

# Let 'Em Play God

(from *Hollywood Reporter*, 11 October 1948)

By Alfred Hitchcock

1. Every maker of mystery movies aims at getting the audience on the edge of their seats. The **ingredient** to keep them there is called "suspense." Producers<sup>1</sup> cry for it, writers cry in agony to get it, and actors cry for joy when they do get it. I've often been asked what it is.
2. As far as I'm concerned you have suspense when you let the audience play God.
3. Suppose, for instance, you have six characters involved in a mystery. A man has been murdered and all six are possible **suspects** but no one is sure including the audience.
4. One of the characters, a young man, is standing in a shadowy room with his back to the door when an unidentified character in a cloak and black hat sneaks in and slugs him into **insensibility**. It's a brutal act, but if the audience does not know whether the young man himself is a killer or a hero they will not know whether to cheer or weep.
5. If the audience does know, if they have been told all the secrets that the characters do not know, they'll work like the devil for you because they know what fate is facing the poor actors. That is what is known as "playing God." That is suspense.
6. For 17 years I have been making pictures described alternately as thrillers, dark mysteries, and chillers, yet I have never actually directed a whodunit<sup>2</sup> or a puzzler. Offhand this may sound like **debunking**, but I do not believe that puzzling the audience is the essence of suspense.
7. Take, for instance, the drama I recently filmed at Warner Bros, called *Rope*. It stars James Stewart with Joan Chandler, our new discovery, in the feminine lead.
8. John Dall and Farley Granger strangle a young man in the opening shot. They put his body in a chest, cover the chest with a damask cloth and silver service, then serve *hors d'oeuvres* and drinks from it at a party for the victim's father, mother, sweetheart, and assorted friends. Everyone is gay and charming. When Stewart begins to suspect foul play late in the film John Dall puts a gun in his pocket in case things get too hot.

9. The audience knows everything from the start, the players know nothing. There is not a single detail to puzzle the audience. It certainly is not a whodunit for the simple reason that everyone out front knows who did it. No one on the screen knows except the two murderers. The fact that the audience watches actors go blithely through an atmosphere that is loaded with evil makes for real suspense.
10. These are the questions, now, that constantly pop up: Will the murderers break and give themselves away? When the victim does not show up for the party will his father suspect? Will Jimmy get killed before he discovers the actual crime? How long will that body lie in its wooden grave at a champagne party without being discovered? If we are successful we'll have the audience at such a pitch that they want to shout every time one of the players goes near that chest.
11. In order to achieve this, one of the necessary ingredients of the formula is a series of **plausible** situations with people that are real. When characters are unbelievable you never get real suspense, only surprise.
12. Just because there is a touch of murder and an air of mystery about a story it is not necessary to see transoms opening, clutching fingers, hooded creatures, and asps on the Chinese rug.
13. *Spellbound* was based on complete psychiatric truth. *Foreign Correspondent* was simply the story of a man hammering away at events with a woman who was not much help. *Notorious* concerned a woman caught in a web of world events from which she could not extricate herself and *The Paradine Case* was a love story embedded in the emotional quicksand of a murder trial.
14. In none of these was the house filled with shadows, the weather dull and stormy throughout, the moor windswept, and the doors creaky. In fact, it is important in a story with sinister implications to use counterpoint, great contrast between situation and background, as we did in *Rope*.
15. John Dall is guilty of a bestial crime which the audience sees him perform with young Granger. But throughout the film he is grace and charm itself and his apartment is gay and beautifully appointed. And when Granger plays the piano he picks a light and childish piece, a minuet. Suspense involves contrast.

#### Endnotes

1. Producers: the people who oversee the production of a film
2. Whodunit: a story about a murder in which the murderer's identity is concealed until the conclusion of the narrative

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(Note: the following is the rest of the essay by Hitchcock. This is not required reading unless you have been instructed otherwise)

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The question is often asked — Do I mind being typed as a mystery maker? Not at all. Most professional men have their trademarks. You always know a piece of Frank Lloyd Wright architecture when you see one and the buildings of Sir Christopher Wren have that distinctive something which no others have. You would not expect to hear Lauritz Melchior crooning or Bing Crosby singing Wagner. And it would be a colossal surprise to go to the theater and see a farce written by Eugene O'Neill.

I do not believe it is necessary for a director to change his style in order to develop new characters and a different story in each film. Through the ages, in literature, acting, directing, and the dance, style has been the mark of the man, the element of his work which has tended to set it apart from the work of others.

Style in directing develops slowly and naturally as it does in everything else. In my case there was much dabbling about in so-called versatility before I found my niche. My titles included such varied films as *The Lodger* (the silent version with Ivor Novello), *Easy Virtue*, *The Farmer's Wife*, *Champagne*, *The Skin Game*, and *Waltzes from Vienna*. Then I began to get more and more interested in developing a suspense technique. By the time I had made *The Secret Agent*, *Sabotage* and *The 39 Steps* I made up my mind to shoot this type of story exclusively.

Within its framework I can tell any story under the sun but on the screen it will have a definitely recognizable style. I suppose it should be remarked in passing that style, no matter what art it is concerned with, cannot be superimposed consciously on any work. It must be the result of growth and patient experimentation with the materials of the trade, the style itself emerging eventually almost unconsciously.

As it has happened to many others this same thing has happened to me. And having made my bed I'm quite content to lie in it.