

Mel Brooks' *HIGH ANXIETY* (1977)

That's Entertainment!

Fun.

Mel Brooks equals fun. Fun to watch and listen to. This small and rather chubby fellow was born an entertainer and, thank God, he followed his innate talents entering the long, bumpy road of the showbiz. Mel Brooks was (and he will always be remembered as) part of that golden generation of delightful Broadway comedians – overtly humorous, histrionic (always a hint over the top), constantly ready to sing and dance – never mind ‘the score’. This golden generation generously and constantly gave itself to the public. Fully, steadfastly, frantically. The stage was their world and the public their “immortal beloved”. Naturally these sublime *uber-clowns* were not alike; each one of them had his/her own creative wand with which they casted their personal spell over the public. Mel Brooks’ adorning wand is his unparalleled sense of irony and, sometimes, sarcasm. In his movies, Brooks seems acutely aware of the idiosyncrasies ‘pestering’ the entertainment industry. And, boy, had he fun to point them out!

This is why *High Anxiety* is such a hilarious burlesque adventure – it is Hitchcock upside down. One almost could hear a pixie-Brooks whispering: “I am going to give you folks such a massive thrill that you’ll burst uncontrollably into laughter”. The Master himself should have had an exceptionally good time watching it since, after the premiere, he sent Brooks a case containing six 1.5 L bottles (magnums) of an outrageously expensive 1961 Château Haut-Brion wine, as a token of his appreciation (3350 CAD per 750ml bottle).

High Anxiety creatively uses Hitchcock’s most identifiable earmarks in a pastiche which is both full of serene irony and utmost respect. Serene irony, because nothing in this movie is meant to denigrate or demean the merits of the Great Master of Thriller. On the contrary, the film conveys a respectful albeit humorous homage to Hitchcock. There is no mean or spiteful sarcasm in this movie, just good old sincere laughs. Utmost respect, because Mel Brooks did his homework thoroughly. He clearly studied in detail the work of his famous British-American colleague. Brooks perfectly reproduces the Hitchcockean style in both cinematography and narrative. Tension builds up in waves and leads to a classic and unexpected climax. Famous moments chosen from some of Hitchcock’s most acclaimed filmography are carefully parodied not by simplistic distortions but by clever hyperbolic alterations which turn those tensed moments into hilarious clips.

Here is an example. After the opening scene at the airport, Dr. Richard Thorndyke (the main character played by Mel Brooks) gets into a taxi. The subsequent conversation between the doctor and the cab driver leads to the first 'strange' revelation of the movie. Dramatic music immediately follows enforcing the sudden uneasiness which engulfed both the passenger and the taxi driver. It is a tensed, ominous, thriller-like music – a pure Hitchcockean moment. A couple of seconds later a bus doubles the cab. The bus reads: "The Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra" and the viewer notices the musicians rehearsing inside.

Everything is well-done in this comedy. The characters are all bizarre and mysterious. A little *too* bizarre and *too* mysterious, of course. They bear names to match – Nurse Diesel, Dr. Montague, Prof. Lilloolman etc. All of them are gathering into a high-end clinic "for the very, VERY nervous". To be sure, Mel Brooks chose well. *High Anxiety* is based mostly on *Vertigo* and *Psycho*, the two most celebrated films by Alfred Hitchcock. This is why everything happens around a mental institution ('psycho') and, more evidently, this is why Dr. Thorndyke suffers from acrophobia (fear of heights). Even the title is a combination of the two – *High+Anxiety*. As a true Broadway entertainer, Mel Brooks even creates a title song! Can you imagine a song – with proper text! – called "High Anxiety"? I bet you can't. Well, Master Brooks makes this possible. And you know what? He created a really engaging song, believe it or not!

High Anxiety is not Brooks' first or only parody. He cultivated the genre with panache – *History of the World*, *Young Frankenstein*, *Spaceballs*. However, the character of Dr. Thorndyke is Mel's first spoken role in a movie (he made his debut on the silver screen with another parody directed by himself: *Silent Comedy*). All these parodies are solid proofs of a comedian who knew how to take humour very seriously. Be it World History, Mary Shelley's novel, Star Wars or the flicks of the silent period, Brooks made his research thoroughly knowing that one cannot possibly make fun of something without knowing it inside out. A professional seriousness worth of our highest praise. A professional seriousness which also demands the viewers to come to the theatre informed and well-read. One cannot get the gist of Brooks' full comedic sparkle without having an above-than-average cultural background. These spoofs are definitely not for "the very, VERY uneducated" – to paraphrase the subtitle of the mental institution in *High Anxiety*.

In 1974 MGM celebrated its 50th Anniversary by compiling various memorable scenes from its most acclaimed musicals. They were shown to the world under the title "That's Entertainment!" I couldn't think of a better title for this review. At 86 years old Mel Brooks remains one of the most

entertaining, intelligent and seductive comedians in America. His parodies may not be “the greatest movies ever made” but they surely are “very, VERY” entertaining.

May the gods be good with you, dear Mel, for a long-long time to come!

Dr. Phil M. Ovie