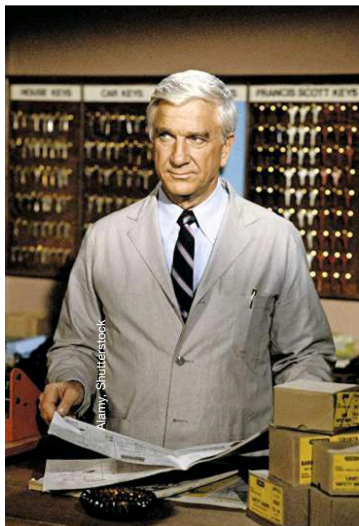


Main: Leslie Nielsen as cop Frank Drebin in *Police Squad!*. Top to bottom: Nielsen with Kathryn Leigh Scott and Alan North; Guest star William Shatner comes a cropper in the opening credits; Gags galore as Drebin goes undercover.



# THE FIRST TAKE CLUB

Classic movies, seen for the very first time



THIS MONTH

**AUTHOR SIMON STEPHENSON BRAVES THE DIZZY HEIGHTS OF *VERTIGO* FOR THE FIRST TIME**



*EMPIRE* RANKED *VERTIGO* as one of the 100 Greatest Movies Ever Made, and an unmentionable film magazine even anointed it the best ever made. For any film fan, never having seen Hitchcock's masterpiece would be inexcusable, but as a screenwriter and erstwhile proud San Franciscan, I should probably surrender both my WGA card and BART pass. To make matters worse, *Vertigo* even features one of my favourite character actors of all time — the Golden Gate Bridge itself. So how did this happen? It began with a case of mistaken identity. For much of my life I believed I'd seen *Vertigo*, and any time it came up I would declare it overrated. When I recently did this, then proceeded to badmouth Sean Connery's performance, my friend laughed. And that was how I discovered I had not seen *Vertigo*. I had seen *Marnie*.

The real *Vertigo*, of course, stars James Stewart. He plays John 'Scottie' Ferguson, a detective whose fear of heights has led to the death of a colleague and his own retirement. A MacGuffin arrives in the form of an unusual request from an old college acquaintance of Scottie's, Gavin Elster. Elster's young wife Madeleine seems to have been possessed by the spirit of a suicidal ancestor and Elster wants Scottie to follow her to get to the bottom of it.

Thus, much of the first half of *Vertigo* consists of James Stewart following Kim Novak around San Francisco, making me absurdly nostalgic for my former home, and by the time Madeleine threw herself in to

the bay beneath the Golden Gate Bridge, I had fallen in love with her. Fortunately, Scottie had fallen in love with her too, and so he dives in to rescue her. All the excitement has rendered Madeleine unconscious, so Scottie takes her back to his apartment, undresses her and puts her in his bed. When she eventually awakes, he gives her a robe and they flirt by the fire. It was, quite evidently, a different time.

And yet I was chagrined. Why did Madeleine choose to jump from the road at Fort Point, and not the Golden Gate Bridge itself? Jumping from the bridge is usually fatal, but jumping from the road would get you merely wet. Of course, this is the point — Madeleine is putting on a show for Scottie's benefit — but for Hitchcock to have played this all out in the shadow of the mighty bridge felt like a missed opportunity, like glimpsing Philip Seymour Hoffman amidst a crowd of extras in a party scene.

Halfway through, the narrative takes an abrupt turn, with Madeleine leaping to her death from the mission's campanile. Here, again, I found myself distracted by the thought that this action should be unfolding on my beloved Golden Gate Bridge. The campanile was a perfectly adequate location, but — like watching Jeremy Renner in a *Bourne* film — I could not shake the feeling that something was missing.

Scottie begins to obsessively visit the places Madeleine once frequented, until one day he spots a dark-haired version of her on the street. He follows this woman to the hotel where she lives, discovers her name is Judy Barton, and immediately sets about aggressively attempting to make her over into the departed Madeleine.

At the point, Hitchcock lets us know — via a flashback and a voiceover — that Madeleine and Judy are the same person, Judy having been hired by Gavin Elster to help him cover up the murder of his wife in a dastardly plot designed to take advantage of Scottie's vertigo. It might just be the film's masterstroke, humanising Judy and her predicament to such an extent that her murderous conspiracy pales into insignificance beside Scottie's descent into obsessive madness.

In the movie's most jarring scene, Scottie pursues Judy up the campanile, conquering his vertigo and filling in the film's backstory as they go. At the top, Judy jumps and Scottie has now transformed her into Madeleine, just not in the way he had hoped.

So is *Vertigo* the greatest film ever made? Having now actually seen it, I would still argue not. Yet I will no longer argue it is overrated. I have watched it three times in the past fortnight and still find myself thinking about it near constantly. And it certainly beats *Marnie*.

SET MY HEART TO FIVE IS OUT IN HARDBACK AND ON DIGITAL ON 28 MAY

