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## Review of Charade

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Charade (Blu-ray)

(Criterion, 9.21.2010)

“Oh, it’s a Universal picture. I’ll bet it’s *Charade*. I’m Stanley Donen. I produced and directed this picture. I hope you forgive me.”

“I’m Peter Stone. I wrote it, and you don’t have to forgive me. I’m pleased as punch.”

Thus begins the commentary by the director and screenwriter of *Charade*, and Stone gets it right. *Charade* is a nearly perfect entertainment, arguably the best imitation Hitchcock, and one of the last true movie-star movies before the studio system bit the dust. I’ve seen it at least 25 times since its 1963 release and never grow tired of its considerable charms.

*Charade* opens with the murder of Charles Lampert, soon followed by the discovery by his widow, Reggie (Audrey Hepburn), that she knew nothing about her husband. The mysterious Peter Joshua (Cary Grant), who goes by three additional names before the film ends, tries to help Reggie sort out a puzzle made more complicated by the presence of three thugs, Gideon (Ned Glass), Tex (James Coburn), and Herman (George Kennedy).

CIA agent Hamilton Bartholomew (Walter Matthau) informs Reggie that her husband and the other three stole \$250,000 in government funds at the end of World War II only to have Charles steal it from his partners. They will do anything to get it back, and the government wants it as well. (Newcomers to the planet may not realize that in 1963 \$250,000 was a big chunk of change.) Chases through picturesque Paris, mayhem, and romantic interludes ensue.

In the commentary recorded for the first Criterion issue of *Charade* in 1999, Donen explains that he wanted to make a film in which the leading lady is chased. Reggie is the distaff version of Hitchcock’s wrong man because she has no idea where Charles hid the money. Donen and Stone, who died in 2003, disagree about which Hitchcock films they watched before filming began, mentioning *Rear Window*, *Vertigo*, *To Catch a Thief*, and *North by Northwest*. *Charade* clearly has elements influenced by the latter two but has more comedy than is typical of a Hitchcock film.

*Charade* works equally well as a thriller and romantic comedy. The complicated plot devised by Stone is engrossing, though the solution to the mystery, while clever, seems farfetched if you think too much about it. Surely one of the characters would have noticed Stone’s variation on Hitchcock’s MacGuffin. The dialogue is clever and expertly delivered by the entire cast. Even if the film had been flawed, it would have been notable as the only pairing of Grant and Hepburn, the embodiment of big-screen

glamour. You might quibble that Grant has aged considerably since *North by Northwest*, four years earlier, but he still moves with his patented effortless grace, even in a rooftop fight with the much younger and larger Kennedy. Although he would make two more films before retiring, *Charade* represents the last time he was truly Cary Grant.

Matthau famously complained that Grant was too old for the part and that he should have played it, not understanding that his role is the film's showiest. He milks the maximum from it, with perfect timing and wonderful bits of business in his every scene. Seventeen years later Matthau would play a Grant-like role in the similar *Hopscotch*.

*Charade* represented a significant departure for Donen, best known for musicals like *Funny Face*, with Hepburn, and light comedies such as *Indiscreet*, with Grant. He shows he is equally adept at action and suspense and proved *Charade* was no fluke three years later with the underrated and even more action-filled *Arabesque*, also written by Stone.

Criterion's previous DVD of *Charade* looked pretty good, but this Blu-ray has darker, crisper images, with much more detail. I had never noticed that one of the skiers in the opening scene is wearing red pants. Reggie's red coat has richer texture, and the spangles on a beaded evening gown sparkle. The small paintings on hotel room walls are much clearer. Charles Lang's beautiful cinematography shines, with the shot of a massive tour boat on the Seine at night breathtakingly luminous.

The Donen-Stone commentary is delightful, with the two movie veterans bickering like an old married couple, constantly disagreeing about everything, including whether Hepburn could be considered tall. Stone sounds like he was more involved in the production than is usual for a screenwriter and seems to have better recall than Donen, who admits, "I have no idea who thought of what. I can never remember that."

Stone explains how the project evolved from treatment to screenplay (written with Grant and Hepburn in mind) rejected by seven studios to novel to hot property. Donen describes how he selected Maurice Binder to design the titles, thereby launching the career of a master, best known for his work on the James Bond films. He picked Henry Mancini, providing perhaps his best score here, because of the composer's work on Howard Hawks' *Hartari*. Donen reveals how, because of the recalcitrance of Columbia, the film's original studio, it was almost made with Warren Beatty and Natalie Wood. Stone and Donen make a few mistakes, such as claiming one of the French actors is in *To Catch a Thief*, but they're having such a good time they can be forgiven. The only other extra is a booklet with the background essay "The Spy in Givenchy" by Bruce Eder.

*Charade* represents the best of what Hollywood could achieve in the final few years before the revolution launched by *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967. Together with Blake Edwards' *The Pink Panther* and *A Shot in the Dark*, Ronald Neame's *Gambit*, and the early James Bond films, it demonstrates what could be accomplished with intelligence, style, and professionalism.--Michael Adams