



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

I Confess

Set and filmed largely in Quebec, and exploiting the city's architectural atmosphere, rich in the traditions of French Catholicism, *I Confess* is the Hitchcock film which treats most fully the religious theme of the universality and transference of guilt which some commentators see as central to his work. The plot turns on what might be called a diabolic situation: a murderer (O.E. Hasse) admits his crime to a priest in the confessional; the latter (Montgomery Clift) is bound by his vow of silence, and circumstantial evidence increasingly places him under suspicion for the murder, since the victim was blackmailing him over an affair, prior to his entering the priesthood, with a woman (Anne Baxter) now married to a prominent citizen.

Despite the sensuous quality of the flashback to the love affair, *I Confess* has an austerity which prefigures that of *The Wrong Man*. At an intra-mural level, it is interesting to speculate on the degree to which the protagonist's outcast status mirrors Hitchcock's attested unhappiness with Clift's adherence to 'method acting' in his performance.

Phil Hardy (ed.), *The BFI Companion to Crime* (Cassell, 1997)

An oft-overlooked product of Alfred Hitchcock's unbeatable 1950s – a masterpiece, if you're to believe the French New Wave filmmakers who revered the film – *I Confess* finds the master of suspense working in the (relatively) austere fashion of *The Wrong Man* (1956). Matching Hitch for understatement is Clift as Quebecois cleric Father Michael Logan, a tortured priest in the Bressonian mould who wrestles with the knowledge, given during sacred confession, that a parishioner killed a local lawyer in a robbery gone wrong. The director was allergic to stars with their own ideas, but *I Confess* is more than most Hitchcock films a showcase for an actor's personal craft. Clift, who spent time in a Canadian monastery as prep, delivers a masterclass in interiority, the film's real conflict playing out on Logan's face in micro-expressions.

Brogan Morris, bfi.org.uk, 17 October 2020

Contemporary reviews

Hitchcock's long-planned *I Confess* marks a slight change of pace for the director. Based on a play of a solid, perhaps slightly old-fashioned, type, it develops its story mainly through scenes of dialogue (the flashback interludes, though well enough managed, have a little the air of padding), and, since the identity of the killer is revealed at the start, its suspense depends primarily on the priest's moral problem and on conflicts of motive and character. There are enough opportunities for tension, though, in such scenes as a cat-and-mouse interview between Larrue and Father Michael, Ruth Grandfort's confession, and the cold, authoritatively staged trial scene with its unexpected denouement. The final chase through the huge Chateau Frontenac seems a touch that Hitchcock could not resist: out of keeping with the generally sober tone of the film, it provides a showily melodramatic climax. The unresolved split between the straightforward thriller technique and the more penetrating psychological study of character, indeed, makes itself felt as a weakness at

intervals throughout the film. Hitchcock has made predictably good use of the theatrically effective Quebec street backgrounds and has been served by an excellent cast. Montgomery Clift gives a quiet, finely controlled performance as Father Michael; Anne Baxter and Karl Malden are both at their most professionally competent, and, in a small part, Roger Dann makes a convincingly restrained but perturbed Grandfort. Brian Aherne and Dolly Haas make capable screen comebacks as the prosecutor and Mrs Keller.

I Confess is rather less successful than *Strangers on a Train* and a good deal more so than anything else Hitchcock has done since the ill-fated *Rope*. And, whatever its shortcomings, it has the professional concentration of effect, the narrative control, of a story teller who can still make most of his rivals in his chosen field of operations look like amateurs.

Penelope Houston, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, May 1953

The scene is Quebec. It is dark, and the Castle looms against the sky. As the credits fade, we see a deserted street, a flight of steps, at the top of which a portly, enigmatic figure hurries mysteriously by.

The figure is Alfred Hitchcock's, making its traditionally brief appearance in this, his first film for two years. Its earliness represents a stroke of superb self-confidence. Eagerly one anticipates the precision, the perfect timing of effects, the beautiful agonies of suspense – all those qualities which have made Hitchcock a master in his own genre. Alas, the mastery ends with the early sequences; the rest lapses into highly polished, often stylish ordinariness.

We watch a figure wearing a priest's cassock leave a house and disappear down the street; through the open window we catch a glimpse of the murdered man. His assassin is a German refugee, gardener and odd-job man employed at the presbytery of the local Catholic church. On his return, he is seen entering the church by his friend the priest (Montgomery Clift), to whom he confesses his crime, but he refuses to give himself up to the police. Bound by the silence of the confessional, the priest cannot speak – even when he himself is arrested and tried for the murder.

It is a situation worthy perhaps of the late Georges Bernanos, but not, one would have thought, the ideal Hitchcock subject. And this, indeed, proves to be the case. Far too much time is wasted in exploring by flashback the relationship between the priest and the politician's wife (a blonde Anne Baxter). Although this provides the police with a motive for the murder and evidence upon which to arrest the priest, the question of what really happened in the summerhouse is surely subordinate to the main subject – that of the priest torn between fear for his own neck and the sanctity of his vows. It is here in creating the tension within and between the characters, that the director and the writers (George Tabori and William Archibald) fail. They have their success, of course, particularly in those excellently written scenes between priest and detective (Karl Malden); but never for a moment does one feel that any of these characters have lives they lived before the events of the film and must go on living afterwards. Having rejected any plot mechanism which would have enabled him to create suspense, Hitchcock can only offer a high surface polish in its stead, and this is no substitute for humanity.

I Confess is not constructed as one of his superb shock-machines, and because of this its improbabilities and shallow characterisations disturb us.

Of course there are some fine things – the horror of the murderer's confession, the courtroom scene with its quiet intensity (Dimitri Tiomkin's

musical clichés are for once sparingly employed) and dignified conversational tone, so that Clift’s denial of the murder rings out like a cry of despair, and the beautifully stylised shots in the ‘first love’ flashback, soft focus being used legitimately and with telling effect.

There is an interesting cast. Karl Malden’s detective is a nicely keyed performance, O.E. Hasse plays the murderer with one eye on the Peter Lorre style, Anne Baxter gives a *Collier’s* magazine performance of a *Collier’s* magazine character – the only thing to do under the circumstances. As the priest, Clift conveys noble integrity and little else, but this is the fault of the convention, not the actor. Poker-faced saintliness seems *de rigueur* for Hollywood priests.

David Fisher, *Sight and Sound*, July-September 1953

I CONFESS

Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Production Company: Warner Bros.

Associate Producer: Barbara Keon

Production Supervisor: Sherry Shourds

Assistant Director: Don Page

Screenplay: George Tabori, William Archibald

Based on the play by: Paul Anthelme

Director of Photography: Robert Burks

Editor: Rudi Fehr

Art Director: Edward S. Haworth

Set Decorator: George James Hopkins

Wardrobe: Orry-Kelly

Make-up Artist: Gordon Bau

Music Composed and Conducted by: Dimitri Tiomkin

Music Director: Ray Heindorf

Sound: Oliver S. Garretson

Technical Consultant: Father Paul Lacouline

Cast

Montgomery Clift (*Father Michael Logan*)

Anne Baxter (*Ruth Grandfort*)

Karl Malden (*Larrue*)

Brian Aherne (*Willie Robertson*)

O.E. Hasse (*Otto Keller*)

Roger Dann (*Pierre Grandfort*)

Dolly Haas (*Anna Keller*)

Charles Andre (*Father Millais*)

uncredited

Judson Pratt (*Murphy*)

Ovila Légaré (*Vilette*)

Gilles Pelletier (*Father Benoit*)

Nan Boardman (*maid*)

Henry Cordon (*Farouche*)

Carmen Gingras, Renée Hudson (*French girls*)

Alfred Hitchcock (*man crossing top of flight of steps*)

USA 1953

95 mins

The screening on Wed 20 Apr will have a pre-recorded intro by Christina Newland, Lead Film Critic, *The i newspaper*

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Léon Morin, prêtre (Léon Morin, Priest)

Mon 28 Mar 17:50; Thu 7 Apr 20:40; Sun 24 Apr 12:00

Lourdes

Tue 29 Mar 20:50; Thu 7 Apr 18:10; Wed 20 Apr 20:50

Ordet (The Word)

Wed 30 Mar 17:45 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);

Sun 10 Apr 15:30; Fri 15 Apr 18:10; Sat 23 Apr 11:50

Black Narcissus

Thu 31 Mar 21:00; Tue 12 Apr 20:45; Tue 19 Apr 18:10; Sat 30 Apr 15:00

Babette's Feast (Babettes Gaestebud)

Fri 1 Apr 18:10; Sun 10 Apr 12:10; Sat 16 Apr 12:20; Tue 26 Apr 20:50

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Sat 2 Apr 20:40; Fri 8 Apr 18:15; Tue 19 Apr 20:50; Mon 25 Apr 18:10

The Seventh Seal (Det Sjunde Inseget)

Sun 3 Apr 15:20; Mon 18 Apr 15:20; Fri 22 Apr 20:50

The Miracle Woman

Mon 4 Apr 18:20; Fri 15 Apr 20:50; Thu 28 Apr 18:10; Fri 29 Apr 18:10

Stalker

Tue 5 Apr 20:00; Sat 9 Apr 17:30; Thu 21 Apr 20:00; Sat 23 Apr 20:00

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Wed 6 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);

Thu 14 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 17:50; Mon 25 Apr 20:45

Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)

Wed 6 Apr 21:00; Wed 13 Apr 18:20 (+ intro by independent filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett); Mon 18 Apr 13:10

The New World

Sun 10 Apr 17:30; Sat 30 Apr 19:50

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Mon 11 Apr 18:00; Sun 17 Apr 14:40

The Last Temptation of Christ

Fri 15 Apr 14:15; Sun 24 Apr 17:40

Sebastiane

Sat 16 Apr 14:50; Tue 19 Apr 20:30; Wed 27 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by

BFI curator Simon McCallum)

I Confess

Sun 17 Apr 12:00; Wed 20 Apr 18:00 (+ intro tbc)

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