

Octopussy: "Quantum of Solace"

Written by Mike Schulz

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QUANTUM OF SOLACE

As much as I enjoyed James Bond's re-invention in *Casino Royale*, I'll admit I was psyched to learn that the new Bond thriller, *Quantum of Solace*

, was about 40 minutes shorter than its predecessor, which I felt was about 40 minutes too long. (The movie was great fun, but also proof that there *can*

be too much of a good thing.) I presumed that this film's condensed running length would've led to an adventure that was even leaner, speedier, and livelier than director Martin Campbell's 2006 endeavor. So how, despite some fantastic set pieces and the continuing pleasure that is Daniel Craig, does

Quantum of Solace

wind up feeling about twice as long as

Casino Royale

?

Let's start with its director, and a question: Which of Marc Forster's previous film credits made him the sensible choice for a James Bond picture? *Monster's Ball*? *Finding Neverland*? *The Kite Runner*

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? You could argue, I guess, that 007 spectacles - with their proven spy-flick formula that gets shaken but very rarely stirred - are director-

proof

; certainly, none of them displays a very strong directorial personality, and even the lamer efforts probably make their helmers look more adroit than they might actually be. (Martin Campbell, after all, didn't bring much to the party in

The Mask of Zorro, Beyond Borders,

or

Vertical Limit

.) Yet Forster seems not just stylistically but temperamentally wrong for James Bond.

At his best - in *Monster's Ball* and *Stranger Than Fiction*, especially - Forster can be keenly perceptive about character and emotional complexity, and with all due respect to Craig and the rest of the film's cast, those qualities aren't of much use here. By now, most moviegoers know that

minutes after the finale to

Casino Royale

, with our hero seeking revenge for the death of Bond gal

par excellence

Vesper Lynd (the much-missed Eva Green). But considering the franchise's updated, newly bad-ass take on Ian Fleming's character, a Bond in mourning isn't much different from a "happy" Bond - it's not like Craig was a barrel of laughs beforehand - and so the time devoted to the super-spy's pain here feels not just arbitrary but supremely unnecessary. Craig plays this (more) grim, severe Bond beautifully, but given no lighter moments, it's a less interesting performance than the one he offered two years ago.

Bond, though, only accounts for part of *Quantum of Solace's* melancholic, and consequently plodding, nature, as nearly everyone else on-screen is

equally

morose; you could likely count the visible smiles here on one hand. Gemma Arterton, as a redheaded agent, briefly brings some snap and sparkle to the film - predictably, she's killed for her good humor - but despite the actors' expert work, Judi Dench, Jeffrey Wright, and Giancarlo Giannini have little to play beyond seriousness of intent, and leading lady Olga Kurylenko (whose character is

also

seeking revenge) is lovely yet so neutralized that she's easy to forget about.

As for Mathieu Amalric, the natural-resource-hoarding *über*-villain, the French actor exuded more vigor with one eye in

Diving Bell & the Butterfly

The

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than he does with a full body's worth of ennui-laden decadence.

Quantum of Solace

's

plot is of no great interest, but even still there's a lengthy sequence here in which Amalric, Kurylenko, and a henchman with a Corky St. Clair haircut discuss their nefarious plans, and I'm pretty sure that, for a few minutes, my brain checked out of the movie completely; when characters aren't shooting, breaking glass, or dangling from girders, Forster's film dies a few slow deaths. (

Quantum of Solace

really could've used a cameo by John Cleese's mad inventor Q, though for the time being, I'm thinking that particular ship has sailed.)

"But how *are* the stunts?" you may be asking. They're okay, although they're frequently so incoherently assembled that you can barely tell if they're cool or not. The pre-credits car chase, in particular, is confoundingly edited, but spatial relationships are barely clear in any of the action scenes - boats that appear hundreds of feet from one another are, in the next shot, right *next*

to one another - and too-obvious CGI ruins a potentially exciting aerial attack. (In addition to Cleese, the movie really could've used

Bourne Ultimatum

director Paul Greengrass.) Far more impressive were the *quietly*

thrilling escapades; there's a marvelous foot chase across a series of outdoor patios, and a wildly clever sequence in which Bond surprises a cadre of schemers at the opera.

And this brings up the one truly smart thing that Forster, by design or not, does in *Quantum of Solace* : he

evenly spaces out the best moments - be it a memorable corpse (poor Gemma Arterton) or a brutal fight - every 15-or-so minutes, so the film is rarely out-and-out dull. Compared to *Casino Royale*

, though, this latest Bond is still a letdown, and its theme song, "Another Way to Die," actually hits the level of "ghastly." If producers are looking for fresh victims for Bond 2010, I'd consider that tune's composers

first

.