Notes on SHADOW OF A DOUBT (1948) from Barry Yuen

Posters from Barry Yuen’s collection are on display in the Lobby.

SHADOW OF A DOUBT, which Hitchcock once named as his favourite out of all his films, takes on the theme of Evil Comes to a Small Town, and how Evil can take on a likeable, charming face. As such, it tells the story of a loss of innocence, as Young Charlie (Teresa Wright) learns a lesson about the corruption and danger that exists beyond the confines of her up-to-then protected existence. Hitchcock said in an interview “It (small town life) was Her World, but it was not THE World.” Take note of all the black smoke coming from the train that brings the sociopathic Uncle Charlie to town. This was an intentional effect by Hitchcock to symbolize “the Devil coming to town”. Very apt, since Uncle Charlie is a serial killer, called “The Merry Widow Killer” by the press. Hitchcock gave Joseph Cotton the best role of his career as Uncle Charlie. His monologue where he describes his contempt for his victims is one of the highlights of the film.

Hitchcock gives us two points of view. Is the world a serene, comfortable place or is it, in the words of Uncle Charlie, a pigsty, a hell? The truth, as in most cases, is somewhere in the middle. The detective has the last word when says that the world “needs watching”. The world is not black and white, and Hitchcock demonstrates this with the 2 characters, neither of whom is completely good or completely evil. Before the movie is over, Young Charlie swears that she will kill Uncle Charlie if he doesn’t leave. Even within this Norman Rockwell-like normalcy, there’s a hint of a dark undercurrent, in the scenes with Charlie’s father and a neighbour cheerfully inventing scenarios about murder. (THE BIRDS has a similar scene where the after-dinner conversation includes a light-hearted story of a husband shooting his wife.) Uncle Charlie, as Young Charlie’s shadow-double, embodies the desire to break the law and commit murder that the civilized, law-abiding citizens may fantasize about but dare not act out. Throughout the film, Hitchcock draws attention to a link between Young Charlie and Uncle Charlie, both visually (the mirroring shots showing each character lying awake on his/her bed, in the same position; the ring that Uncle Charlie gives Young Charlie which evokes a marriage) and verbally (both of them having the same names, obviously. The dialogue reinforces this idea as well: “We’re not just an uncle and a niece. It’s something else,” she says, and they are referred to as twins at one point). Hitchcock would explore this theme in even more detail in STRANGERS ON A TRAIN. The two films are very much companion pieces.

In two previous films, THE LODGER and SUSPICION, studio interference prevented Hitchcock from filming the endings as originally conceived, with the male lead turning out to be a murderer. Both Ivor Novello and Cary Grant were considered too big of a star to play a villainous role. The studio felt the public would not accept it, so the ending in each case had to be changed. Finally, in SHADOW OF A DOUBT, Hitchcock got his way.

Some 40 years later, David Lynch would examine some of these same ideas in BLUE VELVET, where the small town world of blue skies and white picket fences also contains depths of crime and depravity. Virtually any director working in the suspense genre owes some kind of debt to Hitchcock. More recently, the film STOKER (2013) specifically riffs on SHADOW OF A DOUBT.
Cinematica Classic Film Series for Summer 2019

Alfred Hitchcock Presents: “The Murdering Mind”

This Summer we’re presenting a career-spanning six-film selection of Alfred Hitchcock’s movies that explore one of the master’s favourite recurring story lines: murders that take place in everyday society, in which “normal” people discover the dark truth that someone close to them is a killer. This is a program for Hitchcock fans & true crime enthusiasts alike!

The essential Rear Window (1954) kicks off this series, followed by Shadow of a Doubt (1943) (the filmmaker’s own favourite of his 53 films), one-shot-wonder Rope (1948), style-defining silent The Lodger (1927) featuring a Live Soundtrack by Spencer Evans, the impossibly clever Strangers on a Train (1951) and finally the “criminally”-underrated Frenzy (1972). Shadows, doubles, false accusations and dark humour will abound on Thursdays at 6pm through July & August.

- REAR WINDOW (1954) - Thursday July 18 @ 6pm
- SHADOW OF A DOUBT (1943) - Thursday July 25 @ 6pm
- ROPE (1948) - Thursday August 1 @ 6pm
- THE LODGER (1927) + Live Soundtrack by Spencer Evans - Thursday August 8 @ 6pm
- STRANGERS ON A TRAIN (1951) - Thursday August 15 @ 6pm
- FRENZY (1972) - Thursday August 22 @ 6pm