Written by Mike Schulz
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THIRTEEN DAYS

Just because a movie is smart doesn't mean it'll avoid dullness. Roger Donaldson's *Thirteen Days*, which documents the terrifying two weeks of the Cuban Missile Crisis, is evidence of this, a well-scripted, well-acted drama that might still cause you to doze off.

The story itself, of course, is endlessly fascinating. Set in October of 1962, the film details the political maneuverings within the Pentagon as President John F. Kennedy (Bruce Greenwood), Attorney General Robert Kennedy (Steven Culp), presidential aide Kenny O'Connell (Kevin Costner), and numerous politicos and government officials react to the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba; war with the Soviets appears inevitable, and despite pressure from his top aides to use force in having the missiles removed, JFK is determined to keep peace. The tagline for the film's advertising campaign is "You'll Never Believe How Close We Came," and that simple sentence keys directly into *Thirteen Days*' hook; Donaldson, screenwriter David Self, and the talented cast do an expert job of showing how there seemed to be no option but to go to war, and it was only through incredible shrewdness, conscience, and luck that World War III was averted.

And yet the movie still doesn't come off as gripping entertainment, due to the nagging sameness of its presentation. The screenwriter has the daunting task of providing us with a great deal of information, which he does ably, but it makes the movie feel repetitive; we get scene after scene of JFK being briefed on the current state of the crisis, listen as military officials make strategic recommendations, see Costner's O'Donnell get indignant over their zealotry, and watch the president furrow his brow and ruminate over the next course of action. This scene is repeated with slight variations more than a half dozen times during the course of the film, and no matter how true to life it is, it doesn't exactly make for stirring cinema. (Rumination is not the most visual of activities.) Donaldson does some fine work with his actors, but he doesn't seem able to breathe much life into these static, behind-closed-doors sequences, and visually, the movie is very drab; it looks like it was shot in a '60s-era fallout shelter.

That's a shame, because *Thirteen Days* does have some crackerjack sequences, particularly when we're freed from the confines of the Pentagon. A scene in which American aircraft are

shot at while photographing Cuban missile sites has some tension, and there are occasional (far too infrequent) shots of a panicked American public watching the news and fearing the worst; the film might have had more impact if we had a stronger sense of what the crisis meant to those outside of Washington. The cast, too, can hardly be faulted for its work. Greenwood and Culp are well-matched and give a lot of shading to roles that could've been played merely as caricature, and Dylan Baker as Robert McNamara and Michael Fairman as Adlai Stevenson are particularly strong. Even Costner, despite his laughable attempt at a Boston accent, shows some dramatic fire. But their hard work still amounts to little more than an above-average TV movie, one that should be lauded for its good intentions – and one that, perhaps, should even be seen for them – while its actual presentation rates a shrug.

FINDING FORRESTER

Thirteen Days is an example of sensational material trapped in a rather humdrum picture. *Finding Forrester* is its exact opposite, one in which the director and performers transcend a mostly wretched script and make it reasonably entertaining. To call it "*Good Will Hunting* meets *Scent of a Woman*" is to give the script too much credit; it's more like *Good Will Hunting* and *Scent of a Woman* shoved in a blender and whipped into a gooey mess. I don't think there's an original idea in the entire film. Newcomer Rob Brown plays Jamal Wallace, a brilliant 16-year-old from the Bronx who is consciously throwing away his intelligence in his inner-city school, maintaining a C average and his status as a star on the basketball team. Circumstances lead him to the tenement apartment of William Forrester (Sean Connery), a J.D. Salinger-like character who once wrote the Great American Novel and promptly vanished from public life. Through the course of the film, Forrester will teach Jamal about writing and guide him in surviving his new prep-school surroundings, and Jamal will give Forrester the courage to come out of hiding and conquer his inner demons.

Haven't we all seen this movie before? Among the other hoary subplots *Finding Forrester* trots out are the inevitable romance with the rich kid with the heart of gold (Anna Paquin), the terrible secret from Forrester's past that haunts him to this day, the odious prep-school professor (F. Murray Abraham) convinced that Jamal's writing is a sham, and the inevitable, "uplifting" finale in which Forrester shows up at Jamal's school and puts everyone in their place. And gets applause for doing it. Mike Rich shouldn't get a screenwriting credit; he should get a subpoena from the lawyers of the screenwriters he's stolen from.

Damn it, though, the movie kinda works. Gus Van Sant (who, it should be noted, also helmed *Good Will Hunting*) is a director who's interested in physicality; his camera is very attuned to the characters' movements and gestures, and his images have a surprising poignance that feels very fresh and natural. He gives the material an atmosphere of reality that it doesn't deserve. He also, thankfully for us, has a wonderful cast at his disposal. The role of William Forrester calls for someone with an outsized personality, and God knows Sean Connery has that in spades. You can find yourself blissfully happy just listening to him intone his lines with that marvelous Scottish brogue, and he plays beautifully off of Brown, as subdued and measured as Connery is larger-than-life. Their dialogue scenes have an unforced, happy rhythm; you can practically feel the charge they give each other. Anna Paquin is stuck with little to do (the film is terribly timid about dealing with her interracial crush on Jamal) but brings lovely undercurrents of curiosity to her scenes, and F. Murray Abraham has one of those only-in-the-movies, snarling-old-bastard roles that needs to be played to the rafters to work at all, which he does gleefully; he's Salieri with tenure.

The movie should be hell to sit through, but it's surprisingly enjoyable; it shames me to admit it, but the vibrantly-performed junk of *Finding Forrester* is actually preferable to the indifferently-executed "quality" of *Thirteen Days*. Go figure.