



Alfred Hitchcock Resents

In his 63rd year (and his 38th of film-making), Alfred Hitchcock holds two distinctions in the movie-TV industry—one centered on his odd physiognomy, the other on his impudent vocal cords.

First of all, Hitchcock's basset-hound countenance, mounted on his pear-shaped body, is far better known than many of the stars he directs. In fact, during the shooting of his latest Universal Pictures film, *The Birds*, he had to be smuggled into a moving van to protect him from his fans in the streets of San Francisco. Hitchcock and his cameraman worked behind one-way glass, which was built into the side of the van, while the stars, Rod Taylor, Jessica Tandy and Tippi Hedren, moved about the streets unrecognized.

The second and probably the most distinctive thing about Hitchcock is that in an industry noted for executives who gingerly avoid criticizing anything or anybody, he spews a constant stream of delightful Cockney-accented vituperation. He is such an outspoken curmudgeon that during the run of his old half-hour CBS and NBC television show, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (now replaced by a new one-hour series, *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour*, on CBS), one appreciative NBC publicity man labeled his interviews with the press *Alfred Hitchcock Resents*.

Following, listed by subject, are some examples of Hitchcockian curmudgeonry which he expressed to me:

DISNEY, WALT: "I used to envy him when he made only cartoons. If he didn't like an actor, he could tear him up."

FANS: "Most of my fans are highly intelligent people *per se*, or they wouldn't be watching my shows. Some, however, are idiots. One man wrote to me, after I had Janet Leigh murdered in a bathtub in *Psycho*, that his wife had been afraid to bathe or shower since seeing the film. He asked me for suggestions as to what he should do. I wrote back, 'Sir, have you considered sending your wife to the dry cleaner?'"

TELEVISION, COMMERCIALS ON: "Most are deadly. They are perfect for my type of show."

HITCHCOCK, ALFRED, GIRTH OF: "A few years ago, in Santa Rosa, California, I caught a side view of myself in a store window and screamed with fright. Since then I limit myself to a three-course dinner of appetizer, fish and meat, with only one bottle of vintage wine with each course."

ACTORS, CHILDLIKE QUALITIES OF: "There is no question that all actors are children. Some are good children; some are bad children; many are stupid children. Because of this childlike

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By BILL DAVIDSON

quality, actors and actresses should never get married. An actress, for example, attains the blissful state of matrimony and almost immediately goes to work in a picture with a new leading man. She plays a love scene with him so passionately that after three weeks on the picture she comes home to her husband and says idiotically, 'Darling, I want a divorce.' During her love scenes at the studio she has heard people say, 'Look, it's real,' and now *she* thinks it's real too. They are children who never mature emotionally. It's a tragedy."

TELEVISION, QUALITY OF: "The television set now is like the toaster in American homes. You press a button and the same thing pops up almost every time."

STAR SYSTEM: "Because of our mass psychology, we will always need stars. We need Winston Churchill, Bernard Baruch and Roger Maris. In reality, however, the movie star is no longer important. The picture is. If you check, you realize that in recent years the biggest stars, like Audrey Hepburn and Marlon Brando, have disappointing records at the box office. The star is no better than the story. In the right picture the star will be as big as ever; put him in the wrong picture and you're no better off than if you used an unknown. There is a perfect analogy in public affairs. Right after World War II, who could have conceived that the great Churchill—the biggest star on the world stage—could be thrown out of office and rejected by the very people he had saved from disaster? What happened? The big star was in the wrong picture. The script called for a domestic-problems hero instead of a war-problems hero."

NOVAK, KIM: "With a girl like Kim Novak you sometimes delude yourself into thinking you are getting a performance. Actually she is just an adequacy. The only reason I used her in *Vertigo* was that Vera Miles became pregnant."

Such barbed utterances, in addition to his impudent gargoyle face seen on TV each week, have become two of Hitchcock's trademarks in the entertainment world. He has others, as well. There is, for example, the Hitchcock practical joke, and, like everything else he says or does, the joke frequently is a sly answer to something that Alfred Hitchcock resents. Not long ago he became incensed over the Hollywood party at which the seating arrangement is as excruciatingly important as that of a diplomatic affair. So Hitchcock threw his own lawn party, complete with delicacies and red-coated waiters from Chasen's Restaurant. "It was," Dave Chasen



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Hitchcock told me, “a shambles. Forty people showed up, but when it came time to sit down for dinner, all the place cards had phony names on them and no one knew where he was supposed to be. Jimmy Stewart’s wife said to him, ‘My Lord, we haven’t been invited,’ and they left. Everyone else shuffled about in embarrassment until Hitch got up and told them it was a gag. They all then sat down at the nearest place, catch-as-catch can, and we had a wonderful dinner. But Hitch, as usual, had made his point.”

Hitch Washes the Dishes

Another Hollywood foible that Hitchcock resents is the extremely intramural and *nouveau riche* aspect of life in the film colony. He says, “I have no friends who are actors or directors, and my wife and I spend as much time as possible away from Hollywood in our country home in northern California; we bought it in 1938, the year we came here from England. I must confess that, like some of my colleagues in the movie industry, I collect paintings and I am proud to own a Klee, a Vlaminck and a Dufy, but I keep them in the country house for my own enjoyment rather than putting them on display in our Los Angeles home for status purposes.”

The Hitchcock Los Angeles home is comparatively modest as Bel Air mansions go. Here Hitchcock once again defies Hollywood tradition. While other filmland pads feature huge drawing rooms or outdoor patios, the most expensive and spectacular room of the Hitchcock home is the kitchen, the walls of which are lined with rack after rack of the rarest wines and liqueurs. Says Hitchcock, “My wife cooks every night and I help her wash up. Therefore I designed the kitchen so madame can cook in the most elegant surroundings and serve those of us who patiently wait there, sipping good wine, for her to complete her culinary masterpieces. We dine in the kitchen as well.” The queen of this palace among kitchens, Alma Hitchcock, is a small, aristocratic, British-born woman who had been Hitchcock’s assistant director on his first film when he married her 36 years ago. She compounds Hitchcock’s Hollywood heresy by employing only one servant, a cleaning woman.

Chief among Hitchcock’s resentments is what he calls the growing misuse of the movie camera, a mechanism which is as important to him as the palette is to the fine artist. “There are a lot of young directors coming up, and after two pictures they’re hailed as geniuses,” he said, “but they all have one common fault. They don’t take the time to learn, as Somerset Maugham learned, that true simplicity is the hardest thing to attain—the elimination of all that is unnecessary. They all run to complicated fads. I just don’t think the new people get as much basic training as we did in the old days.”

Hitchcock’s own training during the Golden Age of the silent films was as suspenseful and as harrowing as his own pictures, but, as he says, “I learned. There is no mill like this anymore.”

The son of a poultry dealer in London, he had a strict education in a Jesuit seminary, and then, while he studied blacksmithing, lathe-turning,

screw-cutting and draftsmanship at the School of Engineering and Navigation in London, his hobby became the technical side of motion-picture making, which was flowering into a superb art form in the United States, Germany and Russia. The 17-year-old youngster read every movie trade magazine he could get his hands on, studied art at the University of London and finally backed into the infant movie industry in London as an artist, designing titles for the silent films. By the time he was 23, he was an assistant director and a writer.

“In those days,” he told me, “my writing came almost exclusively out of my imagination. My first script, for example, was about a shell-shocked British officer and a French dancer who turned up with child. I was twenty-three and an uncommonly unattractive young man, and I had never been out with a girl in my life. With my background, I barely knew *how* the dancer got to be with child.”

In 1925, after a couple of years of work as an assistant director with the great Emil Jannings in Germany, Hitchcock got his first directorial assignment from Gainsborough Pictures, then a comparatively new British company. He was 25 years old. He set out for Genoa with a cameraman, two actors, his future wife Alma and a thousand dollars. On the Genoa waterfront his money was stolen by a pickpocket, and he was able to continue the epic, *The Pleasure Garden*, on funds borrowed from the actors. At Lake Como he was joined by his star, Virginia Valli, then a big-name actress in America, and he promptly borrowed \$200 from *her*.

“Throughout the shooting of the picture,” says Hitchcock, “I spent more time worrying about day-to-day finances than I did about filming the script. Finally we headed back to Munich, my home base, and we missed our train in Zurich. I thought that was the end, because I didn’t have enough money left to put my people up at a hotel. Then I discovered a fleabag near the station where the rate was only \$1.50 a night, and I put them up there—my big American star and all. I carried everybody’s luggage to save the tips, but I broke a window and had to pay a fine of 35 Swiss francs. The next day I hustled my people on the train. I told them, ‘The food is terrible on these trains, so let’s wait to eat until we get to Munich.’ Hours later we pulled into Munich and I nearly collapsed with the relief of it. I, the big director, had exactly one *pfennig* in my pocket, less than one cent.”

The Pleasure Garden was a success, and the following year—1926—Gainsborough gave him his first horror film to do. This was *The Lodger*, the story of London’s most famous murderer, Jack the Ripper. The theme fascinated young Hitchcock, and, feeling his oats, he attempted many innovations which were inspired by his period of apprenticeship in Germany. For example, he opened on the full face of a hysterically screaming woman, and later in the action, through a specially constructed glass floor, he photographed Jack the Ripper pacing up and down in his room. Nothing like this had ever been done before.

When the film was completed, the Gainsborough executives looked at it and said, “This is dreadful. We can’t release it.” For several

weeks Hitchcock’s budding career hung in the balance as the film sat on the shelf. Economic necessity, however, forced Gainsborough to show it to the press and to a group of theater owners. The reviews were overwhelming in their praise.

One critic wrote, “This is the greatest British picture made to date.” Another exulted, “Young Hitchcock is a national asset.”

Hitchcock says, “One day I was a flop, all washed up at the age of 26; the next day I was a boy genius. So you can see I’ve had some personal experience in the field of suspense.”

He went on to make such classic British thrillers as *The 39 Steps* and *The Lady Vanishes*, and then, after being summoned to Hollywood in 1938, he continued to add to his reputation as the master of suspense with *Rebecca*, *Spellbound*, *Notorious*, *Rear Window*, etc. Today, with his movies, his TV show and his Alfred Hitchcock mystery books and magazines, he nets close to \$1,000,000 a year. He has long since become an American citizen, a designation of which he is extremely proud, and which, he says, “gives me the constitutional right to comment acidly on all the ludicrousness around me.”

A Traffic Ticket Causes Panic

Not long ago, in the glow of conviviality engendered by a round of magnificent dinners with Hitchcock in his favorite San Francisco and Los Angeles restaurants, I screwed up my courage sufficiently to ask him to comment acidly about himself, as he had about so many others.

He thought for a moment and said, “You know, despite all my bluster and bravado, I’m really quite sensitive and cowardly about many things. You’d never believe it, but I’m terrified of policemen and entanglements with the law, even though I make my living from dramatizing such situations. That’s why I haven’t been able to drive a car since I migrated to the United States. Even the thought of getting a traffic ticket throws me into a panic. Another thing I’m afraid of is going to see any of my pictures with an audience present. I only tried that once, with *To Catch a Thief*, and I was a wreck. I’m scared of seeing the mistakes I might have made.”

He continued, “Most of all, I don’t like myself for being afraid to make three pictures I’ve wanted desperately to do for years. They are *Malice Aforethought*, a book by the British author, Francis Iles; *We, the Accused*, by another Englishman, Ernest Raymond; and Kafka’s *The Trial*, which Orson Welles has just made. Why am I afraid of them? Because I once did an arty picture in this category, *The Trouble With Harry*, and it was a disastrous flop. I’ve been afraid to try these favorite projects of mine, because they’re about middle-aged or elderly people—which is death in our business, where the present world audience for movies averages between nineteen and twenty-four years. A man in my position shouldn’t be afraid of this, but I am.”

Then, as I took the master of the macabre home (I drove—he has his fear of police entanglements), he concluded with a Hitchcock parable: “I guess I’m like the murderer who is taken to the gallows, and he looks at the trap and says, in alarm, ‘Is that thing safe?’”