

ROALD DAHL ON FILM

36 HOURS

USA/1965/115mins/adv12A

Dir: George Seaton

With: James Garner, Eva Marie Saint, Rod Taylor



Cult British TV show 'The Prisoner' set a new benchmark for paranoia and intrigue upon hitting the nation's screens in autumn 1967. But what were its antecedents?

The school of 'enforced institution' shock-thrillers may be an early pointer. These took a step onward from the popular 1940s sagas of young wives seemingly being driven insane by outwardly dashing blazer-and-cravat-sporting types (LOVE IS A STRANGER, GASLIGHT, REBECCA, SUSPICION, SECRET BEYOND THE DOOR, EXPERIMENT PERILOUS, etc), and are best represented by MY NAME IS JULIA ROSS (Joseph H. Lewis 1945), with Nina Foch's title character accepting employment as a live-in secretary at a Cornish mansion, soon finding herself imprisoned there while her employer and the conspiratorial staff all insist she is actually called 'Marion Hughes'. 1983's LIES and 1987's DEAD OF WINTER respectively threw Ann Dusenberry and Mary Steenburgen into similar despair, while Sam Fuller's classic SHOCK CORRIDOR (1963) has journalist Peter Breck proving too convincing while feigning madness (to gain access to an asylum chasing a story), with gruelling and terrifying consequences.

Cold War tensions had also brought about an increase in disturbing political fantasies through the fifties and early sixties. Don Siegel's indelibly powerful INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS (1955) couched its beautifully ambiguous allegory of right-wing homogeneity/communist infiltration (delete according to personal persuasion!) in overt monster movie gloop, but before long it became difficult to tell the subversive film fare apart from the routine releases - THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE, SEVEN DAYS IN MAY, DR. STRANGELOVE, FAIL SAFE, THE BEDFORD INCIDENT and others brought a 'Twilight Zone'-like sensibility to the big screen, lacing what appeared to be conventional war stories with layers of satire, speculation, even surrealism.

Director George Seaton was primarily known for his light touch on Betty Grable vehicles and for writing and directing that annual festive delight MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET (1947). Seaton dabbled in military themes with the Montgomery Cliff comedy THE BIG LIFT (1950), the William Holden drama THE COUNTERFEIT TRAITOR (1962), and as producer of THE BRIDGES AT TOKO-RI (Mark Robson 1954), but in 1964 he directed a movie that seemed to pull together

CHAPTER



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the loss-of-identity-under-duress puzzle and the don't-trust-anyone-in-authority trope.

36 HOURS was based on a concise yet florid Roald Dahl prose piece entitled 'Beware Of The Dog'. Dahl's tale, penned in 1944 and published in Harper's Magazine, tells of a Spitfire pilot who loses a leg in battle and bails out over the English Channel. He rouses in a Brighton hospital but begins to muse that if he is on the South coast of England, then why is the water hard rather than soft, and why can he hear the vibrating bass/high pitched tenor duet constituting the unmistakable rumble of a Junkers 88 German bomber as it passes overhead? As with those fragile newlywed damsels in distress we referred to earlier, all is not what it appears to be...

'Beware Of The Dog' is a brisk read but deceptively basic, concluding at a perfect moment and leaving you wondering how events may proceed. It also allows Dahl the opportunity for a couple of gorgeous literary flourishes, most notably the paragraph in which our hero revives, in a flurry of black/white/black/white/black flashes and images. Seaton's film can't compete on these terms and so instead expands the concept - in 36 HOURS, army major James Garner is made privy to the secret details of the D-Day landings, but one Mickey Finn later, he finds himself in a lavish military medical facility, realising to his amazement that six years have passed and World War Two is over. Or could this all somehow be an elaborate ruse, maintained by chummy psychiatrist Rod Taylor and kindly nurse/Auschwitz survivor Eva Marie Saint? Tension remains high throughout the first hour, with very distinct signposts towards 'The Prisoner' - Garner and his fellow officers wear prominently numbered badges, and the major's swift abduction and the subterfuge surrounding him will ring clear bells with Patrick McGoochan devotees.

One is also reminded of the likes of THE SECRET CINEMA (Paul Bartel 1968) and THE TRUMAN SHOW (Peter Weir 1998); so very complex and intricate is the plot against Garner that it seems at times that dozens, if not hundreds, of enemy personnel are acting out false roles to preserve an illusion. This idea is developed with the strong suggestion that even those taking part in the deception may concurrently be being deceived themselves, including the various officious 'Number 2s', the populace of The Village, and by extension, we viewers at home - and indeed, that Number 6 himself may merely be looked upon by other inhabitants/prisoners as an active complicit component rather than the rebel we assume him to be, simply on the basis that the programme tells us that every week. 'Prisoner' episode 'The Schizoid Man' mirrors the plot of 36 HOURS directly to a great extent, sharing its storyline about putting a captive under extreme pressure in order to extract the secrets held within his head (though in this instance attempting to convince Number 6 that he is an impostor, via use of a double), and even turning on a near-identical twist involving a minor injury.

Indeed, it is moments such as that one where 36 HOURS excels, with the tiniest giveaway glimpses or revelations taking precedence over the bigger contrivances, putting one party or another in the picture as they gradually piece everything together. And if 36 HOURS should lapse into comic farce at times during its final third, that in itself could be judged merely as a reflection of the nature of wartime conflict - as well as influencing 'The Prisoner', you may conclude that perhaps the movie worked its magical effect upon another all-time classic of British television, 'Dad's Army'!

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