

"The Tailor of Panama" Shows Its Seams: Also, "Town & Country"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 08 May 2001 18:00

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THE TAILOR OF PANAMA

It's been a very long time since a movie was released in our area that wasn't abjectly stupid, so it's easy to get some initial enjoyment from John Boorman's *The Tailor of Panama*, an adaptation of John LeCarré's 1996 bestseller. It's partially a spy thriller, but unlike the James Bond installments or the recent smash

Spy Kids

, the goofiness is kept to a minimum. Beyond that, the plot is smartly established, the cast is promising, the locations are exotic, and director Boorman shows from the start that he's in a frisky, playful mood; this is easily his most lighthearted work since 1987's

Hope & Glory

. So with all this going for it, and considering the undisputed wretchedness of the year's cinematic output, I have to admit that I feel like an ungrateful jerk for finding

The Tailor of Panama

itself rather disappointing.

Geoffrey Rush plays the title character, Harry Pendel, who lives contentedly in Panama with his devoted wife (Jamie Lee Curtis), his two children, and his reputation as the finest tailor in the country. Harry is agreeable, complimentary, and always willing to please, and his friends and customers adore him, but his life threatens to come crashing down with the arrival of Andy Osnard (Pierce Brosnan). A weathered, possibly sinister spy who knows Harry's secrets (chief among them: Harry spent time in prison for arson), Andy begins to insinuate himself into Harry's life for his own financial gain, and *The Tailor of Panama's* labyrinthine plot concerns the escalating tensions between these two, the Panamanian, British, and American governments,

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and a series of lies and double-crosses that could put all the characters' lives and freedoms at risk.

Perhaps the film's biggest weakness is that while the crux of the story centers on the battle of wills between Harry and Andy, performance-wise it's a hopelessly one-sided match: Rush trounces Brosnan without batting an eye. Rush is a superior technician but I usually find him heavy-spirited and remote; even in more overtly comedic roles (as in *Shakespeare in Love* and *Mystery Men*

) you can see his wheels grinding as he thinks out his funny business. But he appears perfectly cast as the lumpy, befuddled Harry; it's one of the few times on screen that Rush appears to be *being* rather than acting.

As for Pierce Brosnan, the acting is all you see, and it's grating as all get-out. In previous roles, most notably the Bond series and 1999's *The Thomas Crown Affair*, Brosnan has slid by on his charm, giving pleasant, forgettable, perfectly innocuous performances. But in *Panama*

, playing an oily-bastard variant of James Bond, he's trying with all his might to prove he's capable of darker character traits, and so he hideously overdoes everything; his come-ons to an embassy official (Catherine McCormack), his mid-coital phone conversation, his "dangerous" insinuations to Harry all border on the ridiculous – he's assembled the most annoying tics of Hugh Grant and Roger Moore. If this is what we have to look forward to in a Pierce Brosnan performance, I'd just as soon he go back to doing little-to-nothing at all.

Even with a more balanced pair of leading men, though, the movie might still prove unsatisfying, because there's a huge dichotomy between Boorman's genial, jazzy direction and the cryptic, undernourished script (which is somewhat surprising, considering that along with Andrew Davies and LeCarré, Boorman is one of the film's co-screenwriters). Boorman appears to be having a ball early on, as he plays with the film's tempo as Harry cuts a suit – a beautifully sped-up sequence of a master enjoying his work – and occasionally pops the spirit of Harry's dearly departed Uncle Benny (embodied by Harold Pinter) into the realistic setting. However, the comedic visuals don't match with the seriousness of much of the material – particularly the subplot involving Harry's politically attacked friends (played by Leonor Varela and the great Brendan Gleeson, easily the finest performer onscreen) – and there are plot lapses that are truly bothersome; it doesn't take long to realize that, despite quite a bit of screen time, Jamie Lee Curtis's loving-spouse role isn't going to amount to anything, and the ending is a true let-down, where all the film's plot points are on the verge of collision and then – poof! – nothing of interest happens.

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It might be that little of this will matter to intelligent audiences – the film has shown decent box-office life in the six weeks it's been out – for whom the names Boorman, LeCarré, and Rush have to be welcome after the five months of dreck we've sat through at the multiplex. And I certainly won't discourage anyone from giving *The Tailor of Panama* a shot; it *is* better than 90 percent of 2001's movies. But if you do catch the film and find yourself underwhelmed, don't think you're just being a grouch – it's not quite the oasis we in this current cinematic desert were hoping for.



TOWN & COUNTRY

Much like *The Tailor of Panama*, the first 20 minutes of Peter Chelsom's *Town & Country* are promising. Warren Beatty, Diane Keaton, Garry Shandling, and Goldie Hawn star in this farce about sexual indiscretions among wealthy Manhattanites, and the cast seems genuinely game; Keaton, in particular, seems to be having a high old time (even though she's played variants of this character dozens of times before), and Hawn radiates that effortless effervescence that her much-praised daughter, Kate Hudson, hasn't yet demonstrated. But it doesn't take long for this foursome to be completely undone by the witless script by Michael Laughlin and Buck Henry, which continually veers off in odd directions that appear wholly unscripted – the writers seem to think that the mere sight of Warren Beatty with his pants around his ankles or Charlton Heston brandishing a semiautomatic are good for loads of chuckles. And I'm not sure I've ever before seen a purportedly "literate" comedy that was cut this haphazardly;

Town & Country

's release has notoriously been held off for some 18 months, and it doesn't appear to be edited yet

. The movie dribbles on for what feels like forever; by the time you've gotten to Andie MacDowell's completely wrong-headed psycho turn, Beatty prancing about in a polar-bear costume, and Marian Seldes' matriarch blurting "cocksucker" over and over, you'll find yourself asking, "What the hell ... ?" and searching desperately in the dark for the "Exit" sign. Further proof that some pictures, and perhaps especially ones with embarrassingly high-profile casts, should

stay

on the shelf.