

Local Inspiration for Movie Classics: Hitchcock had Link to Santa Cruz

By Ross Eric Gibson

Santa Cruz's Nickelodeon movie theater will celebrate its silver anniversary with a film marathon Friday and Saturday [November 1994] after naming its four auditoriums after Santa Cruzans connected with the movies: ZaSu Pitts, Rory Calhoun, John Hoyt and Alfred Hitchcock. The best known, but least associated with Santa Cruz, is Hitchcock.

His film career began in 1920 as a title-card designer for the new London branch of what became Paramount Pictures. He worked closely with screenwriters, advising them to show more action, with minimal title cards. This approach became apparent in 1926 when Hitchcock directed a Jack the Ripper story called "The Lodger." The film also introduced a recurring theme of an innocent man wrongly accused. When a scene was short one extra, Hitchcock stepped in, giving the first of his trademark cameo appearances.

Although his 1929 "Blackmail" was the first British feature with sound, his films retained the silent film discipline of visually building suspense, becoming the foremost pioneer of this genre. His string of international hits in the 1930s included "The Man Who Knew Too Much" "The 39 Steps," "Sabotage," and "The Lady Vanishes," the last winning him a Monday New York Film Critics best director award and a Hollywood contract.

Hitchcock came to California in 1940 with his wife and 11-year-old daughter, Patricia. He made "Rebecca," which won Hitchcock his only best-picture Oscar. "Rebecca" starred Joan Fontaine, and the Hitchcocks became close friends with Fontaine's parents, the G.M. Fontaines of Los Gatos. During a six-month search for a permanent home where Hitchcock could pursue his interests in viticulture and horses, the Fontaines recommended the Vine Hill area near Scotts Valley.

In September 1940, after filming "Foreign Correspondent," Hitchcock bought the 200-acre 1870 Cornwall Ranch at the end of Canham Road near Scotts Valley. The \$40,000 spread included a house, tennis court, stables, and a winery across Highway 17. The Hitchcocks kept a modest home in Bel Air while working in Hollywood, but preferred their main home near Scotts Valley.

The Hitchcocks enlarged the 1938 adobe house from its original nine rooms. Entry was through a courtyard, where a Jacob Epstein bust of their daughter was displayed. A winding outdoor stairway led to the tower guest room, while inside, rooms surrounded a central atrium. The living room was lined with bookshelves and contained furniture by California designer Paul Frankel and paintings by famous 20th century artists. In the rose garden was a mosaic by the father of Cubism, Georges Braque.

Hitchcock had a fearful side, so as a director he knew which buttons to push. He never drove, and surrounded his Scotts Valley compound with an electric fence. And to conceal his weight fluctuations, his closet contained the same style suit in a dozen sizes.

Hitchcock worked very hard preparing for a film, visualizing many sketches and meditating in his enormous marble bathtub. In his 1941 film "Suspicion," he used the north coast of Santa Cruz for its English coastline sequence. It was the rare time that Cary Grant was cast in a sinister role, and Joan Fontaine won the best-actress Oscar.

Santa Cruz was Hitchcock's escape from the film industry, yet while he rarely shot scenes in the county, he took inspiration from these surroundings. Local legend indicates the mansion in 1960s "Psycho" was based on the setting of the dilapidated Hotel McCray (now Sunshine Villa) on Beach Hill, with its nearby motel. And the design of the mansion was a dead ringer for the decayed Bernheim House, which stood at Broadway and Ocean streets.

In his 1963 film "The Birds," Santa Cruz is mentioned as the place this phenomenon first occurred. Local news accounts bear this out, reporting incidents where birds got lost in fog, headed toward city lights and invaded the towns of Capitola and Santa Cruz.

In 1966, Pacific Garden Mall landscaper Roy Rydell (who designed the forecourt of the Nickelodeon) was hired by Hitchcock to landscape his estate.

Rydell became friends with the Hitchcocks, even visiting the set of "Torn Curtain" in Hollywood. Ingrid Bergman visited Hitchcock's Scotts Valley estate, and when Princess Grace of Monaco (formerly actress Grace Kelly) visited, Hitchcock re-oiled his entire driveway. Hitchcock's granddaughter, Teresa Carrubba, remembers a Christmas in Santa Cruz when Hitchcock dressed as Santa Claus, typical of his playful, humorous nature. Carrubba lives in La Selva Beach.

After a break-in at the estate, Hitchcock replaced all his paintings with studio-made copies. They sold the estate in 1974, six years before his death.

Sources

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