

HITCHCOCK'S

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT (1940)

by John Rossi

In the late 1930s as Europe rushed headlong into another war, Hollywood went serenely along making films that studiously avoided any comment on the political scene. Afraid of alienating some pressure group and seeking always the broadest popular themes, the film industry reflected the isolationism that characterized America in those years. The most popular movies for 1938 and 1939 were exclusively escapist in content: The Wizard of Oz, Gunga Din, Dodge City, and Gone With the Wind.¹ Just how far Hollywood would go to avoid antagonizing the sensibilities of some powerful political constituency became evident in 1938 during the making of Blockade. Ostensibly a pro-loyalist piece about the Spanish Civil War, it finally emerged in a form in which it was impossible to tell what political issues were involved or even if it was about Spain.²

Hollywood's first hesitant steps toward a firm anti-fascist line were taken in 1939 with the making by Warner Brothers of Confessions of a Nazi Spy, the first film to explicitly use the term Nazi and single them out as villains. Since it was well received by both critics and public alike, Hollywood undertook to make more clearly anti-fascist films. Escape, Arise My Love, and The Mortal Storm all appeared in late 1939, early 1940 after war had broken out in Europe.

It was against this backdrop of growing international tension that Alfred Hitchcock's career in America began. Hitchcock had been making films in England since the 1920s and had won a reputation as one of Europe's most creative directors. His films in the mid-1930s, from The Man Who Knew Too Much (1934) through The Lady Vanishes (1938) were all characterized by a gift for narrative flow, mounting tension, and

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unexpected twists and shocks. He had developed the thriller-chase film to new levels of perfection in pictures like The Thirty-Nine Steps and The Lady Vanishes. Because of the financial limitations of the British film industry, there was literally nowhere for Hitchcock to go in Britain in the late 1930s. For some time his work had come to the attention of the Hollywood studios and they had sought to lure him to America. David O. Selznick succeeded in 1939 with a lucrative contract to direct four films for \$40,000 per picture.³

Hitchcock's first film for Selznick was the artistically successful and enormously profitable Rebecca. Based on the Daphne du Maurier best seller, the film won numerous awards including the Academy Award for the best picture of 1940. It was responsible for establishing Hitchcock's American reputation. And yet, despite its great success, Rebecca was not a typical Hitchcock product. For one thing, it was a relatively safe first choice for him as though he was determined to plant his feet firmly in Hollywood before taking any serious risk. Rebecca contained few of the touches that had characterized his best English work. It had a superb professional cast, including Lawrence Olivier, Judith Anderson, George Sanders, and Nigel Bruce, who along with the popularity of the novel, virtually guaranteed the film's success. It did, however, include one daring touch, Selznick's insistence on the casting of the virtually unknown Joan Fontaine as the second Mrs. deWinter.

For his second project Hitchcock sought a property that would be closer to the type of film that had made his reputation. At the same time, once war had finally broken out in Europe, Hitchcock wanted to do something for Britain. There is no doubt that he felt some guilt for leaving England just as her moment of crisis had arrived. According to a recent biographer, he had been expressly asked by the British government to continue filmmaking in America.⁴ He was also aware of the fact that many of the British colony in Hollywood were regarded as deserters. Sir Seymour Hicks, a British actor and stage manager, had singled out Hitchcock along with John Loder and Charles Laughton for leaving England for the comfortable confines of Hollywood. He sarcastically suggested that Hollywood's British colony get together and make a film called Gone With the Wind Up.⁵ Hitchcock rejected Hicks' criticism but when essentially the same charges were made by a former associate and old friend, the producer Michael Balcon, he was deeply hurt. Somehow, he would prove his loyalty to Britain.⁶

At this critical moment in Hitchcock's life, the producer Walter Wanger arranged to borrow him from Selznick to direct a film that he

had been working on for a couple of years, a screen dramatization of Vincent Sheean's memoir, Personal History. Sheean was the prototype of the colorful foreign correspondent. A hard living, hard working newspaperman since age 19, he had covered Riff wars in Morocco, a communist revolt in China, and Arab-Jewish riots in Palestine. A drinking companion of Ernest Hemingway, he had published Personal History in 1935 to rave reviews. Dealing with his years as a foreign correspondent, it was a runaway bestseller. Wanger paid \$10,000 for it and made a number of unsuccessful attempts, along with a score of writers, to mold it into a coherent screenplay.⁷ He had in mind the kind of film that would show the American foreign correspondent against the exciting backdrop of war and revolution. Wanger's investment in Personal History grew to over \$60,000 by 1939 since he had hired the German emigre director, William Dieterle, to make a version of Sheean's book based on the events of the Spanish Civil War. By 1939 that conflict was ending and Dieterle was relieved of the assignment. Wanger was getting desperate and short of cash. Eventually the script alone would cost him over \$200,000.⁸

All of his attempts before the outbreak of war in Europe to get the movie on screen failed. There was no single theme to shoot the film around. The war and the growing awareness of the menace of Nazism in America changed all that. Hitchcock was brought in to make one of his patented thrillers very loosely based on Sheean's book. Hitchcock was now in his milieu.

The new film was budgeted for \$1,500,000, a large sum for 1939.⁹ Hitchcock started immediately supervising the work on a screenplay. Eventually fourteen people, including the English novelist, James Hilton, Hitchcock's longtime assistant, Joan Harrison, and the newspaperman turned actor, Robert Benchley, worked on the script. Benchley, who had a small part in the film as an alcoholic newspaperman, was allowed to write his own dialogue. He had only a few lines but they were all characterized by and delivered with the witty, world-weary quality that he was famous for.¹⁰

The final screenplay bore striking similarity to the most successful films Hitchcock had made in England. It was a chase, spy thriller with many aspects similar to the 39 Steps, The Man Who Knew Too Much, and the little known, underrated Hitchcock masterpiece, Young and Innocent.

Foreign Correspondent, as it was ultimately titled, had very little to do with Sheean's book. It was set in Europe on the eve of the outbreak of war. A naive American newspaperman is sent to Europe to get the real story, the story behind the headlines, for the American public.

The main settings for the film would be England, Holland, and eventually a trans-Atlantic clipper in the middle of the ocean. This gave Hitchcock an opportunity to spread out his story. For example, he sent a crew of cameramen to England and Holland to shoot some second unit scenes in order to capture the atmosphere of pre-war Europe. He also constructed in California an elaborate set of the Dutch countryside complete with windmills and tulip fields. This provided him with one of the best ideas--the hero's sudden discovery that the windmill is turning against the wind as a signal to an enemy airplane.

Although he never felt comfortable with the idea of overt propaganda, a close reading of Foreign Correspondent indicates that Hitchcock used the film to alert America to the dangers it would soon face as Europe went to war. He didn't like message pictures and believed that he could get his ideas about the war across better by using the thriller format.¹¹ The film was also his way of contributing to the cause of Britain once war started. Initially when Hitchcock began the project there was no mention of war. It was to be about Europe in the last days of peace. But as the picture was shot, reality caught up with the story. According to the final shooting script preserved at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, the final scenes were shot in June 1940 as Germany swept through France and the Low Countries. This gave an added impetus to Hitchcock's task of awakening America to the dangers of isolationism.¹²

Once a workable script was developed, Hitchcock began casting the film. He wanted Gary Cooper to play the naive American newspaperman who is sent to cover the story of the outbreak of the war. Cooper rejected the part on the grounds that it was just a simple thriller.¹³ Hitchcock had to settle for Joel McCrea, who gave a credible performance, but lacked the simple, almost dopey, American quality that Cooper specialized in. The female lead went to Laraine Day, just 22, and appearing in her first major role outside of the Dr. Kildare series. The supporting cast was superb. The villain was played with classic suaveness by Herbert Marshall. As Dr. Stephen Fisher, the head of the Universal Peace Party, Marshall was secretly working for a foreign power, i.e., Nazi Germany. He was in the grand traditions of Hitchcock's charming villains. In some ways he was modeled after Godfrey Tearle's Professor Jordan in the Thirty-Nine Steps. Others in the supporting cast included such British stalwarts as George Sanders and Edmund Gwenn. The latter, an old associate of Hitchcock's, was very effective in his brief appearance as an assassin. Eduardo Cinnelli also had a small part as one of Marshall's

associates in villainry. Shooting started early in 1940 and was completed within three months with Hitchcock bringing the film in under budget.

The film opens in the offices of a New York paper, The Globe, where the editor, played by the fine character actor Harry Davenport, is trying to get a new angle on the possibility that war might break out momentarily. The time is August 1939. Davenport is unhappy with his foreign correspondents because they are not getting the news behind the headlines. He says there is a crime taking place today and decides to send The Globe's best crime reporter, played by Joel McCrea to Europe during the last days of peace.

The reporter's name is Johnny Jones, and he is a symbol of American naivete and ignorance about the European situation. Even the name is a giveaway. "Johnny Jones" was George M. Cohan's name in the musical Little Johnny Jones which he wrote about a crude, rough American who went to Europe just before World War I. McCrea's ignorance is made clear right from the start:

Davenport: What do you think about the present European crisis, Mr. Jones?

McCrea: What crisis?

Davenport: I'm referring to the impending war, Mr. Jones.

McCrea: Oh, that. To be very frank, sir, I haven't given it much thought.

Any further doubts about Jones' naivete about European affairs is removed when he suggests to Davenport: "How about interviewing Hitler; it's be a good idea to pump him, too, wouldn't it? He's probably got something on his mind."¹⁴ Davenport's look is incredulous.

McCrea is shipped off to England with orders to interview the Dutch Prime Minister, Van Meer, who is supposed to hold the key to peace. Van Meer was played by the great German character actor, Albert Basserman, making only his second film in America. McCrea also meets with Marshall who agrees to fill him in on the work of the world peace organization he heads, a group that is supposed to be close to Van Meer. At the last minute the reporter is also given a new identity on the grounds that no self-respecting foreign correspondent could be named Johnny Jones. His new name is Huntley Haverstock. The change of names is symptomatic of change of view that McCrea's character will eventually undergo during the film. The simple, naive and aptly named Jones will gradually become the sophisticated and perceptive foreign correspondent.

McCrea arrives in England and immediately manages to meet with Van Meer but is unable to secure any inside information from him. He also

meets Marshall's daughter, played by Laraine Day, and it is obvious that he has fallen in love. When Van Meer suddenly leaves London for Amsterdam, McCrea decides to follow him. This sets the stage for one of the most imaginative scenes in the movie: Van Meer's apparent assassination. For this scene Hitchcock had an elaborate Dutch city square built. Since he wanted the assassination to be even more dramatic, he had a very complex drainage system constructed so that he could shoot the scene during a heavy rainstorm.¹⁵

Van Meer mounts the steps of a government building while a large crowd of people, all carrying black umbrellas, press forward. As he reaches the top step a photographer steps out of the crowd to take his picture. The next shot shows a close-up of the camera and we see a gun held along its side. Before the audience has time to react, Van Meer is shot in the head, toppling backward down the steps. The assassin flees through the crowd, his path made clear to the audience by the disturbance among the umbrellas. This scene, with overtones of Eisenstein's steps scene from Potemkin, is a brilliant construction. The rainstorm, mass of people, umbrellas, and the method of assassination were devised by Hitchcock for maximum shock effect. It remains one of the most vivid images from his films, cited by many critics as one of his master pieces. There are also elements of this scene in Martin Balsam's murder at the top of the stairs in Psycho.

The following scene with McCrea pursuing the assassin through the Dutch countryside leads to one of the turning points in the film. Noticing a windmill turning against the wind, McCrea investigates and amidst mounting tension discovers Van Meer alive. The murdered man was a double, a ploy so that the real Van Meer can be kept a captive. McCrea has taken his first steps away from innocence. Shortly after discovering Van Meer alive, his competitive instincts aroused, McCrea tells the doubting Laraine Day:

I don't know the ins and outs of your crackpot peace movement and I don't know what's the matter with Europe. But I know a story when I see one. And I'll keep after it 'til I either get it or it gets me!¹⁶

McCrea now is a symbol for America; angry, confused, but gradually realizing that isolation and neutralism will no longer suffice.

McCrea's further education in the dangers of the European scene takes place when he returns to London having convinced Laraine Day that he did see Van Meer alive. They rush to tell Marshall what they have discovered in Holland. Marshall in this scene is revealed to the audience

for the first time as a member of the group who kidnapped Van Meer. He also plots to get McCrea out of the way by having Edmund Gwenn kill him. During the planning to eliminate McCrea, Marshall speaks German, the first overt sign that the group that kidnapped Van Meer were Nazis. It is interesting that in the first half of the screenplay nowhere are those plotting against Van Meer clearly identified as Nazis. They even speak a strange, made-up language. But in the second half of the film the villains are clearly identified. This results from the fact that the screenplay was started before the war and then was revised after the outbreak of hostilities in September 1939. The final revisions on the scene where Marshall is revealed to be a traitor are dated April 9, 1940, by which time the Germans had not only conquered Poland but had attacked Denmark and Norway in western Europe.¹⁷

Gwenn's role is a short but very effective one. He joins McCrea as a bodyguard. In his best obsequious cockney manner, Gwenn insinuates himself into his victim's confidence, all the while looking for an opportunity to kill him. The climax occurs atop Westminster Cathedral. While a requiem Mass is sung in the background, a body falls off the cathedral tower.

The viewer doesn't know who was killed until the next scene when the camera gradually pulls back to show McCrea discussing the incident with Benchley. "All I could think was 'Fisher.' Fisher planned this!" McCrea's education now is complete. In the next scene the loose details of the plot are tied up neatly.¹⁸

Hitchcock was famous for his use of the concept of the maguffin in his films, a plot device that seemed important but wasn't really intrinsic to the story. The money stolen by Janet Leigh in Psycho is a classic example of this. There is really no maguffin per se in Foreign Correspondent, but the closest thing to one is the details of the secret treaty that the Nazis are trying to get from Van Meer. This provides Albert Basserman with one of the most effective scenes in the film. Knowing that McCrea suspects that he is a Nazi, Marshall goes to Van Meer to trick the details of the treaty from him. The tortured and drugged Van Meer comes to suspect Fisher and denounces him in a brilliant scene that earned Basserman his Academy Award nomination as outstanding supporting actor:

Basserman: You cried 'peace,' Fisher--peace--and there was no peace--only war and death--you were a liar, Fisher--a cruel, cruel liar! You will never conquer them, Fisher--little people everywhere--who give crumbs to birds...(his voice rises a little). Lie

.to them--whip them--force them into war (his voice fades). When the beasts--like you--will devour each other--(almost in a whisper) the world will be theirs!¹⁹

Marshall is devastated by this and it is obvious that he is now having reservations about his role as a traitor.

The concluding scene is one of the most famous in the film. After McCrea has exposed Marshall's plot and rescued Basserman, he telephones the details of the story to America:

McCrea: You don't keep out of war just by sitting around being peaceful, while other people are slowly digging away at the ground under your feet. That's not how you keep out of war. That's how you lose a war.²⁰

Some commentators argue that Hitchcock is not really engaging in pro-British propaganda in these final scenes. Rather than labeling these sections as British propaganda, Andrew Sarris dismisses them as "the acme of Hollywood's non-ideological militancy."²¹ Donald Spoto, the author of one of the most definitive studies of Hitchcock's films, sees Foreign Correspondent as concerned less with propaganda "than with the people whose complexities have created the war."²² Later the film was attacked by isolationist U.S. Senators as an example of the kind of pro-Allied material designed to get America involved in the war.²³

As the picture ends, McCrea is broadcasting to America from London while an air-raid is underway. In the final script, dated June 3, 1940, the scene is datelined Paris, but it was changed to London before the film was released in August. For dramatic impact, London made more sense. For one thing, the Germans only bombed Paris once while by the time the American public saw the film, they would be used to the idea of German raids on England. Also McCrea's broadcast paralleled those of Edward R. Morrow from London which became hugely popular in the summer of 1940.

The picture ends with "American the Beautiful" playing in the background while McCrea warns the American people of what is in store for them:

Hello, America. I have been watching a part of the world being blown to pieces. A part of the world as nice as Vermont and Ohio, Virginia, California, and Illinois, lies ripped up and bleeding like a steer in a slaughter house...All that noise you hear isn't static. It is death coming to Paris. Yes, they're coming here now. You can hear the bombs now, falling on the streets, cafes, and homes. Don't tune me out, hang on a while. This is a big story--and you're part of it. It's too late to do anything here except

stand in the dark and let them come. It feels like all the lights are out everywhere except America. Keep those lights burning there. Cover them with steel, ring them with guns. Build a canopy of battleships and bombing planes around them. --Hello, America! Hang onto your lights. They're the only lights left in the world.²⁴

When Hitchcock was pressed later that this speech was overly dramatic as well as childishly patriotic he said that it wasn't written by him but by Wanger and Hecht. But then with a smile he noted that he got a telegram of congratulations on the ending speech from President Roosevelt's advisor, Harry Hopkins.²⁵

After final changes were made, Foreign Correspondent was released in early August 1940. The major reviews appeared within a month and were without exception enthusiastic. Both Bosley Crowther in the New York Times and Howard Barnes in the Herald Tribune praised the film as classic escapist entertainment with challenging propaganda overtones.²⁶ Otis Ferguson in the New Republic, after praising the perfect atmosphere of Foreign Correspondent, wrote: "If you have any interest in the true motion and sweep of pictures, watching him [Hitchcock] at work is like listening to music."²⁷ The New Yorker critic, John Mosher, called it a classic spy thriller that was so up to date "that you have somewhat the sense of turning from a paragraph in the current news and finding it dramatized for you upon the screen."²⁸ Time called it one of the finest films of the year. Most critics had some reservations about the work of Joel McCrea but the supporting cast was praised enthusiastically.²⁹ Many reviewers noted how skillfully Hitchcock used his minor characters and extras to add authenticity to the film.

The film was nominated for an Academy Award at the Best Picture of 1940 but lost out to Hitchcock's first film, Rebecca. Basserman and the script team of Bennett, Hilton, and Joan Harrison were also nominated unsuccessfully for Academy Awards. In Basserman's case the film had a profound impact in launching his American career. A refugee from Nazi Germany, he played a variety of sympathetic German and Viennese parts in America until he died in 1952.

Foreign Correspondent sealed Hitchcock's reputation in Hollywood as a skilled director. His career never really sagged following its success and the even greater success of Rebecca. And yet the film was largely forgotten. The general opinion of it, except among certain Hitchcock buffs, was that Foreign Correspondent was at best second rate Hitchcock. This is Truffaut's view.³⁰ He also believes that Foreign Correspondent was a singular comedown from Rebecca. Few of the critical

examinations of Hitchcock's career give it more than a passing reference, concentrating instead on intense examinations of Vertigo, Strangers on a Train, Psycho, or Rear Window. And yet I believe there is much to be said for Foreign Correspondent as definitive Hitchcock.

First, the film recreates the atmosphere of Europe on the eve of the second world war with astonishing accuracy. The rush from meeting to meeting of Fisher and his Peace Party, McCrea's crossing to Holland and returning to England within a day, all capture the almost hopeless search for peace that characterized Europe in these days. The second unit shooting in England and Holland combined with the technical genius of William Cameron Menzies, who designed the Hollywood sets, gave added authenticity to the film. Second, the script was effective. Benchley's part, Sanders' role as an urbane English reporter, Marshall's suave personification of evil were all deftly written. Hitchcock wasted little time in plunging McCrea into action and, as a result, the audience was kept on the edge of their seats from the opening frames. The weakest link in the story was the romance between McCrea and Day. It never worked. Perhaps two more sympathetic performers could have carried this off, although I doubt it. Their relationship was never really crucial to the story. Third, there are at least four scenes in the film that rank with the best work that Hitchcock did: the assassination of Van Meer, McCrea trapped in the windmill, the attempted murder of McCrea on the roof of Westminster Cathedral, and the crash of the airplane carrying Marshall and McCrea to America. This last scene was enormously effective. The plane is shot down by a German destroyer and the crash into the Atlantic was shown from pilot's viewpoint. Hitchcock achieved this by having the windshield of the plane painted on very thin paper and when the crash occurred, water crashed through the windshield as though the plane had really crashed into the sea.

Foreign Correspondent succeeded on many levels. It was nominated for four Academy Awards and, although it won none, it was considered one of the top ten films of the year. It was a good solid adventure yarn on a par with the best thrillers made in England by Hitchcock. Yet it was as a piece of pro-British propaganda that Foreign Correspondent was most memorable. Subtly, but very effectively, it showed Hollywood's growing awareness of the Nazi menace. When the war broke out Hitchcock wanted to return home but the British authorities told him to continue making movies. He rewarded their confidence by making a skillful and clever anti-Nazi film. Foreign Correspondent can be looked at as Hitchcock's beau geste for the Allied war effort.

¹Cobbett Steinberg, Reel Facts (New York, 1979), p. 341.

²See the review by Frank Nugent, New York Times, June 17, 1938.

³John Russell Taylor, Hitch: The Life and Work of Alfred Hitchcock (London, 1978), p. 140.

⁴George Perry, The Films of Alfred Hitchcock (London, 1965), p. 71.

⁵Colin Shindler, Hollywood Goes to War: Films and American Society, 1939-1952 (London, 1979), p. 14.

⁶Taylor, Hitchcock, p. 163.

⁷Ibid., p. 164.

⁸Shindler, Hollywood Goes to War, p. 21.

⁹Taylor, Hitchcock, p. 167.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 166. Shindler has pointed out that while "no copies of the various drafts are available, it seems reasonable to conclude that, in view of the writers Wanger employed, a transition was made from the political hardedge of Lawson through the pro-British feelings of Hilton to Hitchcock's own distinctive obsessions." Shindler, Hollywood Goes to War, p. 20.

¹¹Ibid., p. 164.

¹²The final shooting script is dated March 19 to June 3, 1940. Foreign Correspondent, Revised Final Script, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, University of Wisconsin.

¹³Cooper later told Hitchcock that he had made a serious mistake in not taking the part. Francois Truffaut, Hitchcock (New York, 1967), p. 96.

¹⁴Foreign Correspondent, Revised Final Script, p. 8.

¹⁵Taylor, Hitchcock, p. 167.

¹⁶Foreign Correspondent, Revised Final Script, p. 99.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 195.

²⁰Ibid., p. 247.

²¹Andrew Sarris, "Foreign Correspondent," Film Comment, May/June 1974, p. 22.

²²Donald Spoto, The Art of Alfred Hitchcock (New York, 1976), p. 98.

²³Foreign Correspondent, along with such films as That Hamilton Woman, The Lion Has Wings, and The Great Dictator, were singled out as examples of pro-British propaganda in the United States Senate. Isolationist Senators like Gerald Nye of North Dakota scheduled hearings into Hollywood's involvement in the war for the fall of 1941. Pearl Harbor put an end to that. See Wayne Cole, Senator Gerald Nye and American Foreign Relations (Minneapolis, 1962), p. 185-190, and Karol Kulik, Alexander Korda: The Man Who Could Work Miracles (London, 1975), p. 252.

²⁴Foreign Correspondent, Revised Final Script, p. 243.

²⁵Charles T. Samuels (ed.), Encountering Directors (New York, 1972), p. 244.

²⁶New York Times, August 28, 1940; New York Herald Tribune, August 28, 1940.

²⁷The New Republic, September 16, 1940, pp. 385-386.

²⁸The New Yorker, August 31, 1940, p. 51.

²⁹Time, September 2, 1940, p. 31.

³⁰Truffaut, Hitchcock, pp. 95-96.

³¹Foreign Correspondent was nominated for: Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, Original Screenplay, and Cinematography.