

Current Film Reviews

TOPAZ

(M)

(Universal) Technicolor Espionage Drama 125 Mins.

Cast: Frederick Stafford, Dany Robin, John Vernon, Karin Dor, Michel Piccoli, Philippe Noiret, Claude Jade, Michel Subor, Roscoe Lee Browne, Per-Axel Arosenius and John Forsythe.

Credits: Directed by Alfred Hitchcock; Associate Producer Herbert Coleman; Screenplay by Samuel Taylor, from the novel by Leon Uris; Photography by Jack Hildyard; Music by Maurice Jarre.

Spy rings in the French government, the Cuban Missile Crisis and whatnot in Alfred Hitchcock's version of Leon Uris' big best-seller. The director is up to his old tricks, but they are still very good ones. An effective cast of mostly foreign players and a nicely complicated plot make the film thoroughly absorbing. Solid box-office.

There will undoubtedly be those movie buffs who will argue that Alfred Hitchcock's *Topaz* is an echo chamber, that everything in it has been done before by the Master, and better. But after the malnourished *Marnie* and *Torn Curtain*, it is a pleasure to find the director working with a densely plotted story-line. You have to keep on your toes during *Topaz* and that's what makes it so enjoyable. The film is a thoroughly absorbing work, but an abrupt ending, meant probably to be ironic, has the effect of pulling the carpet out from under the viewer. As a commercial entry, the boxoffice potential is very strong; the Hitchcock name, alone, would be a crowd-puller, but this time he is also working with a pre-sold property; the Leon Uris novel his film is based on was an international best-seller.

Topaz begins beautifully, and silently, with a sequence depicting a Russian KGB official, his wife and teenage daughter attempting to flee Copenhagen and defect to the Americans. They are trailed by Russian agents through a porcelain factory and the Den Permanente department store, and when the U.S. diplomats arrive, led by Michael Nordstrom (John Forsythe), the girl in her dash to the awaiting car trips over a cyclist. The Russian prize mocks his new guardians with the sloppiness of the escape, ("We would have done it better.") and flaunts his uncooperativeness, knowing that if the Americans would return him there would never be another defector. News of the Russian's defection is leaked out by the Paris Intelligence Office, and Andre Devereaux (Frederick Stafford), working in Washington, D.C., as a French

commercial attache, but in reality a pro-American French Intelligence man, wonders how Paris got the news in the first place. Inexplicably Devereaux promises Nordstrom to help the U.S. in uncovering just how much Soviet intervention has taken place in Cuba. His search takes him to a rally in Harlem, then to Havana, into the arms of his sultry mistress, Juanita de Cordoba (Karin Dor), whose splendid hacienda houses the very latest espionage gadgetry and whose servants list as errands finding out the latest number of nuclear warheads being unloaded at the harbor. It evolves that there is a leak in the French government circles, a spy ring with the name *Topaz*. Learning the identities of the Frenchmen is Devereaux's final assignment and three deaths are required before the abrupt finish.

Samuel Taylor's screenplay has more than its share of cliché lines, but it also has several very amusing ones. It gets the characters on and off, and globetrots efficiently enough, but two omissions are disturbing. We are never told just why Devereaux would risk everything for the American agent, and the arrival of Devereaux's wife (Dany Robin) at the hideout of Jacques Granville (Michel Piccoli), suspected of being a member of the *Topaz* ring, is a surprise, but an unexplained one.

In telling the complicated story, Hitchcock has supplied his usual touches. For a tortured woman's inaudible whisper the camera rushes in to hear; Juanita's murder is recorded by an overhead shot, and as her corpse collapses, the deep purple dress spreads out like the blossoms of a flower; a seagull flying with an unusually large piece of bread in its beak, giving away the fact there must be snooping picnickers nearby. Cameras glide up and down staircases, swoop onto mirrored reflections of the enemy's face.

Seeing things, rather than hearing them, has always been a favorite device of Hitchcock's (*Rear Window* was practically devoted to it) and in *Topaz* it is again used. Instructions between Devereaux and his contact take place behind a florist's refrigerator glass door; an important transaction at the Hotel Teresa is shown from across the street; and in a spacious conference room, the camera way up amidst the chandeliers, we watch as the various consuls shift into groups, isolating themselves from the suspected traitor.

In the past Hitchcock has been hampered by casting his films with an eye toward the boxoffice (Jane Wyman in *Stage Fright*, Julie Andrews in *Torn Curtain*, to name two), but in *Topaz* he has selected his players, mostly foreign actors, without using any "names." The choices have been excellent ones, especially Frederick Stafford as Devereaux and the great-looking Karin Dor as the doomed Juanita.



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