

ROALD DAHL ON FILM

ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS

USA/1962-1965/25mins
approx./NC

It's fair to say that Sir Alfred Hitchcock is considered to this day as the number one director in cinema, by a majority of film buffs, critics, and industry insiders. At time of writing, his outré

1958 classic VERTIGO is rated as the greatest movie ever made, that is if you accept the ten-yearly filmmakers-and-journalists survey conducted regularly by 'Sight & Sound' magazine as a reliable benchmark. More than three decades after he left us, Hitch remains a palpable presence and influence - in recent years we've seen biopics both reverent (HITCHCOCK, Sacha Gervasi 2012) and contentiously legend-debunking (THE GIRL, Julian Jarrold 2013), while releases as diverse as STOKER (Park Chan-wook 2013), DISTURBIA (D. J. Caruso 2007) and HORRIBLE BOSSES (Seth Gordon 2011) signify the continuing sway of the Hitchcock legacy.

If one accepts Hitchcock's peak years as running from 1954 to 1960, i.e. REAR WINDOW through to PSYCHO almost without a fumble or flaw, then how all the more remarkable it is that during that productive and artistically satisfying period, the great man managed to find time to embark upon a television series. 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents' aired on CBS (and later, NBC) for seven successful seasons from 1955, after which 'The Alfred Hitchcock Hour' played through to the mid-sixties. The show's title may hint that this was an opportunity for Hitch to further his 'brand' and name recognition (famously, of course, he's often cited as being one of that tiny handful of directors that "the general public might have actually heard of"); yet this was to prove a much more hands-on operation, as Hitchcock appeared on camera to introduce the shows - usually in some



CHAPTER



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wild wig/costume, or incongruous setting, and handling elaborate props - and, more importantly, helmed seventeen of the episodes himself. PSYCHO (1960) seems to have entered production almost as a feature spin-off from the series, Hitch noting how quickly and efficiently his tv crews got on with the job and wondering whether this work ethic could be transferred to the time-devouring milieu of a movie set.

Hitch struck a rich vein of jet-black humour with these shows, too - something which had often been present in his big screen work, but largely as quirky moments or wry asides, punctuation before the next epic set-piece or revelation of evil villainy. THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY (1955), from a novel by Jack Trevor Story filled with irreverent bad-taste fun, may well have set the tone for 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents' - but despite that apparent bridge, and indeed as John Russell Taylor points out in his authorised biography 'Hitch', "it is difficult now to reconstruct how revolutionary it was, back in those early days of television, for a front-rank, top-class movie director to involve himself in any way with this trashy, despised medium". Hitchcock's airy dismissals of the show's sponsors and the constant requirement of the tv medium to cut to commercials, have entered legend, and the jauntily lumbering theme tune (Gounod's 'Funeral March of a Marionette') is to this day instantly recognisable, and forever entangled in association with the Hitch persona.

Over its lengthy run, 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents' featured half-a-dozen small-screen versions of stories by Roald Dahl - of which four were directed personally by Hitchcock himself. In seeking out different, more macabre fare suitable to a brisk twenty-five minute slot, it seems Dahl's tales were deemed ideal for the series. The adaptations focused upon his character-based or exotic works rather than anything more fantastic (a mix of the two was to come, in the British-produced 'Tales Of The Unexpected' from 1979 onwards), and the Dahls sat neatly alongside other twisted tales of crimes gone awry, murder most foul, insurance scams and identity switches, from such notable sources as Dorothy L. Sayers, Fredric Brown, Cornel Woolrich, Ray Bradbury, and Evan Hunter.

Dahl failed to make the cut for the first two seasons, but scripted the efficient teleplay for 'Lamb To The Slaughter', based on his own 1953 short story for Harper's Magazine, directed by Hitchcock himself, and broadcast in April 1958.



Darrell Buxton, cult movie historian, freelance lecturer, and editor of the books 'The Shrieking Sixties: British Horror Films 1960-1969', 'Dead or Alive: British Horror Films 1980-1989'

Unexpected', dir: Graham Evans 1980); THE MAN AND THE SNAKE (dir: Sture Rydman 1972) - not a version of Dahl but a short film based on an Ambrose Bierce frivolity, taking a similar approach to Hitchcock/Robinson by eking thrills and tension from a protagonist's irrational fear of the reptilian.

MAN FROM THE SOUTH - originally aired January 3rd 1960. Directed by Norman Lloyd. Written by William Fay, from the story by Roald Dahl. Starring Steve McQueen and Peter Lorre. Another of Dahl's 'strange wager' yarns, this one centred upon a bet over whether a young gambler can flick his cigarette lighter into action ten times in succession - at a perverse price should he lose to the seasoned hustler setting the terms. Also see: 'The Man From The South' ('Tales of the Unexpected', dir: Michael Tuchner 1979); 'Man From The South' ('Alfred Hitchcock Presents', dir: Steve De Jarnatt 1985); 'The Man From Hollywood' (FOUR ROOMS, dir: Quentin Tarantino 1995)

MRS. BIXBY AND THE COLONEL'S COAT - originally aired September 27th 1960. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Written by Halstead Welles, from the story by Roald Dahl. Starring Audrey Meadows and Les Tremayne. Playful, breezy study of infidelities among the moneyed classes - this bit of fluff probably appealed to Hitchcock's gossipy curtain-twitching nature as well as offering a chance for him to go through the 'Hitchcock blonde' routine with his refined and stylish female lead. Inessential but lots of fun. Also see: 'Mrs. Bixby and the Colonel's Coat' ('Tales of the Unexpected', dir: Simon Langton 1979). The BBC also filmed the story in 1965 for 'Thirty-Minute Theatre', directed by Naomi Capon, but this transmission is missing, believed wiped.

THE LANDLADY - originally aired February 21st 1961. Directed by Paul Henreid. Written by Robert Bloch, from the story by Roald Dahl. Starring Dean Stockwell and Patricia Collinge. "It's never too early for a nice cup of tea"... really creepy episode with an impossibly clean-cut Stockwell set up as red herring for a spate of burglaries in a small English provincial town, making his way to a stuffy old boarding house where the over-attentive elderly proprietor has a mysterious secret and a particular, peculiar talent. Adapted by the author of the novel 'Psycho', from Dahl's 1959 story for Tree Nuts magazine. Also see: 'The Landlady' ('Tales of the Unexpected', dir: Herbert Wise 1979).



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