

## Writing With—And Without—Hitchcock

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Imagine that.

*The Man Who Knew Too Much* turns out to be its screenwriter, John Michael Hayes.

At least that is what I deduced after reading screenwriter Steven DeRosa's fascinating new book, *Writing With Hitchcock (The collaboration Of Alfred Hitchcock And John Michael Hayes)*, which invites us behind the torn curtain of their relationship.

Their profound, prolific film relationship (*Rear Window, To Catch A Thief, The Trouble With Harry, The Man Who Knew Too Much*), became an ultimately poignant relationship. *Writing With Hitchcock* is nearly a textbook on the perfect collaboration, however rare and endangered now, between director and screenwriter, and how quickly—and tragically—that relationship can evaporate.

Before recounting their momentous collusion and legendary collision—I must describe the ethos of the participants.

DeRosa always refers to both as “Mr. Hayes” or “John Michael Hayes,” and “Mr. Hitchcock” or “Hitchcock.” However, a published book supposedly quoting DeRosa edited all his actual references to Hitchcock as “Hitch,” a term he would never use. The formality in our informal conversation at first caught me off guard in this day of over-familiarity in an attempt to appear Hollywood hip, hep, in, edgy, down and “now.”

“I knew I was among greatness,” DeRosa explains. “I felt an enormous responsibility.”

DeRosa's abiding respect for everyone involved in his project is catching. I came to emulate DeRosa's deference throughout our interviews and e-mails, as well as in my correspondence with Mr. Hayes, who is now retired and living in New Hampshire.

It also effectively takes us back to the sensibility and time the story takes place; a time when decorum was customary.

However, the esteem of his subjects does not interfere with DeRosa's resolve to tell some difficult truths—in a compassionate, readable way.

Meticulously researched, DeRosa shows us not just the big picture, but also the details—the part of storytelling Hitchcock himself considered paramount.

I'd like to think of myself as being above what might be considered “dishing.” I'd like to. But, hey, some of those details are downright juicy and I loved them all.

Then there are the celebrity bits and pieces. Like did you know that Cary Grant actually shopped for—and bought—his own wardrobe for his role as a suspected cat burglar in *To Catch A Thief*? And that during the shooting of the film Grace Kelly actually—Wait. You'll have to read the book for that sort of thing. SCREEENTALK is a serious **screen-writing** magazine! Ahem.

### A TALE OF TWO ARTISTS

Another title for DeRosa's book could well be *A Tale Of Two Artists*—both paralleled in their devotion to their art and quality of their craft, yet completely opposite in personality.

Hitchcock—was the cool, detached, aloof, impersonal analyst and strategist. He is also the beguiling architect of groundbreaking, riveting suspense films and an unapologetic self-promoter. He worked closely with his wife, Alma, whose advice he revered. A former “continuity girl,” Alma worked—formally and informally—on every Hitchcock film and was the only person he trusted to tell him the truth. And he dearly loved his daughter, Patricia. He once said she was the production of which he was most proud.

Hayes—is the handsome, open, warm, personable, loving husband who infused his characters and stories with an audible heartbeat, tender flesh and emotions. Devoted to his wife, Mel, Hayes embraced life with spirited ease and joy. Who he was as a person was every bit as important to him as the quality of his scripts. Words on a paper meant nothing to Hayes if they didn't, in some way, relate to the emotions of the characters in his stories. His characters dictated the plot—not the other way around.

Mr. Hayes had another notable personality trait, one that would cost him his working relationship with the acknowledged great director: integrity.

Hitchcock, the voyeur.

Hayes, the participant.

Hitchcock, the bedeviled eccentric who *always* had to be the center of attention.

Hayes, the picture of a healthy self-esteem.

Hitchcock, the technique master.

Hayes, the character “emotional road map” cartographer.

The result: a symbiotic relationship that resulted in films that continue to enthrall audiences some 50 years later—and will probably still be viewed for another 50 years.

Then, the fallout happened.


Now we are only left to wonder what they could have created if they had resolved their differences.

### THE PLOT

The difference between a plot and a story is simple. The plot is basically what happens. I.e., boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy kills himself.

The story is how everything happens—interesting enough to keep you watching what happens. i.e., it's love at first sight for two attractive, passionate teenagers named Romeo and Juliet...

What DeRosa offers you in *Writing With Hitchcock* is the story. I can only depict the real life plot.



Writer-director-producer Colleen Patrick's screenplay *The Director* was a quarterfinalist in this year's CineStory competition; last year her screenplay *The Lucky Penny* finished in the top 10% of Austin's Heart of the Film competition, and she was a finalist in the Disney scriptwriting competition with a “Frasier” script, *The Hero*.

Colleen's feature script *Into Thin Air* was optioned by Landis Productions (US) in 1998. Colleen is a former president and international liaison for the Seattle chapter of Women In Film.

Colleen's short film, which she wrote, directed and produced, *Life As Art* was an official 1997 Academy Award submission. She has written, produced and directed four short films, the most recent a pilot for the series, *Behind The Movie Screen*, a mockumentary associated with her feature, *The Director*. The pilot can be seen at <www.director3.com>.

She is currently in development as writer/director with her feature, *The Director*. Colleen is a successful on-camera acting coach who also successfully coaches writers. One of her writers was recently picked up by a major New York agent; 12 publishers are interested in the writer's book. Colleen will be writing the screenplay based on the book.

She is the author of two published books, *Mind Over Media*, (CHEF Publishing) and *The 100% Solution* (Meadow Brook Publications).

Basically, Hitchcock and Hayes enjoyed a genial working relationship through three films. And, Hayes thought, the fourth: *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. But Hitchcock tried to give a writing credit for Hayes' script to an old, troubled friend.

Hayes insisted the name of Angus MacPhail be removed from the credits. In Hayes' opinion, it was undeserved. Hitchcock had called on MacPhail's counsel as a favor, but nearly everything MacPhail suggested was thrown out by Hitchcock himself.

Still, Hitchcock refused to remove MacPhail's name. He dismissed Hayes, whose astounding contributions to his films were undeniable, as a "radio writer who wrote the dialogue."

For the first time, someone in Hayes' position not only stood up to Hitchcock, but challenged him. Despite the notable, verifiable evidence of their substantial individual contributions, Hitchcock considered writers lackeys who did nothing more than his bidding.

Hayes took his complaint to the WGA—Writer's Guild of America—who took the

Not only did Hitchcock have to view Hayes' name standing alone on the screen, the writer's next film, *Peyton Place*, soared at the box office and he was nominated for an Academy Award® for his script. This while Hitchcock's next film *The Wrong Man*, languished financially and critically.

John Michael Hayes took little joy in his victory. He was too hurt, disillusioned and bitter. After giving the director such fine scripts; after working so hard and so well together, Hitchcock tried to give a writing credit to someone who did not deserve it. His writing credit.

"I have to admire Hitchcock for being loyal to his friend," says DeRosa, "But not at the expense of John Michael Hayes."

Hitchcock had the opportunity to change the credit and refused—which made him responsible for putting his own perceived disgrace in motion. Growing up with near sadistically controlling parents, Hitchcock was probably infused with shame at the public disclosure.

Overnight Hitchcock went from believing he could do anything and was untouchable to

## ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

To the end, Hitchcock considered performers and writers secondary on his films. "He was the star," says DeRosa. "And I'd say even his least successful films held some interest because of what he brought to them. But when either the writing or the acting weren't at the very top level supporting him, he could misfire in a BIG way.

"In *Torn Curtain*, for instance, Hitchcock was working with the two hottest stars at the time, Paul Newman and Julie Andrews. But the script—which was an original—had problems. So in that film, neither the director or stars could make up for the script's shortcomings."

DeRosa continues, "In Hitchcock's next film, *Topaz*, he had the opposite problem. The film was based on a huge best-seller, but there were no major stars in the cast, and the actors he *did* use had no charisma on screen."

## A NIGHT AT THE BALLET

Some time after the separation, Alfred and Alma Hitchcock attended a performance of



Left photo: Alfred Hitchcock and John Michael Hayes. Right photo: Hayes, Grace Kelly and Hitchcock on the set of *To Catch A Thief*.

matter into arbitration.

Hayes won.

Hitchcock saw it as his colossal loss, not a win for Hayes.

From what I know of Hitchcock, a lowly writer trumping the great Hitchcock must have been traumatic. Hitchcock tried to convey complete ownership of his films in the press—that he and he alone was responsible for making them remarkable.

So, going from insult to injury, Hayes received attention within the industry for his victory. Although Hollywood media didn't cover such things at the time, the studios, producers and other writers were very aware of the victory.

someone whose image within the industry had been shaken.

Oh—there's one more thing.

At least, one more thing that DeRosa knows. Before their separation, Hitchcock decided to make *The Wrong Man*. "Hayes told him not to make it—that it was not a Hitchcock film," he says. Hitchcock pursued the project anyway.

It should have been called *The Wrong Film*. It bombed.

Just like Hayes said it would. He knew.

That must have infuriated Hitchcock more than the ailing box office receipts.

Hayes was, indeed, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, at least for Alfred Hitchcock's liking.

the Bolshoi Ballet. To their dismay, they were seated right next to Clark Gable, with whom Hitchcock had been friends for years, Gable's wife, and their friends, John and Mel Hayes. Gable was starring in Hayes' new film, *But Not For Me*. Despite sitting apart from each other, permafrost linked Alfred Hitchcock and John Michael Hayes that night.

At the intermission, Alma approached Hayes. "I'm going to talk to Hitch," she said, "because you two should get together again."

Hayes, who always got along well with Alma Hitchcock, welcomed her sentiment.

DeRosa sighed, "If she actually did say that to Hitchcock, we know it's one of the few times he did not take her advice."

## AFTERMATH

John Michael Hayes went on to write *The Children's Hour*, *The Chalk Garden*, *Peyton Place*, *The Carpetbaggers*, *Harlow*, *Iron Will* and many television projects. He received an Academy Award® nomination for *Peyton Place*; he had already received a nomination for *Rear Window*.

Hitchcock never again made consecutive movies with the same screenwriter again, and

pense program. Hitchcock became renowned as a personality—the star he always wanted to be—who greeted viewers with his inimitable, “Gooood Eeeevening.”

## WRITING WITH HITCHCOCK BIOGRAPHY AND SCREENWRITING TOOL

DeRosa not only explains how the two artists worked together, but shows how script decisions were made. Script pages and notes at all

tone of the piece, building on the step sheet (a step by step description of the story). I lay down the essence of what I want the characters to say. I don't want to stop and edit as I go. I want to get through this and go back to page one and see how it plays.”

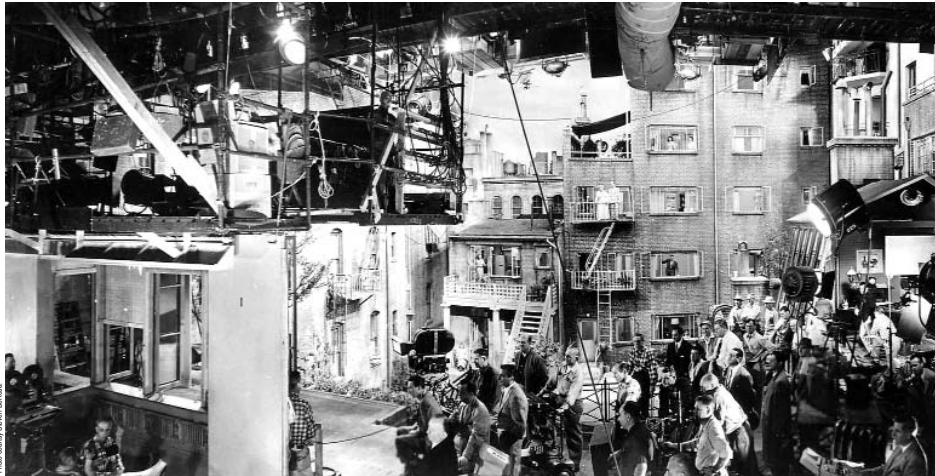
While those who teach such things today recommend a treatment to be about 20 pages, DeRosa follows Hayes' example and makes his 60-80 pages. It's a more thorough, complex result.

## SUSPENSE VS. SHOCK

DeRosa admires Hitchcock's preference for suspense over shock. Shocking an audience is easy—and fast. Keeping an audience in suspense will keep their eyes riveted to the screen for the duration of the film.

Defining the difference, “Hitchcock often referred to his ‘bomb theory,’” DeRosa explained. “If two people are sitting in a room and a bomb suddenly explodes, the audience has a ten second terrible shock. Take the same two people and put them in the same room but tell the audience ahead of time that there's a bomb in the room and it's set to go off in ten minutes, and you'll have the audience growing frantic as the clock ticks away.”

The thing is, suspenseful stories, no matter how well structured technically, only become truly engaging if we care about the people who are put in jeopardy. John Michael Hayes, among other writers who worked with Hitchcock like Ben Hecht, brought those characters to life. The characters were believ-



six of his ten post—Hayes films used multiple writers. He enjoyed great success with *North By Northwest*, *Frenzy* and *Psycho* (*Vertigo* and *The Birds* made only small profits at the box office). But over the years, he seemed to stray from his original working technique; a method that resulted in so many terrific films, such as *Notorious*, written by Ben Hecht.

Hitchcock outlined his creative process in detail for a speech he made in 1939. In it he explains how he would carefully build the story, adding dialogue after everything else is in place. This was done with the assistance of a writer. At that time, he considered casting—the actors—*extremely* important, because he wanted the audience to care about the characters. Later he would disdain the use of “stars.”

“I think he let himself become so big and so important that it was impossible for him to accept criticism,” says DeRosa. “And he did not like conflict.”

DeRosa tells the story of Hitchcock hiding in his office, cowering behind his door, in order to avoid dealing with someone with whom he worked with eleven years—who had dropped by to patch up a rift between the two.

Like Hayes, Hitchcock found the world of television and hosted, “Alfred Hitchcock Presents,” which became a hit series, and is still shown in reruns on cable television. Many writers contributed to the mystery/sus-

stages of the projects made the metamorphosis of each screenplay clear.

Reading their creative process, how they developed stories and characters, I found my own writing influenced; I like to learn from the best.

Fortunately, DeRosa chose a number of great script development examples from the

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avalanche of research he unearthed that will probably impact many screenwriters—if for no other reason than to inspire us to read John Michael Hayes scripts!

So, what influence did the writing of the book have on Steven DeRosa's own writing?

“First and foremost,” he responds, “I learned the value of writing a treatment, and the importance of maintaining a certain momentum when writing the first draft.”

Hayes wrote what is considered the finest script treatment *ever*—a 75 page narrative for *Rear Window*.

“In the treatment,” he continues, “I get the

able, engaging and often sexy, despite being stuck obeying ludicrous studio censors at the time.

Hitchcock acknowledged the importance of his film's characters when he insisted that if you are going to put someone in jeopardy, you have to do it onscreen. If we didn't care about the characters, it wouldn't matter if they were put in harm's way *on* or *off* screen.

Good character development spells the difference between using suspense, which engages the audience, and shock, which manipulates the audience.



## FORGET FORMULAS, PARADIGMS, QUICK FIXES AND EASY ANSWERS

Another lesson learned from Hayes' work: every script written for/with Hitchcock is different.

"Each script has something unique—none of the films are similar," says DeRosa. "Although the four films share a similar theme—Hayes' writing 'voice' shows through. Each has its own hook, whether it's in the structure, the dialogue, or how the character interacts. That is probably because of the meticulous way the director and writer collaborated on each story—neither writer nor director would settle for less."

"I asked Mr. Hayes—who worked with a number of fine directors over the years—which director he would consider the best, which one he would still work with," DeRosa told me. I could hardly wait for the answer.

"He said Hitchcock—and for one specific reason."

Really? What was that?

"Because Hitchcock let him go off and do his work. He let John Michael Hayes leave and write his script. He left him alone. He didn't interrupt. He didn't hover over him. He didn't demand to see ten pages, then say, 'no, we have to make changes here,' then make him start all over again," he explained.

"Hitchcock let the writer go from start to finish. And then they would both pick over what he had written."

One of the major problems DeRosa sees in Hollywood films now is that decision-makers are constantly second-guessing audiences and trying to make scripts meet marketing statistics. Which means that they constantly second-guess scripts and writers.

"They don't have the guts to let one person's vision stand. Too many people are making the decisions."

In my opinion, when a writer and director work as closely and as symbiotically as did Hitchcock and Hayes, a single vision emerges. And it's up to the director to bring it into the world fully developed. Unfortunately, Hitchcock's ego would not permit the acceptance of the intrinsic and authenticated contribution made by Hayes, so he saw it as being only his own vision.

## FINAL IMPRESSIONS

So, how does DeRosa regard Hayes and Hitchcock now?

"I have a tremendous amount of admiration and respect for John Michael Hayes both personally and professionally." In the book, DeRosa questions some of the professional deci-

sions made by Hayes—which he sees as turning points in his career that did not benefit him.

"I am very much of an admirer of Alfred Hitchcock, professionally speaking," continues DeRosa. "As a director, I think nobody can touch him. But I do wish that he'd taken more chances. Personally, though, I'm a little disappointed in him. He could be generous at times, and petty at others."

## TODAY

Patricia Hitchcock-O'Connell, the daughter of Alfred and Alma, still harbors resentment toward John Michael Hayes. When Steven DeRosa approached her, telling her about the book he was writing, she turned and walked away.

Interestingly, when the studio did the big restoration-reissue of *Rear Window* in 2000, they did not contact Hayes and he's not mentioned in the "special thanks" on the restored prints. But when they released the film on DVD, they featured Hayes' script as a bonus!

I asked Mr. Hayes how he feels now about the decades-old split.

"No anger, no bitterness. Both of us made our respective marks upon the history and lore of film. At this point, it's up to anyone else who chooses to do so to draw their own conclusions," he said.

And the anger of Patricia Hitchcock-O'Connell?

"My professional dealings were with Hitchcock himself and it would be unfair of me to comment about the feelings and loyalties of others."

I wondered what sort of story he would write if he were writing today.

"The same type of stories that I've always created," he replied, "a little story with big import. Or another way to put it—big stories about small people. After all, no matter what year it is, there are people there with the same emotional makeup—the same fears, wants and wishes—as fifteen generations before them. The same things, in general, make their hearts palpitate with fright, or delight or with love. As the writer, it's my job to jump-start that palpitation regardless of whether it's 2002 or 1950."

And how does John Michael Hayes feel about Steven DeRosa's book?

"It's wonderful. Accurate, analytical, but still an easy read. All in all, Steven did a fine job."

Indeed.

But I am still left with a sentiment best expressed by poet John Greenleaf Whittier:

"For of all sad words of tongue or pen,  
The saddest are these: it might have been." ■

## WANT MORE?

John Michael Hayes' website:  
<[www.johnmichaelhayes.com](http://www.johnmichaelhayes.com)>

Steven DeRosa's comprehensive website:  
<[www.writingwithhitchcock.com](http://www.writingwithhitchcock.com)>

This is a growing website that includes, among many other aspects of Hitchcock, DeRosa's analysis of Hitchcock's less famous films—an insightful read for writers and directors.

Steven DeRosa is setting Hollywood aside for his next book, although the subject would have been a great one for Hitchcock. His current script projects are *Italian Lessons*, which he created with playwright Franco D'Alessandro, and *Adventures Of A Hollywood Hero*. *Italian Lessons* deals with a young man who finally comes to accept his ethnicity; *Hero* is a World War II comedy about a reluctant draftee plucked by a government agency to impersonate a celebrity *uberdirector* in order to smoke out a cell of Nazi sleeper agents working within the film industry.

My analysis of Hitchcock's 1939 speech, which outlined his creative process in detail is here:  
<[www.screenwalk.org/hitchcockspeech.htm](http://www.screenwalk.org/hitchcockspeech.htm)>

You can download *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, *The Birds*, *Rear Window*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *Strangers On A Train* in proper screenwriting format for free at <[www.screenwalk.org/hitchcock.htm](http://www.screenwalk.org/hitchcock.htm)>.

## A Very Special Thanks

I would like to offer a warm thank you to screenwriter Corey Ellis Hayes—the son of John Michael Hayes.

Corey was kind enough to be the "go between" for Mr. Hayes and me, and was generous enough to entertain my inquiries. What a pleasure he has been to work with—he shares his father's warmth and professionalism.

Corey says that it took him a while to muster the courage and confidence it takes to follow such a tough act—to do what he knew in his heart he **could** do, and has always wanted to do.

"To borrow baseball parlance," he replied, "it's like trying to follow in the footsteps of a Hall of Fame slugger when you're basically just a rookie. It's daunting."

"I've also found rampant personal doubt many times as well-kind of a 'Why bother? You're fooling yourself if you think you're in the same league,' type of deal."

What finally got him to start creating the seven scripts he has completed already? "I needed, if nothing else but to prove to *myself* that I had my own voice in writing, a completely different voice than my father's."

How does John Michael Hayes feel about his son's screenwriting endeavors?

"...my father has been very supportive of my work."

The two screenplays Corey is marketing are *Ex Appeal*, a romantic comedy about a woman desperate to get out of her marriage who must find her husband another wife to take her place or he won't grant her a divorce; and *Yancey Gates*, a murder mystery about a captured serial killer who unearths deeply held secrets about those who caught him—secrets they would do anything to hide.