

Hitchcock's debt to German

By William Cook

NEARLY 30 years after his death, Alfred Hitchcock remains the great master of British cinema, but a fascinating new exhibition at Berlin's Film Museum reveals how much this quintessentially English director owed to his apprenticeship in Berlin. "Casting a Shadow: Alfred Hitchcock & His Workshop" shows that although Hitchcock spent almost all his working life in Britain and America, his early career in Berlin had an enduring influence on his cinematic style.

"You get a real feeling of this German period," says the show's co-curator, Nils Warnecke, showing me the storyboards for the 1943 movie *Shadow of a Doubt*, one of Hitchcock's favourite films. Hitchcock made this movie almost 20 years after he left Berlin, but the claustrophobic perspectives and long shadows in these moody storyboards look like something from a silent movie by Fritz Lang.

Hitchcock came to Berlin in 1924, in his mid-20s, to work as the assistant director on an Anglo-German co-production called *The Blackguard* at Berlin's Babelsberg studios. He also worked as the scriptwriter and art director on the silent melodrama, and his work caught the eye of the German company Emelka, which hired him to make a movie of his own. Improbably for a director who's remembered for taut psychological thrillers such as *Vertigo*, his directorial debut, *The Pleasure Garden*, was a jolly romp about chorus girls.

After *The Pleasure Garden*, Hitchcock directed another film in Germany, *Der Bergadler* (*The Mountain Eagle*), now sadly

lost. He then returned to London, where he directed his first thriller, *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*. *The Lodger* was a

big hit, and Hitchcock's German films were soon forgotten, but as this exhibition shows, his time in Berlin had a profound and last-

ing effect. In the 1920s, Babelsberg was Germany's Hollywood, the most modern movie studios in the world. When Hitchcock



ALFRED Hitchcock on the set of *The Mountain Eagle* (1926), with his future wife Alma Reville behind him.

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arrived there, F.W. Murnau was filming his silent masterpiece, *Der Letzte Mann* (The Last Laugh), and this young English wannabe leapt at the chance to watch the great German auteur at work. "What you see on the set does not matter," Murnau told him. "All that matters is what you see on the screen." Hitchcock lapped up Murnau's advice. When *The Blackguard* required a scene outside Milan cathedral, Hitchcock built an exact replica of one tiny corner of the doorway, rather than attempting a more extensive yet less authentic set. Even contemporary critics recognised his ability: "Hitchcock's buildings have a pictorial beauty and a sense of style which even our German masters could not have bettered," reported the German film magazine, *Lichtbild Bühne*, in 1925.

From Murnau and his Babelsberg colleagues, Hitchcock learnt that film is a visual medium, that its main means of communication is images, not words. At Babelsberg, directors strived to shoot their films with as few subtitles as possible, and even after the advent of sound, Hitchcock stuck to this house style. In this exhibition there's a scene from *Marnie*, made almost 40 years later, which shows he never forgot this lesson. The scene lasts several minutes but there's only one line of dialogue. As Warnecke says, "the visual power of German cinema at that time is in almost every Hitchcock film".

Murnau also taught Hitchcock the value of painstaking preparation. Meticulous notes and storyboards from his later films are on show in this exhibition, alongside

photos from his Berlin films. Stills of *The Mountain Eagle* are particularly tantalising, since no prints of this movie have survived. There's also a charming photo of a young (and relatively svelte) Hitchcock in a boat in Berlin's Spreewald with Alma Reville, the English script editor he met there, who became his wife.

Hitchcock returned to a bombed-out Berlin in 1960 while promoting *Psycho*. Casting a *Shadow* features some superb shots from that promotional tour, taken by the Berlin photographer Mario Mach. We see him outside the shattered spire of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church (now a war memorial) and in front of the Brandenburg Gate, just before the Wall went up. His last visit was in 1965, to research his cold war thriller, *Torn Curtain*. It wasn't one of his greatest hits, but his research was typically thorough. Exhibits from this era include a letter from Hitchcock (in fluent German) enquiring about potential locations in East Berlin.

However the most revealing exhibit is a letter from Marlene Dietrich to John Russell Taylor of the *Times*, replying to his request for information for a Hitchcock biography. "He frightened the daylight out of me," wrote Dietrich, recalling the one movie she made with Hitchcock, *Stage Fright*. "He knows all about motion picture technique - most directors don't know as much." And a lot of what he knew, he learnt here in Berlin. As this evocative exhibition shows, Hitchcock may have been a British icon, but he remained a German Expressionist at heart.—*Dawn/The Guardian News Service*