

The Bride Wore Black

Dennis Raymond

a film review of
"The Bride Wore Black"

Francois Truffaut's "The Bride Wore Black" is terrific. Infused with his patented brand of gentle humor, the film is a modern horror story in which lovely Jeanne Moreau goes about methodically murdering five gentlemen with an iron calm and comic sunniness. Essentially an entertainment movie, a minor effort for Truffaut, other films of similar genre pale beside it.

Yet despite the brilliance of its execution, "The Bride Wore Black" leaves one with a central dissatisfaction. When Truffaut is capable of so much more, why does he limit himself to a slick slice of boo-in-the-night?

"The Bride Wore Black" has been defined as Truffaut's "homage to Alfred Hitchcock." But Truffaut, in his adulation of his motion picture idol, has betrayed his own talent, his gift for expressing the richness of life that would have made him the natural heir of the greatest French director of all time, Jean Renoir. Instead, he is the bastard pretender to the commercial throne of Hitchcock—and his natural warmth and sensibility \ will- destroy his chances of sitting on it. Others, like Rowan Popnski, will get there before him.

Truffaut can't use Hitchcock's techniques because they were devised for something tightly controlled and limited; every detail is thought out in advance. Hitchcock conceives the movie visually from the beginning of the script preparation, designing the production like a complicated mousetrap, then building it. His scripts are a set of plans representing the completed film, including the editing, and if he doesn't need to depart from it, that is because he works for calculated effects. He is an ingenious, masterly builder of mousetraps, and more often than not, the audience is caught tight; his techniques, however, have more to do with craftsmanship than With art, and they are the opposite of the working methods of the greatest directors for whom making a movie is itself a process of discovery.

That process of discovery is not part of studio movie-making; in Hollywood even Jean Renoir, whose greatest work has been free and improvisatory, was expected to stick to plan, and his American movies show what happens to an artist under such conditions. If a director is forced to follow a plan, whether another's or his very own, when, at the time of shooting, he wants to do it some other way—to use an idea that occurs to him when he sees the actors together -on the set or sees the possibility of using the landscape in a way he hadn't thought of before—the necessity to do it according to specifications is crippling. It means he can't use his wits, he can't be spontaneous or inventive, he can't think and feel as an artist.

Hitchcock is a master of a very small domain: even his most amusing perversities are only two-dimensional. Truffaut has it in him not to create small artificial worlds with gimmicky, prefabricated plots but to open up the wide world, and to be loose and generous and free with it.

In itself, the plot could have made this a silly picture. What transforms it has nothing to do with what Truffaut has learned from Hitchcock; the grace that saves it is Truffaut's own comic and poetic feeling for behavior, perverse Gallic hero worship of an irrelevant model simply prevents the film from attaining greatness on its own level. It is as if, say, Jean-Luc Godard set out on an awestruck imitation of that other great Cahiers du Cinema idol, Howard Hawks.

One can only experience relief upon hearing that Truffaut has passed through this Hitchcockian phase. His next film, "Stolen Kisses," due to open shortly in this country, has been acclaimed by French critics as his best since "Jules Et Jim."

By some miracle of taste and insight Truffaut almost shakes off the limitations of his master and the film grows into something human and beautiful. "The Bride Wore Black," in spite of its glaring faults, suddenly becomes one of those rare moments in the history of the cinema when the screen suddenly glows with youthful exhilaration, tenderness, lively rhythmic variations, and understatement.

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