

Fango Flashback: "PSYCHO" (1960)

Written by Tony Timpone

Monday, 25 October 2010 12:58



In honor of the 50th anniversary of Alfred Hitchcock's PSYCHO release, and its one-week engagement at New York City's [Film Forum](#) (209 West Houston; [212] 727-8110) from October 29-November 4, and its Blu-ray debut last week (PSYCHO is only the second Hitchcock flick to make the hi-def transfer) and the DVD launch of the new Shout! Factory PSYCHO LEGACY documentary, I thought I'd salute the greatest horror film ever made with the "top 50 reasons why I love PSYCHO."

1. The opening titles (disjointed text racing across the screen and being split apart) by the great Saul Bass (VERTIGO, CAPE FEAR, SECONDS), who also helped design the film's murder scenes.
2. The opening title music by Bernard Herrmann, immediately setting the mood.
3. The taboo-breaking hanky-panky between Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) and Sam Loomis (John Gavin), hooking up in a Phoenix hotel room.



4. Leigh in the white bra and slip. She's a hottie and we can see where Jamie Lee Curtis got her looks. But besides the sex appeal, Leigh is a damn fine actress, making her larcenous character complex and sympathetic.

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5. And for the girls, bare-chested hunk Gavin, oozing pure machismo. It's no surprise that the actor tested for the role of James Bond at some point in his career.

6. Perky Pat Hitchcock (Hitch's daughter) as the office secretary/busybody.

7. Actor Vaughn Taylor as humorless bank manager Mr. Lowery, who just wants the missing money back.

8. Frank Albertson as randy Texas oilman Cassidy, he of the loose lips and owner of the fateful \$40,000. The actor also appeared in everything from MAN MADE MONSTER to IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE.

9. Crane/Leigh, now the "bad girl," in sexy black lingerie after she steals the dough.

10. The scene where Marion, in her getaway car at the stoplight, sees her boss crossing the street directly in front of her. Will he spot her? A simple but effective moment of patented Hitchcock suspense.

11. Marion, driving late at night, the voices in her head playing out the discovery of her crime.

12. The creepy highway patrolman (Mort Mills), symbolizing Hitch's childhood fear of authority.

13. Marion's gutsy retorts to the cop, arousing suspicion and, again, creating viewer tension.

14. John Anderson as California Charlie, the least pushy used car salesman you will ever meet. Wish they were all like that.

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15. The sharp B&W cinematography of reliable TV DP John L. Russell (THRILLER, ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS, THE MUNSTERS, etc.). His lens captures every shadow, raindrop and shower spray.

16. Marion meeting the shy, boyish and innocent-looking Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) for the first time.

17. The Bates' creepy, Victorian Gothic mansion on the hill, the ultimate old dark house (designed and built by art director Joseph Hurley and production designer Robert Clatworthy).

18. Those creepy taxidermied birds in Norman's office.

19. Norman's line: "My hobby is stuffing things. You know—taxidermy."

20. Norman's line about Mother: "She just goes a little mad sometimes. We all go a little mad sometimes. Haven't you?"

21. Norman's line: "A boy's best friend is his mother."

22. The flushing toilet. Hard to believe, it was a taboo in Hollywood's olden days to show a poop pot, let alone seeing it flush on screen.

23. The shower scene, of course. Those 45 seconds combined represent one of cinema's greatest achievements. Marion's murder still packs a wallop.

24. The blooper. Even PSYCHO has one! After Marion falls out of the shower stall and the camera closes in on her "lifeless" face, look at Leigh's throat on the bottom left of the frame: You can see the actress swallow!

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25. Norman cleans up. It's almost as sick-making as the big kill, as we see the dutiful son mop up the bloody mess that Mother has made.

26. Norman dumping Marion's car in the swamp. We wait with bated breath as the vehicle slowly sinks in the water, then get even more nervous when the auto's descent stalls. Are we rooting for Norman Bates?

27. Vera Miles as Lila Crane. We admire the no-nonsense, feisty, gutsy sister of Marion. Her own journey will presage the final girls and scream queens to come decades later.

28. The kooky old lady (Helen Wallace) in Sam's hardware store who, while buying bug poison utters the macabre line, "Insect or man, death should always be painless."

29. Martin Balsam as Milton Arbogast, the quintessential private detective. He's a smarmier version of Peter Falk's Columbo. He won't be rewarded for his persistence.

30. Norman's line: "Uh-uh, Mother-m-mother, uh, what is the phrase? She isn't quite herself today."

31. Under moonlight, Norman's face in partial shadow, in the back of the motel by the swamp.

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32. Sheriff Al Chambers and his wife. Westerns actor John McIntire and Lurene Tuttle play these stock characters like they just stepped out of an Andy Hardy or Frank Capra movie, but they are ingratiating.

33. The murder of Arbogast. For this viewer, the detective's shocking stabbing on the stairs of the Bates' house is the scarier of PSYCHO's two slayings because we really don't see it coming.

34. Sam and Lila going all Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew at the Bates place. Especially love Sam's needling of Norman and watching the fidgety man crack under the pressure.

35. Lila meets Norma Bates. Again, one of the scariest moments in scream history—Mother's rotted corpse revealed.

36. Those unearthly howls and screams from Norman and Lila, respectively, accompanied by Herrmann's strings. Still blood curdling.

37. The Mother prop. The mummy skin pulled tight across the sneering, eyeless skull, the old lady wig...frightening work by Robert Dawn, who closed out his career on John Carpenter's CHRISTINE.

38. Future Vincenzo of THE NIGHT STALKER fame, Simon Oakland, as psychiatrist Dr. Richmond, clinically explaining Norman's psychosis to the other characters and the audience. It's pure exposition, but some of us like having everything spelled out.

39. Mother's final line, "Why, she wouldn't even hurt a fly."

40. The subliminal shot of Mother's desiccated skull over Norman's face in the jail room.

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41. The blood-freezing voice of old crone Mother, a combination of three separate performers: Virginia Gregg, Jeanette Nolan and Paul Jasmin (a male pal of Perkins!)

42. PSYCHO's solid editing by one of Hitch's greatest collaborators, George Tomasini (THE BIRDS, VERTIGO, REAR WINDOW).

43. The screenplay by Joseph Stefano, who improved on Robert Bloch's pulpy novel by changing Norman from a fat, alcoholic middle-aged man into the character we know and love, plus coming up with the memorable dialogue.

44. Herrmann's all-strings music, one of the best film scores ever.

45. PSYCHO's trailer. Hitch himself hosted the macabre coming attractions preview (written by James Allardice, who also penned his witty ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS wraparounds). No film footage is revealed in the six (!) minute spot, but it did a great job helping to entice \$15 million worth of business during PSYCHO's initial run.

46. Spawned the better-than-expected PSYCHO II 23 years later, directed by Richard Franklin and scripted by Tom Holland.

47. Nicely shot by Bruce Surtees, the flawed but watchable PSYCHO III (1986) put Perkins in the director's seat, who channeled the Master in a tingly scene with an icebox, a dead body hidden within and a prying sheriff (Hugh Gillin).

48. Mick Garris' direct-to-Showtime PSYCHO: THE BEGINNING (1990), at the very least, brought original sripter Stefano back into the fold.

49. Anthony Perkins: in his career defining—and breaking?—role, the actor plays the granddaddy of all screen maniacs. Except, unlike all the others, we like him. We really, really like him.

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50. Alfred Hitchcock: the greatest director who ever lived making the greatest horror film of all time.

{comments on}