
“ROPE”: FROM 7:30 TO 9:15 IN ONE SHOT ■ CLOUDS OF SPUN GLASS ■ COLORS AND SHADOWS ■ WALLS THAT FADE AWAY ■ FILMS MUST BE CUT ■ HOW TO MAKE NOISES RISE FROM THE STREET ■ “UNDER CAPRICORN” ■ INFANTILISM AND OTHER ERRORS IN JUDGMENT ■ RUN FOR COVER! ■ “INGRID, IT’S ONLY A MOVIE!” ■ “STAGE FRIGHT” ■ THE FLASHBACK THAT LIED ■ THE BETTER THE VILLAIN, THE BETTER THE PICTURE ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

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FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT. *Rope* was made in 1948. In several respects this picture is a milestone in your career. For one thing, you produced it; for another, it was your first color film; and finally,* it represented an enormous technical challenge. Is the screenplay very different from Patrick Hamilton’s stage play? *

ALFRED HITCHCOCK. No, not really. Arthur Laurents did the screenplay and Hume

Cronyn worked with me on the adaptation. The dialogue was partly from the original play and partly by Laurents.

I undertook *Rope* as a stunt; that’s the only way I can describe it. I really don’t know how I came to indulge in it.

The stage drama was played out in the actual time of the story; the action is continuous from the moment the curtain goes up until it comes down again. I asked myself whether it was technically possible to film it in the same way. The only way to achieve that, I found, would be to handle the shooting in the same continuous action, with no break in the telling of a story that begins at seven-thirty and ends at nine-fifteen. And I got this crazy idea to do it in a single

* Since Alfred Hitchcock deals solely with the technical aspects of *Rope*, a brief description of the story is sufficient for our purposes. All of the action takes place on a summer evening in a New York apartment. Two young homosexuals (John Dall and Farley Granger) strangle a college friend just for the thrill of it and conceal his body in a chest in the very room in which his parents and fiancée are expected for a cocktail party. Among the guests is their former college professor (James Stewart). As the party is in progress, their attempt to impress their mentor leads them to disclose bits of truth which he eventually pieces together. Before the evening is over, he will discover the body and turn the two young men over to the police.

* Alfred Hitchcock’s description of *Rope* as a stunt calls for an explanation to those readers who are unfamiliar with shooting



When I look back, I realize that it was quite nonsensical because I was breaking with my own theories on the importance of cutting and montage for the visual narration of a story. On the other hand, this film was, in a sense, pre-cut. The mobility of the camera and the movement of the players closely followed my usual cutting practice. In other words, I maintained the rule of varying the size of the image in relation to its emotional importance within a given episode. Naturally, we went to a lot of trouble to achieve

techniques. As a rule, a film sequence is divided into shots that last between five to fifteen seconds. A film that runs an hour and a half will average six hundred shots. Occasionally—and this is particularly true of the highly pre-cut Hitchcock pictures—there may be as many as a thousand shots; there were thirteen hundred and sixty shots in *The Birds*.

In *Rope* each shot runs to ten minutes, that is, the entire film roll in the camera magazine, and is referred to as a ten-minute take. In the history of cinema this is the only instance in which an entire film has been shot with no interruption for the different camera setups.

this; and the difficulties went beyond our problems with the camera. Since the action starts in broad daylight and ends by nightfall, we had to deal with the gradual darkening of the background by altering the flow of light between seven-thirty and nine-fifteen. To maintain that continuous action, with no dissolves and no time lapses, there were other technical snags to overcome, among them, how to reload the camera at the end of each reel without interrupting the scene. We handled that by having a figure pass in front of the camera, blacking out the action very briefly while we changed from one camera to the other. In that way we'd end on a close-up of someone's jacket, and at the beginning of the next reel, we'd open with the same close-up of the same character.

F.T. Aside from all of this, I imagine that the fact that you were using color for the first



time must have added to your difficulties.

A.H. Yes. Because I was determined to reduce the color to a minimum. We had built the set of an apartment, consisting of a living room, a hallway, and a section of a kitchen. The picture overlooked the New York skyline, and we had that background made up in a semicircular pattern, so that the camera might swing around the room. To show that in proper perspective, that background was three times the size of the apartment decor itself. And between the set and the skyscrapers, we had some cloud formations made of spun glass. Each cloud was separate and mobile; some were hung on invisible wires and others were on stands, and they were also set in a semicircular pattern. We had a special working plan designed for the clouds, and between reels they were shifted from left to right. They were never actually shown in motion, but

you must remember that the camera wasn't always on the window, so whenever we changed the reels, the stagehands would shift each cloud into the position designated on our working plan. And as soon as a cloud reached the edge of the horizon, it would be taken off and another one would appear in view of the window at the other side.

F.T. What about the problems with the color?

A.H. Toward the last four or five reels, in other words, by sunset, I realized that the orange in the sun was far too strong, and on account of that we did the last five reels all over again. We now have to digress a little to talk about color.

The average cameraman is a very fine technician. He can make a woman look beautiful; he



can create natural lighting that is effective without being exaggerated. But there is often a problem that stems purely from the cameraman's artistic taste. Does he have a sense of color and does he use good taste in his choice of colors? Now, the cameraman who handled the lighting on *Rope* simply said to himself, "Well, it's just another sunset." Obviously, he hadn't looked at one for a long time, if ever at all, and what he did was completely unacceptable; it was like a lurid postcard.

Joseph Valentine, who photographed *Rope*, had also worked on *Shadow of a Doubt*. When I saw

the initial rushes, my first feeling was that things show up much more in color than in black and white. And I discovered that it was the general practice to use the same lighting for color as for black and white. Now, as I've already told you, I especially admired the approach to lighting used by the Americans in 1920 because it overcame the two-dimensional nature of the image by separating the actor from the background through the use of backlights—they call them liners—to detach him from his setting.

Now in color there is no need for this, unless the actor should happen to be dressed in the





Lending some books to the father of his victim, John Dall ties them with the cord he used to kill his friend.

same color as the background, but that's highly improbable. It sounds elementary, doesn't it, and yet that's the tradition, and it's quite hard to break away from it. Surely, now that we work in color, we shouldn't be made aware of the source of the studio lighting. And yet, in many pictures, you will find people walking through the supposedly dingy corridors between the stage and dressing rooms of a theater, and because the scene is lighted by studio arc lamps, their shadows on the wall are black as coal. You just can't help wondering where those lights could possibly be coming from.

I truly believe that the problem of the lighting in color films has not yet been solved. I tried for the first time to change the style of color lighting in *Tom Curtain*. Jack Warren, who was on *Rebecca* and *Spellbound* with me, is the cameraman who cooperated.

We must bear in mind that, fundamentally, there's no such thing as color; in fact, there's no such thing as a face, because until the light hits it, it is nonexistent. After all, one of the first things I learned in the School of Art was that there is no such thing as a line; there's only the light and the shade. On my first day in school I did a drawing; it was quite a good drawing, but because I was drawing with lines, it was totally incorrect and the error was immediately pointed out to me.

Going back to *Rope*, there's a little sidelight. After four or five days the cameraman went off "sick." So I wound up with a Technicolor consultant, and he completed the job with the help of the chief electrician.

F.T. What about the problems of a mobile camera?

A.H. Well, the technique of the camera movements was worked out, in its slightest details, well beforehand. We used a dolly and we mapped out our course through tiny numbers all over the floor, which served as guide marks. All the dollyman had to do was to get his camera on position Number One or Number Two at a given cue of the dialogue, then dolly over to the next number. When we went from one room into another, the wall of the hallway or of the living room would swing back on silent rails. And the furniture was mounted on rollers so that we could push it aside as the camera



passed. It was an amazing thing to see a shot taken.

F.T. What is truly remarkable is that all of this was done so silently that you were able to make a direct sound track. For a European, particularly if he works in Rome or Paris, that's almost inconceivable.

A.H. They'd never done it in Hollywood either! To do it, we had a special floor made. The opening scene, you will recall, shows two young fellows strangling a man and putting his body into a chest. There was some dialogue. Then there is more dialogue as they go into the dining room and then to the kitchen. Walls are being moved and lights are being raised and lowered. I was so scared that something would go wrong that I couldn't even look during the first take. For eight minutes of consecutive shooting everything went very smoothly. Then the camera panned around as the two killers walked back toward the chest, and there, right in camera focus, was an electrician standing by the window! So the first take was ruined.

F.T. That raises a point I'm curious about. How many takes were there for each reel that was completed? In other words, how many takes were interrupted and how many did you complete?

A.H. Well, there were ten days of rehearsal with the cameras, the actors, and the lighting. Then there were eighteen days of shooting, including the nine days in which we did the retakes because of that orange sun I told you about.

F.T. Eighteen days of shooting. That would mean that the work on six of those days was totally useless. Were you ever able to complete two whole reels in a single day?

A.H. No, I don't think so.

F.T. In any case, I don't agree that *Rope* should be dismissed as a foolish experiment, particularly when you look at it in the context of your whole career: a director is tempted by

the dream of linking all of a film's components into a single, continuous action. In this sense, it's a positive step in your evolution.

Nevertheless, weighing the pros and cons—and the practices of all the great directors who have considered the question seem to bear this out—it is true that the classical cutting techniques dating back to D. W. Griffith have stood the test of time and still prevail today. Don't you agree?

A.H. No doubt about it; films must be cut. As an experiment, *Rope* may be forgiven, but it was definitely a mistake when I insisted on applying the same techniques to *Under Capricorn*.

F.T. Before winding up our discussion of *Rope*, one remarkable aspect is the painstaking quest for realism. The sound track of that picture is fantastically realistic, in particular, toward the end, when James Stewart opens the window to fire a shot in the night and one hears the noises gradually rising from the street.

A.H. You put it very correctly when you referred to the rise of the noises from the street. As a matter of fact, to get that effect, I made them put the microphone six stories high and I gathered a group of people below on the sidewalk and had them talk about the shots. As for the police siren, they told me they had one in the sound library. I asked them, "How are you going to give the impression of distance?" and they answered, "We'll make it soft at first, and then we'll bring it up loud." But I didn't want it done that way. I made them get an ambulance with a siren. We placed a microphone at the studio gate and sent the ambulance two miles away and that's the way we made the sound track.

F.T. *Rope* was the first film you produced. Was it financially rewarding?

A.H. Yes, that part was all right, and it had good notices. It cost about a million and a half dollars to make because so many things in it were being done for the first time. James Stewart was paid three hundred thousand dollars. M-G-M bought the rights a little while ago and they reissued the picture.

F.T. After *Rope* you made your second pic-



ture as an independent producer, and that was *Under Capricorn*. In France there was and still is some confusion around that movie. It turned out to be a financial disaster, and you are reported to be sorry you ever undertook it. Yet many of your admirers regard it as your very best work. Wasn't it taken from a British novel that you liked?

A.H. I had no special admiration for the novel, and I don't think I would have made the picture if it hadn't been for Ingrid Bergman. At that time she was the biggest star in America and all the American producers were competing for her services, and I must admit that I made

the mistake of thinking that to get Bergman would be a tremendous feat; it was a victory over the rest of the industry, you see. That was bad thinking, and my behavior was almost infantile. Because even if the presence of Bergman represented a commercial asset, it made the whole thing so costly that there was no point to it. Had I examined the whole thing more carefully from the commercial angle, I would not have spent two and a half million dollars on the picture. At the time that was a lot of money, you see.

In 1949 I was regarded as a specialist in the suspense and thriller genre, but *Under Capricorn* fitted into neither one of these categories. In fact, *The Hollywood Reporter* commented on it

by saying that one “had to wait a hundred and five minutes for the first thrill of the picture.”* Anyway, I looked upon Bergman as a feather in my cap. We were making it with our own production company and all I could think about was: “Here I am, Hitchcock, the onetime English director, returning to London with the biggest star of the day.” I was literally intoxicated at the thought of the cameras and flashbulbs that would be directed at Bergman and myself at the London airport. All of these externals seemed to be terribly important. I can only say now that I was being stupid and juvenile.

My second mistake was to ask my friend Hume Cronyn to do the script with me; I wanted him because he’s a very articulate man who knows how to voice his ideas. But as a scriptwriter he hadn’t really sufficient experience.

Still another error was calling upon James Bridie to help with the scenario. He was a semi-intellectual playwright and not in my opinion a very thorough craftsman. On thinking it over later on, I realized that he always had very good first and second acts, but he never succeeded in ending his plays. I still remember one of our working sessions on the script. The man and wife had separated after a series of terrible quarrels, and I asked Bridie, “How are we going to bring them together again?” He said, “Oh, let them just apologize to each other and say, ‘I’m sorry, it was all a mistake.’”

F.T. It is true, even to an admirer of the picture, that the last fifteen minutes are rather weak; the denouement is too contrived. . . .

A.H. That’s what I mean. At any rate, I’m

* The action of *Under Capricorn* is set in Sydney, Australia, in 1830. The governor’s nephew, Charles Adare (Michael Wilding), newly arrived from England, is invited to dinner by Sam Flusky (Joseph Cotten), a former convict who is now the wealthy husband of Charles’s cousin, Henrietta (Ingrid Bergman).

There, he finds himself in a strange household. Henrietta has become an alcoholic. The shrewish housekeeper, Milly (Margaret Leighton), who is secretly in love with her master, terrorizes the young woman. Charles undertakes to restore his cousin’s self-confidence and subsequently falls in love with her.

At a brilliant ball the jealous husband, inflamed by the housekeeper’s lagolike intrigues, provokes a row in which Adare is wounded. Henrietta then admits to her cousin that she is guilty of the crime for which her husband had been convicted.

The confession leads Adare to renounce his love, but before leaving the country, he discovers that Milly has been administering slow poison to her mistress and succeeds in exposing her.

trying to give you a clear picture of my proper confusion at the time and of how wrong I was. For a director there should be no question on this one matter: Whenever you feel yourself entering an area of doubt or vagueness, whether it be in respect to the writer, the subject matter, or whatever it is, you’ve got to run for cover. When you feel you’re at a loss, you must go for the tried and true!

F.T. What do you mean by “to run for cover” behind the “tried and true”? Do you mean that when you have doubts about something it’s best to fall back on elements that have already been tested?

A.H. You’ve got to use an approach you’re completely sure of. I mean literally, that whenever there is confusion or doubt in your mind, the first thing to do is to recover your bearings. Any guide or explorer will tell you that. When they realize they’re lost, or they’ve taken the wrong road, they won’t take a short cut through the forest, nor do they rely on their instincts to set them back in the right direction. What they do is to carefully go back over the whole road until they’ve found their starting point, or the point at which they took the wrong turn.

F.T. Well, isn’t that true of *Under Capricorn*? You have a domineering housekeeper, gradual intoxication, a skeleton in the closet, an admission of guilt . . . all of those ingredients had been used in *Rebecca* and in *Notorious*.

A.H. That’s right, but, you see, those elements would have remained in the picture anyway if I’d had a good professional, like Ben Hecht, writing the script for me.

F.T. I see. I’ll grant you that the picture was too talky, but even so, the dialogue was quite poetic. And if *Under Capricorn* wasn’t a good movie, it was certainly a beautiful one.

A.H. I would have liked it to have been a success, even outside of commercial considerations. With all the enthusiasm we invested in that picture, it was a shame that it didn’t amount to anything. I was also ashamed that



Ingrid Bergman and I—as director—producer—took such large salaries. Perhaps I shouldn't have taken anything at all, but it didn't seem fair at the time for Bergman to be taking so much money and for me to work for nothing.

F.T. Did the film lose a lot of money?

A.H. Yes, it did, and the bank that financed it reclaimed the picture. But now it's going to be re-released throughout the world and also probably on American television.

F.T. The picture is so romantic that it's surprising it wasn't more of a commercial hit. It's true, of course, that it's also rather gloomy and morbid, with all of the characters feeling guilty about something and the over-all nightmarish climate of the action. Even so, the outstanding aspect of the picture is that it perfects upon many of the elements you had used in your past work. For instance, the tyrannical housekeeper in *Under Capricorn* might be the daughter of *Rebecca's* domineering Mrs. Danvers, but Milly is far more terrifying.

A.H. I thought so too, but the British critics said it was terrible to take a lovely actress like Margaret Leighton and make her into an un-

sympathetic character. And, at a press conference, one London newspaperman said, "I don't see why you had to bring Mr. Joseph Cotten from America when we have such a fine British actor as Kieron Moore."

F.T. Oh no! The casting was perfect and the acting was first-rate.

A.H. I'm not so sure. Remember, *Under Capricorn* was again the lady-and-groom story. Henrietta fell in love with the groom, and when Joseph Cotten was shipped to Australia as a convict, she followed him there. The main element is that she degraded herself for the sake of her love. Cotten wasn't the right type; Burt Lancaster would have been better.

F.T. You were concerned with contrast—the same problem as in *The Paradine Case*. Anyway, even if this picture was a flop, it can't be put in the same class with *Jamaica Inn*. To anyone who sees *Under Capricorn*, it is clear you believed in it, that you like the story—just as you believed in *Vertigo*.

A.H. Well, it's true that I liked the story, but not as much as *Vertigo*. As I say, *Under Capricorn* was made for Ingrid Bergman, and I



Joseph Cotten at forced labor in a scene that was cut.



thought this was a story for a woman. But if I'd been thinking clearly, I'd never have tackled a costume picture. You'll notice I've never done any since that time. Besides, there wasn't enough humor in the film. If I were to make another picture in Australia today, I'd have a policeman hop into the pocket of a kangaroo and yell, "Follow that car!"

F.T. Another interesting aspect of *Under Capricorn* is its technique. Like in *Rope*, there are several shots that run from six to eight minutes; in fact, these are more complex since they switch from the ground floor to the floor above.

A.H. Well, we didn't have too much trouble with that, but the fluidity of the camera was probably a mistake, because the easy flow emphasized the fact that the picture wasn't a thriller. But Ingrid Bergman got angry with me one evening because of those long shots. And, since I never lose my temper and I hate arguments, I walked out of the room while her back was turned to me. I went home, and later on someone called to inform me that she hadn't noticed my departure and was still complaining twenty minutes after I'd gone.

F.T. I remember talking to her in Paris later on, and she had harrowing memories of the way large pieces of the decor would vanish into thin air during those long shots.

A.H. That's right. She didn't like that method of work, and since I can't stand arguments, I would say to her, "Ingrid, it's only a movie!" You see, she only wanted to appear in masterpieces. How on earth can anyone know whether a picture is going to turn out to be a masterpiece or not? When she was pleased with a picture she'd just finished, she would think, "What can I do after this one?" Except for *Joan of Arc*, she could never conceive of anything that was grand enough; that's very foolish! The desire to do something big and, when that's successful, to go on to something else even bigger is like the little boy who's blowing up a balloon and all of a sudden it goes Boom! right in his face. I never reason that way. I might say to myself, "*Psycho* will be a nice little picture to

do." I never think, "I'm going to shoot a picture that will bring in fifteen million dollars"; that idea never enters my mind. In those days I used to tell Bergman, "Go out and play a secretary. It might turn out to be a *big* picture about a *little* secretary." But no! She's got to play the greatest woman in history, Joan of Arc. Even today we still argue about these things. In spite of her beauty she wants to play mothers because she's over forty-five. What will she play when she's eighty-two years old?

F.T. Grandmothers, I guess!

F.T. While *Under Capricorn* seems a perfectly logical picture for you, it seems to me that *Stage Fright*, which you made right afterward in London, added little or nothing to your prestige. It's simply another one of those little British crime movies in the Agatha Christie tradition. Besides, you claim you disapprove of whodunits. . . .

A.H. That's true, but the aspect that intrigued me is that it was a story about the theater. What specifically appealed to me was the idea that the girl who dreams of becoming an actress will be led by circumstances to play a real-life role by posing as someone else in order to smoke out a criminal. You wonder why I chose that particular story? Well, the book had just come out and several of the reviewers had mentioned that it might make a good Hitchcock picture. And I, like an idiot, believed them! I did one thing in that picture that I never should have done; I put in a flashback that was a lie.

F.T. Yes, and the French critics were particularly critical of that.

A.H. Strangely enough, in movies, people never object if a man is shown telling a lie. And it's also acceptable, when a character tells a story about the past, for the flashback to show it as if it were taking place in the present. So why is it that we can't tell a lie through a flashback?

F.T. In this picture it isn't as simple as that.

Richard Todd, who's running away from the police, gets into Jane Wyman's car which rolls off at top speed. She says to him, "Now that we've lost the police, could you tell me what this is all about?" Then Richard Todd proceeds to explain, and his story makes up the flashback. He tells her how—and, mind you, this is the way we see it on the screen—Marlene Dietrich had turned up at his house in a bloodstained dress and in a state of near hysteria to ask for his help. Now, since Todd is reporting on something Marlene Dietrich has supposedly told him about, the narration is all the more indirect. Anyway, as told by Todd to Jane Wyman, Marlene Dietrich's story is that she has just killed her husband and wants Todd to help her to de-



Richard Todd, the cowardly villain of *Stage Fright* (1950), with Jane Wyman.

stroy some incriminating bit of evidence. He goes on to explain that the reason for which he is now under suspicion is that he was seen at the scene of the crime when he went there to remove the damaging evidence. Then, at the end of the picture, we learn that Todd has lied to Jane Wyman, to Marlene Dietrich, and to the police, that he is the real killer. Therefore, since the flashback is divided into three parts, it would seem as if he's lied three times.

A.H. I agree that the whole thing was very indirect.

F.T. Anyway, the first three reels are the best part of the picture.

A.H. Perhaps, but I had lots of fun with the theater-benefit garden party.



F.T. Yes, that was funny, but I didn't care for Alastair Sim in the role of Jane Wyman's colorful father. I objected to the actor as well as to the character.

A.H. Here again is the trouble with shooting a film in England. They all tell you, "He's one of our best actors; you've got to have him in your picture." It's that old local and national feeling, that insular mentality again. Aside from that, I had lots of problems with Jane Wyman.

F.T. It occurred to me that you might have chosen her because of her resemblance to your daughter, Patricia Hitchcock. As a matter of fact, I got the impression that the whole film was somehow a paternal, a family, picture.

A.H. Not exactly! I ran into great difficulties with Jane. In her disguise as a lady's maid, she



should have been rather unglamorous; after all, she was supposed to be impersonating an unattractive maid. But every time she saw the rushes and how she looked alongside Marlene Dietrich, she would burst into tears. She couldn't accept the idea of her face being in character, while Dietrich looked so glamorous, so she kept improving her appearance every day and that's how she failed to maintain the character.

F.T. Applying the yardstick you used a few days ago, it seems to me that the reason for which the story is of no interest is that none of the people in it are ever in real danger.

A.H. I became aware of that before the shooting was completed, but by then it was too late to do anything about it. Why are none of the people ever in danger? Because we're telling a story in which the villains themselves are

afraid. The great weakness of the picture is that it breaks an unwritten law: The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture. That's a cardinal rule, and in this picture the villain was a flop!

F.T. The better the villain, the better the picture . . . that's an excellent formula! It's true that the reason why *Notorious*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, and *Strangers on a Train* were so great is that Claude Rains, Joseph Cotten, and Robert Walker were your three best villains.

