

*'Don't forget. The birds will sing at 1:45'*



by Richard Combs

If there's anything like an Alfred Hitchcock memoir on film, then his 1936 production *Sabotage* is the best candidate. In fact, this is a memoir in two senses: one as a recollection of the London where he grew up, something of an on-the-streets documentary mixed in with elaborate studio recreations; and second – at which point it becomes a future-tense memoir – a reminder of the film-maker Hitchcock was about to become, a more self-conscious one not defined by the mechanisms of thrillers and his reputation as the 'master of suspense'.

At the outset of filming, *Sabotage's* producer, Michael Balcon, boasted that it would show more of London than any film to date. In the event, it looks like a guided tour of the hometown Hitchcock knew, as John Russell Taylor's biography, *Hitch*, points out: "*Sabotage* is the richest and most detailed picture in Hitch's work of the London he grew up in and knew like the back of his hand. Much of the detail is drawn from his own experience: the greengrocer's shop which the detective uses as cover recalls his own childhood home, the little East End cinema the kind where he had his own experiences of the flicks... The quirkily vivid scenes in the street markets, the back-street shops, the cheery by-play of the peddlers and the darker sense of crime behind closed doors in mean

streets all summon up Hitch's own childhood and his early fascination with the domestic details of the murder cases he loved to read".

In being true to Hitchcock's biography, the film is also atmospherically true – despite its many changes - to its source, Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* (one change, the film's title, was necessary because Hitchcock had already made a film, earlier the same year, called *The Secret Agent*). Conrad's story of anarchist plotting, agents and double-agents, police spies, dupes and innocent victims, is set in a late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century netherworld stuffed with all the rancid domestic details of Hitchcock's preferred reading matter. "The shop was small, and so was the house. It was one of those grimy brick houses which existed in large quantities before the era of reconstruction dawned upon London", as Conrad opens his story, introducing us to the shabby but sulphurous world of Mr Verloc and his small ménage.

Verloc is the secret agent, the proprietor of a seedy Soho emporium whose window displays "photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls; nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes...". In Hitchcock's film, the Soho soft-porn shop has become a cinema, a Bijou of his East End youth, which Verloc (Oscar Homolka) runs with his young wife (Sylvia Sydney) and her younger brother, Stevie (Desmond Tester). But in both cases, the business is a front for Verloc's terrorist activities, plotting with fellow anarchists to black out London or bomb the Lord Mayor's parade.

More than 70 years later, the terrorism may have resonance again, though Hitchcock's very English-seeming anarchists are, we're obscurely told, agents who are "making trouble at home to take our minds off what's going on abroad". Conrad's conspirators are less veiled though motives here are even murkier because his Verloc is a double agent, an *agent provocateur*, being paid by a certain foreign embassy to expose the anarchists. Blackest of Conrad's would-be revolutionaries is the Professor, a proto-suicide bomber who dreams of society's destruction – memorably played, against the grain, by Robin Williams in Christopher Hampton's 1996 film of *The Secret Agent*. In *Sabotage*, he's the kindly, bumbling owner of a bird shop, which doubles as a bomb-making factory.

This is located in Islington, which the film places with more ciné-vérité footage (Islington market is still recognisable). And it's another Hitchcock marker: in 1919, the Hollywood company Famous Players-Lasky opened a studio in Islington, and the 20-year-old Hitchcock wangled a job designing intertitle cards for silent films. The East End neighbourhood, though, with the Bijou and the next-door greengrocer's (such as Hitchcock's father ran), from where a police detective is spying on Verloc, is a studio dream of Hitchcock's past. He did, however, insist on one expensive piece of reality: a tramline, with functioning tram, running from the Lime Grove studios in Shepherd's Bush to White City.

This indulgence, evidently, had an ulterior motive: to impress Hollywood producers. With *Sabotage*, Hitchcock is beginning to look for other ways both to establish himself and to define himself as a film-maker. He's beginning to look beyond the story for his subject, for a different game to play with the audience,

for a way to turn the devices of the thriller into – what?: tools of metaphysical enquiry, metaphors to send critics scrambling for keys ever since? *Sabotage*, in fact, is as sleek a tease as that famous conceptual put-on, *North by Northwest*.

This begins with its first image, of what purports to be a dictionary definition of sabotage: “Wilful destruction of buildings or machinery with the object of alarming a group of persons or inspiring public uneasiness”. The oddity of this is on a par with the oddity of the saboteurs we see: what they really alert us to is the alarm and uneasiness spread by the saboteur behind the camera. Hitchcock has switched Verloc’s front operation from a dirty magazine shop to a cinema so he can double real sabotage with our willing enjoyment of mayhem in the latter. “I thought someone was committing a murder”, says the detective when he hears a scream in the Verlocs’ parlour; “Someone probably is. On the screen there”, replies Mr Verloc.

Jokes abound about ‘danger’ real or simulated (or real *and* simulated: cans of nitrate film). And mayhem enacted can give a nasty edge to the idea of performance: “Don’t forget. The birds will sing at 1:45”, says a note from the Professor with a birdcage that conceals a bomb. Birds as harbingers of destruction are more active here than in any film until *The Birds*. When Verloc’s first act of sabotage, putting sand in the works of Battersea power station, only causes Londoners amusement (“Comedies in the Dark”), his ‘handler’ warns him, “When one sets out to put the fear of death into people, it is not helpful to make them laugh”. Unless you’re a really skilled saboteur and can use one reaction to heighten the other.

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