

## **"ALFRED AND JACK: RIPPING YARNS"**

**Londoner Alfred Hitchcock grew up in the shadow of the capital's most famous killer, and screenwriter Stephen Volk thinks it left an indelible imprint on his films.**

I re-watched Hitchcock's penultimate film *Frenzy* recently. Apart from rediscovering what a truly macabre delight it really is, I was struck that, though it was based on a book ("Goodbye Piccadilly, Farewell Leicester Square" by Arthur La Bern; screenplay by Anthony Shaffer) this story of London in the grip of a serial killer, with its newspaper headlines, salacious gossip and rampant mix of dread and titillation, reflected another killing spree, perhaps closer to home, literally and psychologically, as far as the director was concerned.

Early in film when first victim found, someone says "He's a regular Jack the Ripper!" Later, two posh city gents talking in a pub comment sardonically while waiting for their meat pies to arrive from the buxom barmaid: "Tourists expect London to be full of ripped whores." Interestingly, the Jon Finch character (Richard Blaney) is known for beating his wife and becomes a suspect when she is murdered: exactly reminiscent of Joseph Barnett, partner of Ripper victim Mary Kelly. Barnett was a Billingsgate fish porter and *Frenzy* is stuffed with tradesmen and porters, set as it is in and around old Covent Garden Market before it relocated to Nine Elms. In fact the whole film is so incredibly "Ripperesque" in tone it made me wonder why Hitch didn't tackle JTR more directly.

In making the Ripper references, in using the tropes of Jack, which he had done throughout his career, in the very act of returning to London, was he returning to the central myth of his early childhood?

Young Alfred was born in 1899 and grew up the son of a greengrocer in Leytonstone (his knowledge of Covent Garden market in *Frenzy* was first hand: it was where his father did business). His mother was Catholic and young Fred (as he was called) was clearly well-schooled in notions of guilt and innocence from an early age.

At a Hollywood banquet to receive an award late in life, he told the now-famous tale of being incarcerated in a police station cell at the age of six, only to be given by his father afterwards the moral instruction: "That's what happens to naughty little boys." (1) (A phrase the director reputedly wanted on his gravestone: nice idea, but in fact he was cremated.)

But Hitchcock also said on another occasion that when he was growing up mothers used to scare their children into obedience with the threat: "Jack the Ripper will get you." (One can imagine him adding in his distinctively lugubrious voice: "And it never did me any harm.")

Clearly, in the early 1900's, the season of blood in Whitechapel was within recent memory, and its most famous denizen still held a grip. Out of the moral panic of 1888 that created a cultural icon, the Ripper had become a frightening bogeyman that must have loomed large in many a child's imagination.

One such child was Fred. A kid with a touch of the Asperger's who avidly memorized ferry timetables and collected tram numbers (a "trolley-dolly"). Would it be too much to guess that he also collected details of the notorious crimes that so shocked London? Crimes that conflated violence and sex in the boy's fertile and receptive mind?

Evidence for that comes in the production deemed by the director himself as "the first true Hitchcock film." *The Lodger* (1927), based on Marie Belloc-Lowndes' play "Who is He?" is a fictionalized account of the JTR story. Its subtitle: "A tale of the London Fog" perpetuated another myth: in fact there was no fog at the time of the murders: September 1888 was rather drizzly. Its plot focuses on a serial killer who (like Hitchcock, on the evidence of future casting) had a thing about blondes. Meanwhile a landlady entertains growing suspicious that her mysterious lodger Mr Drew (as in drew blood, get it?) is the murderer. Matinee idol Ivor Novello turns out to be innocent, but not before a rabid lynch mob chases him through the streets.

This now-obligatory "Ripper" scene is in fact based on truth. PC Walter Dew (who later arrested Crippen) was on duty in Hanbury Street (scene of the Annie Chapman murder) when he spotted a local ne'er-do-well wanted on a minor misdemeanour. When Dew went to arrest him, "Squibby" shot off and no sooner did the constable give chase than someone shouted: "Jack the Ripper! Get him!" Hundreds joined the mob before Squibby ran to ground, terrified, in a house in Flower and Dean Street. Police reinforcements rescued him but the crowd laid siege to Commercial Street Station, still baying for his blood. (2)

The similarity of the names of PC Dew to Drew, the character in *The Lodger*, is perhaps only coincidence, but the famous "Hitchcock" shot

through the glass floor of the man pacing upstairs seems to ask: what do we know of dreadful inner lives of people we brush shoulders with?

There is a clear connection here to Dr Frances Tumblety, the very real lodger who was considered a suspect at the time of the investigation. A German landlady of a boarding house near Russell Square reported finding blood on the shirt cuffs of a guest, an American. Alarm bells rang for the Ripper detectives as the coroner in the Chapman murder had mentioned an American enquiring to a sub-curator of the British Museum about acquiring female anatomical parts. They added two plus two, but Tumblety, a quack doctor and snake oil salesman with a documented hatred of women, jumped bail to the USA and the police had let their prime suspect slip through their fingers. (3)

Donald Spoto has written that *The Lodger* was the first time Hitchcock revealed "his psychological attraction to the association between sex and murder, between ecstasy and death." (4) Certainly it contains themes common in his later work: the innocent on the run (as in *Frenzy*), suspicion and fear, and fetishistic sexuality.

With the coming of sound it was Hitchcock who helmed Britain's first talking picture: *Blackmail*. And what did he do? He gave us the unforgettable scene where repetition of the word "knife" jars into the brain of the killer, and ours. ("The Knife" was what the police nicknamed the Whitechapel killer before the arrival of the "Dear Boss" letter.)

Then, later, there was the most famous cinematic knife of all time: the one used in the shower scene in *Psycho*. In this the visual language is surely pure Ripperese. In that death of a thousand cuts the filmmaker spawned a whole breed of cutlery-plunging offspring, from Michael Myers to the blade-wielding dwarf in *Don't Look Now*.

The original novel on which *Psycho* was based was, notably, written by one of the great Ripper-obsessives of all horror fiction, Robert Bloch, who even put the meta-killer on the starship Enterprise in a classic episode of *Star Trek*.

But Hitchcock's Ripper wasn't a fantasy, he was all too real. He was a man like you or I or Uncle Charlie in *Shadow of a Doubt*, or Bruno in *Strangers on a Train*, indistinguishable in a crowd.

If Hitchcock's women were glamorous because he wondered what they wore under their furs, perhaps he equally wondered what debonair

men got up to on the quiet: a reflection of the concern in 1888 than the Ripper might be a respectable gentleman or doctor with a secret life.

Chirpy Cockney Bob Rusk in *Frenzy* has a secret too: his name sounds eerily like George *Lusk*, the head of the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee at the time of the Ripper killings: the man who received the famous "FROM HELL" note with the human kidney.

And is it me or is the real Inspector Abberline much more likely to have been like the redoubtable but po-faced Alec McCowen (*Frenzy* again) than Johnny Depp's freebasing incarnation in *From Hell*? Fascinatingly, the real Abberline didn't die until 1929, which means he could easily have sat in a cinema and watched *The Lodger*, thirty years after the Whitechapel murders had ended.

Sin and innocence courses through the veins of *Frenzy*. Hitchcock's Covent Garden is a Garden of Eden where Rusk is the snake. He's even seen chomping an apple for good measure. When Jon Finch sleeps in a Salvation Army doss house, it's a reminder of the salvation doled out to loose women on the streets of the East End by pious vicars and social reformers.

To Victorian society it was all virgins or whores and if you weren't one you were the other. Or, as Bob Rusk, surely channelling Jack, says: "Some women deserve all they get."

But then, what's the old saying? "Catholics are born feeling guilty – and spend most of their life trying to work out, guilty of what?"

In *Spellbound* Gregory Peck uncovers with help of Ingrid Bergman a buried childhood memory, something for which he felt everlastingly guilty. In *Marnie* the trauma is even more explicitly about sex and death.

Is this what Alfred Hitchcock kept revisiting in symbolic form as Master of Suspense? Was the one thing he could not master his childhood sense of terror? Was he compelled to try to control that spirit of chaos we call, almost playfully now, Jack the Ripper?

Lenore Terr says "Traumatic terror, shock and the 'gross out' are feelings with which writers from Edgar Allan Poe to Edith Wharton to Stephen King have titillated their audiences. And why must such writers do this? Because, at least in certain instances, they must

release their own childhood horrors back into the external world from whence they originally came." (5)

Of Hitchcock she says his intensely terrifying stint in the jail cell "was most likely traumatic" – however I wonder if the social influence of the Ripper murders might have contributed substantially to his sense of anxiety and fear. True, everyone felt that residual Ripper fear since it was a public event, but for young Hitchcock, sensitive and introverted, it must have felt deeply personal. Terrorizing his fans was a reaction (Terr might say an urge to "re-enact") being terrorized himself by the very idea of Jack. To scare others the way he was scared.

Even stars and stars' daughters didn't escape his terrorization. He once sent Melanie Griffith, daughter of Tippi Hedren, a tiny doll of her mother in a coffin. The practical joker perhaps showed a stunted development, a part of him that was still the little boy playing tricks. "Call me Hitch," he would joke: "I have no cock." (But is that because his cock means sin, and sin means murder?)

At the end of his life, in going back to his roots to make *Frenzy*, did he take time to walk those streets of Whitechapel, I wonder?

Did his storytelling cure him of his own terrors? Probably not. As Stephen King has said, horror and terror stories are a way of "exercising" not "exorcising" your demons. And he should know.

But Hitchcock helped Jack enter our culture. And now he's ubiquitous. From Hammer horror to Michael Caine. From *Murder by Decree* to graphic novels. From pub signs to walking tours. From lyrics by Nick Cave (or Morrissey) to Spike Milligan's Phantom Raspberry Blower of Olde London Town.

But perhaps Mr H, inspired by his childhood bogeyman, more than anybody made "the lodger" become "real" for millions of cinemagoers. Elusive Ripper to ubiquitous slasher in one easy lesson. Or one lifetime of terror.

-----

#### Notes:

(1) An incident I dramatised in my own short story "Little H", published in *Dark Corners* (Gray Friar Press 2006).

(2) Donald Rumbelow: *The Complete Jack the Ripper (revised and updated)*, Penguin, 2004.

(3) Stewart Evans and Paul Gaine: *Jack the Ripper: First American Serial Killer*, Arrow books, 1995.

(4) Donald Spoto: *The Dark Side of Genius: The life of Alfred Hitchcock*, Plexus, 1994.

(5) Lenore Terr MD: *Too Scared to Cry*, Basic Books, 1990.

More information on Jack the Ripper: [www.casebook.org](http://www.casebook.org)

An exhibition of documents and artefacts is at the Museum in Docklands until 2<sup>nd</sup> November:  
[www.museumindocklands.org.uk/jacktheripper](http://www.museumindocklands.org.uk/jacktheripper)