

Written by Mike Schulz
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THE GHOST WRITER

Calling Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* "lighthearted" isn't entirely accurate, as the movie is a moody suspense thriller concerning high-level government conspiracies, and its color palette seems to shift only from gray to very *dark gray*.

Then again, this is a Polanski film we're talking about - coming from the man who gave us *Rosemary's Baby*, *Repulsion*, *Chinatown*, and

The Pianist

, it's practically

Gidget

Goes Hawaiian

Yet beyond *The Ghost Writer* being something of a genre lark for its director, this classically structured entertainment breezes along with such masterly wit and confidence that you find yourself grinning even when - *especially* when - the onscreen deeds are at their dirtiest. Ewan McGregor plays the unnamed author of the title, assigned the task of completing the memoirs of a former Prime Minister (Pierce Brosnan) after the Brit's previous ghost writer washes up on a beach in Martha's Vineyard. In the manner of so many paranoid thrillers, McGregor's involvement quickly leads to hidden agendas, uncovered secrets, motivational mysteries, and threatening shadow figures in black sedans, and you could easily consider the movie old-hat if Polanski's supremely smart and elegant orchestration didn't make

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it feel so new.

Based on Robert Harris' novel *The Ghost*, the film boasts a sharp, fiendishly clever screenplay (written by Harris and Polanski) in which the narrative complexities are always coherent, if not always plausible, and the dialogue is laced with a liberal dose of mordant humor. (After McGregor informs an ally that he's afraid for his life, the man snorts and replies, "They can't drown *two* ghost writers, for God's sake. You're not *kit tens*

.) It's Polanski's directorial finesse, though, that really keeps

The Ghost Writer

humming. Barring a nerve-jangling, gorgeously shot sequence that finds McGregor escaping onto, and then off of, a departing ferry, there aren't many large-scale set pieces in the film. But Polanski's senses of rhythm and composition are so controlled yet so exciting that even the most minor passages here percolate with giggly/scary anticipation; a lengthy tracking shot of an incriminating note being passed along at a cocktail party manages to keep you breathless for almost a full minute.

And Polanski performers wonders with his cast, some of whom - Olivia Williams, Kim Cattrall, a nearly-unrecognizable Jim Belushi - haven't been this strong in years, if ever. (The vital Eli Wallach, at age 94, briefly swipes the film as a helpful beachfront denizen.) McGregor, with his dazzling, boyish charm, makes for a remarkably engaging and empathetic protagonist, but it's Brosnan's *very*-thinly-veiled Tony Blair figure that's most welcome; he's affable, guarded, vaguely untrustworthy, and, at all times, wildly charismatic. (A friend recently asked if there are actually *two* Pierce Brosnans out there in the world - the one who bores and/or embarrasses us in *Laws of Attraction* and *Mamma Mia!* and the one who kicks ass in

The Thomas Crown Affair

and

The Matador -

and I'm happy to report that the latter one shows up here.) Gloomy and expectedly nihilistic though it is, the movie is a sensational amount of fun; think what you like about Polanski the person, but when he's working at the quality level of his

Ghost Writer

, it's hard to argue with the greatness of Polanski the director.

Roman's Holiday: "The Ghost Writer," "Diary of a Wimpy Kid," "The Bounty Hunter," and "Hubble 3D"

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