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TOPAZ

By Vincent Canby

It's perfectly apparent from its opening sequence that no one except Alfred Hitchcock, the wise, round, supremely confident storyteller, is in charge of *Topaz*, the film that opened yesterday at the Cinerama Theater. *Topaz*, the code name for a Russian spy ring within the French government, is the film adaptation of the Leon Uris novel, which itself was based on a real-life espionage scandal that kept both sides of the Atlantic busy in 1962.

Hitchcock sets his scene in a first act that dramatizes the defection of a high Soviet intelligence officer to C.I.A. officials in Copenhagen. The sequence, which lasts approximately ten minutes and uses only a minimum of dialogue, is virtuoso Hitchcock, beginning with a dazzling, single-take pan shot outside the Soviet embassy, then detailing the flight, pursuit through, among other things, a ceramics factory, and the final safe arrival of the irritable Soviet official and his family aboard an American plane headed for Wiesbaden. The Russian's only comment to the proud C.I.A. man: "We would have done it better."

Topaz is not a conventional Hitchcock film. It's rather too leisurely and the machinations of plot rather too convoluted to be easily summed up in anything except a very loose sentence. Being pressed, I'd say that it's about espionage as a kind of game, set in Washington, Havana, and Paris at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, involving a number of dedicated people in acts of courage, sacrifice, and death, after which the survivors find themselves pretty much where they were when they started, except that they are older, tired, and a little less capable of being happy.

Topaz is, however, quite pure Hitchcock, a movie of beautifully composed sequences, full of surface tensions, ironies, absurdities (some hungry seagulls blow the cover of two Allied agents), as well as of odd references to things such as Michelangelo's *Pietà*, only it's not a Mother holding her dead Son, but a middle-aged Cuban wife holding her dead husband, after they've been tortured in a Castro prison.

Hitchcock, who can barely tolerate actors, has been especially self-indulgent in the casting of Topaz. The film has no one on the order of James Stewart or Cary Grant on which to depend, although it does use some fine character actors (Michel Piccoli, Philippe Noiret) in small roles. Most of its performers are, if not entirely unknown, so completely subordinate to their roles that they seem, perhaps unfairly, quite forgettable.

John Stafford, who plays a Washington-based French intelligence man (and is more or less the lead), and John Forsythe, his counterpart in the Central Intelligence Agency, have all the panache of well-tailored salesmen of electrical appliances. Dany Robin, cast as Stafford's worried wife, and Claude Jade, who was so lovely in Truffaut's *Stolen Kisses*, and who here plays Stafford's worried daughter, frown quite a lot.

The people one remembers are those who are employed for the effect of their looks (John Vernon as a bearded Castro aide with brilliant blue eyes; Carlos Rivas as his bodyguard, a Cuban with remarkably red hair), or who are bequeathed vivid images by the narrative (Karin Dor as a beautiful anti-Castro Cuban who is shot for her efforts and collapses onto a marble floor, her body framed by the brilliant purple of her dress).

The star of Topaz is Hitchcock, who, except for his brief, signature appearance, remains just off-screen, manipulating our emotions as well as our memories of so many other Hitchcock films, including *Foreign Correspondent*, *Saboteur*, and *Torn Curtain*, all inferior to Topaz. This is a movie of superb sequences that lead from a magnificent Virginia mansion to the Hotel Theresa in Harlem, from an extraordinarily well-stocked Cuban hacienda to a small, claustrophobic, upstairs dining room in a Paris restaurant. Even architecture is important.

It's also a movie of classic Hitchcock effects. Exposition may be gotten across by being presented either as gossip or as incidental, postcoital small talk. Conversations are often seen—but not heard—through glass doors. A Cuban government minister, staying at the Theresa, finds a misplaced state document being used as a hamburger napkin.

The film is so free of contemporary cinematic clichés, so reassuring in its choice of familiar espionage gadgetry (remote control cameras, geiger counters), that it tends to look extremely conservative, politically. Topaz, however, is really above such things. It uses politics the way Hitchcock uses actors—for its own ends, without making any real commitments to it. Topaz is not only most entertaining. It is, like so many Hitchcock films, a cautionary fable by one of the most moral cynics of our time.

TOPAZ (MOVIE)

Produced and directed by Alfred Hitchcock; written by Samuel Taylor, based on the novel by Leon Uris; cinematographer, Jack Hildyard; edited by William Ziegler; music by Maurice Jarre; production designer, Henry Bumstead; released by Universal Pictures. Running time: 126 minutes.

With: Frederick Stafford (Andre Devereaux), Dany Robin (Nicole Devereaux), John Vernon (Rico Parra), Karin Dor (Juanita de Cordoba), Michel Piccoli (Jacques Granville), Philippe Noiret (Henri Jarre), Claude Jade (Michele Picard), Michel Subor (François Picard), and John Forsythe (Michael Nordstrom).

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