

Shadow of a Doubt

By Thomas Leitch

Following the popular success of “Saboteur” in 1942, Jack Skirball of Universal Pictures and Alfred Hitchcock were eager to extend their collaboration. The property they eventually settled on was “Uncle Charlie,” an unpublished story outline by Gordon McDonell about a California family whose visitor, the mother’s charming younger brother, turns out to be a serial killer on the run from the police. Hitchcock and his wife Alma Reville added movies, radio, juke boxes, and hints of war to the setting, which McDonell had called “a typical small American town,” to produce the effect of “a small town lit by neon signs.”

Hitchcock succeeded in interesting the Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist and playwright Thornton Wilder in working on the screenplay during the five weeks before Wilder was to join Army intelligence. Together the director and the playwright crafted a story that hearkened back to “The Lodger,” Hitchcock’s first big success, but also marked a decisive turn in Hitchcock’s career and provided a model for many Hitchcock films that followed.

“Saboteur” had been a large-scale, picture-postcard overview of America that traveled across the country from a California aircraft plant, pausing for memorable episodes aboard a circus train, at the Boulder Dam, and inside Radio City Music Hall before ending with one of Hitchcock’s most spectacular set-pieces at the Statue of Liberty. “Shadow of a Doubt” is American in a completely different way. After a brief prologue cribbed from Ernest Hemingway’s story “The Killers” and shot in Newark, New Jersey, it reverses “Saboteur”’s trajectory by traveling to Santa Rosa, California, an hour north of San Francisco, where, shooting largely on location, Hitchcock maintains a resolutely small scale, focusing his chamber-music Americana on a single family. The film makes a running joke of the Newtons’ typicality, in fact, when two of the police officers who are chasing Charles Oakley (Joseph Cotten) masquerade as profilers in search of a demographically normal family.

Although Wilder’s draft screenplay was revised and polished by Sally Benson, a “New Yorker” writer who had recently won a wide audience for the stories collected in “Junior Miss,” Hitchcock asked that an unusual final credit be added to the film’s opening: “We wish to acknowledge the contribution of Mr. Thornton Wilder to the preparation of this production.” Whether because the experience of making the film was unusually pleasant or because he was



Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) enjoys the breakfast in bed brought to him by his namesake and niece Charlie (Teresa Wright). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

unusually satisfied with the result, Hitchcock called “Shadow of a Doubt” his favorite of all his films.

The single most obviously arresting feature of the film is its emphasis on doubles. Its two opening sequences begin with a series of virtually mirror-image shots showing first Uncle Charlie, then his niece and namesake (Teresa Wright), lying on their beds obliquely facing opposite sides of the screen—and, inferentially, each other, across a distance of three thousand miles—with frozen, disillusioned expressions that thaw very little when they are interrupted by visitors who try to rouse them to a greater interest in life. The visual doubling ends when Uncle Charlie eludes the police officers watching him and catches a train for Santa Rosa, where his ecstatic niece is convinced that his visit is just the thing to shake her family out of its doldrums.

But these visual doubles are only a prologue to the film’s litany of thematic doubles. Uncle Charlie is stalked by two policemen in New Jersey; his niece’s family plays host to two visitors, themselves secretly policemen, in California. Charlie has two parents, two siblings, and two friends. Uncle Charlie, suspected of being the Merry Widow Murderer, is temporarily cleared when one of two other suspects runs away from the police and into an airplane propeller. The film includes two scenes in the Newtons’ garage, two focusing on a ring Uncle Charlie gives his niece, two showing Charlie’s interactions with a crossing guard at a busy intersection, and two depicting attempts on her life. The pivotal scene in which her uncle acknowledges his guilt to her and taxes her with a crippling naïveté is played out at a bar called the ‘Til Two.

This long series of doubles is clearly organized a single central doubling, the relationship between Charlie and her uncle. At first she idolizes him, displays him proudly to her friends, and does everything she can to protect him from the smilingly intrusive police officers who present themselves as profilers. After she realizes that her adored uncle has courted and killed several women for the money he lives on, she turns on him as a corrupting intruder and does everything in her power to force him out of her family's home—everything short of turning him in to Jack Graham (Macdonald Carey), the detective who has fallen in love with her. Long before Uncle Charlie's climactic attempt to silence his niece by throwing her off the train that is carrying him away from Santa Rosa, many viewers will have found hints of incest beneath all these doubles, from the young victim's hero-worship of the magnetic older family member who commands her devotion to her anguished inability to share what she regards as her guilty secret with her parents (Patricia Collinge and Henry Travers) or the blandly official suitor who has professed his unobjectionable love.

In the decade leading up to "Shadow of a Doubt," Hitchcock had alternated between spy stories like "Saboteur" and tales of domestic homicide from "The Lodger" to "Rebecca." The signal innovation of "Shadow of a Doubt" is to weld these two strains together, presenting a self-contained family circle whose members turn their domestic space into a

nightmarish trap through their compulsion to spy on each other. Hitchcock did not invent this pattern. He could have found it quite recently in the plays of Lillian Hellman, especially "The Little Foxes," in which both Collinge and Wright had appeared, and "Watch on the Rhine." In Hitchcock's hands, though, the amalgam of spying and domestic melodrama produces a highly distinctive structure. The first act of "Shadow of a Doubt" sets up the duality between Charlie and her uncle without defining what it means. In the second act, Charlie, gradually suspecting the truth, increasingly spies on her uncle in order to unmask him. Once she has confirmed her worst suspicions, he turns the tables in the third act by spying on her with lethal intent. Hitchcock would repeat this structure to telling effect three years later in "Notorious," and the combination of spying and domestic menace would serve as one of his signature achievements in films as different as "Strangers on a Train," "Rear Window," "Vertigo," "Psycho," and "Family Plot."

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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