

FAMILY PLOT

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock
Distributed by Universal Pictures
Released in 1976

Considering Alfred Hitchcock's final film on its own terms is difficult. We see it in light of the 52 directorial efforts that preceded it. We ponder whether Hitchcock's aborted plan to film Ronald Kirkbride's novel The Short Night as a dark espionage tale would have been a more fitting capstone. In any event, we should be happy that *Frenzy* (1972) was not Hitchcock's last film. It is meticulously constructed and fitfully amusing, but—arguably—pornographic. It undeniably leaves a bad taste in one's mouth (certainly Hitchcock's point). *Family Plot* has its suspense, but it is also breezy, witty, and fun. While its cost-cutting are apparent in shoddy blue-screen effects and undistinguished location work (this is certainly no globe-hopping adventure—it was made on the backlot and looks it), *Family Plot's* reputation as a lesser Hitchcock is undeserved. Its strengths include meticulous plotting, humor grounded in characterization and irony, a perfect cast, and a whimsical John Williams score. And appropriately enough it begins with a wistful look on the past, with longing and regret, perfectly in keeping with the character of that frightened and tormented Romantic, Alfred Hitchcock.

The film opens in an antiquated parlor, where a rich old woman is unburdening herself to 'Madame Blanche,' the fake seer played by Barbara Harris. While the scene has the important function of setting up Hitchcock's last MacGuffin, it is also designed to establish that even though Blanche is a phony she unwittingly provides a beneficial service to those who need someone to talk to about long-buried sins. Sometimes all we have to do is be willing to listen. In the next scene we meet Blanche's loyal puppy, phony man-of-many-hats George Lumley, who introduces the good-natured ribald humor of the story. Theirs is a combative romance punctuated by moments of unusual tenderness.

Hitchcock achieves a deft segue way when George has to slam on the brakes to avoid hitting Fran. Her face obscured, she's on her way to collect on an elaborate ransom scheme. We learn how disciplined she is when she resists all inducements to reveal her voice, most memorably when she coolly fires a warning shot through the Plexiglas of the helicopter. Then we meet the final main character. Arthur Adamson is cool and refined where George is a lovable bumbler. With just 20 minutes of screen time Hitchcock has set the plot into motion. The big question is how these two sets of disparate characters will intersect.

A couple of scenes rank amongst the most interesting in Hitchcock's canon.

George Lumley, investigating the identity of the long-dead Edward Shoebridge, arrives at the funeral for Maloney, the man who tried to kill him. He stalks Maloney's widow through the cemetery, their inexorable meeting delayed by the decorum of the ceremony and an unwillingness to address painful truths. Hitchcock tracks their progress with a crane shot that recalls the bird's-eye view used in *The Birds* when Bodega Bay was under attack, perhaps the director's dispassionate comment on the inexorable progression towards death that awaits all

men. After all, the widow accuses *Lumley* of being responsible for her husband's death, and fears what will happen to her if Arthur Adamson decides that she cannot be trusted with these dark secrets. Her own death will inevitably follow. Bumbling Lumley is making waves and seems to her an agent of chaos leaving destruction in his wake.

In the other scene, loveable Blanche finds Arthur Adamson's house, where he holds his kidnap victims until the ransom is produced. In a classic Hitchcockian twist, she has no idea who these people really are, while we the audience know that she is in grave danger. What is intriguing is that we figure she'll never get a chance to explain her intentions before Adamson seizes her. But she does. And just when Arthur is warming to the idea of being a legitimate millionaire, Fran opens the car door to hide the bishop's protruding robe, he is exposed, and Blanche is struck dumb by her gross presumption as Arthur's countenance resumes its default setting of disgusted malevolence.

We know something has to give. While waiting for the soon-to-arrive climax (Arthur and Fran hoist with their own petard, locked in the hidden room) we enjoy a homage to *Notorious* (1946). George shows up to rescue his lover who has been drugged, the twist being that she's now fully conscious and biding her time. Plus, we begin to see that Fran is disgusted by greedy Arthur's ruthlessness, and we wonder if she will betray Arthur and aid Blanche and George just as Mrs. Drayton did at the climax of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956). But she acquiesces, resulting in a merely satisfying climax.

Some would say that Fran's punishment is too harsh. But it is fitting. Did she not have the wherewithal to collect a ransom without compromising the scheme? Yet she allows herself to be overawed by an overdressed con-artist. She is just as guilty as he, and the ending is a fitting conclusion to the whole bizarre affair. Both couples are greedy, but the one that causes pain is punished.

His universe-in-miniature restored to its proper balance, Hitchcock has set things right, for the last time.