

Rope-1948: In the tangle of lies, there lies a tangle of rope....

Some call this film Hitchcock's best, but when released in 1948, most of the critics hardly bothered to review it. In some places in USA, it was actually banned; in others, it had to be severely cut before it could be shown.

It was Hitchcock's first colour film, at a time when film noir was only done in black-and-white. And, it was Hitchcock's first attempt to use the long take and, when viewed, it appears to be one continuous flow, with no cuts, wipes, dissolves or fades. However, it was filmed as a series of long takes of between 8 and a half and 10 minutes each, and then cleverly spliced to give the continuous effect. And it works. You have to be eagle-eyed to note when those cuts are managed, however.

Why did Hitchcock go to such trouble to produce that effect? According to one source, he did it "as a stunt", simply to see if he could pull it off (in that regard, Hitchcock's desire with the production parallels the fictional evil murderers' desire to pull off the perfect murder). So, for the discerning viewer, this is a very technical movie that required very precise positioning of equipment and rigid placement of the actors and props, all of which then had to be rehearsed endlessly before attempting a ten-minute take. Despite those self-imposed restrictions, Hitchcock finished the movie within a month. No mean feat, in my opinion...

Be aware, though: when you view this movie, you are transfixed as though you are in the apartment with the two murderers all the time. When I saw it, as a boy, over fifty years ago, I was mesmerized; watching it again on DVD today, the same effect applies, but with a PAUSE button, I can interrupt the flow now. However, the fascination is still there, and like no other movie from Hitchcock.

This is a movie that relies upon dialog for the story, with great lines and much double entendre – resulting in macabre humour. The visual creates the suspense, however, the most effective piece being when the maid (Edith Evanson) takes away the dinner dishes from the top of the chest with the body inside, and you just know that she will try to open the chest to put some books in it. It's a long sequence, and the dinner conversation is chattering on, and all the while the moment when she will want to open the lid gets ever nearer. Aaaaah, it's excruciatingly good... What will happen to stop her?

That's the nub of this narrative: from the very outset, you know who's dead, and you know who did it. What you don't know is how it will all end, and you don't know that until the very last second of screen time. So, it's worth seeing the movie for that alone. I know I'll be watching the movie again and again, simply to take in the astuteness and precision of Hitchcock's direction, the best of its type I've seen.

You can quibble about the quality of the acting all you wish, for this is not an actor's movie. It's Hitchcock all the way: he's showing us just how well he can do it, and he succeeds.

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Rating: 9

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