

Master of illusion and suspense

"The truth is, people like violence. People like to go on roller coasters and do dangerous things. They pay money to be scared," Alfred Hitchcock once said. "That kind of behavior is rooted in everyone and it really starts, I think, when we're children. It starts with the mother holding a three-months-old baby and saying, 'Boo.' Scares the hell out of the child, gives it hiccups, but gives the mother a kind of pleasure."

The 80-year old filmmaker, who died Tuesday, made scaring the hell out of people, giving and getting that kind of pleasure, his life's work. For nearly 60 years, movie audiences the world over have hunkered down in the dark — nerves raw, mouths dry, hearts pounding — knowing, but not wanting to know, what deadly turn the plot of any one of his film thrillers would next take.

Hitchcock was, of course, a master of illusion and suspense. But, more important, he was a master entertainer. Some directors work to please themselves, to confirm their sense of self, to assert their artistry. This Englishman, who has been described as a giant panda in black serge, managed to make the connec-

tion that too many of them miss. He worked with his audience in mind. How would they see the images he assembled on the screen. How would they react to the ideas he conveyed, the angles he shot, the scenes he set up. The people who paid to see Alfred Hitchcock's movies were infinitely more important to him than the directors and critics who defied him and subjected his films to rigorous scrutiny and high-minded analysis.

In the end, he knew his audiences let him get away with murder. For that reason, he never underestimated their intelligence. "The essential thing is to make the audience participate," he explained. "My films are designed to create emotion in the audience. That's what makes suspense."

Better than many who would make art their profession, Alfred Hitchcock trusted the human imagination. He realized he had the skill to set it off in any one of a thousand directions. But he also realized that, ultimately, the human imagination could create violence, terror, tension and fear far more chilling than any explicit statement on his part. Surely, that was his genius.