



TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast Monday 3 December 2007

Media Film and Technology

Film Review – December 2007

In 1955 the great director Alfred Hitchcock, the man known as “The Master of Suspense”, chose to make a movie which was very different from the others he made during his most stellar period of production. Sandwiched in between the suspenseful romance of *To Catch a Thief* and the razor-sharp drama of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Hitchcock directed a black comedy called *The Trouble with Harry*.

This was a story about the difficulties encountered by a gaggle of ordinary people attempting to quietly, but illegally, dispose of an inconvenient dead body. Despite the rather gruesome premise upon which the movie is based, it was a story told with great gentility and I recall it – after all these years – as a chuckly, and sometimes hilarious, delight. Hitchcock’s instinct had told him that one of the ways human beings can cope with the spectre of death is by laughing at it – how often do we have a good relieving laugh at the wake after a funeral or even a chuckle at a humorous line in the eulogy?

The Trouble with Harry was a great success for Hitchcock and it also launched the long-running screen career of Shirley MacLaine.

With Christmas just around the corner, a DVD of a timeless classic such as *The Trouble with Harry* would make a welcome gift for anyone who loves movies.

Hitchcock left a great legacy. We not only have his wonderful movies, but his directing style, and even some of his plotlines and sequences, have had an on-going influence in the motion pictures of many other directors to the present day.

I was not surprised therefore, when I went to see the recent British movie *Death at a Funeral*, to find some distant echoes of *The Trouble with Harry*. Promotional material for *Death at a Funeral* has attempted to associate it with *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, the runaway British romantic comedy success of 1994. However, apart from their British origins and the fact that they both feature casts of very capable and engaging performers, the two movies have very little in common. Whereas *Four Weddings* was a well-written romance with the breathtaking ability to move from comedy to tragedy and back to comedy, *Death at a Funeral* is pure farce.

Its heritage reaches back more towards the good old *Carry On...* movies of the 1950s and 60s rather than the stylish and multi-layered British romantic comedies which have had such great success since the 1990s.

Not that there’s anything wrong with pure farce as long as it delivers the laughs – and *Death at a Funeral* does that very well. There were times when I found myself guffawing out loud at some of

the well-developed crazy situations. None of it is very subtle. There are comic sequences about going to the toilet: sequences about the lid coming off the coffin and even sequences about naked men on the roof of the house.

And there's a very funny sequence about attempts to dispose of an inconvenient body. That's the part that reminded me a bit of *The Trouble with Harry*.

Quite a number of the farcical situations are generated because one of the wedding guests has mistakenly swallowed an hallucinogenic drug instead of a valium. This young man – a normally very properly behaved young lawyer – becomes the cause of much distress and embarrassment amongst the other guests as a result of his hallucinatory outbursts.

Placing this loose cannon amongst the rest of the sombre funeral guests is quite a good comic device although it is somewhat over-used in this movie. The funeral party mostly comprises those young British professional types that we have come to be familiar with in recent years, and they are all very well portrayed by a fine ensemble of actors and actresses. Most are in the thirty-something age range with a couple of notable exceptions.

One of these is actor Peter Vaughan who plays Uncle Alfie, the foul-mouthed, abusive and incontinent elder statesman of the dysfunctional family. Vaughan is a delight and milks laughs galore from his character. Another of the older members of the cast is the porcelain-complexioned Jane Asher who plays the bereaved widow.

She has one of the best lines in the movie. When her dignified and composed character is offered a soothing cup of tea she waves it aside wearily with the comment:

“Tea can do many things, but it can't bring back the dead.”

Death at a Funeral is just a load of nonsense but it's good fun. Another thing in its favour, is that it doesn't go on too long. At just under ninety minutes it is somewhat shorter than most movies nowadays and that's fine by me.

The great Alfred Hitchcock was not one for drawing out the length of a movie for no good reason. He is reported to have commented that “the length of a film should be directly related to the endurance of the human bladder.”

I gave *Death at a Funeral* three stars for making me laugh. I hope you get to see some movies over the summer. It's a great way to keep out of the sun. Happy Christmas to you all.

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29.11.07