



North by Northwest

‘Brilliant performances by Cary Grant, Eva Marie Saint, James Mason and Martin Landau, stunning set pieces, a riveting mistaken identity tale and a beautiful soundtrack – this is an absolute classic that always feels fresh and exciting.’ – Lucy Bolton

‘As well-directed as *Vertigo*, as tense as *Rear Window* and as thrilling as anything that’s ever been released. A masterclass of concise writing, too – there’s nothing here that could be shaved off to make the film any better.’ – Jacob Stolworthy

‘Cary Grant is at his urbane best in a tale that effortlessly blends menace with romance and sly humour.’ – James Healy

Sight and Sound, Winter 2022-23

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

A contemporary review

Critics who like to see Alfred Hitchcock’s films as so many cryptograms to be puzzled over for hidden symbols are going to have a hard time with *North by Northwest*. This is the purest piece of entertainment filmmaking we have had from him in some years; it is also, which does not inevitably follow, the most purely entertaining. After the strains of wrongful arrest, or the elaborate identity-puzzle of *Vertigo*, there is something spacious and assured about this return to a world of gigantic spy rings ruled by silkily mannered art collectors, of secret plans (what secrets? – it never matters) taken out of the country by chartered aircraft, of transcontinental chases in express trains and bewildering midnight meetings in darkened airports.

The script, by Ernest Lehman, is apparently a screen original, itself a change in these days when Hollywood regards an adaptation from something or other as part of a film’s pedigree. But Mr Lehman, one feels, was working under orders. Almost 20 years ago, Hitchcock staged a final chase around the Statue of Liberty; this time, he has chosen a formidably grotesque national monument – Mount Rushmore, where the features of America’s dead presidents have been hugely hacked out of a cliff-side. Longer ago still, in *The 39 Steps*, the spy chief, training his revolver on Hannay, was interrupted when his wife calmly called him to lunch; here, again, interrogation is interrupted by a summons to the dinner table. And so on. Hitchcock’s ability to repeat himself has always been infinite.

The story itself is a sort of high-pressure *39 Steps*, with the hero, innocent, imperturbable and implausibly resourceful, pursued simultaneously by the police for murder and by the spies for execution. In this case he is an advertising man, played by Cary Grant without the vestige of a rough edge or a crudely spontaneous reaction, who is mistaken by the master spy (James Mason) for a secret service agent. Intervening, as one of those cool but cryptic blonde intriguers who have fascinated Hitchcock since Ingrid Bergman first played the part in *Notorious*, is Eva Marie Saint.

All that matters, though, in this type of story is how plausibly and rapidly the victim can be sent on the run and how much ground the chase can be made

to cover. And here Hitchcock shows all his unmatched ingenuity in using public places – Grand Central Station, the United Nations Building – as backgrounds for the alien and sinister.

North by Northwest's most effective sequence, however, takes place in a setting wholly bare. Cary Grant has been dropped by bus at a remote prairie stop and stands, an incongruous fugitive from Madison Avenue, in a landscape of scrub, cornfields, the occasional car speeding down the straight, flat highway. He is expecting an encounter with an agent; he waits, and eventually another man appears. They confront each other across the width of the road; but the man, introduced with such elaborate solemnity, is only a farmer waiting for a bus.

Casually, he points out a crop-dusting plane, operating where there are no crops growing. He boards the bus... and in seconds the aircraft is swooping on Cary Grant, pursuing him with a rattle of gunfire, chasing him through the growing corn. In the contrast between the slow, silent build-up, the long shots of the prairie, the isolation of the waiting figure, and the sudden, definitive burst of violence, we are safely in the hands of the most authoritative of precision experts.

Not all of *North by Northwest* is as good as this. The film is ridiculously long (two and a quarter hours), and inevitably there are passages, mostly those involving the equivocal heroine, in which the action drags and no adequate substitute is offered. Motivation, here, scarcely counts: even the situation of the girl involved with, and herself spying on, the enemy agent is brushed aside. Hitchcock explored this one, up to a point, in *Notorious*; here he merely states it.

An advantage of these paper-thin characters, though, is that they can be used for humour, which would be redundant if the film even pretended to take its adventures at more than their face value. The advertising man, for instance, takes his mother, acidly argumentative and missing her bridge party, along with him on a detective expedition. A car chase, beginning with careful tension, ends in a ludicrous three car bumper-to-bumper pile-up.

Hitchcock's early chase films had a zest he has never been able, or perhaps wanted, to recover. But the immense calculation that has gone into this film, the cheap joke so carefully timed, the suspense effect so gloatingly delayed, is the mark of the ultimate in professionalism. And there is something to be said for a film that never puts a foot wrong without making one feel that even the false step is a deliberate one.

Penelope Houston, *Sight and Sound*, July 1959

NORTH BY NORTHWEST

Directed by: Alfred Hitchcock

©: Loew's Incorporated

Production Company: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Producer: Alfred Hitchcock *

Associate Producer: Herbert Coleman

Assistant Director: Robert Saunders

Written by: Ernest Lehman

Director of Photography: Robert Burks

Colour Consultant: Charles K. Hagedon

Special Effects: A. Arnold Gillespie, Lee LeBlanc

Editor: George Tomasini

Production Designed by: Robert Boyle

Art Directors: William A. Horning, Merrill Pye

Set Decorations: Henry Grace, Frank McKelvey

Make-up by: William Tuttle

Hair Styles by: Sydney Guilaroff

Titles Designed by: Saul Bass

Music by: Bernard Herrmann

Recording Supervisor: Franklin Milton

Sound System: Westrex Recording System

Cast

Cary Grant (*Roger O. Thornhill/George Kaplan*)

Eva Marie Saint (*Eve Kendall*)

James Mason (*Phillip Vandamm*)

Jessie Royce Landis (*Clara Thornhill*)

Leo G. Carroll (*Professor*)

Josephine Hutchinson (*Mrs Townsend*)

Philip Ober (*Lester Townsend*)

Martin Landau (*Leonard*)

Adam Williams (*Valerian*)

Edward Platt (*Victor Larabee*)

Robert Ellenstein (*Licht*)

Les Tremayne (*auctioneer*)

Philip Coolidge (*Dr Cross*)

Patrick McVey (*Chicago policeman*)

Edward Binns (*Captain Junket*)

Ken Lynch (*Chicago policeman*)

uncredited

Doreen Lang (*Maggie*)

John Beradino (*Sergeant Emil Klinger*)

Nora Marlowe (*Anna, the housekeeper*)

Alexander Lockwood (*Judge Anson B. Flynn*)

Stanley Adams (*Lieutenant Harding*)

Lawrence Dobkin (*cartoonist*)

Harvey Stephens (*stockbroker*)

Walter Coy (*reporter*)

Madge Kennedy (*housewife*)

Baynes Barron, Jimmy Cross (*taxi drivers*)

Tommy Farrell (*elevator starter*)

Harry Seymour (*captain of waiters*)

Frank Wilcox (*waiter*)

Robert Shayne (*Larry Wade*)

Carleton Young (*Fanning Nelson*)

Ralph Reed (*bellboy*)

Paul Genge (*Lt Hagerman*)

Robert B. Williams (*Patrolman Waggoner, at Glen Cove*)

Maudie Prickett (*Elsie, the maid*)

James McCallion (*valet*)

Doris Singh (*Indian girl*)

Sally Fraser (*girl on loudspeaker*)

Maura McGivenev, Susan Whitney (*girl attendants*)

Ned Glass (*ticket agent*)

Howard Negley (*conductor*)

Jesslyn Fax, Lucille Curtis, Anne Anderson (*women*)

Jack Daly (*steward*)

Tol Avery, Tom Greenway (*detectives*)

Ernest Anderson (*porter*)

Malcolm Atterbury (*man on the road*)

Andy Albin (*farmer*)

Carl Milletaire (*clerk*)

Olan Soulé (*assistant auctioneer*)

Helen Spring (*woman at auction*)

John Damler, Len Hendry (*police lieutenants*)

Patricia Cutts (*bit woman*)

Hugh Pryor, Charles Postal (*bit men*)

Taggart Casey (*man with razor*)

Bobby Johnson (*waiter*)

Wilson Wood (*photographer*)

Bill Catching (*attendant*)

Dale Van Sickle (*ranger*)

Frank Marlowe (*Dakota taxi driver*)

Harry Strang (*assistant conductor*)

Alfred Hitchcock (*man who misses bus*)

Sara Berner (*telephone operator*)

Charles C. Welch

USA 1959©

136 mins

* Uncredited

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