller "The Wrong Man." The sixties saw a downturn in the overall quality of Hitchcock's movies, other than "Psycho" and "The Birds." If "Psycho" had been the only movie he made in the entire decade it would have been worth it. Directors pick up lifetime achievement awards without ever making a film that iconic. He revisited similar territory with "Frenzy," filmed in England in 1972. His final film was four years later, "Family Plot," a light-hearted thriller starring Barbara Harris, Bruce Dern, Karen Black and William Devane.

It has been long said that you can imitate Hitchcock, but you can't remake him, and the attempts to remake him have been thankfully few, because they've been pretty much uniformly awful. Some Hitchcock imitations, like Colin Higgins' "Silver Streak" (heavily modeled on

“North by Northwest”) and “Foul Play (which references multiple Hitchcock movies, including “The Man Who Knew Too Much” “Saboteur,” “North by Northwest” and “The 39 Steps”), Brian DePalma’s “Obsession” (“Vertigo”), “Dressed to Kill” (“Psycho”), “Blow Out” (which references Michelangelo Antonioni’s “Blow Up” as well as Hitchcock’s work) and “Body Double” (“Rear Window,” “Vertigo”) and D.J. Caruso’s “Disturbia” (“Rear Window”), have all been relatively successful.

Despite becoming a part of modern filmmaking lexicon, Hitchcock never won an Oscar, other than the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award, and was only nominated 5 times in his entire multi-decade career, for “Rebecca” (1940), “Lifeboat” (1944), “Spellbound” (1945), “Rear Window” (1954) and “Psycho” (1960). In retrospect it seems nothing short of amazing that “Shadow of a Doubt,” “Notorious,” “North by Northwest” and “The Birds” weren’t nominated. He might not have brought home gold for his mantle, but Hitchcock became a brand name director before there were such things, and “The Master of Suspense” remains just that.