

The Paradine Case



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Produced by David O. Selznick. Screenplay by David O. Selznick from adaptations by Alfred Hitchcock, Alma Reville and James Bridie. Based on the novel by Robert Hichens. Production design: J. MacMillan

Johnson. Cinematography by Lee Garmes. Original Music by Franz Waxman. Edited by Hal C. Kern. Key Costumer: Travis Banton.

Cinematic length: 132 minutes. Distributed by Selznick Studio. Cinematic release December 29th 1947: DVD release 2007 edited down to 110 minutes. Television release 94 minutes Check for ratings. Rating 80%.

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Cast

Gregory Peck as Anthony Keane

Ann Todd as Gay Keane

Alida Valli as Mrs. Maddalena Paradine

Charles Laughton as the Judge, Lord Thomas Horfield

Ethel Barrymore as Lady Sophie Horfield

Charles Coburn as Sir Simon Flaquer,

Joan Tetzl as Judy Flaquer,

Louis Jourdan as André Latour,

Leo G. Carroll as the counsel for the prosecution

Isobel Elsom as the Innkeeper in Cumberland

Review

Despite having many qualities, this film did not do well on its release, either critically or commercially. The film was initially about the downfall of a great, good and happy man brought down by his figurative blindness when involved in a puzzling law case. However the film changes direction, putting the greater theme into second place. Instead the focus goes onto the murder trial and the legal

preparations. At its heart *The Paradine Case* has a mystery: Did Mrs Paradine poison her blind, aged husband? If she did not, then what happened? Her barrister, Anthony Keane (Gregory Peck) sums up the possibilities succinctly: either he committed suicide, she did it as charged or her husband's sinister manservant André La Tour (Lois Jordan) murdered him for a bequest - or in an assisted suicide. Conflicting evidence for all four possibilities emerge in the narrative. One problem is that for both the cast (excepting Keane) and the audience no mystery emerges. If not everything behind the scenes appears as obvious, too much is.



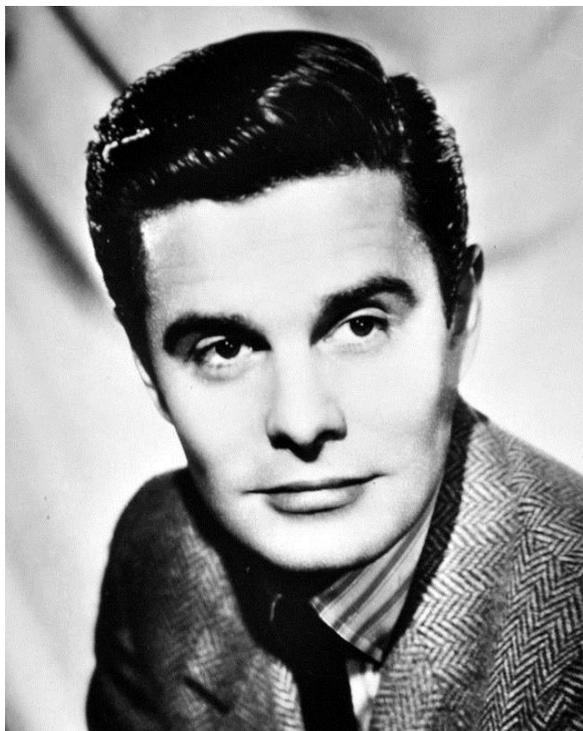
[Hitchcock and Peck on the set](#)

Problems behind the scenes would ultimately affect the film. While *The Paradine Case* was being made producer Selznick was doing too many things at once. Apart from his usual heavy involvement going into this film, he was also in legal wrangling over contracts concerning other films. Much of his time and energy simultaneously went into promoting his big hope *Duel in the Sun*. The making of

the *The Paradine Case* was fraught with problems and delays which Ronald Haver recounts in his *David O. Selznick's Hollywood* (1980). In an era when six weeks was frequent for making a film from a discussed idea to first screening, months were spent on casting and writing before filming began in December 1946. It would be just over another year before the film's world premiere - and by then the costs had hit a then extraordinary four million dollars. Delays were often part of this cost, some of these seem caused by disputes. Selznick had disagreements with Hitchcock over casting and the screenplay. Taken from a 1930s novel, Hitchcock and his wife Alma Reville worked on the script. Discontented with their efforts, Selznick got James Bridie to work on it, then took over the writing himself. The end product was the work of five writers. If this was not confusing enough, the first version of the film was three hours long, but in its cinematic release it was down to 132 minutes, the DVD is 110 minutes long and the television version was butchered down to 94 minutes, almost half the initial length. Going by childhood memories decades later, the television version had very little characterisation and less sense, but size as a factor increased, due to many large holes in the plot. Some of those holes, while smaller, are still in the DVD version.

Too many writers, combined with over-editing on a slowly paced story could have been a disaster. It is a tribute to Selznick, Hitchcock and their team that it was not, but there are still many things that puzzle, strain credibility and reduce the film's effectiveness. Stills show Barrister Anthony Keane (Gregory Peck) in a romantic embrace with his client Mrs Maddalena Paradine (Alida Valli), but in the film version we have he does not so much as try to touch her or even look at her lustfully, he just seems admiring, curious and heading towards being entranced. The warnings and dismayed reactions about this developing non-relationship from his barrister Sir Simon Flaquer (Charles Coburn), Flaquer's daughter Judy (Joan Tetzl) and finally his wife (Ann Todd) seem slightly overdone, as nothing romantic happens in the released version.

Gregory Peck is very good in the scenes where he is with his wife, associates, investigating the case in Cumberland and best of all, in court. He is not so good when enacting the attraction with Mrs Paradine. This is not Peck's fault as the script here deprives him of plausible motivation, consistency with the earlier scenes and just common sense. Consider who he is. One of England's most respected barristers, he reveals himself to be a shrewd judge of character elsewhere with a strong understanding of human motivation. He is middle aged, past the age of adolescent foolishness in romance. The early scenes with his wife Gay (Ann



Louis Jordan Alida Valli. Both stars had been making films continental from the 1930s onward, but were introduced as new stars in the film's credits





The Paradines, no this is not their first date, eleven years of marriage have gone by since then.

Todd) show them in a happy relaxed marriage and in one scene the sexual attraction between them obviously remains strong and definitely not in danger of waning. This light hearted, sensual scene provides a welcome contrast to the dreary prison scenes with the intensely dreary, faintly contemptuous Mrs Paradine. So why throw his happy marriage, career, near palatial home and reputation away for a suspected murderess who far from encouraging him, frequently treats him with a cold, supercilious contempt?

In history and fiction such people frequently appear. Alida Valli's portrayal make her character and motivations in this dreary non-romance plausible, but Keane's character lacks this plausibility. With a bit more writing we could have had hints that explain this. Masochism, self –destructive guilt, either over not serving in the war, or his life of privilege would suffice for motive. As a lawyer a case where he



Ann Todd

got someone he knew was guilty off would be a very plausible motive for self-destruction.

Any of these possibilities would serve. His could also be depicted as an adventurer in sexual slumming from a man habituated to and therefore bored with wealth and the goodness his wife obviously possesses. In Hitchcock films such as *Suspicion*, *Lifeboat*, *Notorious*, *Strangers on a Train* and *Psycho* frequently subtle and sometimes clear indications show us why a character has their flaws, but not Keane. The few lines we do get on this clearly show that he does not see Mrs

Paradine clearly, but this only leads to other credibility problems. As mentioned he is an astute judge of character and Mrs Paradine tells him clearly about her past when at aged sixteen, she ran off with an older man, they tired of each other and she had to survive alone in a foreign country or go off with other men like the first. She has clearly married a rich, blind old man to gain a comfortable life, but even after hearing her tell him otherwise, he continues to insist that she is an elegant, decent lady.

Another problem emerges with casting. Hitchcock rightly wanted Greta Garbo for the role of Mrs Paradine and Ronald Coleman or Lawrence Olivier for Keane. Alida Valli is very good as the former street waif from Italy who has learned to play the part of an elegant upper class wife and widow in England. The way she is a suspicious foreigner repressing whatever she really does feel and pretending comes across as well done, but Garbo could have done this with a more enigmatic performance, and with the beguiling looks that would lure in anybody and so solved some credibility problems.



Charles Laughton

Other problems also emerge. Hitchcock had a dream cast, with some of the finest character actors the cinematic world has ever known, as they clearly demonstrate here, but they are underused – or more likely edited down. In the early scenes Charles Coburn seems built up for a major part in the story, but he literally stays in the background during the trial. Charles Laughton as the trial judge becomes the

embodiment of smug, glib cruelty. When Gay Keane cuttingly ends his lecherous advances at a dinner party, his vindictiveness becomes apparent and it is obvious that her husband and his client will pay for it when they go before him in court. His magnificent performance there is matched by Ethel Barrymore as his sad, gentle wife. This actress can do more with a restrained facial expression to delineate a character or convey what unfolds in a setting than many can do with a film. Leo G. Carrol as the prosecutor also conveys much with little and once again a sense of a role being over edited emerges. This does not happen with André La Tour. Lois Jordan gives an initial impression of intensity and menace, but in court his motivations and his complex unsettled personality are revealed.

While *The Paradine Case* has flaws, the fine performances, the quality production values, skilful editing and continuity all aid the filmmakers, who have done a fine job of plastering over the flaws. See the film once, then don't mull over it. That way the flaws won't be evident. See it twice or think over it and the cracks appear, a mistake and a pity.

David O. Selznick



Alfred Hitchcock 1899-1980

