The Screen Savor: â€˜Das Bad Berlinerâ€™

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "THE GOOD GERMAN"

One would think that between the stellar talents of director Steven Soderbergh ("Traffic," "Erin Brockovich," "Sex, Lies and Videotape") screenwriter Paul Attanasio ("Sum of All Fears," "Donnie Brasco," "Quiz Show") and three of the most winning actors on screen today (Clooney, Blanchett and Maguire), "The Good German" would be, at the very least, "good." Even great. But like five-day old sauerbrauten, it is surprisingly unpalatable.

The impossibly overly-complicated, undernourished plot consists of an American war correspondent named Jake (Clooney) returning to Berlin in post-war 1945, running into his mysterious ex-lover Lena (Blanchett). With a story line that is fuzzier than the archival footage, there's red-herring intrigue over her still living? still dead? husband, a rocket, black market greed and some papers (there's always papers!)

Though he never opens a notepad or files a story, war correspondent Jake is a secondhand version of "Chinatown"'s Jake, always showing up in the right place at the wrong time, and always a step or two behind shadowy bad guys' misdeeds. Though he's no detective, how he manages to successfully tail every character in the picture having five lines or more is just as mysterious as the fact that for the first time, ever, Clooney has wholly misplaced his on-screen charisma.

Cate Blanchett's Lena also suffers. That's it â€¦ she just suffers. Though her suffering is replete with glorious cheekbones (made more magnificent due to the black-and-white photography) and a Dietrich-ian accent, without her bursting into a rendition of "Falling In Love Again," she also comes up sorely lacking in personality and energy.

The only spark to this goulash comes from Tobey Maguire as Jake's driver, a whiz-bang kid on the outside, hiding a vicious money-grubbing demon not too far below the surface. Thirty tedious minutes into the film, the first actual plot point emanates from his mysterious murder. Though I was momentarily energized, hopeful that a real story might emerge, I would have gladly traded this cruel plot tease for more Tobey.

Director Soderbergh has some interesting ideas that get lost in the execution. For example, each of the three main characters is allotted one single voiceover. With their external personas largely unexamined, more inner monologues might have been a revealing conduit into character. And though it was a treat to see the integration of actual footage from '40s Berlin, it turned out to be more of a demonstration of technical ability rather than a means for adding some much-needed substance to the film.

Unexplained plot ambiguities literally litter the screen. Though Lena is possibly the most wanted woman in Berlin, she wanders around on foot and on cycle, tra-la-la, tra-la-la, without so much as a backwards glance. Hiding out for the umpteenth time, she fearfully approaches what looks to be danger. Horrors! It's a cigarette left burning in a theaterâ€”but who was there? What did they want? Might they come back to snuff her out, unlike the aforementioned cigarette? Oh well â€¦ fade to the next scene. In one of Jake's many unsuccessful scuffles, a shoe is left behind. The camera closes in for a dramatic closeup. Whose shoe? Does anyone subsequently develop an unexplained limp? Is it a pricey shoe and might it fit my husband? And finally, at the long-awaited last act, for what earthly reason does Soderbergh & Co. feel moved to re-enact the ending to "Casablanca"? If the film doesn't work in its first 100 minutes, paying homage to a classic in the final scene isn't going to turn a schwein's ear into a silk purse.

Lena's hubby Emil wearily states near the end, "Why does it have to be so complicated?" Ja, Emil, Ja.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: D-plus

Click here to view the movie trailer of â€œThe Good Germanâ€•.

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Production Credits: "THE GOOD GERMAN" Directed by: Steven Soderbergh Screenplay by: Paul Attanasio Based on the novel by: Joseph Kanon Cast: George Clooney, Cate Blanchett, Tobey Maguire, Beau Bridges Rated: R Running Time: 105 minutes Grade: D-plus

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