

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: **NOTORIOUS**

( France, 1946. Not Rated. 101 min. Cast: Cary Grant, Ingrid Bergman, Claude Rains, Louis Calhern; Cinematographer: Ted Tetzlaff; Producer: Alfred Hitchcock; Director: Alfred Hitchcock )

Ingrid Bergman, Cary Grant and Alfred Hitchcock. Those three names alone should be enough to get you to watch any film, especially one with the two actors at their commercial peak and the director arguably just reaching another artistic one. Perhaps his finest film of the '40s, *Notorious* captures the cackling chemistry of its two iconic stars in the framework of a carefully constructed, lush and elegant romantic thriller.

The film opens with Alicia Huberman (Bergman) attending the trial of her father, a convicted Nazi spy. Distraught, she drinks excessively at a party at her Miami home, attracting attention from the mysterious T. R. Devlin (Grant). In typical Hitchcockian manner, we're introduced to Devlin with a shot that only shows us the back of Grant's head, a perverse touch for such an established star. Eventually, Devlin accompanies Alicia as she takes an intoxicated drive along the coast. Their acerbic banter would fit right into a screwball comedy if she wasn't so seriously, dangerously drunk. After getting pulled over by a cop, Alicia learns Devlin is more than a mere party guest; he's really a Government agent. Coinciding with her father's suicide in jail, Devlin asks Alicia to assist him in Rio de Janeiro to spy on a group of her father's Nazi friends. The task will help her clear her own name. However, she once had a fling with one of these friends she's asked to spy on, the wealthy (if not nearly as dapper as Devlin) Alexander Sebastian (Claude Rains).

In due course, Devlin receives orders to ask Alicia to pose as Sebastian's lover in order to gain access to his house and in particular, a suspect wine cellar. Complicating matters is that she's already started to fall in love with Devlin. Watch for the languorous, on-and-off kiss they share on their moonlit hotel balcony, strategically fragmented in order to appease the current production code that would not allow a screen kiss to last longer than three seconds. Devlin's feelings toward Alicia are a little harder to figure out. His ambiguity (and subsequent jealousy) will lead to potentially devastating consequences for at least one person of



this triangle. With all the usual red herrings and unforeseen plot developments present, Hitchcock keeps the audience enthralled and uncertain as to whom that will be until the final scene.

*Notorious* finds screenwriter Ben Hecht bringing a two-part short story from 1921 (written by John Taintor Foote for the *Saturday Evening Post*) into an era that was just recovering from World War II and anticipating the Cold War. Simultaneously, Hitchcock was nearing the end of his tenure as a director for David O. Selznick's studios. Selznick had originally wanted Vivian Leigh to play the part of Alicia but soon distanced himself from the project, selling the rights to RKO and

Vanguard in order to pay for production costs on the over-budget *Duel In The Sun*. As was the usual case with Hitchcock at this time, critics weren't particularly impressed with the film, and it would only receive two Academy Award nominations: Rains for Best Supporting Actor, and Hecht for Best Screenplay.

Inexplicably, Bergman and Grant were ignored for performances that rank with their finest work. The tension and attraction between them is incessantly apparent, from their first double entendre-laden conversation (After Alicia invites Devlin to join her for a drive: He: "Don't you need a coat?" She: "You'll do.") until their climactic, incredibly tender and vulnerable reunion. Both actors had worked with Hitchcock before (Grant in *Suspicion*, Bergman in *Spellbound*) and were at ease with the director's inimitably acerbic and ironic touches—consider how Alicia greets Devlin with persistent kisses after babbling on and on about the burnt chicken she's prepared for dinner. Yet, don't underestimate Rains; his role is arguably the most difficult to pull off. He manages to make what is essentially a villainous character almost sympathetic. Such complexity and nuance, rather than plot twists or outrageous situations are what really drive all the great Hitchcock films. Even though there was an ill-advised made-for-TV remake of the film in 1992, it's still awfully difficult to imagine anyone ever creating a more definitive version than Hitchcock's original.

- Chris Kriofske