

The 39 Steps

Finding a scene that provokes a strong emotional reaction from the audience in an Alfred Hitchcock film is unlike finding a needle in a haystack and more like finding a hippo in a haystack. Hitchcock is famous for his ability to conjure up tension and scares in his movies to keep his audiences enthralled. A few of his titles instantly elicit thoughts or memories of emotionally tense movies, such as *The Birds*, *Psycho*, and *South by South West*. One film of Hitchcock's which is suspenseful yet contains examples of his use of humour is *The 39 Steps*.

The 39 Steps, was filmed in 1935 (filmsite.org), four years before the second world war began. The film takes place in London, England and in the Scottish countryside. The film focuses on a man named Richard Hannay, who meets a woman at a show where the main act's big attraction is an incredible sense of memory. At the show a gun is fired and Hannay and the woman retreat to Hannay's apartment. The woman tells Hannay that she is a spy and that she needs to go to Scotland. Later in the night the woman comes into Hannay's room and tells him to save himself as she falls dead with a knife in her back. Hannay escapes his apartment, but is then on the run from the police, who think that he murdered the girl, and the spy syndicate that the girl was working against. The movie develops its plot through Hannay trying to prove his innocence while on the run and trying to get to the bottom of the mystery that the girl left him with when she died in his apartment.

Although, the premise for the movie has the formula for constant suspense, Hitchcock is able to fill some scenes throughout the film with ironic humour. One such scene that is well done in both its humour as well as its emotion, is the scene where

Hannay, after telling the Scottish police about how he was involved in the murder with the girl and survived being shot by the evil spy master known as The Professor. The police arrest him, but Hannay escapes and is then mistaken as a running mate of a Scottish political candidate for the house of lords. Hannay is then forced to address an audience about the candidate where he ad libs an entire speech in front of the audience.

In this scene he begins by saying how delighted he is to be in front of such a friendly and receptive crowd and how speaking in front of them has relieved him from the “anxieties of a man in his position” (filmsite.org). He continues on about how he never planned to be in front of them and how he planned a very different journey to Scotland for himself. To the audience he is addressing it seems that he is being very modest, when in reality he is talking about his misadventures, knowledge that only he and the viewing audience knows. This form of ironic humour is effective in engaging the audience because of the prior knowledge required to understand the irony.

The scene also takes a serious tone when Hannay stalls for time so as not to be apprehended by the police or by two members of the rival spy gang by opening up to the audience for questions. Hannay is asked several questions, but one that strikes his interest is the question about what will be done about the idle rich by the candidate. Hannay begins his response with a joke, that again is ironic to the viewer because of its double meaning. Hannay’s joke to the audience is that he has never been idle and that he is not rich. His joke continues with him saying he has been busy his entire life and he is going to be much busier soon. The hidden double meaning that he will be busy with the spies although the audience thinks he will be busy with the political candidate. After these jokes, Hannay addresses the audience by trying to relate to them by admitting

that he knows how it feels to be lonely and feel “like the entire world is against you” (filmsite.org). Again this has a double meaning, but instead of being humorous, it is more serious. This is Hannay pouring his heart out about the circumstances that he has found himself in. As the speech that Hannay is giving becomes more intense, the camera angle changes from a medium eye level shot of both Hannay and the audience he is addressing, to a medium low angle shot of Hannay passionately pleading for a world where there is no fear, no aggression, where there is equality, and where no neighbour plots against neighbour. This speech given by Hannay is emotional because not only is he speaking about a world that the audience at the rally can get behind, but it is his plea for a world where he would not have ended up in the situation he has found himself. He wishes for this world not only for his sake, but for the safety of all the lives that got involved along the way, such as a couple on a farm who gave Hannay shelter while he was on the run.

This speech given by Hannay is not unlike the speech given by Charlie Chaplin at the end of *The Great Dictator*. Another speech that is emotionally moving and one that calls for peace and understanding

Alfred Hitchcock has cemented his place among the all time great directors through his suspenseful and, for the time, scary movies. But, in *The 39 Steps*, Hitchcock shows his skill by blending clever ironic humour as well as informed and emotionally charged messages in his movie.