

Secret Agent Woman: "Fair Game" and "The Warrior's Way"

Written by Mike Schulz

Sunday, 05 December 2010 13:03



FAIR GAME

Presuming that it might not open locally, I caught director Doug Liman's *Fair Game* – in which Naomi Watts plays outed CIA operative Valerie Plame, and Sean Penn plays Plame's husband, former ambassador Joe Wilson – in Chicagoland on Thanksgiving night. I thought the movie was intelligent and intensely well acted, but still didn't *feel*

much toward it, and with so many of the film's characters arguing over events that, by 2010, have become old (if still infuriating) news, my eyelids grew droopy during a few scenes too many.

This past weekend, however, *Fair Game* did indeed arrive in our area, and with only one other debuting release to attend (see – or, rather, don't – *The Warrior's Way*), I thought I'd give the movie another shot. I am now officially blaming the Thanksgiving-turkey tryptophan for my initially lukewarm response, because on a second viewing, I found Liman's latest to be positively riveting, an alert, entertaining, and resonant re-telling of the notorious Plame-Wilson scandal that's actually the exact *opposite* of an earnestly somber recent-history lesson.

A drama shot and edited like a thriller, *Fair Game* follows the real-life events that led to the war in Iraq and Plame's secret-agent cover being blown, and given the (expected) factual omissions and creative liberties taken, plenty of politically astute audience members will no doubt have several beefs with the film's account of "the truth." Based on books authored separately by Plame and Wilson, *Fair Game* – with its screenplay by Jez and John-Henry Butterworth – is unquestionably on the side of its married protagonists, who are seen solely as patriotic, righteous, and unjustly maligned throughout. And even if you fundamentally agree with Plame's and Wilson's conspiracy theories, you can still sense some Hollywood white-washing going on. Despite his enjoyable, hammy brio, David Andrews, as Dick Cheney chief-of-staff Scooter Libby, is just a mustache-twirl away from caricature, and the subplot that finds an Iraqi doctor (the excellent Liraz Charhi) recruited by Plame as an undercover operative plays too much like the convenient fiction it is.

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Yet no one can, or should, expect documentary-style *vérité* in a liberal rabble-rouser by the director of *The Bourne Identity* –

starring the vociferously liberal Sean Penn, no less – and while

Fair Game

might not be entirely “fair,” it’s still a supremely intelligent, energetic, and forceful production. Wielding a hand-held camera, Liman (also credited as the film’s cinematographer) keeps the action moving with swift directness, and has an eye for beautifully telling bits of business; a quick throwaway of Plame and Wilson walking down a hallway, him giving her a playful shove on their way to a deadly serious CIA conference, provides a lovely bit of marital familiarity. Liman is also marvelously inventive in his handling of the story’s increasingly propulsive narrative. With no type of “three months later” title card ever popping on the screen, televised news programs and press conferences – oftentimes witnessed merely in the backgrounds of shots – continually clue you in to just where and when in the Iraq-war saga you are, and subtly raise the stakes for each of Plame’s and Wilson’s encounters and setbacks.

Considering its relatively intimate scale, *Fair Game* displays major filmmaking gravitas, and for perhaps the first time since 1999’s *Go, Lima*

n, here, reminds you that he can be a fantastically savvy and generous director of actors. (A point nearly forgotten thanks to those plasticized, high-concept outings

Mr. & Mrs. Smith

and

Jumper

.) Delivering a pair of wonderfully vivid portrayals, Watts and Penn delineate the gradual meltdown of a once-secure marriage with heartbreaking emotional accuracy, and the stars are backed by an almost staggering supporting ensemble: Sam Shepard and Polly Holliday as Plame’s parents; Jessica Hecht, Tom McCarthy, Brooke Smith, Ty Burrell, and Norbert Leo Butz as the dinner-party friends whom Penn’s Wilson can’t stop (accidentally) insulting; Bruce McGill, Michael Kelly, Noah Emmerich, Tim Griffin, and David Denman as CIA associates forced to turn their backs on Plame. It’s a SAG-member smörgåsbord of talent, and

Fair Game

itself is frequently as exhilarating as its cast, a movie successfully designed to wake you up, and then piss you off all over again.



THE WARRIOR'S WAY

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With its schizophrenic blend of stylized blood-letting and abject goofiness, director Sngmoo Lee's *The Warrior's Way* is what you'd get if you combined *Shanghai Noon* with *300* and added a healthy dollop of HBO's

Carnivale

. Could

anyone

have thought this was a good idea? Taciturn Dong-gun Jang stares down the camera, drunken sharpshooter Geoffrey Rush channels Tom Waits, ever-villainous Danny Huston (with an old-timey

Phantom of the Opera

mask) glowers and salivates, and Kate Bosworth sports the purtiest pink lipstick in the Wild Wild West, and it's all as senseless, repellent, and tiresome as can be. The film's one honest pleasure comes from the amusing reaction shots of Jang's toddler, whom the martial-arts master carries like a suitcase, and who watches the dimwitted goings-on with an expression of, "Are you freakin'

kidding

me with this?" The kid can't be one year old and

still

outsmarts everyone on-screen.