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BODY OF LIES

I learned recently that Russell Crowe gained 50 pounds for his role in Ridley Scott's action-thriller *Body of Lies*. To which I reply: For *this* role? *Seriously*?

It's not that he isn't kind of entertaining. As the portly CIA supervisor to Leonardo DiCaprio's anxious operative, Crowe's Ed Hoffman (speaking with the same twang the performer employed in *A Beautiful Mind*) is forever feeding his face, swilling booze, or acting the dedicated family man by taking pictures at his daughter's soccer game or helping his young son pee in the toilet and not on the floor - all the while issuing drawling directives into his hands-free cell phone - and his lumpy amiability, combined with his relaxed professionalism, is rather endearing. (So are some of his lines, such as Hoffman's rationale for drinking a dozen beers in succession: "I'm taking the kids to *The Lion King*. *Again*.")

But in the end, the character is little more than a joke (nothing Crowe couldn't have pulled off merely by tucking a pillow in his shirt), and *Body of Lies*, in the end, is a joke, too - a tedious, implausible, and ultimately ridiculous stab at a "topical" blockbuster. Crowe's Method-like dedication to his craft here is admirable (if misguided), as is his dedication to Ridley Scott, who guided him to an Oscar for *Gladiator*. The actor, though, received the award in 2001, and in the years since, has found himself stuck in pointless-or-worse roles in the director's *A Good Year*, *American Gangster*, and now this endless, achingly repetitive spy escapade. Isn't his debt paid off *yet*?

Not that you'd know it from *Body of Lies*' maddeningly busy and convoluted opening hour, but the film concerns a CIA plan to nab an Osama bin Laden-type terrorist responsible for a series of bombings throughout Europe. That's a simplification, of course, but you can actually simplify the movie even further: subtitled intrigue, satellite surveillance, explosion, angry phone call, car chase, shoot-out, angry phone call, repeat. Through the whole of the movie's action sequences, there isn't one that displays anything more than the most rudimentary of suspense tropes -

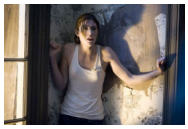
insistent musical score, check; hyperactive editing, check - and the formulaic presentation is so tiresome that even the constant globe-trotting offers no solace; after detours in Manchester, Iraq, Virginia, Jordan, Washington, and Amman, by the time we got to Amsterdam I was so desperate for some variety and surprise that I found myself praying for a Harold & Kumar cameo.

Body of Lies is steadfastly unmemorable, which wouldn't be such a crime if it were at least impassioned or clever. But the screenplay by *The Departed*'s William Monahan seems just a lazy, liberal borrowing from other movies - including *The Departed*, as DiCaprio (with a Southern accent that comes and goes every few minutes) again gets his hand pummeled by an adversary, engages in a completely tangential romance, and does that thing where he yells on his cell phone and then, for extra intensity, holds the cell phone in front of his mouth so he can yell *directly into it*. (In these scenes, Crowe is cast as *The Departed*'s Martin Sheen and Mark Wahlberg characters, which might account for the weight gain.)

Despite a truly excellent, sinister turn from Mark Strong and the amusement provided by Crowe, Ridley Scott's latest is an exhausting, ludicrous bore, and hits new lows in its final reel, after DiCaprio has been kidnapped and shackled, and awaits certain death. "Do you think the calvary's coming to rescue you?" asks the bin Laden clone, and considering the remoteness of the locale and the vicious abuse DiCaprio's already received, we think, *Wow, maybe not*. And then the cavalry rescues him. *Body of Lies* would be great fun to hoot at if it weren't so deadly dull.

THE DUCHESS

Saul Dibb's period epic *The Duchess*, in which Keira Knightley juts her neck forward as the 18th Century Duchess of Devonshire, is a slog to get through, proof that gorgeous costumes and sets aren't much consolation when the script is dramatically inert, or when the director doesn't possess much visual artistry, or when the leading lady mistakes peevishness for character for 105 minutes. Only Ralph Fiennes lends some texture, and that's mostly because he's the only one allowed to be funny; the character may act monstrously, but the actor's withering deadpan and ennui-laden sarcasm yield occasional laughs where you'd think none could possibly emerge. I'd say that Fiennes was the only participant here convinced that *The Duchess* was actually a *comedy*, except Knightley's hairdressers and wigmakers were apparently also in on the gag. Was anyone else thrown out of the film's "realism" by noticing that, historically correct or not, the star's coifs made her frequently resemble Bert Lahr's Cowardly Lion?



QUARANTINE

In one of the most unforgivable spoilers in the history of coming attractions, the preview for the horror film *Quarantine* gives away the final shot in the movie. And I mean the *very last shot.* (You'll recognize it, because a still from the climactic moment is also used for the *Quarantine* poster.) Granted, it's not like promoting *Citizen Kane* with the image of a burning sled or anything, but director John Erick Dowdle's remake of the Spanish-language *REC* still deserved far better pre-release treatment than it received - clever, nerve-racking, and scary as hell, the movie is an almost obscene amount of fun. Shot documentary-style, the film finds a friendly TV reporter (empathetic Jennifer Carpenter) and a dozen-and-a-half others trapped in an L.A. apartment complex infected by a deadly, rabies-like virus, and while the word "zombie" is never uttered, Dowdle's work is one of the best zombie movies to be released in years; after a deliberately low-key, amiably jokey opening, the intensity builds with sensational force, and for a low-budget effort, the sound and gruesome visuals are pretty remarkable.

And *man* but there are some awesome death scenes! A firefighter's unexpected plunge down a stairwell was a perfectly-timed shocker, and I might never forget the quick termination of a charging rat, but *Quarantine* also features what might be the *ne plus ultra* of undead "executions," when on-screen cameraman Steve Harris bashes an infected marauder's brains in, over and over, *with the camera*. (Our P.O.V. allows us to witness this terrifying, blood-splattering, absolutely hysterical moment first-hand, and other horror movies have achieved legendary status without featuring anything *nearly* this memorable.) Sure, the dialogue's not great, and the climactic action gets a little frenzied and incoherent, but *Quarantine* is still a spectacularly nasty entertainment, and just behind *The Strangers* as the year's best scare flick. Maybe even *ahead* of it, if you've managed to avoid the trailer.