

SEANKELLY

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PHOTOGRAPHY Why doesn't Johan Grimonprez's new show dedicated to images of Alfred Hitchcock feature the great man himself? **John Russell Taylor** finds out

**JOHAN GRIMONPREZ:
LOOKING FOR ALFRED**
The Photographers'
Gallery, WC2
★★★★☆

AS SOON AS you enter the Photographers' Gallery you are left in no doubt that the new exhibition by the Belgian artist Johan Grimonprez (pictured) is the fruit of an overwhelming obsession. All around you are glossy images of Alfred Hitchcock, beautiful large colour photographs of the man standing, walking, looking at pictures of himself on a gallery wall, examining reproductions of Magritte paintings which feature the backs of anonymous heads wearing (significantly? suspiciously?) the same sort of black bowler that Hitchcock himself affected. They are all very vivid and satisfactory — except that there is something not quite right in each of the photographs.

The answer is made plain when, as in a pantomime, you look behind you. On the small wall to the right of the entrance is a screen showing what appears — except for the immaculate photography and editing — to be a random collection of test or audition shots. In them any of about a

dozen Hitchcock lookalikes, or in a couple of cases sound-alikes, are put through their paces, walking, standing, repeating the opening words of Hitchcock's McGuffin story as he told it in the definitive interview with François Truffaut.

So, of course, what is wrong with the still photographs is that none of them is in fact of the man himself: they are merely performers who have specialised in Hitchcock imitation, summoned from all over the world (one is even Chinese) by the prospect of appearing in *Looking for Alfred*, Grimonprez's planned film about Hitchcock.

Though, as Grimonprez points out, it is not really about Hitchcock himself so much as about perceptions of Hitchcock and about his part in the elaboration of the public persona. The artist's interest has homed in on two things: the little unbilled appearances that Hitchcock made in nearly all of his films since the first talkie, *Blackmail*, in 1930, and his later film *The Birds*.

Grimonprez, a wiry un-Hitchcockian figure in his early forties, thinks the significance of the cameo roles is obvious: "These are the clearest evidence of how he wanted the public to see him.

He was unique among directors in that everybody knew what he looked like, and if they didn't, they soon found out because spotting him in his films was all part of the game."

In the film, to which the photographs and the reel of tests are merely a prelude, Grimonprez concentrates largely on two of the best-remembered cameos: that in *Strangers on a Train*, in which the portly figure of the film-maker is observed struggling to get a massive double-bass on to the

"He was a unique director in that everyone knew how he looked"

train; and that in *The Birds*, in which he crosses paths with Tippi Hedren at the entrance to a smart pet shop.

Why these in particular? "Well, that was not the original intention," Grimonprez smiles. "Just look at this story-board book for the film." He leafs through a massive tome, demonstrating that his original intention was to include many others, such as Hitchcock in *Blackmail* being interfered with by an unruly child while reading on a bus or in

North by Northwest just missing a bus.

But other appearances do sneak their way in. The cameo in *Stage Fright* in which Hitchcock turns to look at Jane Wyman also appears in *Looking for Alfred*, where it is fused with the same composition in reverse, to create a situation in which Hitchcock appears to be passing himself and looking back coolly at his alter ego.

But the predominant influence on the finished film is clearly *The Birds*.

Grimonprez's film is shot in Horta's Deco Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels, where all sorts of mysterious things are made to happen, involving various Hitchcock simulacra walking round, taking coffee (is the coffee poisoned? — shades of *Spellbound*) and, most un-Hitchcocklike, sprawled asleep on a red velvet couchette. All are observed by the one black bird perched on the chandelier or impending over the coffee-table, and shadowed by a mysterious blonde who serves the coffee and ends by apparently munching on a just-dead bird.

Why does he find *The Birds* so significant? "Oh," he says airily, "9/11." Apparently he

makes the connection between the totally unheralded attack of the birds out of a clear blue sky and the terrorist attack on the twin towers. And what about the echoes of Magritte in the film?

"Of course, I am Belgian, and I was very conscious of Hitchcock's fascination with the Surrealists, with Dali and particularly Magritte. It occurred to me that Hitchcock and Magritte were almost exact contemporaries, and that there was a certain comparison between them in their conservative habits of dress, concealing perhaps their deeply subversive natures. And somehow their images fused, and so Magritte increasingly takes over, as the umbrellas fly and the girl eats the bird."

So perhaps the next project will be about Magritte? "Oh, I don't think so. I have so much material that it should keep me occupied for a while. Hitchcock is such a richly suggestive subject. After all, he was not just a film-maker: he was Film."

● **Johan Grimonprez:** *Looking for Alfred*, The Photographers' Gallery, 5 Newport Street, WC2 (020-7831 1772), to Jan 9

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