

Alfred Hitchcock, master of suspense film, at 80

By Jerry Belcher
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HOLLYWOOD — Sir Alfred Hitchcock, the master director who probably frightened more moviegoers than anyone in history with his 54 suspense-packed movies, died peacefully yesterday at his home. He was 80.

Hitchcock, who began his movie career in London in the 1920s, was one of the few motion picture directors to become a superstar in his own right.

Some of his best known films are "Psycho," "The Birds" and "Dial M for Murder."

In ill health for several years — he suffered from a heart condition and arthritis — Hitchcock had still remained active, visiting his offices at Universal Studios almost every day until quite recently.

He had entered Cedars-Sinai Hospital Medical Center early last month for several days of diagnostic tests, but a hospital spokesman said at the time that the octogenarian "just didn't feel good" and added that the health problem then was not serious.

The cause of death was not immediately announced. A source at Universal Studios said, however, that he died quietly of natural causes about 9 a.m.

Actor Jimmy Stewart, who starred in several of Hitchcock's finest films, was shocked to learn of his old friend's death.

"I've lost a great friend and the world has lost one of its finest directing talents," Stewart said. "Alfred Hitchcock has made a tremendous contribution to the art of motion pictures and has been a source of joy to people all over the world."

Hitchcock was noted not only for his genius as a filmmaker but for his skill in promoting himself as a personality through his cameo appearances in nearly all of his films. He was also well known for hosting the television series Alfred Hitchcock Presents.

The cameo appearances were always ingenious, often humorous, and became his trademark. One

famous appearance showed the stout, slow-moving Hitchcock trying to wrestle a cello through a revolving door.

But despite his fame and his penchant for professional self-promotion, the British-born director did not live the limelight life of a celebrity. His personal life revolved about his family — his wife Ama, daughter Patricia and his grandchildren.

Their lives were intensely private.

"My wife and I," he said in an interview, "have never gone into the night clubs and cafes."

Hitchcock was the son of a London poultry dealer. He began his film career in London in 1925, settled in the United States in 1940 and became a US citizen in 1955.

Among his many films, he once listed his own favorites as "Spellbound," "Lifeboat," "Shadow of a Doubt" and "Psycho."

His first American made film, "Rebecca," won the Academy Award for best picture in 1938.

Oddly, he never won an Oscar in his own name, but was nominated four times.

Some critics consider Hitchcock one of the inventors of the modern motion picture — and certainly the greatest master of the suspense genre in which he specialized.

While often including scenes perceived as gruesome — the "Psycho" stabbing scene is perhaps the most notorious and chilling — the horror was more often implied than directly shown. And always, there was the subtly Hitchcockian humor.

In an interview several years ago, Hitchcock was asked to outline his traditional film.

"It encompasses pure horror and comedy at the same time," he said. "If you do a realistic murder story, you should show that life goes on around murder just as in real life. People still laugh and joke in the corridors, as it were. And I've always adhered to the fact that the amusement comes out of the characters as much as anything, not out of the situation."

Hitchcock was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II late last year for his contributions to British culture.