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 Sec. 4.01.4 Topaz
 P-Uris, Leon

Cold-war spy stuff

warmed up

By PATRICK GIBBS

THE usual synopsis of the story, so useful to spectators who slumber, was not provided with Alfred Hitchcock's Topaz (Odeon, Leicester Sq. "A"). This omission might seem to indicate that the master had complete confidence in keeping us awake for a couple of hours, though I prefer to see him, more modestly, reading a summary in draft and bursting into either tears or laughter.

Very wise, then, not to provide a synopsis of this preposterous plot, which is certainly not of the kind to make its point when written on the proverbial postage stamp, or even on a post-card.

The weaknesses are two. A central character is constantly before us in whom neither authors nor actor can find any interest; and in the middle of the film is a long expedition to Cuba which is both ridiculous and irrelevant.

The basis is a novel by Leon Uris, adapted by Samuel Taylor, which turned to fictional account the allegations, which still reverberate, made by the French Military Attaché in Washington, Col. Thiraud de Vosjoly. He maintained that there was a Russian agent high up in Gen. de Gaulle's Government on the evidence, apparently, of the Russian, Anatoly Dolnytsin, who defected to the Americans in 1961.

Onlie begetter

A spy story, in fact, of the kind which has provided Hitchcock with some of his greatest successes. If he fails now to bring off the trick again, it is largely because there appears to be so little of himself in the film, so much of his writers and actors.

As we know from his intimate confessions on his craft, Hitchcock has always regarded himself as the sole creator of his films, not esteeming writers at all highly, dismissing acting merely as "the art of doing nothing well" and finding scarcely a single cameraman worth mention.

Now, at 70, he finds, perhaps, the feat of total creation, which he carried off so triumphantly in the past, a bit too much for him, and some of the chickens, which he sent scurrying, are coming home to roost. How helpful, for instance, would have been a well-turned script

on which he could have leaned a little, how useful a few rarely resourceful acting performances.

The opening is promising enough, with a high Russian official, his wife and daughter throwing off, quite excitingly, their shadows from the Embassy to defect to the Americans in Copenhagen. The showroom of the Royal Copenhagen porcelain factory, where the daughter evades her watchers to make a vital telephone call, is a typical Hitchcock location and there's some typical business, too, with a broken porcelain figure.

The defector, nicely played by Per-Axel Arosenius, is pleasantly ironic, with his remark to the Americans: "We would have managed this much better," but once in Washington, set up in a hideout, he and his family rather vanish from view. Instead, interest is demanded for a commercial Attaché at the French Embassy, called Devereaux, actually a secret agent, whose chief mysteriously receives news of the defection from Paris, while it is still secret, and orders him to confirm.

Since he is intimate with the CIA man responsible for the defector, this isn't difficult. The outcome is that he finds himself, out of personal friendship, doing a spying job for the Americans, which is to obtain photographs of some secret documents carried by the Cuban delegation to the United Nations—it is just before the crisis over Russian missiles being sent to Cuba.

The picture of the Cubans, all bushy beards and peaked caps, turning their Harlem hotel into a military camp is an engaging caricature, and Hitchcock is very much himself in the sequence in which an agent employed by Devereaux enters the building pretending to be a journalist and offers one of the secretaries a large bribe, this episode being caught wittily in mime, and much play being made with the subsequent theft of a briefcase.

Yet even Hitchcock, surely, would acknowledge a debt here to that accomplished Negro actor, Roscoe Lee Brown, who brings the daring, self-confident little agent so amusingly to life. By comparison the failure of other, more important actors to transcend the script becomes conspicuous and we have to endure some absurd adventures by Devereaux in Cuba itself, where he goes for more spying and some amorous passages, before the French actor, Philippe

Noiret, pulls off the same sort of feat in the little part of a suspected civilian high up in NATO.

Studio style

By this time Devereaux, having got the required information out of Cuba with some loss of blood, his mistress paying the price, as they say, is in Paris to run the great traitors, whose code name is Topaz, finally to ground. This involves, naturally, some more bloodshed, poor M. Noiret ending up picturesquely as a corpse on top of a Citroën, but not before he has delighted us, and Mr Hitchcock too, I hope, with his display of "doing nothing well."

Whether any actor could delight us in the part of Devereaux I rather doubt. Frederick Stafford gamely slogs it out, sometimes even trying a French accent, with little help from the director who seems to have been unable to find an appropriate style. Given the factual basis, a realistic style seems indicated; falling that, the plausible. Instead we have a good old Hollywood studio style with a few exterior locations supporting some stunning interiors, my favourite being the elaborate villa belonging to the lady in Cuba where, it seems, the *douceur de vivre* still prevails.

Awfully old hat, this Cold-War spy stuff and Hitchcock himself seems to feel this at heart, for since I saw the film he's added a new ending, which can hardly fail to be an improvement, though it's a new middle that's wanted.