

Cary Grant, an acrobat who became a Hollywood legend

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Picture shows a scene from Cary Grant's movie North By Northwest.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

One of my favourite Hollywood actors was Cary Grant. There was something so refreshingly remarkable about him, something so wonderfully cultured that he was often called a perfect gentleman. Suave and sophisticated, Grant was as easy playing in screwball comedies as he was in classics of the kind Alfred Hitchcock created for all times, nay eternity.

And let us not forget that Cary Grant achieved all this despite a traumatic childhood – when his mother disappeared for many, many years, resurfacing when he was 31. He was a man by then, not quite in need of a woman to play mother. His father was callous and irresponsible, and the boy grew up in the homes of relatives, experiencing the cold of England in houses where there was no heating and no food either.

To me it seems nothing short of a miracle that Cary grew up into a fine young man – with no trace of rancour or bitterness. On the contrary, he was warm and genial and adoring and helpful.

I saw all this and more recently in a gripping documentary called *Becoming Cary Grant* by Mark Kidel.

Later, when Cary voyaged to America, to Hollywood, the journey ahead proved singularly marvellous. But a much more eventful voyage happened in the late 1950s when he began searching for his true inner self. He tried yoga and hypnosis, eventually settling down for LSD sessions, 100 odd in fact. "During my LSD sessions, I would learn a great deal," he would remark. "And the result was a rebirth. I finally got where I wanted to go." A restless Grant found peace, and could come to grips with his childhood dilemma of having to grow up without a mother.

Kidel portrays Grant as an actor who was forever in flight. He was a Bristol (that is where he was born) street urchin, who set off to conquer Hollywood. He did become an American prince, an embodiment of grace and glamour. Some called him the male version of Grace Kelly, who became the Princesses of Monaco.

Born Archie Leach, Cary Grant once admitted that he had always been overwhelmed by an identity crisis. Was he Archie or Cary? It was only after his LSD therapy – a legitimate form of psychiatric treatment in those days for agitated minds – that he learnt to be at peace with himself and the world. "I have spent the greater part of my life fluctuating between Archie Leach and Cary Grant," he once confessed. "Unsure of each and suspecting each," he said.

The documentary gives us such rare insights into Grant's life. Culled from the star's unpublished autobiography, *Becoming Cary Grant* also draws from the cinematic material that he shot. Much of these have never been seen before. And Kidel's biopic gives us a rich tapestry of people, places and impressionistic images that evocatively reflect the ups and downs of Grant's inner journey.

The film has contributions from friends who have never spoken before, from critic David Thomson, who regards Cary as the greatest actor of all time, and Professor Mark Glancy, whose new findings and comments feature throughout the movie. It includes a treasure trove of extracts from Grant's films, some of the well-known ones – comedies and Hitchcock classics – as well as the less familiar ones that throw a revealing light on the man's identity – *None But the Lonely Heart*, *Mr. Lucky* and *Father Goose*. We also get to see the famous scene in Hitchcock's *North By Northwest*, where Grant is attacked by a small plane in an open field, and where he has to run to save his life.

And this was a run he started when he was 14. He became an acrobat with the Bob Pender Stage Troupe, and two years later, he set sail for America. He changed his name and his accent, walked in and out of marriages – forever grappling with a fear of intimacy. His lonely childhood was one of the causes for this, and it was during his 30s that he chanced upon the truth about his mother, whom Grant had assumed to be dead. She had been pushed into a lunatic asylum by Grant's philandering father! The meeting between the mother and son was poignant. When Grant went to get her out of the institution, she looked at him disbelievingly and asked: "Archie, is that really you?"

The reunion – apart from the LSD – certainly helped Grant to find solace. His films like *His Girl Friday*, *North by Northwest* and *Notorious* took him to the skies.

But Grant decided to quit stardom when he was really at the peak, up there. Kidel says that Grant's decision to exit was also prompted by the fact that he had made enough movies and money. "On top of that, his life had changed. I think he stopped because he became a father," Kidel adds.

Becoming Cary Grant wraps up with his autumn years. It shows father and daughter lounging in front of the TV or dancing together on the terrace of his home.

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