

Movie Review: "Duplicity"™ actors skillfully drive us through the twists and turns

by Zachary Woodruff

Writer and director Tony Gilroy painted a chilling picture of corporate espionage with "Michael Clayton." Now he's flipped the canvas to paint something lighter – a romantic comedy set in the same cutthroat world. The movie is sleek fun, full of verve and charm, but never lets the audience forget that big businesses fight just as dirty as governments do.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) That's a lesson Ray Koval (Clive Owen), formerly of the British Secret Service, and Claire Stenwick (Julia Roberts), formerly of the CIA, must come to terms with after they decide to go mercenary as company spies. Giving up the sophistications of Dubai, Rome and London for a dumpy apartment in Cleveland, Owen takes a job protecting and pilfering trade secrets for a pizza company. He eventually joins the intrigue in Manhattan, where Roberts helps run security for a firm called Burkett & Randall.

That company's president, played by Tom Wilkinson, has an undisclosed new product that will blow away their competitor, a company run by Paul Giamatti. Watching these two character actors go toe-to-toe is one of "Duplicity's" secondary joys. Wilkinson was a victim in "Michael Clayton"; here, he's a cool, crafty victimizer, pompously philosophical while pruning his bonsai tree. Giamatti displays his trademark short-fused temperament, barrel-cheeked and bare-teethed as he screams for his team of spies to steal the secret formula.

The mystery behind what these companies produce is one of many sly instances where "Duplicity" denies the audience key information. Gilroy's screenplay is equally playful with the relationship between Owen and Roberts: In a rhythmically meted out series of flashbacks, the nature of their affair reveals a series of twists and turns worthy of a minor-key thriller, and served up as delicacies.

Reprising the chemistry they forged in "Closer," Owen and Roberts have enough romantic bubbles to justify the champagne cork they pass back and forth as a reminder to each other. It's a love affair built on distrust: In the characters' professional parlance, Roberts had "gamed" him years earlier, and their communication often doubles as interrogation.

"Duplicity" throws its own game at the audience when, midway through, an entire line-for-line dialogue sequence is repeated (echoing of the Hal Hartley movie "Flirt"). It will be repeated four times total, each time taking the plot in a new direction.

Charming but guarded, with her trademark big laugh nowhere to be found, Julia Roberts embodies the fearful heart of the relationship: The idea that when the gamesmanship is pushed aside, what's between them might not be real at all. (She should worry; the games are the best part of the movie.)

Owen, the man who could have been Bond, seems to be making up for it with one globe-trekking, spy-themed movie after another. He's as hearty and dapper here as he was recently haggard and desperate in "The International," providing a different take on similar settings and sequences.

Owen's smooth operations include the seduction of a Southern-accented corporate employee played by Carrie Preston. It's a bit part, but Preston's tearful self-defense is one of the film's finest laughs, and Roberts gives one of the greatest gifts an actor can: playing a solid foil to boost the performance of a relative unknown. It's this kind of generosity that makes "Duplicity" a generously entertaining film.

"Duplicity." Rated: PG-13. Running time: 2 hours, 4 minutes. 3 stars.

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