

STRANGERS ON A TRAIN

Jonathan Goldberg



A QUEER FILM CLASSIC

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SYNOPSIS

Strangers Bruno Antony (Robert Walker) and Guy Haines (Farley Granger) meet on a train leaving Washington, DC's Union Station. Guy is heading to Metcalf, his hometown, to arrange a divorce from his wife Miriam (Laura Elliott) so that he can marry Anne Morton (Ruth Roman), a US senator's daughter. Bruno recognizes Guy as a tennis star and as someone he has seen in the society columns linked to Anne Morton. Bruno quickly deduces Guy's marital difficulties, and after telling Guy about his own hatred of his father, he proposes they solve their problems by swapping murders, committing undetectable, motiveless crimes. Guy apparently entertains Bruno's idea; exiting his compartment, he leaves behind the cigarette lighter Anne had given him, engraved "A to G."

Guy meets with Miriam, but fails to get her to agree to a divorce. He calls Anne to let her know; above the roar of a passing train, he shouts that he would like to strangle Miriam. During a phone call to Guy, Bruno discovers that Miriam has refused to grant Guy a divorce. He proceeds to Metcalf; finding Miriam's address in a phonebook in the same booth from which Guy had called Anne, he follows Miriam to a fairground where he strangles her, pocketing her eyeglasses before he leaves. These he presents to Guy, who has just returned home to his Washington, DC, apartment. Bruno convinces Guy

not to go to the police since they would be bound to suspect him as the one who had a motive for the crime. Guy goes to Senator Morton's home, where the senator (Leo G. Carroll) and his daughters Anne and Barbara (Patricia Hitchcock) already know about Miriam's murder, and that the Metcalf police want to speak to him. Guy returns to Metcalf, only to discover that drunken Professor Collins (John Brown), whom he met on the train, cannot provide an alibi for him, since he has no memory of their meeting. Hennessey (Robert Gist) and Hammond (John Doucette), two policemen, are assigned to tail Guy.

Bruno's repeated frustrated attempts by phone and letter to contact Guy and get him to go through with their bargain incite him to come out into the open; at the Mellon Gallery, Anne regards Bruno with suspicion when he accosts Guy. At a tennis club, Bruno watches Guy play a game and finds himself mesmerized by Barbara's resemblance to Miriam (both brunettes wear glasses); and later, at a party at Senator Morton's, Bruno almost strangles Mrs Cunningham (Norma Varden), a guest, while staring at Barbara. Anne guesses that Guy had Bruno kill Miriam; he tells her what happened. Guy calls Bruno, claiming he will go through with their bargain. Evading the police, he arrives at the Antony house only to find Bruno in his father's bed; when he tells Bruno he will not go through with the plan, Bruno promises revenge. Anne attempts to get Bruno's mother (Marion Lorne) to intervene, but finds her too addled to assist. Bruno intimates to Anne

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that he plans to leave the lighter at the fairground where he strangled Miriam, thus incriminating Guy.

In a final sequence, Bruno goes to Metcalf while Guy must play a tense tennis match in Forest Hills before he can try to stop Bruno. Bruno accidentally drops the lighter down a sewer drain soon after alighting in Metcalf; his struggles to regain it are cross cut with Guy's tennis match. Finally, Guy wins, catches a train to Metcalf, and heads to the amusement park where the two confront each other on a merry-go-round. The police attempt to shoot Guy, but instead kill the merry-go-round attendant. Guy and Bruno fight as the merry-go-round whirls out of control; Bruno is crushed when it is stopped. Only as Bruno dies does he open his hand, revealing the lighter he had intended to plant. Guy calls Anne to say all is okay; in the last shot of the film, they are on a train together when a stranger accosts him, recognizing him. He and Anne hurry away.

CREDITS

Strangers on a Train, 1951, USA, English, 100–101 minutes,
black and white, RCA Sound System, 1.37 : 1

Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc.

Director and Producer: Alfred Hitchcock

Based on the Patricia Highsmith novel *Strangers on a Train*

Adaptation: Whitfield Cook

Screenplay: Raymond Chandler and Czenzi Ormonde

Principal Cast:

Farley Granger (Guy Haines)

Ruth Roman (Anne Morton)

Robert Walker (Bruno Antony)

Leo G. Carroll (Senator Morton)

Patricia Hitchcock (Barbara Morton)

Laura Elliott (Miriam Haines)

Marion Lorne (Mrs Antony)

Jonathan Hale (Mr Antony)

Howard St. John (Captain Turley)

John Brown (Professor Collins)

Norma Varden (Mrs Cunningham)

Robert Gist (Hennessey)

John Doucette (Hammond)

Howard Washington (waiter)

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Crew:

Production Associate: Barbara Keon
Director of Photography: Robert Burks
Original Music: Dimitri Tiomkin
Music Director: Ray Heindorf
Sound: Dolph Thomas
Art Director: Ted Haworth
Set Decorations: George James Hopkins
Wardrobe: Leah Rhodes
Special Effects: H.F. Koenekamp
Makeup Artist: Gordon Bau

Filmed in Los Angeles and on location in New York City, Washington, DC, Danbury and Darien, CT.
Produced October–December 1950; Released June 30, 1951.

DVD with original Hollywood and so-called British version, WB 15324.

Two-disc special edition with commentaries, and final release and preview versions, WB 31975.

Lux Radio Theater adaptations, 1951 and 1954, AUK CD 0041.

Robert Burks nominated for an Academy Award for Best Cinematography.

ONE: PRODUCTION NOTES AND THE MAKING OF A QUEER FILM CLASSIC

Strangers on a Train (1951) is not the only film by Alfred Hitchcock that might be termed a queer classic. Lee Edelman offers bravura chapters on *North by Northwest* (1959) and *The Birds* (1963) in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, for example. These are not the only instances of queer readings of Hitchcock, of course, although they are particularly inspiring ones for me in this study. Even Camille Paglia's BFI monograph on *The Birds*, although certainly not written under the auspices of queer theory—indeed, quite resistant to theory of most any kind—comes into its orbit when her delight in the film, and especially her admiration for Tippi Hedren, leads Paglia to claim for herself a viewing position that she ascribes to “gay men and drag queens” (1998, 44).

Versions of such queer cross-identification also mark the genesis of *Strangers on a Train*. Hitchcock's film takes its cue from the 1950 novel with the same title by Patricia Highsmith. This was Highsmith's first novel; in 1950, she was an unknown writer just shy of thirty years old. Hitchcock was prescient in his discovery of her *Strangers on a Train*, and it gave him a good deal more than a title. Hitchcock's responsiveness to this dark and disturbing work marks my point of contact with his film. I came to it from my attachment to Highsmith, and came to Highsmith in large measure thanks to her depictions

of intense male-male relationships. Other well-known film directors after Hitchcock have found Highsmith's novels irresistible, especially those in which Tom Ripley is the central character.¹ Highsmith, a lesbian writer who infrequently represented lesbians, is best known for these novels; indeed, she identified with Ripley, sometimes even signing herself "Tom." Tom can be regarded as pathological (he kills people to get what he wants), and his supposed pathology can be coupled with his elusive sexuality. His desire to have what other men have is easily understood as his desire to have other men; however, from the second novel on, he is married, and perversely, happily so. Tom is no poster boy for gay identity—or for any identity easy to label. For me, that's part of his charm. The questions about sexuality and pathology he raises are anticipated by Charles Anthony Bruno in Highsmith's first novel; this is the character who provides the template for Hitchcock's Bruno Antony. Understanding him has been central to much critical discussion of sexuality in the film, the topic I pursue in the second chapter of this study: finding terms for what ties him to Guy Haines provides me with the opportunity to think about male-male relationships beyond normative parameters. I pursue further the connections

1. *Plein Soleil* (René Clément, 1960) is the first film based on *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Anthony Minghella's 1999 film with the same title is the most recent. Films based on subsequent Ripley novels begin with *Der amerikanische freund* (Wim Wenders, 1977) and include Liliana Cavani's *Ripley's Game* (2004). Claude Chabrol's *Le cri du hibou* (1987) is also based on a Highsmith novel, although not one with Ripley in it.