

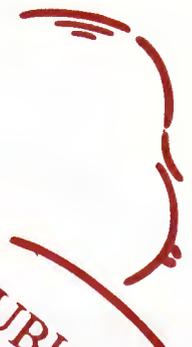


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# A HITCHCOCK DOUBLE BILL SABOTAGE/THE SECRET AGENT [UK; 1936]



Hitchcock during the filming of *Blackmail*.

Alfred Hitchcock is arguably the greatest and certainly the most influential director in the history of the cinema. A technical master always wanting to experiment with film. His career started in silent films - he made the first British talkie 'Blackmail' in 1929, then in America in the 1940's making a series of classic thrillers - 'Shadow of a Doubt', 'Spellbound', 'Notorious' and 'Rope', and then at the height of his power in the 1950's and 1960's a number of undisputed classics - 'Rear Window', 'Vertigo', 'North by Northwest', 'Psycho' and 'The Birds'.

During the Club's 13 years 5 of Hitchcock's 53 films have been shown - more than any other director. Tonight we make it 7 with a double bill featuring two of Hitchcock's 5 classic British pictures made between 1935 and 1938. The first of these - *The 39 Steps* (shown at the A.G.M.) made in 1935, was followed by tonight's two films both released in 1936, and then in 1938 by 'Young and Innocent' and probably his best known British picture 'The Lady Vanishes'.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Secret Agent' is based on two of Somerset Maugham's "Ashenden" stories and stars Sir John Gielgud as the reluctant British spy Richard Ashenden, who is sent to Switzerland during the first world war to kill an enemy agent. He is accompanied by apprentice spy Elsa Carrington (Madeleine Carroll - who also starred in 'The 39 Steps') who poses as his wife, and the hairless Mexican or the General (Peter Lorre) a Mexican double agent.

As in a number of Hitchcock's later films nothing is what it seems. The funeral at the start of the film is fake, Elsa is not really Ashenden's wife, Marvin the charming American is really a dangerous spy, the German speaking Englishman with his German wife are not enemy agents and the hairless Mexican General is not a General, Mexican or hairless. A picturesque country church is the scene of a murder and a chocolate factory is used as the spy's headquarters.

Hitchcock also uses sound in an innovative way constantly interrupting people's conversations with noise - bombs and sirens in London, church bells, peasants singing, fire alarms, the whining of a dog and (a much copied) church organ. "The funeral will be quiet and private in the country" says the guard at the fake funeral but when the film moves to the countryside nothing is quiet or private.



*The Secret Agent*

When the film was released it failed to repeat the success of 'The 39 Steps'. Hitchcock tended to blame John Gielgud's 'laid back' performance for the film's failure. This is one of Gielgud's earliest screen performances. He was already a successful stage actor and accepted the part after it was described to him as "a modern-day Hamlet, a man forced to make a number of difficult decisions". But he did not get on with Hitchcock and admitted at the time "Alfred Hitchcock has often made me feel like a jelly and I have been nearly sick with nervousness".

Another problem was Peter Lorre's morphine addiction. Hitchcock had particularly wanted Lorre for the part of General but he constantly forgot his lines and kept adding unrehearsed bits of acting which annoyed Hitchcock who always liked things wellrehearsed. (This explains a number of mismatched shots and odd jumps in the scenes in which Lorre appears.)

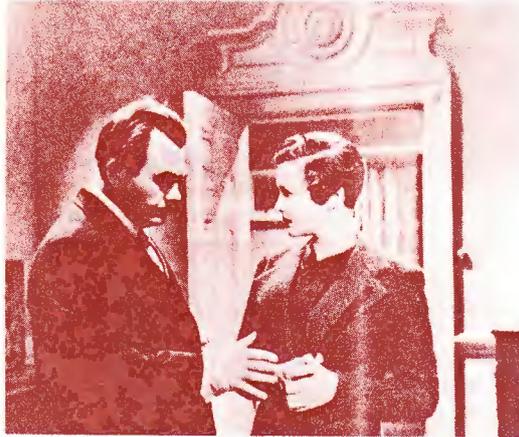
Looking at the film now, Gielgud's acting is one of the most interesting aspects of the film and despite some rather badly done back projections the film is always entertaining.



Sir John Gielgud

**A HITCHCOCK DOUBLE BILL**

'Sabotage' is regarded by many critics as Hitchcock's greatest British film, based on Joseph Conrad's novel 'The Secret Agent'. It is about Detective Sergeant Ted Spenser (John Loder) who is posing as a greengrocer to uncover the details of a terrorist plot to destroy London (very topical). His shop is adjacent to the Bijou Cinema which is managed by Karl Verloc (Oscar Homolka) who uses the place as a front for spies. Living with Verloc are his wife (Sylvia Sidney) and her young brother Stevie (Desm Tester) who are both unaware of his activities.



To reveal any more of the plot would spoil the film. Suffice to say as well as the brilliant use of a clip from Walt Disney's 'Who Killed Cock Robin', there is a classic Hitchcock murder. When Sylvia Sidney read the script she was worried by the lack of dialogue in what was for her the most dramatic section of the film, but by use of montage and restrained film acting, Hitchcock produced one of the most memorable performances of his early British films. "When a film has been properly staged," Hitchcock later said, "it isn't necessary to rely upon the player's virtuosity or personality for tension and dramatic effects. In my opinion, the chief requisite for an actor is the ability to do nothing well, which is by no means as easy as it sounds. He should be willing to be utilized and wholly integrated into the picture by the director and the camera."

Later in his career Hitchcock said both 'Secret Agent' and 'Sabotage' were flawed by the deaths of innocent people - "Suspense is created by providing the audience with information denied the endangered characters. But to be most effective no harm should come to the innocent." He learned from his 'mistake' and never allowed innocent people to be killed in any of his later films. Flawed or not, both films are classic Hitchcock with good supporting casts and lots of clever camera angles and editing, and if they do appear a bit dated, it's in an interesting way.

Stephen Lock

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**Dir. Zhang Yimou China 1992 1hr 40m Subtitled**  
**Gong Li, Lei Lao Feng, Ge Zhi Jun**

In a change of direction from his earlier elegant, 'dissident' period pieces (Ju Dou, Raise the Red Lantern), internationally established director Zhang has created a contemporary, decidedly modern story. Like his previous films it focusses upon the role of women in China, and also once again utilises the talents of his favourite actress, Gong Li. Here she plays a heavily pregnant peasant woman whose husband has been kicked in the balls in an argument with his village chief. Determined to win an apology, she doggedly pursues the matter through the many levels of Chinese bureaucracy.

'Using a palette of rich reds - chains of chilli peppers and matching festive clothes and lanterns - glowing against the snow, the film has a vibrant, fluid beauty. Shooting in the streets with hidden cameras and radio mikes, Zhang plunges his actors into a maelstrom of Chinese life. We see a bashful young couple applying for a marriage licence, a woman sitting on a sofa perched, in its turn, on a rickshaw wobbling gingerly through the crowded streets, posters of Arnold Schwarzenegger jockeying for position alongside Chairman Mao - a vivid insight into universal quirks of human behaviour and a remote culture in rapid flux. It's a masterclass in naturalistic film-making.' Sheila Johnston, *The Independent*

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