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# Dartmouth Film Society

## THE WRONG MAN (1956)

Manny Balestrero	Henry Fonda	Constance Willis	Laurinda Barrett
Rose Balestrero	Vera Miles	Betty Todd	Norma Connolly
Frank O'Connor	Anthony Quayle	Gene Conforti	Nehemiah Persoff
Lt. Bowers	Harold J. Stone	Olga Conforti	Lola D'Annunzio
Detective Matthews	Charles Cooper	Robert Balestrero	Kippy Campbell
Prosecutor Tomasini	John Heidabrand	Gregory Balestrero	Robert Essen
Manny's Mother	Esther Minciotti	Daniell	Richard Robbins
Mrs. Ann James	Doreen Lang	Judge	Dayton Lummis

Script by Maxwell Anderson and Angus McPhail, based on a true story. Photographed by Robert Burks. Sets by Paul Sylbert and William L. Kaehl. Edited by George Tomasini. Music by Bernard Herrmann. Released by Warner Brothers, December 23, 1956.

Produced and directed by ALFRED HITCHCOCK

THE WRONG MAN is based on the true story of Christopher E. Balestrero, a musician who was arrested on January 14, 1953, having been identified by three witnesses as the man who twice robbed the Jackson Heights office of the Prudential Insurance Company. The only problem was that Mr. Balestrero was actually innocent. His trial ended in a mistrial on April 23, 1953, when one of the jury interrupted the hearing. One week later, the real culprit, one Charles Daniell, was arrested while trying to rob a delicatessen in Astoria. The two men looked very much alike. The police were very sorry, and Mr. Balestrero was released. Unfortunately, his wife suffered a nervous breakdown and had to be committed to an institution.

The story strongly appealed to Hitchcock, who has had a basic mistrust and fear of the police from the day when, as a small boy, his father had him locked up in the local jail for some petty misdemeanor. The director decided to treat THE WRONG MAN as a semi-documentary, even dispensing with his usual appearance during the course of the film. The only "star" was Henry Fonda, although a very good supporting cast was assembled. Real locations were used whenever possible and much of the shooting was done where the "crime" took place.

THE WRONG MAN is perhaps Hitchcock's most pessimistic film, dark in subject and mood, and quite unlike almost anything else which he made before. While there is a happy ending of sorts, on the other hand we are presented with the spectacle of Mrs. Balestrero (very well played by Vera Miles, often used in Hitchcock television programs) gone insane from the strain of the trial. Naturally this did not greatly please the general audience, and the film was a failure at the box-office.

As John Russell Taylor writes in Cinema Eye, Cinema Ear, "In putting the story on the screen Hitchcock uses his most severe and rigorous style (indeed, treating a subject which might have appealed to French director Robert Bresson he sometimes comes close to Bresson in final effect); the camera relentlessly pursues the hero through his ordeal, and much of the film is constructed in a series of harsh, searching, black-and-white close-ups with no room for intrusions of the irrelevantly picturesque. Only when it moves briefly away from the central character does the film lose its grip (even if it did happen just like that, it is asking rather much of any actress to go mad convincingly in the course of one short sequence), but elsewhere, as we go through Balestrero's experiences with him, spared nothing of the exhausting formalities of the process of law, watching with him, in the hallucinatory clarity of a bad dream, the faces of the jurors as the trial grinds on, there is not even a momentary slackening of the film's power over us."

Much has been written, particularly by the French critics, about Hitchcock's Catholicism in his films, and THE WRONG MAN lends itself to this trend of analysis particularly well, not only because of the "miracle" which occurs at the end of the movie. Critic Robin Wood, although British, follows the French approach in his study of the film, and some of his comments are well worth reprinting below.

"The other Hitchcock film with overt religious content is THE WRONG MAN; and it seems to confirm in part the impression of I CONFESS, though it is a far more successful film. Its first half can stand comparison with anything Hitchcock has done. Particularly, one might



point out the thematic connection with THE BIRDS, a film so different in tone and subject-matter (indeed, they are in some respects at opposite poles, being respectively the most 'realistic' -- in the narrow sense -- and the most fantastic of Hitchcock's recent films); the theme of the precariousness and vulnerability of the little order we can make in our lives. The imprisonment of Henry Fonda becomes more than a case of mistaken identity, through the very intensity of the images: the treatment of his progress, the gradual stripping away of his means of identification, his personal possessions, the reduction of a man depicted from the start as passive, gentle, slightly ineffectual, lacking any strong identity, to the total anonymity with which he is threatened, makes of it a descent into the underworld--into a chaos-world underlying the surface reality where all men are one man, where values cease to exist, where all particularity is merged. For Balestrero, prison becomes a vision of Hell.

"The second half of the film fails to maintain this intensity. The change of the focus of interest to Balestrero's wife, instead of evoking a more complex response, tends to dissipate the spectator's interest. The failure seems to lie in the realization, in the actual scene-by-scene plotting of the scenario, rather than in the basic conception. We are shown Balestrero, after his preliminary prison experiences, hovering on the brink of a breakdown. Yet it is his wife who goes mad, and it is her madness that saves him. By taking away his chief prop, it places the whole burden of holding together the family unit, on the preservation of which the couple's sense of identity depends, on his shoulders. He is forced to discover unknown strengths within himself, and the film associates this with his discovery of God through prayer. Hitchcock attributes the partial failure of the latter half of the film to the fact that working from a factual story limited his freedom to plan the scenario as he wished. A further cause, on internal evidence, seems to be uneasiness with the dénouement, with its suggestion of a miracle. The crucial scene in the film, if one takes it as essentially a religious work--the scene where Balestrero's mother exhorts him to pray for help--is, significantly, as labored and conventional in execution as in writing. It will be recognized that a very delicate problem of belief is involved here... Hitchcock's response to the undermining of a precarious order in the first half of THE WRONG MAN seems so much stronger than his response to the idea of religious salvation in the latter. One could perhaps argue the flaw is caused by the essential incommunicability of the unknowable; it looks more like a lack of real conviction, a desire to believe rather than belief itself.

"In the final sequences, Hitchcock finds his form again. The confrontation of 'Wrong' and 'Right' men, where Fonda, by his firm stare at the real criminal, proclaims his preservation, indeed the definition, of the identity that was in danger of being submerged, has great force, and the final scene with the wife in the mental home takes us right into the world of THE BIRDS. That Hitchcock's Catholic background has relevance to the assumptions about the universe that underlie his films I would not deny; but it seems to me an indirect relevance. The notion that his cinema is a vehicle for a committed Catholicism is made more than dubious by close inspection of the film which seems, superficially, to endorse it most of all."

In addition to Henry Fonda and Vera Miles, the cast includes the well-known English actor Anthony Quayle, who manages to be quite American here. The sharp photography is again by Robert Burks (very different in style from VERTIGO, which was to follow), and the excellent musical score by Bernard Herrmann.

--David Stewart Hull

Our next film is THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY (1956), presented Saturday, April 30, at 10:30 pm and Monday, May 2, at 4 pm. Directed, of course, by Alfred Hitchcock.