

Hitchcock—Hollywood Genius

A Profile of the Great English Director by One of America's Outstanding Producers

WALTER WANGER

Producer of the motion picture "Foreign Correspondent"



TODAY the name of Alfred Hitchcock means as much to a moving picture as the name of any star. Nowadays sheer merit can win such public and professional recognition that a director becomes an attraction in himself. Frank Capra is one of these, John Ford another, but Alfred Hitchcock is something more. He's an institution.

Roly-poly Hitch learned his craft well. He started early, advanced steadily, always ambitious but never letting his ambition get him beyond the place where his footing was sure and his talent more than equal to the task directly ahead. Hitchcock is a thorough technician, a sensitive artist and a good business man. Few creators of entertainment are all three. Moreover he is that rare combination, a driver with an exquisite sense of humor and the personality to surmount any obstacle. Hitch is never off his guard, over-confident or quite satisfied. I once described him as a combination of a Sherlock Holmes and a Balzac overeating at the Ritz.

He probably puts more of himself into his pictures than any other director I have known in twenty-one years of producing pictures. His talent seems unlimited, his energy and his wit inexhaustible. He never quite lets down and he is one of those fortunate individuals who never reveal fatigue or worry. He'll tackle anything and finish off with an extraordinary success. He's not afraid to change his mind or profit by a suggestion that seems reasonable. He refuses to follow any one hard and fast rule and more than perhaps any other director he has mastered the art of making moving pictures move without obvious mechanical tricks.

Hitchcock feels that the camera is really a participating actor in every action and that, representing as it does the audience, it should mingle with the actors and share their adventures with them, not merely stand aloof as an observer or, as a mechanical recording device, be jerkily shifted from one vantage point to another.

Hitch is fat, forty and full of fire. I've seen him climb a ladder with unbelievable agility and I've

seen him doze off to sleep looking at pictures and listening to my inaugural address as president of the Motion Picture Academy. Twenty-seven spotlights wouldn't phase Hitchcock if he became drowsy, and what he can do to a double-thick steak is no Hollywood secret. On the set it's different. He arrives early in the morning, is punctual on the stage, makes a careful check of his script scenes before he starts and, while he drinks a cup of black coffee, he directs the set-up for the first scene of the day in the minutest detail. A Hitchcock filming script is usually dog-eared from many references before the first week's shooting is finished.

Nearly every page in his script has pencil marks on both sides of each sheet—corrections in the dialog on one side, sketches showing the composition of scenes, medium shots and closeups on the other. His script is an historical document. In addition to having art directors prepare many sketches showing lights, shades and suggested composition, Hitchcock will make as many as 300 quick pencil sketches of his own to show his crew just how he wants scenes to look. Frequently he sketches egg shaped faces to indicate facial expression. Handsome leading men and glamorous leading ladies would not be flattered by these impressionistic miniature portraits, but they produce results.

"Lining up" a scene, Hitchcock first operates like an engineer discussing camera placement, movement and general action. Then he becomes a teacher instructing the actors in dialog rehearsals. When all is ready for actual filming, he becomes an alert and sensitive movie fan. "Twirl 'em," says Hitch quietly, as he orders the camera to begin, and then he sits down in his chair beside the camera watching the actors, his eyes sparkling in anticipation, his lips frequently moving inaudibly as he says "That's right," "A little louder," or "Now move this way." Actors think Hitchcock is a most responsive audience and his expressions of approbation or disapproval are as clear and sharp to them as an orchestra leader's baton is to musi-

cians. Some directors sit by the camera and fairly glower at the actors; others fail to show any emotional reaction whatever. While making a picture he establishes an office on the set in a portable dressing room and substitutes a thirty minute nap for a hearty lunch. The sun usually sets before Hitchcock's car comes 'round the corner of the stage to take him home. Once or twice a week Mrs. Hitchcock meets him at his favorite restaurant—half way to his home—and the burly director's Diamond Jim appetite is given full sway.

Hitchcock is a master of mood, mystery and thrills. Some of his shots may cause you to doubt their logic, but Hitch explains that in directing melodrama it is better to be illogical because "logic is dull." Audiences prove his contention. A half dozen pictures prove it.

Hitch says that the Westminster Cathedral tower scene in "Foreign Correspondent" is perhaps the best illustration of his theory. Edmund Gwenn takes Joel McCrea to the top of the tower to show him an unusual view of London. The audience knows Gwenn is a villain and expects him to push McCrea off. Like a cat with a mouse Gwenn takes his time about maneuvering McCrea into position for the fateful push. McCrea is so unsuspecting the audience becomes impatient with him. Hitch has some boys, then a man and a woman prevent Gwenn from committing his crime. The scene plays slowly, its drama increasing, until the audience sits on the edge of its seat. The camera points down, showing the great drop to the street, a boy's hat blows off unexpectedly and chills run up and down your spine as you build up in your mind the terrible feeling of such a fall. Suddenly Gwenn makes a rush for McCrea and just as one expects to see McCrea pushed off the tower the scene shifts suddenly, a scream follows (the audience screams too) and the story is off on another wild chase. The audience sweats and chills during the scene, but that is good theatre. To Hitchcock, that is why an audience comes to see a show. That is why people go for a ride on a roller coaster. They like to suffer; they want to suffer; they enjoy it.

Hitchcock lives in a former home of Carole Lombard—a well hidden, hillside house in the Bel Air district beyond Beverly and Hollywood. It is not a pretentious place but it is quiet and permits lots of thinking and dreaming with a minimum of interruption. Mrs. Hitchcock, whose professional name, Alma Reville, appears frequently on Hitchcock film titles, an eleven-year-old daughter Patricia, and a copper colored cocker spaniel share the two story home. It's a homey, intimate place. Obviously it wasn't designed by Hitchcock, but one can easily understand his complete comfort in it.

Hitch met Alma Reville early in his film career. He gave up his courses in electrical engineering at London university to help support the family by

Movie Producer

WALTER WANGER, producer of "Foreign Correspondent," was born in San Francisco on July 11, 1894. He received part of his early education in Switzerland and after completing preparatory school went to Dartmouth College. In 1917 came his first job connected with the stage and soon thereafter he gravitated to motion pictures. Mr. Wanger has held important positions with Famous Players-Lasky, Paramount, Columbia, and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. He is now President of Walter Wanger Productions. During the World War Mr. Wanger was a flyer. He is married to Joan Bennett.

working as a technical clerk in a London cable manufacturing company. From a clerkship he advanced to the advertising department and applying his natural talent for drawing became an advertising layout man. Interested in the movies since he was a lad of fourteen, Hitchcock read the British film trade magazines and learned one day that the Famous Players company was to open London studios. So he went to work on a pet idea. He thought film titles were atrocious and decided to design some to show the new producers that Englishmen too had good ideas. He spent five days and nights lettering art title cards using the announced title of the first Famous Players-London film and names of friends to fill out the customary list of credits. After running the gamut of secretaries and assistants Hitchcock reached the "head man," interested him in his work and shortly thereafter shifted his activities from the cable advertising department to the Famous Players title department. Later he joined another studio as art director, script writer, assistant director and production manager. He had no thought of becoming a real director until a friend who had been a close observer of his marked versatility offered him a chance to direct a picture to be made in Munich. The results were noteworthy and when he returned to England Hitch had plenty of offers. Fourteen years in British studios followed. Among his successes during this period were "The Lodger," "The Lady Vanishes," "39 Steps," and "Jamaica Inn."

In 1938 Hitchcock first came to Hollywood to size up the place and sign a contract with Selznick-International. He returned the next year to direct the sensationally successful "Rebecca" although it was not his usual type of material. When "Rebecca" was completed, Hitchcock came to us for "Foreign Correspondent" and wrote the original story from which he later directed a picture I was very proud to produce. During the filming Hitch lost thirty pounds, but he has more than two hundred left.