

'Performing Hitchcock': Robert Donat, Film Acting and *The 39 Steps* (1935)

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This article offers a speculative exploration of performance in a Hitchcock film by looking in detail at Robert Donat's characterisation of Richard Hannay in *The 39 Steps* (1935). It has been argued that Hitchcock's preference for the actor who can do nothing well leads to a de-emphasising of the acting skill of his cast whilst foregrounding the technical elements such as editing and mise-en-scène in the construction of emotional effects (Ryall, 1996:159). Hitchcock's own attitude to actors is thought to be indicated by his oft-quoted claim that "actors should be treated like cattle." [1] However, this image of Hitchcock as a director unconcerned with the work of his actors seems to be contradicted both by the range of thoughtful and complex performances to be found in his films and by the testimonies of the actors themselves with regard to working with him. [2] In this article therefore, I will attempt to unpick some of the issues regarding performance in Hitchcock films through a detailed case study of Robert Donat and his performance in *The 39 Steps*. Initially, I will look at the development of Donat's star persona in the early 1930s and how during the making of *The 39 Steps*, writing about Donat in the press began to articulate performance as opposed to star discourses. I will then look at some of Donat's published and unpublished writing to determine the screen acting methodologies he was beginning to develop at the time. This will be followed by a detailed analysis of key scenes in the film to discuss the interplay of mise-en-scène and performance detail. Finally, I will briefly look at the representation of masculinity in the film, as mediated through some of Donat's performance interventions.

It would appear that scholarship with regard to Hitchcock's oeuvre has expanded considerably since his work was first brought to wider critical attention in the 1950s through the writings of the *Cahiers du Cinema* critics. These articles foregrounded discussion of Hitchcock as auteur in his films, responsible for everything from narrative to mise-en-scène. As the auteur theory was challenged, there was more critical attention paid to the importance of a range of influences on Hitchcock in his films, such as the contribution of his screenplay collaborators, his adaptation of source material and the importance of music in the Hitchcock film (Barr, 1999 and Sullivan, 2006).

Alongside this has been a growth of scholarship on the contribution of the actor to the film, from James Naremore's *Acting in the Cinema* to Baron and Carnicke's recently published *Reframing Screen Performance*. Yet little has been written about pre-Method ideas of acting, aside from Cynthia Baron's informative investigation into the practice of the actor in the Hollywood studio era and Martin Shingler's extensive work on Bette Davis (for example, Baron and Shingler in Lovell and Kramer, 1999). Furthermore, scholars are only just beginning to explore film performance produced outside American cinema. Whilst there are obvious similarities between Hollywood and Britain in terms of performances practices and effects, this article also takes on board the specific industrial and cultural contexts in which Donat and Hitchcock undertook their work in Britain in the 1930s.

There has also been little writing about film acting that explores the notion of skill: what actors think they are they doing, and how they achieve their particular effects. This has been due in part to the nature of film as a collaborative practice, where the notion of authorship is intrinsically contentious, but also to a film scholarship culture that has denied academic authority to the study of film acting. Kuleshov famously demonstrated how a performance effect can be ascribed to an editing sequence, the relation of camera to actor, and so forth (Kuleshov in Levaco, 1974:55). These values, which emphasised the uniqueness of the film process in an effort to promote its distinctiveness as an art form, arguably still hold sway. The actor as creative agent is only a relatively recent concept, marginalized further by developments in film theory such as the auteur and then poststructuralist approaches in the 1970s. Furthermore, many actors (particularly British) will have a somewhat ambivalent relationship to their work on screen, seeming more comfortable in talking about creative agency in relation to live theatrical performance. It is also evident that for the scholar of screen acting, making analyses of film performances is particularly challenging in that the embodiment of reality that is the actor's performance on film, offers little space in which the actor can be separated from the performance. As Peter Kramer and Alan Lovell write in the introduction to *Screen Acting*:

Acting is an elusive art ... the decisions the actor has made are invisible. Many analyses of film acting are in fact discussions of a fictional character (whose creation is the work of a writer) rather than analyses of how that character is embodied (the work of an actor). (Lovell and Kramer, 1999: 5)

However, a study of Robert Donat in *The 39 Steps* does offer some intriguing possibilities for a consideration of issues regarding the importance of the actor's performance in the "meaning creation" of a scene. The presence of Donat's personal papers in the Robert Donat Archive in the John Rylands University Library in Manchester also permits a more interrogative perspective to be taken to his performances on film. They enable us to perceive his own conceptual frameworks with regard to his work as well as an idea of the constraints, limitations, possibilities and insights into the conditions that informed these frameworks

Born in Manchester in 1905, Donat started his career as a touring stage actor with, amongst others, Frank Benson's company. He then moved to London, where he spent two years in various minor stage parts before getting his first major role as Gideon Sarne in *Precious Bane* (Mary Webb), which he eventually played in the West End in 1931. In 1932, after numerous screen tests, he was signed up by the producer Alexander Korda. He took roles in three successive "quota quickies": *Men of Tomorrow* (1932), *That Night in London* (1932) and *Cash* (1933). He then played the leading role in a very successful James Bridie play, *The Sleeping Clergyman* (1933), at about the same time as his breakthrough film role as Thomas Culpepper in Korda's *Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933). The success of this film attracted Hollywood interest and in 1934 he travelled to Hollywood to film the title role in *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1934). This increased his popularity on both sides of the Atlantic and heralded a run of successful films during the 1930s, including *The 39 Steps* (1935), *The Ghost Goes West* (1936), *Knight without Armour* (1937), *The Citadel* (1938), and culminated in his Oscar-winning performance as Mr Chips in *Goodbye Mr Chips* in 1939. On the back of his film success, he also sought stage roles in the 1930s, but only succeeded in premiering James Lansdale Hodson's *Red Night* in 1936, a production that was neither a financial nor critical success. Yet despite his desire to act on stage, Donat was also concerned to refine his screen practice, as is evidenced by an article entitled 'Film Acting' in a multi-authored volume of essays on the industry entitled *Footnotes to the Film* (1938).

At the point at which he returned back to the UK to appear in *The 39 Steps*, Donat was fresh from the transatlantic success of his appearance in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Yet the making of this film had been an arduous experience for Donat and a crash course in the place of the actor in the Hollywood studio system. He was publicly unimpressed with Hollywood, describing it as "Bungalows, boulevards -- the whole place is just an Ideal Home Exhibition," a comment which implied the phoniness of the place against the more authentic creative environment to be found in Britain. [3] The fact that he made this comment in the British fan magazine *Film Weekly*, suggests that he was keen to impress a specifically British audience with his loyalty to his home country. Donat also had agreed to appear in a stage play and so had to return to England. Yet his refusal to sign up to a Hollywood contract was met with incredulity by the studios and ever more frantic battles to attract him to various film projects. But it was not just the theatre that brought Donat back. In the article referred to above, he suggested that in terms of filmmaking, British studios had much to offer him as an actor. At that time the British film industry was embarking upon a period of relative stability with opportunities for sustained and continuous production. Michael Balcon at Gaumont British and Alexander Korda at London Films were setting the standard, producing a number of films with deliberately high production values. Both Balcon and Korda aimed to produce films that would appeal to the American market. After the success of *Monte Cristo* in America, one of the reasons why Balcon contracted Donat for his next film (*The 39 Steps*), was that the Donat name "would be integral to marketing the film in the United States:" a task which Balcon had described to the Gaumont British board as "a contest of David and Goliath" (quoted in Glancy, 2003: 28). Balcon had also assembled a prodigiously creative production unit at Gaumont British, centring on the film's director, Alfred Hitchcock.

The 39 Steps is now of course recognised as one of the most successful British films of the twentieth century. The film came fourth in a 1999 British Film Institute poll of filmmakers, critics and scholars to find the hundred best British films of the century (Glancy, 2003:80). It was also much admired on its initial release and was ranked eighth in the most popular films in Britain in 1935 (Sedgwick, 2000:269). Donat's role as Richard Hannay undoubtedly consolidated his image as the screen's premier romantic adventurer and Caroline Lejeune's review of the film gives an indication of how important the film was in terms of defining Donat's particular appeal:

Mr. Donat who has never been very well served in the cinema until now, suddenly blossoms out into a romantic comedian of no mean order. Beginning a little heavily, and quite obviously feeling his way through this mass of new, realistic material, he strikes, before a quarter of the film is over, an easy confident humour that has always been regarded as the prerequisite of the American male star. For the first time on our screen we have the British equivalent of a Clark Gable ... playing in a purely national idiom. (Lejeune, 1935:10) [4]

In other words, Donat was the first British star to embody characteristics that until then were seen as a uniquely American preserve. This is important, as there was much speculation in the British press as to the absence of a star system in Britain to rival that of Hollywood. For instance, a debate in *The Era*, eight months before the film was released, discussed the "boycott of stardom" amongst British film actors and blamed the theatre for providing films with ready-made names instead of letting the cinema create its own (Hick, 1934: 12). The following issue of the journal concluded that:

The British star has never dominated the box office in quite the same way as the majority of Hollywood stars and I take it for this reason alone, the Hollywood star must possess qualities which the British star lacks. (Playfair, 1934:17)

For British audiences, therefore Donat appeared to be one of the few stars in the early 1930s who did possess the qualities which distinguished Hollywood stars. Significantly he was young and handsome, whereas most British stars were older character actors such as George Arliss and Jack Buchannan. Donat's youthfulness was also framed and emphasised by the modern setting of the film and its contemporary dialogue. It is also notable how many discussions of Donat around this time centred on his virility as a leading man. In an article in *Photoplay*, the author described how apart from Donat, British Cinema had no one to rival Gary Cooper and Clark Gable. Donat was presented as a paradox, "that rarity of rarities -- an Englishman who acts, speaks and looks like an Englishman but is not an Englishman." In this case, an Englishman was defined as someone, "who as a leading man, looks and acts effeminately." [5] For audiences who had clearly tired of what was often termed the 'Mayfair' school of leading men, Donat offered sophistication without effemination:

His commanding presence, fine voice and total lack of those shrinking violet qualities which stamp most of our mincing juveniles, place him in a position of isolated splendour. [6]

Despite the heralding of him as a star, it is also clear from articles published at the time that Donat was keen to direct attention to matters of performance. For example an article published in *Film Weekly* in early 1935, when Donat was still working on the film, gives an indication of his approach to the part. It is also important in tracing how Donat was beginning to define himself in terms of his public image. The article is entitled "My Exciting Film Year" and again we can see how Donat promoted his versatility from the very beginning with a description of the broad range of parts coming up in the following year:

The only thing I am not likely to be called on to do – and I cannot say how glad of it I am -- is to fill the stock role of an ordinary, uninspired juvenile. Character parts are my meat. (Donat, 1935: 8)

He continued by talking about how he was "thoroughly enjoying making" *The 39 Steps*, praising it in terms of the director, the script, and a role, "which could hardly be bettered" (Ibid.). Throughout the article, Donat presented himself first and foremost as an actor of discernment and taste by explaining that these were the markers of quality that attracted him towards a project. This is most apparent when he described the script as "the most exciting thing in print that I have come across in years" with "more vitality and strength ... than the most cunningly written of novels" (Ibid.). The effect is to make the reader aware of the film as a construction and the role that he, as an actor, plays in it. He then made clear why Hitchcock had selected him for the role of Hannay:

[B]ecause I have the quality of repose, or in other words, I know how to keep still. Restraint is the outstanding virtue of all his work and in consequence the necessity for this quality in his actors follows naturally. (Donat, 1935: 9).

This directs our attention to Donat's capacity for underplaying: using his technique to appear to do very little, as detailed in his thoughts about stage and film acting in *Footnotes to the Film* and other published and unpublished material in the archive. [7]

It is worth, at this point, looking in a bit more detail at these, as I would argue that Donat was clearly developing screen acting methodologies which re-configure techniques drawn from his experience in the theatre and applying them to the very different conditions of acting in the studio. For Donat, the camera was a challenge to his skills as an actor, rather than a threat. He condemned actors who were afraid of technology where "anything mechanical is dubbed as a Crude Modern Necessity -- not the product of intense thought capable of subtlety" (Donat in Davy, 1938: 30). He described how cinema was the best medium to capture small truths, challenging the myth that because film is concerned with capturing reality it operated simply by photographing reality. Looking at the material construction of one of these "single moments of truth", he invoked a scenario whereby a single glance from a character was structured by means of the actor's performance, camera angle, shot and the relation of the camera to the actor, an observation which has interesting implications when we come to look at the interplay of Hitchcock's *mise-en-scène* and Donat's performance later in this article:

He must gauge his movements so that at the moment of the close-up, his head will be momentarily still and his eyes -- almost imperceptibly -- will flash their story; not into the lens itself ... but at a spot dangerously close. And an exact spot; remember he is to convey a flicker of doubt -- not a flicker of doubt as to where he should look, ... so insidiously faithful is the lens that it will blurt out the whole story if given half a chance. (Donat in Davy, 1938: 32)

This screen "moment of significance" is described therefore in terms of the conscious awareness of the actor of the technical needs of the medium, so that the moment is clearly and consciously created in dialogue with the processes that interpret it, yet on screen it is read as 'natural'. In the article, Donat further discussed the use of technique to release a "natural" performance in front of the camera. He recognised that in film it was not a question of simply downsizing expression, but emphasising the expressivities of specific parts of the body which worked best on film: both visually and, crucially for Donat, aurally.

In his article, Donat concluded therefore, that screen acting demanded the greatest of skills from the actor, those of "absolute honesty and integrity ... we must deliver up to it the finest work of which we are capable; nothing but the truth will do" (Donat in Davy, 1938: 35). Donat understood that the technical processes, which he might have initially seen as a restriction on his creative expression, represented a paradigm shift that demanded a different kind of creativity. These thoughts about his approach to acting on screen are echoed in a radio interview he gave:

In the old days when I was trying to break into films, I used to under-act for my film tests to such an extent that the result on the screen was entirely negative. In other words something that might have been lively and real and full size on the stage became inhibited and frustrated and frozen on the screen.

[8]

Donat here shows that his understanding of film acting was not just a question of scaling down a characterisation until the actor was doing nothing, but acting in a different way, to maximise the effects of the characterisation when it was blown up on screen. He made the

distinction between appearing to do nothing, and doing nothing, stating that he didn't "believe that acting necessarily stops being acting just because you are in front of the camera." [\[9\]](#) This is a crucial comment with regards to Donat's conception of film acting: it shows that for Donat screen acting was a consciously coded performance, even if it might appear on screen as natural behaviour captured by the camera .

So what implications does this consideration of some of Donat's ideas about film performance have in relation to his work in *The 39 Steps*? The relative importance that Hitchcock gave to the way a film was put together (meticulously story-boarding each scene, planning the construction of shot and the editing) might seem to contest the importance of the contribution of the actors to the film. Ryall describes Hitchcock's method of filming as depending "upon a prior selection of details which dictated exactly the images he required for the scene and these could be shot as separate images without the need for the continuous theatrical playing of the entire scene by the actors involved" (Ryall, 1996: 158). In other words this was exactly the opposite of the way a scene would be played on stage with a clear psychological through-line being able to be built in by the actor from beginning to end. The result for film acting is that this approach "de-emphasises performance in favour of what might be called a neutral acting style in which emotion and feeling are created not by acting performance but by the effects of cinematography and editing" (Ryall, 1996: 159). Hitchcock therefore had no use "for the virtuoso actor who gets his effects and climaxes himself" (Hitchcock in Davy, 1938: 12). The most important thing for an actor was to be able to trust the director to decide how he could be integrated into the film. How does this affect the contribution of Donat's performance to the film, with the actor's oft stated desire for creative authorship potentially being at odds with Hitchcock's insistence that the actor "allow the camera to determine the proper emphasis and the most effective dramatic highlights?" (Hitchcock in Truffaut, 1969: 126). The answer is that *The 39 Steps* evidences examples of both: there are points where Hitchcock's shot construction and editing takes on responsibility for communicating the subjective psychological condition of the character, and instances where Donat uses Hitchcock's frame to clearly demonstrate Hannay's inner state and psychological development.

The ending is perhaps a case in point. Many commentators have noted (and admired) how swiftly and economically Hitchcock brings the film to its conclusion. The resolution to Pamela and Hannay's relationship is not achieved through the playing of the actors, but by the (now notorious) final close-up shot from behind of their hands coming together, with the handcuffs still dangling from Hannay's wrist. It is significant that a further scene was shot that ended the film in a far more conventional fashion with Pamela and Hannay sharing a taxi from the theatre. (Glancy, 2003: 77) Hannay explains that because they signed in at the Inn in Scotland as husband and wife, under Scottish law they are actually married. The final scene therefore shows them kissing as an acceptably wedded couple. As Glancy observes, it is likely that this scene was filmed to placate the censors (Glancy, 2003: 77). In terms of Donat's contribution though, however clumsily the scene seems to bring the couple's relationship to a conclusion, it does rely more on Donat and his acting skill to show his character's state of mind. Whereas the ending of the film as it stands, works more as Hitchcock's comment on the state of Donat's character at this crucial point.

Similarly, the beginning of the film is characterised by Hitchcock's playful but absolute control over the introduction of Donat as Hannay. From the start, the *mise-en-scène* withholds a full and consistent view of him. We see his hands and feet as he enters the theatre, a side view of his body as he takes his ticket, and then a quick glimpse of his profile

as he takes his seat. Even the first shot of his face is taken from a distance, so that he barely stands out amongst the rest of the audience. The stage is shown in shots from the point of view of the audience and from his approximate position but there are no reaction shots of his face for several minutes. Thus the way the entrance is shot precludes performance and the responsibility for introducing the character rests entirely on Hitchcock's shot construction and editing. The method perhaps underlines Hitchcock's presentation of Hannay as a "nobody" as he describes himself to Annabella Smith later, but crucially this character information is communicated by the construction of the scene, rather than Donat's playing of the character. Hitchcock is also teasing his audience here, building up their desire to fully see Donat the star. This underlines the fact that after *Monte Cristo*, there were significant expectations attached to Donat's appearance in this film.

There are other moments in the film where Hitchcock uses a highly stylised *mise-en-scène* to represent Hannay's inner state. For instance, after Annabella has staggered in with a knife in her back and fallen onto Hannay's lap, we cut to a close-up of the ringing telephone. We think this is a point-of-view shot but in fact Donat/Hannay backs into the frame, wiping his hands on the cloth and muttering wordlessly. He goes to answer the telephone but then turns to look out the window. The camera moves closer to his face, but then cuts to the street, where one of the spies is in the telephone box. We then quickly cut back to Donat/Hannay, who looks undecided. Crucially, the development of the realisation of his predicament is shown by the following sequence where Hitchcock conveys his inner state of mind by showing the face of Annabella Smith speaking the words of the previous night superimposed over the street scene. We then see his face briefly again to register that he has spotted the map in Annabella's hand. There is a close-up of his hands wresting the map from her grip and then the camera pans up to show him reading the map. Again we cut to a close-up of the map with Annabella's head and shoulders superimposed on it, retelling her story from the previous night. Only at the end, do we quickly cut back to Donat's face looking apprehensive before cutting to the beginning of the next scene (Glancy, 2003: 42). Thus Hannay's subjective inner state, with its movement from stasis to action, is conveyed by the showing of a montage of images, rather than using Donat's performance to show us a more theatrical conception of the character's journey.

On the other hand, an earlier scene in Hannay's flat, shot in comparatively long takes, gives Donat the responsibility for communicating his character's attitudes and thoughts. It provides Donat with an acting opportunity in the more conventional sense, as he is not competing with Hitchcock's method of shooting and editing. The scene starts in the lobby of the apartment building where he has brought back Annabella Smith after the music hall. Donat is seen in side view with his face shaded almost completely by his hat and the collar on his coat turned up. There is an erotic charge to their dialogue, but Donat plays it lightly with both hands in the pocket of his coat, not giving much away. This effect is consolidated by his positioning, as with him slightly leaning over her and his hat shielding his face, we can only just see his ironic, slightly twisted smile. Inside the flat, they enter the lounge first, which is given an impermanent feel by the sparse furniture covered in dustsheets. The focus is on Annabella at this point as she asks Hannay to keep the light switched off and to turn the mirror facing the window the other way round. Then they move into the kitchen, where the mood changes somewhat with the room's bright lighting and stainless steel coldness. Donat lights a cigarette, puts it in his mouth and keeps his coat on, although he unbuttons it and places his hands behind his back (under the coat). Then he saunters over to the cooker to cook the haddock. His way of standing still and moving deliberately conveys his character's attitude to Annabella during the first half of the scene. He listens to her story carefully but

communicates a cool dubiousness to her tales of being a spy. Whilst cooking the haddock he keeps the cigarette in his mouth all the time, perhaps to give a hint of studied cool to offset the rather feminine and unthreatening effect of his actions preparing and cooking the fish.

At the table, as she continues with her story, Donat has to keep his face very still to communicate that he is listening to what she says, but then gives just a hint of a smile which leads up to the line, "have you ever heard of persecution mania?" This he delivers in a gently disbelieving manner, whilst subtly raising his eyebrows. She challenges him to look through the window at the men in the street to prove that her story is true. After seeing them, he comes back into the kitchen looking slightly more worried, takes the cigarette out of his mouth and puts it down to mark this change in his character's inner state. Then as the focus shifts to Annabella's dialogue, Donat has to make his lengthy reaction shots communicate his attention and interest. He slightly narrows his eyes and his posture now is more angled towards her. He contrasts this with the tone of his voice, which he keeps very light as if determined that it is not going to betray his interest but keep his options open, in case this is a hoax. For instance, he says, "are the 39 steps in Scotland by any chance?" as if still disbelieving and keeping his hands in his pockets. The scene ends with him offering her his bedroom, whilst he "gets a shakedown on the couch" and Donat delivers these lines in a manner devoid of any erotic undertones. Thus he has demonstrated (far more subtly than this description can express) the minute changes in his character's understanding of the situation, whilst keeping it within Hannay's overall nonchalant personality.

Similarly the scene in the Assembly Hall, which is shot by Hitchcock in a relatively straightforward style, allows Donat space to build up his performance as Hannay. Initially Donat/Hannay is pulled onto the platform by a delegate who thinks he is the delayed speaker. Donat exhibits Hannay's realisation that he has no choice but to acquiesce if he is to escape from the Professor's agents. He nervously walks onto the platform and sits down, his unease accentuated by Hitchcock intercutting with close-ups of the other speakers' expectant faces. When he is called to speak, Donat introduces a comic bit of business where he turns his head from left to right, registering expectation of the next speaker then stopping in realisation that it is actually he who is to speak. He draws out his speech and stumbles to emphasise that what he is saying is somewhat off the cuff and betrays his anxiety by taking out a handkerchief and nervously wiping his mouth. As he relaxes more into the speech, he pulls out his hand to emphasise the "me" in his speech, but when he realises that this reveals the handcuffs on his hand, he quickly touches his tie and puts it back in his pocket. Donat uses the arrival of Pamela with the real speaker to indicate a change in his character's motivation as he shows Hannay realise that now his deception is likely to be discovered. His voice changes deliberately from a casual to a more oratorical tone, as Hannay tries to capitalise on the crowd's interest. He shows that his mind is focussed on Pamela, despite outward appearances by leaning on a table, his face angled towards the assembly audience but body turned towards where Pamela is standing. As Hitchcock cuts between Pamela in furious consultation with the event organisers, Donat intensifies Hannay's oratorical delivery, until he has whipped up the crowd in a stirring indictment of the inequality in society. Hitchcock frames him in a tight close-up as Donat/Hannay finishes the speech, with his head turned back and chin defiantly set upwards. As the crowd push forward, we see him pushed back into the arms of the Professor's agents. There follows a short scene at the side of the stage, where he pleads with Pamela to believe his story. Donat here drops the cool exterior with which he has played the majority of Hannay's scenes, and shows real fear and exasperation at Pamela's stubborn refusal to believe him, thus bringing a degree of depth and contrast into the characterisation. Only as he is taken out of the assembly hall, handcuffed to the agents, does

he return to a lighter playing style. The audience clap wildly and Donat/Hannay smiles broadly, cheerfully waving as he is led out of the door.

The inn scene with Carroll also provides us with an example of a sequence that Donat makes entirely his own, through small but strategic performance interventions. After signing in as man and wife, Donat/Hannay and Carroll/Pamela enter the room where they are to stay the night. As the innkeeper in the foreground lights the lamps in the room, Donat invents various "bits" of comic business, which apart from creating a focus for the scene, communicate Hannay's essential tenderness and warmth. First he notices some mud on Pamela's stocking and (still handcuffed to her) tries to brush it off as she resists. Then he gets her skirt and tugs at it to try and get her to stand nearer to him. As she continues to protest, threatening to reveal his identity to the landlady, he takes her over to the fire and fans her skirt to get rid of the damp. When it looks as if Pamela might give them away again, he nuzzles up to her, saying to the innkeeper that they are 'a runaway couple', his face dreamily pushed into the side of her face. [10] This is followed by the famous sequence where they sit down at the bottom of the bed. She rolls off her stockings with her hand still attached to his in the handcuffs, his hand hangs limply down but tantalisingly close to the tops of her legs. That this rather risqué scene escaped the censors might in fact be partially due to Donat's performance style. He undercuts the essential eroticism of the scene, by gulping down a sandwich with the other hand, and talking nonchalantly throughout. The most sexualised moment is when his hand carelessly sets itself down on her knee and is quickly removed by Carroll/Pamela. For most of the sequences in this scene, therefore, Hitchcock lets his players lead the way, the camera observing the performances, rather than shaping them.

An analysis of Donat's performance in the film also raises interesting questions with regard to the representation of masculinity in *The 39 Steps*. Tom Ryall has identified three factors that he feels combine to provide contradictory discourses at work in the film, namely: "the blend of Donat's persona with the Buchan-like adventure trajectory overlaid with Hitchcock's own interests in sexual identity and definition" (Ryall, 1993: 162). John Buchan's original novel had described a world that was exclusively male, where adventure was a welcome departure from the boredom of everyday life. Hitchcock's screen Hannay was similar in many ways to the Buchan original: showing physical ability be it in swinging out on a moving train's door or leaping through the window of a police station.

Yet whilst Hitchcock retained the adventure thriller structure, he also achieved a significantly more ambiguous presentation of the hero's masculinity. This is achieved in the film primarily by the introduction of female characters to the story, thus creating an altered world of relationships in which masculine identity is constantly shifting. All these encounters are given erotic undertones, from the implied sexual promise of Annabella's (Lucie Mannheim) first meeting with Hannay, to the voyeurism of the crofter's scene, where the husband looks through the windows of the cottage, imagining his wife's adultery.

The Gaumont British press book for the film foregrounds Hitchcock's representation of gender relations through the slightly masochistic tone of the catchphrases which the press books suggested were used to promote the film, "Fated to be mated with the one man she hated", "The most charming brute who ever scorned a lady" and particularly tellingly, "She hated to be mastered. But she learned to like it from the MAN who put the MAN back into romance!" [11] However, I would argue that whilst the narrative plays out the traditional formation of the heterosexual couple, albeit with a few twists and turns, the effect is somewhat mediated by Donat's performance. Despite being the "hero", Donat essentially

plays his role as passive, in comparison to the more independent and active Carroll. This has the effect of redefining the boundaries of the masculine and feminine in terms of symbolic configurations of power. His playing style also mitigates against some of the more misogynistic of Hitchcock's narrative interventions. At the end of the scene where he escapes from the Professor's agents, we see him handcuffed to Pamela walking along a country lane. Although the narrative line of this scene is that he is forcing Pamela to walk with him, Donat plays the scene lightly, contradicting the storyline through a display of small but telling performance details. For instance, whilst talking threateningly to her, he tenderly extracts and then brushes away a piece of bramble from her hair. Therefore, although violence plays a narrative role in the relationship with Pamela (his introduction to her by forcibly kissing and embracing her in the train carriage or his potentially violent action towards her, when he threatens her with a concealed gun, which we later find out is a pipe), Donat seems to be performing with a conscious sense of irony. He really looks as if he couldn't hurt a fly, and we are always aware of the distance between what he is showing (in order to escape his captors or exonerate himself) and what his character essentially is.

These deconventionalising performance traits are also underscored by Donat's somewhat ambiguous physicality. For an adventure thriller Donat looks physically very unsuited to action. His performance often utilises the feminine qualities of his face, such as when he looks searchingly with wide-open eyes at the crofter's wife as he mutely tries to stop her from betraying him. His soft lips are accentuated when he whistles the music hall tune in the scenes with Pamela outside the Inn. This is matched in the way he is shot by Hitchcock, with a bleaching out of his face which highlights his rather puppy dog eyes. Attention is also drawn to his hair, which becomes tousled and falls over his forehead in scenes when he is on the run. In the overtly physical scenes, Donat looks somewhat inept and bulky. He has little of the physical grace of the true action hero and is ill at ease with the running and jumping of his character's movements, when forced to flee his captors. [12] He seems more comfortable in stillness. For instance, one of the few times he looks at ease in his body is when he is asleep on the bed as Pamela escapes from the handcuffs. If his body works against the presentation of the traditional masculine hero, then his voice also accentuates his more feminine aspects. Soft, reverberating and quite high (certainly in comparison with a harder and shriller Carroll), it also stands out tonally from the other male voices in the film. [13]

In conclusion then, it would be foolhardy to ascribe creative autonomy to Donat with regard to his characterisation of Hannay in *The 39 Steps*; film production is by definition a collaborative medium. Yet I believe that an examination of the documents in the Donat Archive together with analysis of key scenes in the film, does challenge Ryall's (and Hitchcock's) contention that that the emotional effects in a Hitchcock film are produced by the filmic elements at the expense of the performance elements. As Baron has claimed, "aesthetic choices described in terms of framing or editing are often in fact decisions about the presentation of actors' performances" (Baron and Carnicke 2008: 49). It is clear from his writing on the subject that Donat felt that he had a responsibility to work closely with the director in creating a performance that would have currency within the set up of the scene, taking into account technical as well as narrative elements. Indeed, after *The 39 Steps* Donat continued to refine his screen acting methodologies, creating what he called "Emotion Charts" to track the overall coherency of his characterisation in the context of discontinuous performance conditions. [14]

This article has also looked at the significance of Donat's performance in regard to the representation of masculinity in the film. Where Ryall rightly argues that Donat's "persona"

works with Hitchcock's textual alterations and directorial interventions to complicate the representation of masculinity, I have taken the argument one step further to include a consideration of particular performance details in the film, an aspect sometimes overlooked in investigating the representation of masculinity on screen. Finally, this article has examined the construction of Donat's star persona in fan magazines of the time. It is clear that Donat's success, what King calls his personal commodity value, was based on discourses of "star-acting" -- where personality and acting ability combined (King, 1991:178). For instance, an article on Donat described him as "one of those rare actors who on the screen can retain all the charm of his own personality while giving a complete characterisation of someone entirely unlike him." [15] This had important implications for British cinema of the time as it is clear that in Donat's case, his films were popular because of his playing and performance style rather than despite them. Not only this, but admiration for Donat's acting as an essentially British type of performance, became a way of articulating a distinct institutional identity and expressing resistance to Hollywood values. Donat in particular was seen by the British press as one of the industry's chief players in the struggle to create a viable national production base. The introduction of synchronous sound had brought high hopes that the British film industry would be able to forge a distinctive national cinema, yet there was dismay when the very capital with which this could be done, the actors, moved to Hollywood to further their careers. It was with barely contained glee therefore, that the *Daily Express* described Donat at the beginning of his career, as "the young actor who said no to Hollywood." The article quoted Alexander Korda as saying that in Donat he had discovered, "an Englishman who will prove one of the dominating factors in the struggle to put our talkies on the world map ... He is manly without a trace of truculence. He is gentle without ever suggesting weakness. And furthermore he learned his acting on the stage." The article concluded that Donat was therefore, "one of the first men England has held against all the cajolery and power of Hollywood." [16]

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Notes

[1] Sometimes reported as "actors are like cattle". Murray Pomerance writes that the actual statement was originally made in an interview with David Clayton and published in "Hitchcock Hates Actors," *Filmindia*; July 1947, and then reproduced in Donald Spoto, *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* (New York: Ballantine, 1984), p.317 as "Actors! I hate the sight of them! Actors are cattle--actresses, too. I tell them I hate the sight of them and they love it, the exhibitionists!"

[2] See for instance Garrett (1999). Although there are some actresses who had less pleasant experiences of working with him, e.g Kim Novak as detailed in Lippe, (1999: 46).

[3] *Film Weekly*, 10 August 1934, Donat Archive, John Ryland's University Library, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK, (hereafter DA), FRD 1/6/1/4

[4] Donat's potential to be Gable's British counterpart had also been noted after the release of the *Count of Monte Cristo*. The *Daily Express* proclaimed "A new Clark Gable and he's British!" The article also pointed out Donat's difference to other British actors who signed with Hollywood studios, once in America, "Hollywood can keep its Christmas pudding if he can keep his freedom" (Paul Holt, *Daily Express*, 30 November 1934).

[5] *Photoplay*, 23 February 1936, DA, FRD 1/6/1/1.

[6] *The Era*, 29 January 1935, p. 19. It is difficult to establish who exactly the author was thinking about in terms of "effete" leading men of the time. Ivor Novello's film career was pretty much over by this time and his screen persona could not easily be described in this way.

[7] Whilst a lot of the sources quoted in the following section are from a couple of years later than *The 39 Steps*, I would argue that Donat was already reflecting on screen acting practices through his experiences on working in film before he set down his thoughts in the chapter on film acting in *Footnotes to the Film*.

[8] Robert Donat, "Britain's Pleasure Parade," typewritten manuscript in script form, mark one and a revised version, undated, DA, FRD 1/2/2/17.

[9] Robert Donat, "Britain's Pleasure Parade."

[10] Ironically this is an exact replica of his positioning with Landi in the final shot of the first romantic scene in the *Count of Monte Cristo*. Perhaps Donat here is parodying his own romantic playing style.

[11] Press Book, *The 39 Steps*, British Film Institute, London.

[12] A double (Penrose Tennyson) was used for some of Donat's chase scenes but I am talking about the shots where you can actually see from his face that it is Donat.

[13] A more detailed discussion of the significance of the Donat voice on film can be found in Lowe (2005).

[14] Analysis of the Emotion Chart for *The Citadel* can be found in Lowe (2007).

[15] Richard Hastier, "Robert Donat is a Great Music Lover", *The Star*, 18 March 1935, DA, FRD 1/6/2/6.

[16] Ewart Hodson, "The Young Actor who said No to Hollywood." *Daily Express* 17 September 1932, DA, FRD 1/6/2/6. This article referred to Donat refusing the lead role in *Smilin' Through* in 1932.

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