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TINKER TAILOR SOLDIER SPY

You know that handy, lame, relationship-ending sentiment “It’s not you; it’s me”? That’s what I feel like saying to *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, the new adaptation of the famed John le Carré novel. I readily concede that director Tomas Alfredson’s spy thriller is beautifully made, boasting engaged, cagey performances and a number of superbly shot set pieces. But for all of the film’s merits, I found myself hugely relieved when its end credits rolled, because Alfredson’s intensely complicated endeavor appeared so much smarter than *I* am that I took almost no pleasure from the experience. My issue isn’t that the movie is a dog. It’s that, for most of *Tinker Tailor*’s 125 minutes, I felt like a dog watching a movie.

In basic form, I understand the plot. In basic form, *anyone* should, really. Set in 1973, and concerning the internal workings of the British secret service, the film finds Gary Oldman’s retired agent George Smiley quietly hired to determine which of the service’s high-ranking intelligence officials is a spy for the Soviets – among suspects that include Colin Firth, Toby Jones, Ciarán Hinds, and David Dencik. (Or, as I immediately thought of them: Colin Firth, that other guy who played Truman Capote, that intimidating-looking guy who’s in everything, and “someone I don’t recognize.”) Aiding Smiley on his mission – or *are* they? – are information-gatherers played by Mark Strong, Tom Hardy, and Benedict Cumberbatch, whose hairstyles are all uniformly distracting. (With his bleached-blond locks completely wrong for his coloring and making him resemble a human Ken doll, wouldn’t Hardy’s secret agent stick out like a sore thumb?) We also have John Hurt’s gravelly service head to contend with, and Svetlana Khodchenkova’s mysterious Soviet, and the possibility that Smiley *himself* is the mole ... . *Tinker Tailor* is packed-to-brimming with plot and characters, but nothing about it should necessarily require a schematic to sort out.

Unfortunately, as a film experience, Alfredson’s outing seemed to me almost hopelessly knotty – at least on the first of what might require several repeat viewings to fully comprehend.

Adapted by screenwriters Bridget O'Connor and Peter Straughan, le Carré's tale of espionage is rife with incident, but also with flashbacks and red herrings and shifts in perspective – for a lengthy flashback period, Hardy takes over as our main protagonist – and with narrative detours that only begin to make sense in the final minutes. (The continued, veiled references to Smiley's marital troubles, which seem to weigh on Oldman's every reading and meditative pause, take forever to pay off.) Le Carré's book was turned into an acclaimed 1979 miniseries starring Alec Guinness that ran some 350 minutes, and it's hard not to watch this new version without thinking the material *needed* that length. Clocking in at just over two hours, Alfredson's *Tinker Tailor* fe
els awfully cramped. Its too-much-ness is certainly preferable to what we're handed in many modern thrillers, in which
nothing
appears to be happening for too long a time, and those well-acquainted with le Carré's novel or its TV predecessor may have no trouble with the presentation here. Still, I would've traded this outing's many complexities just for some simple fleshing-out of the characters. The film's central "Who's the spy?" storyline is fundamentally unsatisfying because we have no emotional attachment to anyone, and are given almost no insight into the four chief suspects; consequently, learning which of these inscrutable, vaguely menacing chain-smokers is the
most
devious one doesn't matter in the least.

Still, *Tinker Tailor* sure does look great! Working with his expert *Let the Right One in* cinematog
rapher Hoyte Van Hoytema, Alfredson establishes a convincing air of malice and gloom, and beginning with the early, terrifically unsettling café encounter that goes horribly awry, the film features plenty of sequences – and actors – that entice and absorb you, even if you're not totally up-to-speed on what the hell is going on. ("I don't know what Oldman is talking about in this long monologue, but
boy
is he saying it well!" "I don't know what Cumberbatch is trying to get away with in this library scene, but
boy
am I nervous for him!") I have absolutely nothing against movies that make you work harder than most, and I'll no doubt give
Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy
another stab some day. On a first viewing, though, the experience felt like nothing
but
work, a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle in which I not only couldn't find the right pieces but wasn't sure what what the resulting image was supposed to look like.

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