

Anthony Hopkins and the Redemption of “HITCHCOCK”

Written by Olivia Saperstein
Friday, 23 November 2012 10:56



One knows that a director has truly made history when one of the best actors of our generation is cast to play him. Or is it the other way around? Anthony Hopkins, whose Hannibal Lecter in *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* stands as one of the greatest cinematic villains of all time, plays the role of the eponymous auteur in breakout director Sacha Gervasi's *HITCHCOCK*.

But Hopkins wants to get something straight: While there may be various misconceptions or theories on who Alfred Hitchcock, the man behind such classic blonde-infused thrillers as *PSYCHO*, *REAR WINDOW* and *VERTIGO*, really was, the actor was determined to paint a figure as utterly mortal as possible. This required him to delve deep into the psyche of a man misunderstood. After witnessing his performance and then hearing him further speak on the role, it's apparent that Hopkins has more in common with the director than mere initials or English descent.

While being interviewed, Hopkins is reposed and reflective, like a professor you would find in his office hours, having finished the day's lecturing. His face glows with the vitality of a man fulfilled. He has the confidence that only profound self-reflection and plain hard work can bare. Helen Mirren, an actress on an equal playing field (with an Oscar of her own for *THE QUEEN*) who plays Hitch's wife Alma Reville, reflects, "I think his performance is amazing. Because Tony is, don't you think, an absolute minimalist of an actor. His work is so tiny and so subtle. Very full but incredibly minimalist...yet so full of emotion."



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This is hard to disagree with. Underneath Gregory Nicotero and Howard Berger's intricate makeup and prosthetics, and Julie Weiss' monumental fat suit, Hopkins melts away into the role. The only morsel of him we find lingering is in the sputtering of his lips, so familiar as we recall his elongated vowels in the famous enunciation of "fava beans." In Hopkins' interpretation, there are moments where just a slight expression yields a rotund adolescent, dependent on his wife (also a brilliant writer and editor) for care and reassurance.

In the West, subtlety and humility have been greatly underrated. We carry a notion that to be a man is to be omniscient, and thus might expect our most coveted actors to be stalwart, self-assured, cocky even. But if anything, while Hitchcock and Hopkins may be gifted, they have still thwarted this one-dimensional notion. "I think he was a very complex, probably insecure man who felt like an outsider," Hopkins says of Hitch before revealing that he was very uneasy himself about playing a man who, though possibly introverted, has had a huge influence on cinema, art and popular culture. "My insecurities were so deep. I wasn't sure if I got it right. I had studied many of Hitchcock's mannerisms and watched lot of the Hitch films again and again. I knew I had to get the voice as close as possible, and had to be very careful that I wouldn't disappear behind the face. In the opening shot, I kept asking for more takes because I wanted to get that first scene right."

It's hard to imagine such an accomplished actor, with acclaimed portrayals of famous figures ranging from Pablo Picasso to Richard Nixon under his belt, in a vulnerable light, but perchance this is the oil that fuels the engine. Mirren also notes Hopkins' on-set concerns: "He would never watch himself on the screen," she says, "I think because he was so frightened. The only way to maintain his confidence and carry on going forward was to never review it, never to check whether it was working or not."

In this way, Hopkins truly speaks to the progeny in each of us, just as he believes Hitch did. "I certainly was not my most secure," he recalls, "which made me very good. Because if you get too secure, you become lazy. And so my insecurity drove me deeper and deeper to work harder to become the guy. I felt very vulnerable. I felt moved, not by me, but by Hitchcock himself. He was very guarded and shy and didn't want to express emotion."

Hopkins reminds us that sometimes, what we may consider a detriment on the surface can actually be turned for the good. This is where the theory of the "Hitchcock blondes" came into play. The actor, who certainly added a flamboyant demeanor to his role as Lecter, notes, "Whatever these obsessions with these beautiful women were, they were probably projections

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of his own artistic, sensitive and feminine side. And the feminine in men, I think, is their most creative side."

The same can be applied to Hitchcock's spin on screen terror. Rather than creating horror for the sake of spectacle, he appealed to human "unease." Hopkins stresses the idea that Hitchcock laid out a norm that was not only influenced by German cinema and Henri-Georges Clouzot's *DIABOLIQUE*, but even more by anxiety. "He had a knowledge of human nature, of the dark forces that are in every human being," Hopkins says. In fact, according to *HITCHCOCK*, the making of *PSYCHO* sprang from Hitch's own doubts. He didn't want to repeat himself, and despite resistance from Paramount, he eventually prevailed.

Director Gervasi is also a proponent of that discernment. When asked whether he thinks his film will change the public perception of Hitchcock, he replies, "I can't really tell you that. All I hope is that we've added something to the discussion. For so long he's been deified, put up on a pedestal—you know, the hallowed ground of this great artist who could do no wrong. And on the other side is this evil sadistic artist who tortured actresses. I guess what we're saying is that all of that may be true. But what we're adding is this love story and this relationship with his wife where we see the tenderness of humanity, which you see in movies like *VERTIGO*. So we didn't want to come down on any side. He's not either-or, he's both."

What Hopkins stresses as most crucial is not meta-intellect, and not a "conquer all" attitude, but simply the wisdom and ability to perceive human emotion, and to somehow apply that to your work. That is what Hitchcock did, and clearly what Hopkins does in this role. This poison-into-medicine approach is the source of Hopkins' power, and why Hitchcock's films were able to reach the masses. "I suppose the man and the mythology are confused," says Danny Huston, who plays Alma's friend and confidant Whitfield Cook. "One of their great abilities is to live up to their own mythology, which makes it even more confusing. In the sense of working with Hopkins, I was never really sure whether it was Hitchcock or Hopkins, or Hopkins or Hitchcock, which blurred the lines all the more."

While at times the film can feel a bit fantastical, it's grounded by Hopkins' multifaceted performance. It's no wonder that after Hopkins steeped himself into the background and behaviors of a single man, he seems to morph into that very persona. Through this role, we learn not just how acutely Hopkins homes in on his characters, we begin to receive a glimpse of who he is as a person. In the process of redeeming Hitch's human side, he has in effect revealed his very own. And it is certain that we will continue to be fascinated by the talents of both personas for years to come.

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