

USA, 1958. PG. 129 min

Cast: James Stewart, Kim Novak, Barbara Lee Geddes, Tom Helmore;

Writers: Pierre Boileau, Thomas Narcejac, Samuel A. Taylor, Alec Coppel; Music: Bernard Herrmann;

Cinematographer: Robert Burks;

Producer: Herbert Coleman; Director: Alfred Hitchcock

Vertigo is arguably Alfred Hitchcock's masterpiece, and undoubtedly one of his greatest films. Last year, it placed an impressive second (after *Citizen Kane*) in Sight and Sound's Critic's Top Ten Poll of all-time favorite films. Such a feat seems astounding when one considers the lukewarm response the film received from critics and audiences during its initial 1958 release.

Perhaps *Vertigo* was just slightly ahead of its time. From its innovative, Saul Bass-designed opening credits (which continually zoom in on a woman's eye until giving way to a series of dizzying, spiraling graphs) to its harrowing, utterly devastating final scene, *Vertigo* is particularly demanding for a 1950s studio film. Adapted from a French novel (*D'Entre Les Morts* (*From Among The Dead*, one of the film's many working titles) by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, it tells an intricate, psychologically complex tale. John "Scottie" Ferguson (James Stewart) is a San Francisco detective forced into early retirement due to a "vertigo", or fear of heights, he develops in the film's shocking first scene. At first, he looks to his droll friend and one-time fiancé, Midge (Barbara Bel Geddes) for consolation. Before long, an old college chum (Tom Helmore) asks Scottie to trail his wife, Madeleine (Kim Novak), whom he believes to be mentally unsound and suicidal.

Scottie follows Madeleine as she frequents symbolically significant sites in and around the city. He gradually falls in love with her as he also pieces together an explanation for her strange behavior—or so he

thinks. What develops between them leads to one of the most startling, brilliantly executed, and prematurely revealed (two-thirds of the way in!) twists in all of cinema. It's too good to reveal to someone who hasn't seen the film, and its implications make subsequent viewings intriguing. One comes to see *Vertigo* as Hitchcock's most personal film, passionately concerned with desire, obsession, and the consequences of controlling and shaping another person's physical attributes and emotional states (think of Hitchcock's attitude towards his actors, whom he often referred to as "props".)

Stewart, who had previously acted for Hitchcock in *Rope*, *Rear Window* and *The Man Who Knew*



Too Much, was rarely ever darker, more frightening or vulnerable onscreen than he is here. Novak was a late replacement for a pregnant Vera Miles, and critics originally dismissed her as too sterile and comatose (one memorably dubbed her "Kim Novocain"). In the tradition of Grace Kelly, Novak was the latest and most extreme in a series of chilly, blonde Hitchcock heroines. Gorgeous, seductive, enigmatic, even androgynous (that tightly curled-up hair and gray suit!), Novak's Madeleine was a most unusual and illusive object of longing.

That it was nearly impossible to view a print of *Vertigo* for many years only heightened the film's mystique. In the early 70s, it was pulled from distribution, along with four other Hitchcock classics (includ-

ing *Rear Window*). Hitchcock brought the rights for these films back from the studios, and left them to his daughter Patricia. Not long after his death in 1980, they were gradually re-released, with *Vertigo* finally returning to movie screens in December 1983. Unfortunately, in the following decade, most circulating prints of the film were very poor, and the video release hardly captured the quality of what it was like to see it on a big screen in 1958.

In 1996, James C. Katz and Robert A. Harris finished a complete restoration of *Vertigo* that transferred the film from its original Vista Vision format (Paramount's version of CinemaScope) to a sparkling 70mm print. Highly acclaimed, it premiered as a sold-out special event at the New York Film Festival, and then played packed theaters throughout the world. The restoration was not without controversy. The soundtrack, featuring Bernard Herrmann's grandiose, stirringly romantic score (as essential to the film's success as anything) had to be re-recorded in DTS Digital Stereo. As Dan Auiler notes in his book *Vertigo: The Making of a Hitchcock Classic* (St. Martin's Press, 1998), such enhancements raised the concern, "At what point does an improvement begin and the director's original vision end?"

Regardless, viewing the 1996 restoration is still a revelatory experience, even for those not seeing *Vertigo* for the first time. This version survives on video and DVD, but it all comes marvelously alive—the rooftop chase, Novak's grand entrance, the mission bell tower sequences, the climactic 360 degree camera shot embrace—most effectively on a big screen.

- compiled by Chris Kriofske