



STRANGERS ON A FILM

By Stephen Wyatt

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STRANGERS ON A FILM

**Written by
Stephen Wyatt**

CHARACTERS

ALFRED HITCHCOCK. Early 50s.

RAYMOND CHANDLER. Early 60s.

SETTING

HOLLYWOOD and LA JOLLA 1950

When Hitchcock invited Chandler to work with him on the film adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's Strangers on a Train, they were filled with mutual admiration. By the end they were filled with mutual loathing.

STRANGERS ON A FILM can be performed on its own or in a double bill with DOUBLE JEOPARDY which is about the relationship between Raymond Chandler and Billy Wilder

An earlier version was first performed on BBC Radio 4 with Patrick Stewart as Chandler and Clive Swift as Hitchcock

Some press comments

“A treat. Beautifully poised writing and playing.”

ELIZABETH MAHONEY in The Guardian

“Superb”

VALERIE GROVE in The Oldie

“A real humdinger of a script”

Daily Mail

“Delicious dialogue and subtle characterisation make this outstanding”

PAUL DONOVAN in The Times

“Wyatt’s brilliant drama”

Radio Times

**“A brilliantly entertaining glimpse into the grouchy, secretive and inspired mindset of
Chandler”**

MOIRA PETTY in The Stage

STRANGERS ON A FILM

(CLASSIC FILM NOIR MUSIC)

(FADE UNDER CHANDLER SEATED, TALKING TO THE AUDIENCE, GLASS OF BOURBON IN HAND)

CHANDLER: By 1950, I had nearly pulled myself free of the primeval slime that is Hollywood. I had scored two modest successes with my scripts for Double Indemnity and The Blue Dahlia both of which were nominated for Academy Awards which, of course, they did not win. I had also in my own humble terms earned a great deal of money from this literary prostitution, far more than I earned from the creation of the novels upon which I believe whatever slender reputation I have will be built. I had meanwhile developed bronchitis, skin allergies and shingles, all of which were settling nicely into becoming chronic conditions. The time to flee from the madness of the movie business was long overdue. Then through my agent I unexpectedly received an invitation from Mr Alfred Hitchcock. He wanted me to write a screenplay based upon a novel called Strangers on a Train by a new writer called Miss Patricia Highsmith. I thought I might like Hitchcock, who was that rare thing in Hollywood an intelligent director of imagination and humour. My dear wife was not enthusiastic. (PAUSE) I should have listened to Cissie.

(HITCHCOCK SITS, GLASS OF WINE IN HAND, TALKING TO THE AUDIENCE)

HITCHCOCK: Well, first of all, we tried to get John Steinbeck for the screenplay of Strangers. Then we tried for Thornton Wilder. There was even a chance for a while that Dashiell Hammett might do it. He'd had writer's block for nearly a decade so that would have been something. In all, eight eminent writers turned me down. Then suddenly there was the

possibility of obtaining the services of Raymond Chandler. He had the reputation of being a difficult man but he was undoubtedly the calibre of writer we needed. Now, contrary to popular opinion, I like writers. I enjoy talking to them and I count several writers among my good friends. If actors are cattle, then writers are thoroughbred horses. Put them at their ease and they'll take you where you need to go. I liked Mr Chandler's work so as I said to my wife, why shouldn't I like him too? (PAUSE) I should have listened to Alma.

(A DOORBELL IN THE ETHER. THE DOORBELL IS REPEATED)

(CHANDLER TO AUDIENCE:)

CHANDLER: When a doorbell goes in one of my novels, it is usually a very bad idea to open the door. Outside could be a man with a gun or a beautiful woman without a gun but with murderous intentions. Instead, I took delivery of a package from the studio of Warner Brothers. (PAUSE) There was a copy of Miss Patricia Highsmith's novel. There was a treatment for the screenplay provided by a Mr Whitfield Cook. The novel was a silly enough story. But in outlining a way the novel could be reshaped for the screen, Mr Whitfield Cook had made suggestions that were even sillier. No wonder they needed a proper writer on board. (PAUSE) Apart from reasons given previously for saying yes, did I forget to mention the prospect of very large sums of money?

(HITCHCOCK RAISES HIS GLASS TO THE AUDIENCE AND TAKES A SWIG.)

HITCHCOCK: In vino veritas. (PAUSE) In 1950 I was not at the pinnacle of my career. After making a stiflingly dull studio movie called The Paradine Case, I had gone independent. I made a film called Rope. It was a technical triumph

and a box office disaster. Then I returned to England to make a film with Ingrid Bergman. I was finally coming home, the great director with one of the greatest stars in the world on my arm. Do you know that wonderful Greek word – hubris? Under Capricorn cost a fortune and died at the box office. The English press was, of course, delighted. So I made a smaller picture called Stage Fright starring Marlene Dietrich. On the principle that nothing starring that ultimate professional, Frau Dietrich, could be without merit. It was. (HE SIPS WINE) I was finished as an independent producer. I needed the support of a Hollywood studio again so I sought what I call a “run for cover” project. A project which I could convince the Brothers Warner would be a classic Hitchcock movie and a big box office success. I started reading Miss Highsmith’s book appropriately enough on a train.

(A PIANO IS HEARD PLAYING CHOPIN WALTZES)

(CHANDLER TAKES A SWIG OF HIS BOURBON)

CHANDLER: Warner Brothers offered me \$2,500 a week for a minimum of five weeks’ work. When I first worked in Hollywood with the indefatigable Mr Billy Wilder, I received \$750 a week and I thought it riches beyond the dreams of avarice. Oh, the Devil knows how to tempt a writer. (PAUSE) I talked it all over with Cissie. She was playing her beloved Chopin on the \$3,000 Steinway I’d bought her. The poor darling was not in good health and I was determined not to leave her. Certainly not to return to work in the studios where I had spent so many unhappy hours incarcerated in the aptly named writers’ block. She thought the job would make me very unhappy. So I announced that I would only accept the contract if I could work on the screenplay at home in La Jolla. If they wanted me, Mr Hitchcock would have to travel the hundred miles from

Los Angeles for script conferences. I did not for one moment think he would agree.

(HITCHCOCK TAKES A SIP OF HIS WINE)

HITCHCOCK: Well, a memo went the rounds of Warner Studios penned by myself. "Since the mountain won't come to Mohammed, Mohammed is going down." Because I thought – why not? This was one of the few writers in the field of crime fiction who deserved respect. A man who was obsessed by darkness, death and suspense. A man in short after my own heart.

(PAUSE)

HITCHCOCK: And besides, there was also La Jolla itself. No billboards or concessions or beachfront shacks for the citizens of La Jolla. In fact, the place has an air of cool decency and good manners, which is quite startling in California. I recalled that Mr Chandler was brought up and educated in England. So there was an affinity between us I had not previously realised. But then he went to a public school. I, the son of shopkeepers from Leytonstone, of course, did not. As I arrived, I made a mental note. You could shoot a very nasty murder in the discreet suburbs of La Jolla.

(CHANDLER TAKES A LONG SWIG OF BOURBON)

CHANDLER: From the window I saw the limousine stop and Mr Hitchcock's considerable bulk slowly emerge. Is there anybody in the civilised world not know what Mr Alfred Hitchcock looks like? He'd made himself the

most visible movie director there's ever been. It must have been one of his greatest artistic achievements. I took a drink to steady my nerves. Only one. I intended to be on best behaviour.

(HE STANDS THERE NERVOUSLY AS HITCHCOCK APPROACHES)

HITCHCOCK: Mr Chandler –

CHANDLER: Mr Hitchcock –

(A HAND SHAKE)

CHANDLER: This is a pleasure, Mr Hitchcock.

HITCHCOCK: Please – call me Hitch. Everybody does including my wife. Hitch. Without the cock.

CHANDLER: (HESITANTLY) You may call me Raymond. Maybe even Ray. (PAUSE) Not everybody is encouraged to do that.

HITCHCOCK: Both of us, I believe, were brought up in England where such intimacy could only be assumed after thirty years of acquaintance.

CHANDLER: My feelings exactly. (PAUSE) Hitch.

HITCHCOCK: (PAUSE) Ray.

(THEY BOTH LAUGH)

CHANDLER: Welcome to La Jolla.

HITCHCOCK: Thank you.

CHANDLER: My wife has always wanted to live here. So when we could afford it, move here we did. But frankly, La Jolla is a gilded suburb full of barren old women and arthritic billionaires.

HITCHCOCK: You have children then?

CHANDLER: (THROWN) No. Why? Do you?

HITCHCOCK: A daughter. She wants to be an actress, foolish girl.

CHANDLER: (IGNORING THIS) Do come in. I suppose we ought to get to work right away. Juanita, my secretary has laid out all the stuff the studio sent me in my study. The novel. The treatment. And, of course, my notebook and pen. So – when you're ready, Hitch.

(HE INDICATES THE WAY IN BUT HITCHCOCK DOESN'T MOVE)

HITCHCOCK: In any collaboration, I think it's always best to get to know each other a bit first. We are two passengers at the very start of our journey. Two strangers meeting on a film. Why don't we for the moment stay out here and enjoy your delightful garden? I'm sorry, directors like telling people what to do

CHANDLER: (QUICKLY) Not at all. Maybe in that case – we could also have a drink.

HITCHCOCK: Why not?

CHANDLER: You drink Bourbon?

HITCHCOCK: Of course.

(HITCHCOCK TURNS TO THE AUDIENCE)